

THE SALT VEIL SAGA

THE SPEAR & THE VEIL



THE SALT VEIL

The desert remembers every woman who came before.
TWO HALVES. ONE CIRCLE.

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The Salt Veil

The Salt Veil — Book 1

Prologue — Returned to the Pans

They woke the children before the sun, which was how Sabra knew, even at twelve, that it was going to be a thing they would rather no one saw clearly.

She came up out of sleep the way she had been taught to — all at once, without the thrashing the little ones did, eyes open and mind already counting before the body had agreed to it. A hand at her shoulder. Not a shake. A pressure, two fingers and a thumb, the weight measured exactly to wake and not to startle. She knew the hand before she knew the face. Ru Halene's hands were dry and warm and smelled faintly of the chalk she used at the long slate, and they did not, ever, do a thing they had not decided to do.

"Up," Halene said, very low. "Quietly. Bare feet."

And then she was already three beds down, the same pressure, the same word, moving along the row of sleeping girls in the grey-black before dawn like a woman counting stock.

Bare feet. That was the part that told Sabra something. They were always made to put on their sandals in the cold months; the stone of the Hold held the night's chill like a grudge, and a girl who took a chill missed lessons — and in the Salthold, missed lessons were never treated as small. *Cold feet now*, Halene had said once, tapping the slate, *cost you a week of the Reckoning later. Sandals.*

So *bare feet* meant they were not to be heard. Sandals on stone made a sound. Skin did not. Whatever was waiting for them at the end of the dark gallery wanted no announcement, and that meant it was a thing the order had not made up its mind to be proud of, and *that* — Sabra lay very still for one held breath, doing the sum — that had never happened before.

The Salthold did most of its cruelty in good light. That was the order's way: to do the hard thing plainly, in the open, so that no one could later pretend it had been hidden, so that the doing of it was itself a kind of honesty. The Mothers were proud of that. *We do not lie about what we are*, Ru Halene had told them in the schoolroom, more than once, with the particular warmth she saved for the worst lessons. *A woman who lies to herself about the cost of a thing pays it twice.* She had said it the day she made them watch a deserter's reading, a grown woman from the kitchens brought before the Circle and read down to the bone, every flinch named aloud, the woman weeping not at the punishment but at the *seeing* — and Halene had let them watch all of it, had said afterward, gently, *That is mercy. To name a thing truly is mercy. Look away if you must. But know that you are choosing comfort over your sister's truth.*

So when they came down the dormitory rows in the dark and touched each girl awake by the shoulder — not unkindly, never unkindly — and led them out barefoot onto the cold stone of the gallery that overlooked the Pan, Sabra understood that whatever was about to happen was something the order had decided to be ashamed of and do anyway, and could not square those two facts, and so had split the difference by doing it at the one hour when shame and honesty both went grey.

The girls filed out in their shifts, thirty of them or near it, the youngest cohorts, and the gallery took them in two ragged rows along the long stone rail. No one had told them to be silent and no one needed to. The dark did it. The cold did it. A girl behind Sabra — Petra, she thought, by the catch in the breath, Petra who cried easily and would be marked for it — made a small sound, and another girl's hand found hers in the dark, and that was all. Down the row Ru Halene stood with her back to the rail and her face to the children, and she did not say *be still* and she did not say *watch closely* and she did not say any of the things she said in the schoolroom. She only stood there, very straight, with her chin lifted, and looked at them the way you look at a thing you are about to do and cannot take back, and Sabra, who had been trained for two years now to read a face the way other children read a picture-book, saw that Ru Halene — who laughed like water over stone, who used the laugh freely, who had a stolen-date sort of softness under the chalk and the bone-names — was holding her own face shut with both hands, from the inside.

That frightened her more than the cold. The cold she understood. The cold was honest.

The White Pan lay below them and went on to the edge of the world.

In the no-colour before dawn it was not white but the flat dead silver of a thing that has forgotten how to hold light, and the cold came up off it the way heat would come up off it in six hours, total and without mercy and somehow personal. Sabra had lived above the Pan her whole life and had never once gone down onto it. No one went down onto it. The Salthold sat on its lip the way a tooth sits in a jaw, salt-white and windowless to the salt, all its eyes turned inward — every gallery, every cell, every long table faced the courts and the cloisters and the deep cool dark of itself, and only this one gallery, the high northern one, the one they were never taken to, looked out and down onto the dead silver floor of the drowned sea. She understood now why they were never taken here. You looked out from this rail and the world simply stopped having an opinion about you. The Pan did not care that you were twelve. The Pan did not care that you were clever, or frightened, or counting. It went on flat and grey and final to a horizon you could not find in the dark, and it waited, the way it had waited since the seas died, for whatever you were finished with.

The Pan was where you put the things you were finished with.

There were three figures down on the salt. Sabra knew two of them.

One was the Salt Mother. She was old even then — Yenneth, a name the children said softly and seldom, the way you said the names of the very far places — a straight dark line against the silver with her hands folded into her sleeves and her head bare to the cold. She did not move. She had the stillness of a thing that has decided not to spend itself, that knows the body is a purse with a counted number of coins in it and will not pay out a single one it does not have to. Even from the high gallery, even in the dark, Sabra felt it: the woman down there was holding the whole scene in her two folded hands the way Halene held her own face, from the inside, by main strength.

One was Ru Halene's twin in the dark — but no, Sabra blinked, and it resolved, and it was not a twin, it was only that her eye had wanted it to be, because the second figure stood the way Halene stood and was Halene's shape — and then Sabra's stomach understood before her mind did, with the cold animal certainty of the Reckoning working below words: that was not someone *like* Halene. Halene was up here, on the gallery, holding the children's eyes. There was a second teacher down on the salt because they had needed two: one to make the children watch and one to do the watching's reason.

The third figure was small, and white, and Sabra knew her too.

The third was Imel.

Imel was sixteen and she had been kind to Sabra in the careless way the older girls were sometimes kind — a hand on the head in passing, a stolen date pressed into a palm under the long table, once a whole quarter-hour spent re-plaiting Sabra's hair after a senior had pulled it loose, working the salt-stiff strands gentle and patient and humming something with no words while Sabra sat very still and let herself, for that one quarter-hour, be a thing that someone took trouble over. Imel was clever the way the Mothers liked and clever in three other ways they did not — quick to the back-answer, quick to the forbidden corner of the library, quick to find the loose stone in any rule and lean on it just to feel it give. And she could already do the Stillness well enough to stop a nosebleed by deciding to, which she had shown the little ones once, laughing, blood on her teeth, *look — look, it just stops* — and they had crowded around her in the date-grove shade and watched the bright thread of red climb back up into her like water poured backward and thought her a marvel.

She was a marvel. That was the trouble, though Sabra did not have the shape of it yet.

They had dressed Imel in white. Not the grey of the order but the white of the salt, so that from the gallery she was already half gone into it, a girl-shaped place where the silver was a little brighter. The robe was too big for her, or she had grown small inside it; the wind off the Pan moved it and did not move her. She stood with her bare feet in the salt and her hands loose at her sides, and she was looking up.

Not at the Salt Mother. Up. At the gallery. At them.

Sabra felt the look land and could not tell — the dark was too deep, the distance too far — whether Imel could truly see the children's faces or only the pale row of them against the black stone, thirty small shapes lined along the high rail like a frieze cut into the Hold. But she felt herself *found*. She felt the look pass along the row and stop, or thought she did, and she did the only thing she could think of, which was the wrong thing, which was the thing she would turn over for the rest of her life: she did not lift her hand. She kept it on the cold stone of the rail. She kept herself still and unreadable, the way she had been learning to be, because somewhere off at the edge of the salt there were two figures with their faces wrapped, and the Reckoning had already taught her that someone is always watching to see who reaches out — and she was twelve and she was afraid and she chose, in that instant, to be a girl no one could read instead of a girl who waved goodbye.

Imel looked away first. Back down, to the dark woman in front of her.

No one had explained. That, too, was the order's way — they explained everything except the things that mattered most, which they made you watch until you understood them in the body, where understanding could not be argued with later. You could argue with a lesson on a slate. You could not argue with a thing your own legs had stood through in the cold. Sabra stood between two girls she did not much like — Petra still crying soundlessly on her left, on her right a hard-eyed senior-cohort girl named Doru who watched everything the way the Mothers watched, already half a Mother herself and proud of it — and she watched, and the cold came up through her bare feet and into the long bones of her legs and settled there, and below on the Pan the Salt Mother spoke, and the flatness carried her voice up to them thinned and clear, the way sound carried over still water.

"You know why," Yenneth said. Not to the girls. To Imel.

And Imel — Sabra would carry this for the rest of her life, would carry it down into the Deep and out the other side of everything — Imel *nodded*.

She was not bound. She was not held. The two Veiled ones stood off at the edge of the salt with their faces wrapped, dark on the silver, and they did not move toward her and they did not touch her and they did not need to, and that was the worst part, that would always be the worst part: that the girl in white understood the law better than the children watching, and agreed with it, and walked the law out onto the salt on her own two feet, because she had been raised — as they were all being raised, as Sabra was being raised at that very moment, on that very rail, with the cold teaching her legs the lesson her ears refused — to believe that the order was right even when the order was killing you.

"I reached for it," Imel said.

Her voice did not carry as well as the old woman's. The wind took the edges of it, and the children leaned without meaning to, the whole pale row of them

tilting toward the rail to gather the words. “Didn’t mean to. It was just — there.” A pause. The wind. “All of it. At once. Like a door.”

“I know,” said the Salt Mother.

And there was something in the way she said it, some grief worn so smooth by long use that it had stopped looking like grief and started looking like patience — the way a step looks worn, the way a sill goes pale and dipped where ten thousand hands have rested on the way out and the way back in, until you cannot tell the wearing from the welcome. Sabra had no words for it then. She would not have words for it for years. But she heard it, the way she was being trained to hear things, in the body, below the meaning: *this is not the first time. She has stood here before. She has said I know to a girl in white before, and she will say it again, and the saying of it is the price she has agreed to pay, and she is paying it now, in front of us, on purpose, so that we will see the price has a payer and is not free.*

“It is always a door,” Yenneth said. “That is what it is. That is why.”

“I could hold it.”

A child’s stubbornness in it, suddenly, breaking up through the sixteen-year-old calm like a stone through ice. Imel took a step — toward the old woman, not away, and one of the Veiled ones shifted at the edge of Sabra’s eye and then went still again. “Mother, I *could*. I felt it. I’m strong enough. I’m not like the others, I’m —”

“What were you doing,” Yenneth said, “when it opened.”

The question stopped Imel. Sabra watched the white shape go still. The Pan was so quiet that she heard, or thought she heard, the breath the older girl took before she answered — a long, shaking thing, drawn up from somewhere deep.

“The breathing,” Imel said. “The fourth form. The one at the bottom of the Stillness, where you go under the pulse. You said there was a floor. You said the Stillness had a floor and a wise woman never went looking for what was under it.” A small, terrible laugh, more breath than sound. “I went looking. I always go looking. The floor was a door, Mother. The Stillness opened down into something and the something was *all of it*. The Voice and the seeing and the — I could hear the whole Hold breathing. Could’ve told every woman in it to sleep. Read the lie in the Circle’s own throats. Remembered things that aren’t mine.” The breath again, ragged now. “It was so *quiet* in there. Everything stopped arguing. I knew everything and none of it hurt. And then I — couldn’t find the door again. From the inside. I couldn’t find the way the door had been a floor. I was in the dark of myself with everything I’d ever be and I couldn’t —” She stopped. “I’m out now. I climbed out. That proves it. I’m strong enough. I climbed *out*.”

“Yes,” said the Salt Mother. “You climbed out.”

“Then —”

“This time.”

The word fell flat and small and final onto the salt, and the wind did not even bother to take its edges.

“Every one of them was strong enough to open it,” Yenneth said. She had not raised her voice. She did not need to; the Pan gave her every word. “Do you hear me, daughter? Listen, now, because this is the only thing I am going to teach you tonight and I want you to have it. Every one of them was strong enough to *open* it. The weak never get near the floor. They live their whole lives on the bright side of the Stillness and never once feel the door under it, and they die old in their beds, and that is a mercy they never know they were given. The ones who feel the door — the clever ones, the ones who always go looking, the ones who are not like the others — they are the only ones who can open it. And not one of them, in three hundred years, not one in all the corpses I have stood over on this salt, was strong enough to *shut it again*. Not once. Not one. You climbed out this time. I am glad. I am glad past saying, and you will never know how glad, because there is no one left for me to tell. But you cannot prove to me you will climb out the next time, and the next, every time for the rest of a long life, with no single failure in all of it — because no one ever has, and the ones who failed did not fail quietly. The door does not open onto your death alone, child. It opens onto the death of everyone inside earshot of your Voice.” A pause; the folded hands did not move. “I will not put thirty children in the ground to find out whether you are the first woman in the history of the world who can shut a door that has never once been shut. That is the whole of the law. It is not written against the weak. The weak are safe from it. It is written against exactly you.”

For a long moment the white shape on the silver did not move at all.

Up on the gallery, Sabra realised she had stopped breathing, and made herself start again, slow, the way they were taught — *in for the count, hold for the count, out for the count, the body is a thing you steer, not a thing you ride* — and even as she did it, even as she steadied herself on the very discipline that had killed the girl in white, some cold clean part of her noted what she was doing, and noted that the noting did not stop her, and held it, the first stone of a count she did not yet know she had begun to keep.

“Will it hurt,” Imel said. Quieter now. The stubbornness gone out of her, all at once, the way the Stillness took the blood back up out of a nosebleed — there and then simply not there. “I don’t mind. I just want to know. So I can — I’m good at the Stillness. I can go down under the pain. If you tell me, I can be somewhere else for it.”

“It will not hurt,” said the Salt Mother. “You will not feel the salt. I promise you that, and I have never broken a promise made on this floor.”

“All right.” A breath. “All right. Will you tell them —” the white head tipped, just slightly, up toward the gallery, toward the row of small pale shapes, toward

Sabra without knowing it was toward Sabra — “tell the little ones I wasn’t afraid? I’m a little afraid. They don’t have to know that part. Tell them I understood. Tell them the order was right.”

And Sabra, twelve years old, with the cold in the long bones of her legs and her dead friend not yet dead on the silver below, understood for the first time in her life that there are sentences a person can say that are worse than any scream, and that she had just heard one, and that she would never be able to put it back.

“I will tell them,” Yenneth said.

She did not.

That is — she told them nothing, ever, of that night; the order did not speak of its dead by name; and so the only one who carried the white girl’s last request was the one child on the rail who had heard it land and felt it find her, and Sabra would carry it unkept for the rest of her life, the message and the failure to deliver it folded together into one thing, because there was no one she could ever give it to who would understand what it was.

It did not take long, after that, and they did not make it ugly, and that was its own obscenity. There should have been ugliness. Some part of Sabra needed there to be ugliness — needed a struggle, a cruelty, something her hatred could fasten onto and call a villain. There was none. There was only the slow grey patience of it, like a thing being put gently away in a drawer.

Imel knelt — was not forced, knelt, lowered herself down onto the salt in the too-big white robe the way a tired child kneels to be undressed for bed — and the Salt Mother stepped close and put a hand on the crown of her head. The way you would bless a child. The way you would steady one for sleep, a palm laid warm over the small dark heat of a skull to say *rest now, I have you, nothing is coming that I cannot see*. And Imel leaned her head into the hand. Sabra saw it. Across all that dark and all that distance she saw the small white shape lean into the old dark woman’s hand the way she had leaned, once, into the patient fingers re-plaiting her hair in the grove, the way you lean into the one safe thing in a world that has agreed to end you, and Sabra’s own hands closed on the cold stone of the rail until the salt-rough edge of it bit into her palms, and she welcomed the biting, because it was something to feel that was not this.

The two Veiled ones came in from the edge then. Finally. The two of them, dark on the silver, unhurried. They did not draw the kill-veils tighter — they were already wrapped, already faceless, two pillars of shadow folding inward toward the kneeling white shape and the standing dark one — and what they did, they did with the Stillness, and with their hands, and with the salt, and Sabra did not look away, because she had decided in some place deeper than deciding that to look away would be the second cowardice and she had already spent her one, on the rail, when she had not lifted her hand. So she watched. She made herself a thing that watched. And she could not, afterward, ever, have told anyone

what she saw, because there was almost nothing to see: a closing, a stillness gone stiller, the white robe settling the way cloth settles when what was in it stops insisting on its shape. It was quiet. It was quick.

The only sound that reached the gallery was, once, near the end, a single broken noise.

It might have been Imel's name, said by someone — by the Salt Mother, by the second teacher, by one of the Veiled who were not supposed to have voices. It might have been the wind finding an edge of the Hold to grieve through, some carved sill or salt-eaten lintel that the night air leaned across at exactly the wrong moment and made, for a heartbeat, into a throat. Sabra heard it. The whole row heard it; she felt the row hear it, the small collective flinch run along the pale frieze of children like wind across the Pan. And she never decided which it had been. She turned the choice away at the door of herself and would not let it in. Because if it was the wind, then she could bear it. And if it was a name — if even one of them, the old woman or the wrapped killers, the people who had walked this girl out onto the salt and put her gently away, had been unable to keep from saying her name at the end, the way you say a name when something tears — then the obscenity was complete, then the loving was real, then there was no villain anywhere in the whole grey scene to hate, only love and law braided so tight that the law could kill the loved thing with the loved thing's blessing and weep its name into the wind as it did, and that, Sabra knew at twelve without the words for it, was a thing she did not yet have the strength to carry. So she did not decide. She left it at the door. She would leave it there for years.

Afterward the order did the thing it did with all its dead. It gave the body to the salt.

They left her where she lay, the white on the white. There was no carrying-off, no shroud, no procession; that was for the thrones, for the temple-men with their stone beds and their witnessed rites; the order had no use for any of it. You came up out of the salt — *the remembered*, the mothers of the line, every one a daughter of the First Mother whose memory had never died — and you went back down into it, and the salt took you the way the sea your great-mothers had known would once have taken you, slow and total and without malice. By noon the Pan would begin its work; the heat that came up off the silver in six hours would come up off the white shape too, would draw the water from it and the softness from it; and by the turning of the season there would be nothing on that flat dead floor but the salt itself, blinding and patient and flat to the horizon — and somewhere in it, small and perfect and bitter, the hard bright bloom of a desert rose where a girl had been.

They walked the children inside before the sun came up the rest of the way.

No one spoke. Ru Halene led them back along the gallery and down the cold spiral of the inner stair, and the Hold closed around them again, eyeless to the salt, all its windows turned inward to the lamplit courts as if the Pan and

everything on it were a thing the building itself had agreed not to look at. The girls went back to the dormitory and lay down in the warming dark and some of them, Sabra thought, slept. She did not. She lay on her back with her eyes open and counted the breaths of the room — *in for the count, out for the count* — and felt the cold go slowly out of the long bones of her legs, and did not sleep.

At breakfast there was an empty place at the long table.

She saw it the moment she came in. Of course she saw it; she had been counting since before the sun. The bench where Imel sat, third from the head on the western side, between a girl called Mura and the post — empty, the wood pale and worn and ordinary, holding the shape of no one. Sabra ate. She made herself eat, because not-eating was a thing that got written down, and she had decided, somewhere in the long count of the night, that whatever the order made of her, it would not be a thing they could read in the not-eating of bread. She chewed. She drank the bitter morning tea. She kept her eyes on her bowl and her face shut from the inside the way Halene had shut hers on the gallery, and the empty place sat there at the corner of her eye like a sound she could not stop hearing.

And the next morning there was not.

The benches had been moved a hand's width down to close the gap. The whole western side, slid along its length while the children slept, so that the post that had stood at Imel's shoulder now stood at Mura's, and there was no empty place, and there had never been an empty place, and the line of the table ran smooth and unbroken from head to foot the way it was meant to. The order closed every gap. It closed them so smoothly that you would have to have been counting to know anything had ever been taken away — to know that the world had once held thirty-one girls in this cohort and now held thirty, that a bench had moved, that a hand's width of pale worn wood had stood empty for one breakfast and would never stand empty again.

Sabra was counting.

She would always, after that, be counting. It was the thing the night gave her, the thing she took down off the gallery in place of the message she had not been able to keep: a count she would never stop running, under everything, under every lesson and every Reckoning and every smooth kind face the order ever turned on her — *how many places have you closed, and how smoothly, and did you think no one was counting*. She did not know yet that the count would one day walk her out of the Salthold and across the Deep and into a different desert entirely. She only knew, at twelve, over a bowl of cooling tea, that it had started, and that it would not stop, and that she would never tell them she was keeping it.

She did not cry. The Reckoning had already taught her that they would be watching to see who cried, and writing it down — that grief was a kind of weather a person gave off, readable as a price in the bazaar, and that a girl

who wept at the right thing was as legible as a girl who wept at the wrong one, and legibility was the one thing she had decided, on the cold stone, with her dead friend going slowly to salt below her, that she would not give them. Petra had cried on the gallery. Petra would be marked for it; the marking would be gentle, would be called *tenderness*, *untempered*; it would follow her in the small invisible way such markings did, and she would never know it was there. Doru had not cried, and had watched, and had approved, and was already half a Mother. Sabra had not cried either, but she was not Doru. She knew the difference even if no one watching could read it: Doru had not wept because the order had filled her so full of itself that there was no room left in her for an unsanctioned grief. Sabra had not wept because she was hiding one.

She would learn everything they taught. She had decided that too, in the night. She would learn it better than anyone — the Voice and the Stillness and the names of the bones and the true grief told from the false — would learn it so well that she became the very thing they wanted, the perfect daughter of the House of Salt, so that they would never once think to look for the locked room. And she would keep one room inside herself that she did not let them into. One salt-white room with a girl in it, in a white robe too big for her, leaning her head into a hand. And she would not let them move the benches in there. Not ever. Not for them. However many gaps they closed in her, however smoothly, that one would stay open, would stay an empty place at a long table with the worn pale wood holding the shape of someone, and she would sit with it every morning of her life, alone, counting.

She was twelve. She thought that was a small enough thing to keep.

She had no idea yet how much it would one day cost her to open that door — or who would be standing on the other side of it when she did.

Chapter One — The Salthold

Eight years later Sabra could take a man apart with her eyes across a crowded room and tell you, by the time he reached the door, what he was afraid of, what he had eaten, what he had lied about that morning and whether the lie had worked. She could do it without trying, which was the part the Mothers had never quite managed to teach her to hide.

It was not a thing she had asked for and it was not, she had decided early, a gift, whatever the order called it. A gift was a thing you could set down. This was more like a window with no shutter: a man crossed in front of it and she saw what was behind his face the way she saw the colour of his robe, without choosing to, before she could be polite about it. The tilt of a head, the speed a swallow came after a question, the place a man's hand drifted to when he thought no one was watching — a belt-purse, a knife, a missing ring — and the

whole of him would unfold itself in front of her like a market awning in the wind. She had learned the cataloguing of it before she had learned what to do with the catalogue. That had been the order's first lesson and its longest: *seeing is cheap, child. Anyone can be taught to see. The craft is in saying nothing until the seeing pays.*

She had been bad at the saying-nothing, once. She had been a girl of twelve who told Ru Halene that the kitchen-mistress was stealing salt and weeping at night over a man in Qesh, and had been right about both, and had been made to understand, gently and without raising a voice, that being right was the least of what was wanted from her, and that a girl who announced everything she saw was a girl who would die young and useful to no one. The Reckoning, Halene had told her, was a knife you carried under the robe. You did not draw it to peel fruit. You did not draw it to win a small argument. You drew it once, in the dark, and you put it away wet, and the room never knew there had been a knife at all.

Now the seeing leaked out of her at the seams anyway, despite eight years of the order pouring its discipline into her, and Ru Halene — older now, the laugh rarer but not yet gone — said it was like watching someone try to keep a full cup steady on a galloping horse. *You will spill it on the wrong person one day,* Halene said, *and they will hate you for seeing them. Most people would rather be robbed than read. A thief only takes your purse.*

Sabra was reading the Circle now, and the Circle did not know it, and that was a more dangerous game than reading any man.

They had let her stand at the back of the council because she was being groomed for the Remembering and because the Salt Mother had asked for her by name, which had caused a small cool stir that Sabra had felt move through the room like a draught and had pretended not to feel. She had felt it the way she felt everything — in the bodies. A House of the Closed Hand woman near the door had drawn her shawl a fraction tighter at the name *Sabra*, as if against weather. One of the Long Breath had glanced up from her folded hands and then very deliberately back down, which was its own kind of glance. Nobody had said anything. Nobody in this room ever said the thing; they performed the thing they wished you to believe they were not thinking, and trusted you to read it, because reading it was the price of being allowed in the room. It was a conversation conducted entirely in the negative space around words, and Sabra, who had grown up inside it, had not understood until she was older that most of the world did not talk this way, that out in the canyon-cities and the caravans people simply said what they wanted and quarrelled out loud and were forgiven for it. The Salthold did not quarrel out loud. The Salthold smiled, and remembered, and waited, and that was so much worse.

There were nine women in the Circle and they sat in the round chamber at the heart of the Salthold, the one room in all of Sett with no window to the Pan. Sabra had asked, once, as a child, why the council chamber had no window,

when every other room in the Hold had its slot of white salt-light cut into the wall — and had been told it was an old custom and not pressed, and had worked the rest out herself over years, the way she worked everything out: because the one room where the order decided things was the one room that refused to look outward at the world it was deciding about. The lamps burned even at midday in there. The walls were salt-white and bare. All its attention turned inward, nine faces lit from below by oil-flame and turned toward one another across the round, and the architecture said it plainly to anyone who could read a building: *we do not look out. We look at one another, because one another is where the danger is.*

And they were, as they had been for as long as Sabra had been alive, failing to agree.

She had come in expecting the disagreement. Everyone in the Hold knew the Circle was deadlocked; it was the open secret that organised the corridors, the thing the under-mistresses spoke of with their eyes and not their mouths, the reason the kitchens ran short and the factors in Qesh went unpaid two seasons running and a hundred small decisions sat undecided because the two great Houses had each learned to veto the other and call it prudence. But it was one thing to know a thing as fact and another to stand at the back of the round room and *feel* it — feel the two weathers in the chamber, the open hand and the closed, pressing on each other across the lamps so that even the women who belonged to neither had arranged their bodies along the fault, leaning a hair's breadth one way or the other without, she thought, knowing they leaned.

"She is one girl," said Ru Ysolde. "And you would drown the future to be safe tonight."

Ysolde of the Open Hand was the most beautiful woman Sabra had ever seen and had long since stopped noticing it as beauty, the way you stop hearing a river you live beside; it had become simply a fact of the room, a pressure, a weather. She wore it the way other women wore rank. She did not raise her voice. None of them ever raised a voice in here — to raise a voice was to admit the Voice had failed you, that you had reached for the cheap reflex-tool a mother used on a tired soldier and not the patient art a Ru used on an equal — but Ysolde had a way of laying a sentence down flat and final, like a winning tile on a board, that made the silence after it feel like agreement even when it wasn't. Sabra watched the silence after *drown the future to be safe tonight* and saw it do its work: saw two of the uncommitted Houses settle a fraction into it, saw a woman's mouth begin to move toward a nod and then catch itself. Half the Circle leaned toward Ysolde without knowing they leaned.

Sabra watched them lean. She had learned, slowly, over the seasons of being allowed nearer and nearer the centre, that this was Ysolde's whole art, and that it was a kind of Voice after all, only one with no command in it and no startle, a Voice that worked through the long door of vanity instead of the short door of reflex: not to persuade you of a thing but to make your agreement with it

feel like something you had thought of yourself, your own cleverness, your own nerve — and to make your disagreement feel like a small cowardice you would be ashamed of later. You did not argue with Ysolde. You discovered, an hour after she had left the room, that you had somehow already agreed, and that disagreeing now would mean admitting you had been led, and so you did not, and that was the trap, and the trap was beautiful and bloodless and you walked into it smiling.

“And you,” said Mother Vael, from across the round, “would gamble it all on a tea-leaf.”

The weather changed direction. Sabra felt the leaning hesitate, felt the room’s body turn, slow and reluctant, the way a herd turns.

“We are not seers,” Vael said. “I am tired of being spoken to as if we were. We notice things, and then we lie about how we came to notice them, and let the kings call it prophecy because it keeps them frightened of us. That is all we are. That is all we have ever been.” She unfolded her hands and laid them flat on her knees, and the flatness was deliberate, the gesture of a woman declining to hide anything. “So let us notice things, since that is our craft. Notice this. Every time in three hundred years the salt has thrown up a daughter who could reach the convergence — we have buried her. I’ll use the word. We have *drowned* her. In the Pan. By the law. With our own hands, sisters, and not a one of us has enjoyed it, and we have done it anyway, every time, for three hundred years. And notice the rest, since we are noticing. The desert went on. The wells stayed full. The night-roads stayed open. The kings stayed stupid and stayed ours. The salt did not rise up.” Her grey gaze moved around the round, unhurried, daring each of them to look away from the hard word and letting none of them. “Notice that the law has *worked*. Whatever else you wish to say of it. A terrible law, and it has worked, and I am old enough to be more frightened of a beautiful untried idea than of a terrible thing that has kept us alive.”

Vael of the Closed Hand was not beautiful and had made of that, over a long life, a different kind of instrument. She was square and plain and grey and she sat like a stone that had decided where it was and would require an avalanche to be moved. Sabra read her the way she read everyone, helplessly, the window with no shutter, and read her closely now because Vael was the one she had come prepared to hate and the hate would not catch. She had expected cruelty. She had carried the expectation of cruelty up the years like a coin in her shoe: the woman who drowned children, the order’s executioner, the cold heart in the cold House. It would have been so much easier. A cruel woman you could dismiss; a cruel woman’s law you could dismiss with her.

What Sabra found instead, when she turned the window on Vael across the lamplit round, was a woman who had done the terrible thing enough times to have stopped flinching — and who knew, exactly, what the not-flinching cost and what it looked like from the outside, and had decided to wear it anyway.

There was no relish in the set of her mouth. There was no flicker of pleasure when she said *drowned*. There was only the heavy steadiness of someone who had carried a thing so long the carrying had become her shape, and underneath it — Sabra saw it and wished she had not, because it was the splinter that would not come out, the thing that would trouble her sleep on the road for weeks — underneath it was something that in any other woman she would have called grief. *I am the one willing to be hated so that you may all stay clean*, the flat grey hands said. *I have buried your daughters so your hands would be empty when the kings came to count them. You are welcome. You will none of you thank me, and that is correct, and I do not require it.*

It would have been easier if she were a monster, Sabra thought. The order would have it that she was. The corridors whispered Vael's name with a small theatrical shudder. And here was the splinter: the monster was a woman who believed, with her whole grey weight, that the flinching was the luxury and the terrible thing was the love. That was worse than cruelty. Sabra did not yet have the years to know how much worse, but she felt the edge of it, the way you feel the edge of a drop in the dark.

"The law has worked," Ysolde agreed, gently, and Sabra's attention snapped back across the round, because she knew that gentleness now, had catalogued it: the gentleness was how you knew Ysolde was about to cut. "The way a splint works, sister. You bind the bone, you do not move it, and it does not heal crooked — because it does not heal at all. It simply does not worsen. Which we have agreed to call health, because we've forgotten there was ever anything else." She let her hands rest open in her lap, the open hand, the House made flesh. "Three hundred years in a splint. And now the very suggestion of taking it off sounds to this Circle like a proposal to shatter the leg. We are not safe, sisters. The temples bind men in the dark — yes, we know they do, we none of us say it but we know — and the kings grow a little less frightened each season, and the Circle cannot decide whether to take tea, and we sit in a windowless room congratulating a splint. There is a girl in the Deep who could —"

"We do not *know* what is in the Deep," said the third voice, and the room changed entirely.

The Salt Mother spoke rarely in council, and when she did the others stopped leaning anywhere at all, the way the caravan beasts went still — Sabra had heard the Attuin factors describe it — when the air pressure dropped before a storm they could not yet see; when the animals knew, in their skins, before any human knew it, that the weather was about to become a fact. The whole round went that kind of still. Ysolde's open hands did not move. Vael's grey ones did not move. Sabra felt the two weathers in the chamber simply stop pressing on each other, the way two arguing voices fall silent when a third, older voice clears its throat, and she understood, watching it, that this was a power neither of the great Houses had and both of them resented: the power of the woman who had stopped competing.

Yenneth was very old now and had stopped bothering to look it any less than she was. Sabra had been told — the corridors told everything eventually — that the Salt Mother had once been striking, that men had drunk at her well and women had schemed for her favour, and could not make the telling fit the woman in the chair, who had let all of that retreat down into stillness, into economy, into the long patience of someone who carried more dead women's memories than anyone living and had learned to spend her own few present-tense words like water poured out on the open Pan, where every drop counts and most of it is gone before it lands. She did not lean. She did not perform. She had buried the performing along with the beauty. What was left was very nearly frightening in its plainness, a woman sanded down by the Remembering to the few hard grains that would not wear away.

"We have a rumour," Yenneth said. "Let us be honest about its size, since Mother Vael has called us to notice things, and she is right that it is the only honest thing we do." A dry thread of something in that, not quite warmth, not quite mockery, gone before you could name it. "A whisper off a salt-road. A trader's wife said it to a trader. The trader said it to a House of Salt factor in Qesh over the bitter coffee — the way men say things to our factors thinking they are passing the time — and the factor, being ours, wrote it down. So. A girl among the wandering people."

She let the chamber hold the shape of it. Nine faces, lamplit. The whole order's deadlock waiting on an old woman's parcelling-out of a story.

"A girl who calms a panicking beast by speaking to it," Yenneth said. "Which is nothing; any horse-breaker does as much. A girl who finds water by walking to it — which is more, but the Attuin find water by walking to it and call it knowing the ground, and they are not wrong to. And a girl who once, the story goes" — and here the old voice did not change at all, which was how Sabra knew this was the grain of it, the thing the whole tale was wrapped around — "told a raiding party to put down their spears. And they put down their spears. And afterward they could not say why."

The silence after that was a different silence than the one Ysolde made. Ysolde's silence was a held breath of agreement. This was the held breath before a fall.

"It is a good story," Yenneth said, into it, gently dismantling the thing she had just built, which was its own art and one Sabra was only beginning to see for what it was. "The Deep is full of good stories. A raiding party that lays down its spears makes a better grief-song than one that does not. The salt-singers will have improved it twice before it reached the trader's wife." She turned her head, slightly, and looked at the woman who sat for the breeders' House — Hessa of the Long Breath, younger than the rest, with the still, careful face of someone holding very heavy water and trying not to spill — and something passed between the two of them, quick and buried and not at all resolved, a glance like a knife shown and sheathed before the eye could be sure it was a knife. "The Long Breath would have us believe it is *their* story," Yenneth said,

and her voice was as level as the Pan. “Their patient, centuries-old story, come true at last. But the Long Breath would believe a sandstorm was theirs if it blew in the right direction.”

Hessa’s face did not move. It cost her not to move it. Sabra saw the cost — the held water, the careful hands, the thing under the stillness that was not guilt yet, not quite, but was the country guilt would later be built on — and she marked it, the way her tongue found a splinter, without yet knowing the shape of what she had found.

“We do not act on rumour,” Yenneth said, to the whole round now, the brief turn toward Hessa folded away. “We do not bury a rumour. We have buried enough on better evidence than this — and Mother Vael will not thank me for saying so, but we have. And we do not crown a rumour either, before the Open Hand grows hopeful. We will not make a god out of a horse-breaker because we are weary of a splint. We do the one thing this Circle has forgotten how to do, having spent forty years learning to veto one another instead.” A pause, dry as salt. “We *go and look*.”

“Send the Veil,” said Vael, without heat. “If it’s true — if there is truly a girl in the Deep who can do what only the drowned have done — then the matter ends quietly, by the law, before the temples or the kings or the Open Hand can make a banner of her, and we are arguing over a corpse. Which is at least a thing this Circle is efficient at. We have practice. Send the Veil. Let it be done in the dark. Let me carry the hating of it, as I have carried the rest.”

“Send the Veil,” said Ysolde, and now there was distaste in it, plain and cold, the open hand closing just enough to show it could, “and you have decided the answer before the question, and called it prudence. The Edemre do not assess, Vael. They do not weigh. They are a knife. You point them and they conclude. You would send a conclusion to gather evidence. You would send the verdict to the trial.” She turned her beautiful weary face away from the Closed Hand, as from a thing settled. “If we wish to know what is in the Deep, we must send something that can come back and tell us — and not something that can only come back and tell us it is done.”

And here it came. Sabra felt it coming the way she felt everything coming now, a breath before the room did — felt the old woman’s attention begin to move, felt it the way you feel a held gaze before you have turned your head — and she had time, just, to arrange her face into the smooth attentive nothing the order had spent eight years teaching her to wear over the leaking seams, before the Salt Mother turned, deliberately, slowly, with the unhurried economy of a woman who wasted no motion, and looked at the back of the chamber. At the youngest person in the room.

“Send an initiate,” Yenneth said. “Unraised. Unthreatening. A girl with a salt-trader’s papers and a good eye, who reads to the wandering people as a girl and not a knife. They will give a girl bread and news and the long way round of their hospitality. They will give a knife the open sand to bleed out on. Send

someone with the Reckoning strong enough to know what she is looking at — strong enough to tell a horse-breaker from the thing that drowns halls. Which is not a distinction the Veil is built to draw, and not one the Open Hand wishes drawn.” A pause. The old eyes, which gave away nothing, gave away nothing now; whatever Yenneth was doing she was doing it in a place none of them, not even Sabra, could see into. “Sabra of the House of Salt has the best eye we have made in a generation. The order spent eight years making it. Let us, for once, spend the thing we made. Let her go and *look*, and bring back what is true — only what is true, no more and no less, which is harder than this Circle imagines — and then we may argue over a fact instead of a fear. Which is the only argument we have a hope of finishing.”

The leaning, this time, was all toward Sabra. The whole round turned its lamplit weather on her at once, and it was not warm. She stood very still under it and let it come, because there was nothing else to do, and because being looked at by nine women who could each take a person apart was a thing she had been trained for and had still never quite been prepared for, the way you are never quite prepared for cold water no matter how often you enter it.

And she understood several things at once, because that was what she was for, because the window had no shutter and the room poured itself in.

She understood that Yenneth had just done something the rest of the Circle had not caught — had moved her, Sabra, like a tile, with two sentences, into a game whose board she could not see and whose other players did not yet know a piece had been placed. She understood that the choice of *her* was not idle and not even mostly about her eye; that an order swimming in good eyes did not need this particular girl from the House of Salt for an errand any sharp initiate could run; that the Salt Mother wanted a *particular* pair of eyes on this child in the Deep and had spent a little of her scarce, hoarded authority — the authority she let out of its cellar perhaps twice a season — to put those eyes there, and that the spending told you the errand mattered more than the room was being allowed to know.

She understood that Vael was already filing her away. She could see it in the grey stillness across the round, the small recalculation: *Yenneth's creature*. The Salt Mother had named a House of Salt initiate and the House of Salt was Yenneth's own ground, and so to the Closed Hand, Sabra was now and forever a hand of the woman steering the board, and that would cost her later — in a frostiness, in a door that did not open, in a word not spoken in a room where a word would have helped her — and she had not chosen it and could not refuse it and would pay for it anyway. That was the order. You were filed by your usefulness to someone else's design before you had finished understanding you had been used.

And she understood that Ysolde was looking at her with sudden bright interest — the interest of a woman recalculating in the other direction, the interest of the Open Hand discovering that the eyes going into the Deep were young, and

unraised, and impressionable, and might, with the right warmth at the right moment, be made to *see* the girl the way the Open Hand needed her seen. That would cost her differently. The Closed Hand would freeze her out; the Open Hand would try to take her in. She did not yet know which was the more dangerous, the cold door or the warm one. She would learn.

And under all of it, in the locked salt-white room she had never let any of them into, the one place where the leaking window had a shutter and the shutter stayed down, she understood the rest. *A girl who could do what this child can apparently do.* They were not sending her to find a horse-breaker. They had not, any of them, for all the careful dismantling of the rumour, truly behaved as if they believed it was a horse-breaker; you did not deadlock the Circle of the Adima Ru over a girl who talked to beasts. They were sending her to find another door that opens and will not shut. They were sending her down onto the very thing she had watched the order do to Imel eight years ago — not the Pan itself, but the law that fed the Pan, the law Vael had said the hard word about so steadily, *drowned, with our own hands.* They were going to send her to find another Imel. And depending on what she brought back — on what her famous, leaking, best-in-a-generation eye decided it had seen — this Circle would either bury the girl or crown her, and either way Sabra would have been the one who walked out into the desert, looked at a stranger across the open sand, and pointed.

That was the part the smooth attentive nothing did not cover. She held it inside the locked room and did not let it reach her face, and was distantly, coldly proud of how well she did not let it.

“Mother,” she said, and inclined her head the exact degree the occasion required, no more — because more would have read as eagerness and the room would have catalogued the eagerness, and less would have read as reluctance and the room would have catalogued that too, and she could afford neither, not with the Open Hand warming toward her and the Closed Hand freezing. “I’ll bring back what’s true.”

“I know,” said Yenneth. “It is the only thing I have ever asked of you.” And then, quieter, so that Sabra was not entirely certain the rest of the round was meant to hear it, or that it was meant for the round at all: “It is harder than they think.”

She turned back to the Circle, and the audience was over. Sabra watched the nine of them fold back into their disagreement like water closing over a dropped stone — the Open Hand and the Closed Hand finding each other again across the lamps, the old grievance settling back into its grooves, the brief stillness Yenneth had made already filling in — and she was dismissed, with a small turn of the Salt Mother’s hand, into the lamplit corridors of the only home she had, with a salt-trader’s papers to collect and a long way to fall.

She went up before she went down. She always did, when the Hold had frightened her in a way she did not want it to know about.

There was a stair at the western end of the upper galleries, worn hollow in the centre of each tread by feet older than the order's present quarrel, that climbed past the cell-rows and the memory-vaults to a high gallery with no name and a long view — the one where they had stood the children in the cold eight years ago, the day she had watched what the order did to a girl who could do too much, the day the locked room in her had first acquired its lock. She did not let herself think the name of that day on the way up. She thought instead about the count of the treads, which she knew, and the give of the salt-dust under her sandals, which she knew, and the particular cool that came off the inward walls, which she knew, because the known things were a kind of railing and she wanted a railing.

At this hour the gallery was empty. The work of the Hold ran by the reversed clock the orders kept and exploited — the deep hours of noon were for shade and sleep and the indoor business of scheming, and the corridors below were thick with it, the soft traffic of women carrying messages that were never written and decisions that were never minuted — but no one came up here at noon. There was nothing up here but the view, and the view at noon was punishment.

At this hour the Pan was white. Properly white. A hammered sheet of light flung flat out to the world's rim, salt to the horizon and beyond it, so bright it had no surface, so bright the eye kept trying to find the place where the white stopped being ground and started being sky and could not find it, because there was no such place, because the Pan at noon erased the line between the world and what was above it. You could not look at it long without the glare beginning its slow work behind your eyes, the dull ache that became, by evening, a swimming of pale shapes in the dark of your own lids. And so of course she looked at it long. That was the other thing she did when she was frightened, the thing the order had not taught her and could not unteach her: she made herself look at the thing she did not want to look at, on the theory — childish, she knew it was childish, she did it anyway — that a thing looked-at could not surprise you from behind.

Somewhere out there, small and bright and bitter in the salt, in the country that had no edge, was a desert rose that had been a girl who could stop her own nosebleed by deciding to. Sabra did not know her name. The Circle did not know her name. She was a sentence in a factor's report, a horse-breaker to be argued over, a tile on a board only the oldest woman in the order could see — and Sabra was being sent to walk out onto that white nothing and find her and look at her with the best eye the order had made in a generation, and bring back the single word, *true* or *not*, that would decide whether the girl was drowned or crowned.

She was twenty years old. She had given the order everything except one room, and she had told herself for eight years that the room was enough — that you

could serve a thing wholly and still keep one locked place where you privately did not forgive it, and that this was not the same as a lie. That the servant on the corridors and the locked room at the top of the stair could both be true. That you could carry the order's salt and the splinter of its drowned daughters in the same body and call the arrangement a kind of honesty, even a kind of strength: the strength of a woman who saw clearly what she served and served it anyway, eyes open, no comforting story. She had been rather proud of that arrangement too.

She was very good at the Reckoning. She could take a stranger apart across a crowded room and tell you what he was afraid of by the time he reached the door. She had turned it on kings' envoys and kitchen thieves and beautiful Ysolde and grey terrible Vael and the still careful guilt-country of Hessa's face, and read them all, helplessly, the window with no shutter.

She had never once turned it, all the way, honestly, on herself.

She knew why, standing in the white glare with her eyes beginning to swim, in the unwatched hour, in the one place in the Hold she came when she was afraid. She suspected, the way you suspect a tooth before it goes — the small wrongness when the tongue touches it, the held breath against a pain not yet arrived — that if she turned the eye inward and looked the way she had looked at Vael, the way she had looked at Ysolde, without flinching, without the smooth attentive nothing she wore even on the inside, she would find that the locked room and the loyal servant could not both be true. That one of them was a story the other was telling. That the honesty she was so proud of was the most carefully constructed lie she owned, and that she did not yet know — could not yet afford to know, with the papers waiting and the desert waiting and the long way down opening under her like the white pan opening under the world — which of the two of them was the liar.

She did not turn it inward. Not today.

She had a salt-trader's papers to collect. She had a girl in the Deep to find and point at, a stranger out there in the white with no edge who would give a girl bread and news and the long way round, and whom Sabra would repay with the truest eye the order had made and the single word that would drown her or crown her.

She turned her back on the Pan, finally, eyes swimming with white, the pale shapes already swarming in the dark when she blinked, and went down to do it — and did not yet know, because how could she, she was only very clever, and cleverness is not the same as wisdom, that was the thing the Deep was going to have to teach her the hard way — that she would never, after this, stand on this gallery again as the woman who was standing on it now.

Chapter Two — The Long Water

The caravan sang at night because the night was when you could afford to.

By day you saved your breath for the walking and the beasts and the heat, and you went quiet and folded inward the way everything in the Deep went quiet and folded inward under the white hammer of the sun. There was a discipline to the daylight that no one taught and everyone knew. You did not waste words; words were water spent through the mouth. You did not waste motion; motion was sweat, and sweat was the slow giving-back of the wet you had walked all night to find. So the long water moved through the bright hours like a thing half-asleep, the beasts plodding nose-to-tail with their heads low and their lips crusted white, the people swaddled to the eyes in their head-cloths, each of them gone down into the small cool cave behind their own face where the heat could not entirely reach. You did not even look at the horizon if you could help it. The horizon at noon was a lie that swam and shivered and offered you cities that were not there, water that was not there, the dead seas come back that were never coming back. You looked at the sand in front of your feet and you walked, and that was the whole of the law of the day.

But when the sun went down off the edge of the dune-sea and the sand gave back its heat in one long sigh and the cold came walking in behind it — and the cold did walk, that was the truth of it, you could feel it come across the dunes like a thing with feet, like a guest you had been waiting for, drawing the warmth up out of the ground and out of your bones until you were glad of the fire you had cursed the memory of all day — then the Attuin lit the dung-fires and put the beasts to their knees in a ring and ate. And then, because they were alive, and because tomorrow they would walk again, and because a people who live on the open sand learn early that the only thing the desert cannot take from you is the thing you give away first — they sang.

Naia could not sing.

This was a standing joke of the long water, her caravan, the strung-out family of forty-some souls and their herds that had been her whole world for as long as she had a world. She had a voice like a beast with its foot caught, they said. Like a hinge. Like a man being robbed in a narrow place. Old Dassa swore it could curdle milk in the udder; her cousin Vekh claimed once, with the straight grave face of a man delivering a death, that a hunting cat two dunes off had heard Naia reach for a high note and gone home to its mother. They said all of it with love and made her sing anyway, badly, on purpose, because her badness was a gift she could give and the giving was the point.

So she sat at the fire with Tamar's shoulder warm against hers and made her terrible noise into the grief-song they were singing for old Bey, who had been returned to the sand two crossings back. It was a long song and a slow one, the kind that did not hurry because grief did not hurry, and it had places in it where the women's voices climbed and held and the men came in underneath like the

ground coming up to meet them, and Naia knew exactly none of those places, or knew them and could not find them, and went sailing flat and groaning through every turn while the family bore it like weather. Tamar laughed at her with her eyes while keeping her own voice true and low and lovely. That was the trick of it, the thing the family loved: that Naia's badness made Tamar's goodness visible, that the two of them side by side were the whole joke and the whole tenderness at once, the hinge and the lovely thing the hinge let swing.

That was happiness.

She would have told you, if you had asked her — and no one asked her, because to ask would have been strange, and the long water did not do strange to its own — that it was a specific warmth on the left side of her body and a specific cold on the right, the fire and the coming night, and a song she was ruining, and a girl beside her who let her ruin it.

She did not know what she was. That has to be understood. Everything that came after — the running, the salt, the terrible thing she did with her own throat to a field full of men, the part of her that went out into the dark of all those other women and did not entirely come back — all of it has to be laid against this, the first fact, the floor under the whole of it: that the girl at the fire making the family laugh did not know she was anything at all but theirs.

She knew she was good with the beasts. Everyone knew that.

When a milk-camel went mad with thirst or fear and the men could not hold it, they sent for Naia. It happened the way it always happened, three nights into that crossing: a young she-camel, a nervous one, freshly weaned of a calf the family had been forced to leave when the calf's leg broke on the bad ground — the mother had smelled the leaving, somehow, smelled the abandonment in the wind for two days, and the grief or the thirst or both had turned in her at last and come out sideways as terror. She bolted in the half-dark when they brought the ring of beasts down to kneel, screamed that ugly tearing scream the camels gave, and three men got a rope on her and were dragged through the cold sand on their backs for it, and a fourth went down under the rolling killing feet and rolled clear with the wind knocked out of him and his head bleeding, and someone shouted the only thing there was to shout.

Naia. Get Naia.

She came across the camp not running, because you did not run at a panicked beast, but moving with that long unhurried purpose she had, head a little tilted, and she walked up the rope toward the rolling white eye and the foam strung off the working jaw and the feet that had already put one grown man on his back. The men gave way for her. They always gave way for her. And Naia walked into the place no one walked into, into the killing arc of the front legs, and she put one hand flat in the air between herself and the heaving chest — not touching, never touching, a mad camel that you touched was a camel that took your arm — and she said something.

Not even words, half the time. A low going-down note in her chest. It was not loud. It was not, to any ear at the fire, anything at all except the girl murmuring the way she murmured to all of them, the long soft nonsense the beasts liked. But the note went *down*, and down again, a sound that seemed to start somewhere under her ribs and pour out of her and lie along the sand, and Naia leaned into it, and her own eyes half-closed with the work of making it, though no one saw that, no one was looking at her eyes, they were all looking at the camel —

— and the camel shuddered.

The killing feet came down and stayed down. The white eye rolled once more and then steadied. The screaming jaw worked itself slower, slower, foam to froth to nothing, and the great body that had been all hard angles and murder went soft along its lines and stood, just stood, blowing, broken-hearted, calm. Naia stepped in close then and put her hand on the long neck and leaned her own forehead against it, and the beast leaned back into her, the whole grieving weight of it, and the two of them stood in the firelight a moment like that, the girl and the animal, holding each other up.

The men shook their heads.

“The long water’s luck,” said Vekh, and spat to one side for the look of the thing, and went to see to the man with the bleeding head. And that was all. That was the whole of it, to them. They did not think any harder about it, because the Attuin did not think hard about luck; you took it, you thanked the sand for it, you did not interrogate it in case it took offence and left.

She knew she could find water, too. She had always been able to find water, the way you can always find the door of a dark room you grew up in. It was not a thing she did so much as a thing that happened to her — a kind of leaning, a tilt in the world toward the wet, a sense that out across the dark sand the ground itself was canted ever so slightly downhill toward something, and if she walked the lean, there it would be. She had done it that very crossing, on the second night, when the song-road Amma Reshi steered them by had run out at a seep that the last drought had killed: the old woman had sung them to the place and the place was dry, cracked mud and a white rime and a stink of dead reeds, and there had been a long bad silence around the cold fire that night, the kind of silence the desert taught you to dread. And Naia, who had not been able to bear the silence, had stood up and turned slowly in the dark the way you turn to feel which way a faint wind comes from, and felt the lean, and pointed with her whole arm into the black northeast and said, *there. Not far. Half a night*, and no one had argued, because it was Naia, because it was the long water’s luck, and they had broken camp in the cold and walked the lean and at the grey edge of dawn come down into a little blind canyon no song-road named, and there was water, green and old and good, standing in a stone cup the sun never found.

They drank. The family drank, and the beasts drank, and a child too young

to know better had splashed it and been cuffed gently for the waste of it and laughed, and no one — no one — counted how often the luck was hers.

Only Amma Reshi watched her with her head tilted, the way Sabra's order would one day watch her, though Naia had never heard of Sabra or the order and would not for some weeks yet.

Amma Reshi was the long water's salt-singer — its rememberer, its keeper of the songs that were also maps, the old woman who held in her the names of every night-road the caravan had ever walked and every soul it had ever carried, going back past where the names stopped being people and started being weather. She was older than Yenneth and looked it less, a small dry brown woman like a knot in a rope, with hands that had gone to leather and eyes that had not gone anywhere at all, that were still as black and quick as a young woman's and saw, the family agreed, entirely too much.

She sang the song-roads in a thread of a voice that the family steered by in the dark. *Turn here. Water in four nights. The bad ground on the left hand.* Sung, always sung, because a road that was sung could not be dropped or burned or read over your shoulder by an enemy in a market; it lived in the one place that could not be stolen without killing the woman who held it. When she was very tired you could hear the whole shape of a night's walking laid out in the rise and fall of her, the dunes in the long notes and the hard ground in the short ones, a country made of breath. The children thought she was a little frightening. The grown thought so too, and loved her, and brought her the first of everything, the first dates, the first milk, the first cup of the bitter coffee when a stranger came, and she took it all as her due, because a people who carry their whole road in one old woman do not let that old woman go thirsty.

Amma Reshi watched Naia gentle the grieving camel, that crossing, and did not call it luck.

She waited until the beast was standing and the men had carried their hurt one back to the fire, and the camp had folded the small drama away into the night the way it folded everything away, and then she said, from where she sat a little apart with the fire behind her so her face was only a shape:

"Come and sit by me, long water's luck."

And Naia came, because you came when Amma Reshi called, and sat in the cooling sand at the old knees with the fire's warmth on her back and the night's cold beginning to find her front, and waited, easy, expecting nothing, because she had never in her life been given a reason to expect anything from Amma Reshi but a hard sweet date pressed into her hand and a scrap of an old song.

"You spoke to it," Amma Reshi said.

"I always speak to them." Naia drew her knees up and wrapped her arms round them. "They like the low voice. Everyone does it."

“Everyone speaks *at* them.” The old woman’s voice came out of the dark very level. “You speak *into* them.”

Naia turned that over and could not find the catch in it. “Same thing.”

“It is not.” Amma Reshi leaned forward, and the fire found one side of her face, the deep cuts of it, the black bright eye. “Listening is my whole craft, child. I hold a thousand voices that are not mine, and I know the grain of every one. I know a true word from a hollow one across a fire.” She paused, and Naia, who knew the old woman’s pauses, knew this was not a pause for a word she had lost. It was a pause for a word she did not want to say. “...a hand,” Amma Reshi finished. “A hand that goes inside and takes hold of something and turns it. You put a hand inside that animal tonight. I watched you. I saw the thing in it that was screaming, and I saw you lay your hand on it and gentle it like a child, and the animal had no more say in it than that man had any say in being knocked down.”

A small thin draught of something cold came into the warm room of Naia, then. She had no name for it. She would spend a long time learning the name. “I didn’t hurt it,” she said, and heard her own voice come out a little high, a little young. “Amma. I didn’t. It’s calm now. It’s *better*.”

“I know it is, my heart. That is not what frightens me.”

“You’re frightened?” The idea was so strange Naia almost laughed. She could not remember Amma Reshi frightened. Amma Reshi was the thing the family was *not* frightened *because of*; she was the floor under the fear, the held road, the one who said *turn here* in the dark and the dark obeyed. “Of what? Of me?”

The old woman did not answer that directly. She reached out instead and took Naia’s chin in her dry little hand, the leather fingers cool and very strong, and turned the girl’s face to what was left of the firelight, and looked at her — looked into her, the way she looked into the song-roads when she was choosing a turn, the way you look at a country you are not sure you can cross. She looked for a long time. Naia let her, because you let Amma Reshi do what Amma Reshi did, but the cold draught did not go away now, it widened, it became a small steady wind, and under the old woman’s looking Naia began for the first time in her life to feel that there might be a country inside her she herself had never crossed, that there might be doors in her she had never tried, that *the long water’s luck* might be a smaller, softer word laid over the top of a larger, harder one to keep the family from having to look at it.

“I have heard that hand before,” Amma Reshi said at last, very quietly, almost to herself, her thumb moving once across Naia’s jaw. “Once. Long before you were milk in your mother. In a place I went and came back from — which is more than most who go there can say. And it was not a good place, child, and they were not good people, the ones who had it, and they did not gentle camels with it.” She stopped. “I am too old to lie to you about my own ear. The work

of it is past me. So I will not. You have it. I do not know how — you, born in a tent at the edge of nowhere — but you have it. And an old woman who carries a thousand dead can tell you it has killed everyone I ever knew who carried it.” She was quiet a moment. “I am sitting here in the cold trying to decide whether I love you enough to tell you that tonight, or only enough to let you keep your fire one crossing longer.”

“Tell me what?” Naia’s voice had gone to a whisper. “Amma. What *am* I?”

And Amma Reshi looked at her one moment more, the girl’s whole frightened young face in her hand, the firelight and the cold night dividing it down the middle — and Naia would understand this later, would understand that the old woman had made, in that single held breath, a choice. A choice about how much of the desert’s hardness to let in early. About whether to crack the warm shell now, here, by her own fire, where she could hold the girl while it broke; or to give her a little more of being only theirs before the rest of it came, knowing the rest of it was coming, knowing she was choosing the girl’s last easy nights against the girl’s better warning, and choosing wrong, perhaps, choosing the soft thing and not the wise thing, the way the loving so often choose.

She chose mercy.

“Nothing,” Amma Reshi said. She let go of Naia’s chin, and patted it, once, the way she had patted it a thousand times. “You have done nothing, my heart. Nothing at all.” And the cold wind dropped, swallowed back down into the warmth as fast as it had risen, because the old woman willed it down, because she gave the girl her own ease back with both hands. “I am old and I see roads where there are none. I have carried the dead so long I hear them in everything — in the wind, in a camel’s grief, in a good girl’s kindness to a beast. Pay me no mind. Go.” She made a little shooing motion, dry as ever. “Go and sing badly for Bey. He liked you. He’d want the terrible noise — used to say you were the only one whose singing he could pick out of the dark. Meant it for an insult, the old goat. Meant it for love too, I think. Go on. Give it to him.”

And Naia went.

She went because she was told to, and because the fire was warm, and because Tamar was there, and because she was eighteen years old and the whole of her wanted, with an animal’s whole wanting, for the cold thing not to be true. She put the small cold stone out of her mind the way you put a stone out of your sandal — felt for it, found it, shook it free into the dark, walked on — and she dropped back down into her place at the fire, into the warmth on Tamar’s side, and she lifted her ruined hinge of a voice into the grief-song where it had got to, and made her terrible loving noise into the night for old Bey, who would have wanted it.

Behind her, alone at the lip of the firelight, Amma Reshi sat very still with a road running through her head that she did not trust, and did not sing.

Tamar Spear-Daughter watched her go and come back and was, as she generally was when she watched Naia, of two minds and not at peace with either.

Tamar was three years older and a hundred years harder, and she had taken the spear at fourteen and never put it down, which made her, among the wandering people, a particular kind of woman — not rare, the Spear-Sisters were not rare, but *chosen*, marked, set a little apart from the marrying and the mothering by her own decision and the desert's consent. A girl came to the spear or she did not. Most did not; most chose the tent and the children and the long warm tangle of an ordinary life, and there was no shame in it, the Attuin heaped no shame on a woman for wanting to live the way the body wanted to live. But some came to the spear, and of those some left it again when their hearts turned toward a hearth, and that too was honored, the spear laid down with a song and no reproach. And a few never left it. Tamar was one of those. She had known it at fourteen the way she knew water in her mouth, that this was the shape her one life wanted, the watch and the scout and the hard clean edge of things, and she had taken the spear and meant to die with it in her hand, old, on a good night, having paid all her debts.

She had killed raiders. She did not make a song of it, but she did not flinch from it either; it was the price of the road, and she paid it, and she carried it. She had carried shame and paid it down to the last grain, that time as a girl she had let the watch slip and the long water had walked into bad ground in the dark and lost two beasts and nearly a child; she had walked three days at the rear with her face uncovered for that, eating the dust of the whole caravan, which was the shame-payment the Spear-Sisters held to, and she had come up from it harder and cleaner and never let the watch slip again. She had taken a man salt-bound off a raid two summers back — a wiry furious young throne's-man who had spat at her and promised her a hundred deaths — and worked him a hard fair year at the beasts and the loads, and fed him from her own bowl when the feeding fell to her, and at the year's end let him go whole and grumbling and, against all the odds and both their wills, oddly fond; he had touched his forehead to her at the parting, the throne's-man's gesture, and she had touched hers to him, the Attuin's, and they had stood a moment in the awkward grace of two people who had started as a debt and ended as something with no name, and then he had walked south out of her life and she had not been sorry and had not been glad and had thought about him sometimes since, which surprised her.

She was good at the things the Deep asked of her. She had made a hard clean life out of being good at them. And she had not expected, at twenty-three, to be ambushed.

It was the leaning of the head that did it. She could date it exactly, if she were the kind of woman who kept such dates, which she told herself she was not. There had been an evening the crossing before last when Naia had been mending a hobble by the fire, frowning down at the knot of it, and had leaned her head a little to the side the way she did when she was thinking hard — just that, just

the small tilt, the firelight running along the line of her jaw and into the soft mess of her hair — and Tamar had been in the middle of saying something to her cousin about the morning's order of march, and had simply lost it, lost the thread, lost the whole sentence out of her mouth like water through a cracked cup, and had to ask the cousin what they'd been saying, and the cousin had given her a look. Just a look. A long sister's look that knew exactly what it had seen. And Tamar had felt the heat come up her neck and had cursed herself for it and gone back to the order of march with a great show of being a serious woman about serious things, and had not fooled the cousin for an instant, and had known, with the same cold clean certainty she knew water and bad ground, that she was in trouble.

Because it was not done, exactly, to want a girl the caravan called its luck.

It was not *not* done either — and this was the hell of it, that there was no clean wall to stand on the right side of. The Attuin had no law against any love that paid its debts and kept its word. Two Spear-Sisters sharing a tent surprised no one and scandalized less. A marriage-circle of three had raised half the children at the last fire; old Bey himself, the very man they were grieving, had been *dasha* to a woman and a man both for forty years and the three of them had been the steadiest household in the long water until the woman died and then the two men had grieved her side by side and gone on. There was no closet here to come out of, no category to cross, no name for the thing Tamar felt that was different from any other name for wanting; the desert had never built that particular wall, and Tamar had grown up free of it and never once thought to be grateful, the way you do not think to be grateful for the air.

So it was not the wanting of a girl that stayed her hand. It was the *which* girl.

Because Naia was *theirs* in a way that made her feel, to Tamar, like family. Like the caravan's own held breath. She was the long water's luck, and luck was a thing the whole family owned together and no one owned alone, and to reach for her was to reach into something that belonged to forty people, to put your hand on the held breath of your own and try to take it for yourself. And Tamar of all people — Tamar who had taken a furious man as a debt and given him back whole, who had walked three days in the dust to pay down a shame, who had built her entire one hard life on the difference between what was hers to take and what was not — Tamar knew the difference between taking and being given, and knew that this thing, if it was ever to be a clean thing, would have to be the second and never the first.

So she did the hard sensible thing, which was nothing.

She did nothing every night. She sat her shoulder against Naia's at the fire and let the girl sing badly into her ear, the dreadful flat groaning beloved noise of her, and felt the wanting move through her like weather — and it did move like weather, it came up out of the south of her and crossed her and went, a real thing, a thing with heat in it, and she let it cross and let it go, every night, unspent. It was a discipline as hard as any the spear had taught her, harder,

because the spear's disciplines all said *act* and this one said *hold*, and holding was the thing Tamar had always been worst at, the still watch in the dark with the body singing to move. But she held. She held because spending it carelessly was a way of taking, and because if she ever did get to lay her hand against this girl it was going to be because the girl reached for her first, with both her eyes open and her whole self in it, and not because a Spear-Sister three years older and a hundred years harder had leaned in one warm night and helped herself to the family's luck.

She would, in time, be given. That is ahead.

On the night the singing carried out over the cooling sand, and old Reshi sat apart with a road she did not trust running through her head, Tamar only sat with her shoulder warm against the warm shoulder of the girl who did not yet know what she was. She felt Naia come back from the old woman's fire carrying something — she was a scout, she read bodies, she felt the small new stillness in Naia, the way the girl dropped back into her place a half-beat too carefully, the way she pitched into the grief-song a shade too hard, as if to drown a thing — and Tamar's first instinct, the watch's instinct, was to ask. *What did the old one want. What's wrong. Who do I go and speak to.* But she did not ask, because the song was running and you did not break a grief-song to interrogate, and because whatever it was had already been smoothed over, she could see that too, the old woman had clearly chosen to smooth it, and a Spear-Sister did not go undoing what a salt-singer had chosen to do.

So she let it lie. She would think, much later, that this was the last night she had the *choice* of letting a thing lie — that after this the things stopped being small enough to leave alone — and would not forgive herself entirely for spending the choice on quiet. But that is later, and self-forgiveness was a country Tamar crossed slowly all her life.

That night she only listened to the terrible beloved noise, and felt the warm shoulder against her own, and thought, in the simple unfrightened way of a woman who has not yet been given the size of the thing she is sitting beside: *I could be happy here. I am happy here. Let it be like this a while longer.*

It was like that two more crossings.

Two more nights of fires and grief-songs turning slowly toward the ordinary songs again as the grief wore down, the way grief did, two more days of the white hammer and the folded-inward silence and the long lean toward water, two more evenings of the cold coming across the dunes on its feet and the dung-fires lit and the beasts brought down to their knees in a ring. Naia gentled nothing she did not have to gentle in those two crossings, and found no water no one else could have found, and was, for those two crossings, blessedly, only the long water's luck and only theirs, and laughed and sang badly and sat with her shoulder against Tamar's, and Amma Reshi watched her less, or watched her the same and let nothing show, and the cold stone stayed shaken out into the dark where Naia had thrown it.

Then the salt-trader came up out of the south.

He came at dusk on the third evening, the way decent travellers came, walking his two laden beasts slow into the firelight with his hands well away from his sides so the watch could see them empty, calling the greeting across the cold air in the trade-creole, asking — politely, unhurried, exactly as a decent man should — where there was water, and what was the news, and might a tired traveller share a fire and a cup before any talk of trade. He had good papers; he showed them unasked, which was the mark of an honest man, the seals of two oasis-states and a throne all in order. He had a quiet eye and an easy way and a manner of looking at things sideways rather than full-on, the way you do when you have learned that looking full-on makes nervous people more nervous, and he was, all of him, easy to like. The family liked him. They gave him the cup and the dates and the place by the fire, and he praised the coffee and asked after Bey by name when he saw they were a house in mourning, having read the signs of it, and grieved decently with them for a man he had never met, and it was all exactly right, every grain of it, and the long water settled around its new guest warm and unsuspecting in the cold.

And Amma Reshi, from her place at the lip of the firelight, looked at the salt-trader the way she had looked at Naia gentling the camel — head tilted, the black bright eye gone still, listening into him, into the grain of his voice and the set of his throat and the thing that lay under the easy sideways manner the way the larger harder word had lain under the long water's luck — and she went very, very still.

And she did not call that luck either.

Chapter Three — The Veil and the Ledger

In Qesh you could buy anything, which meant that in Qesh the only thing worth having was the knowledge of what a thing actually cost, and that was the one commodity the oasis did not sell. Kessa had been coming to Qesh for fifteen years to collect on exactly that ignorance, and the city had never once disappointed her.

It was the deep hour after the heat had broken and before the cool had settled, the hour when Qesh came alive the way the desert lived — by lamplight, by night, the reversed clock of the Saltlands turned all the way over so that the great fat oasis-state lay sweating and luminous under its strung lanterns like a thing brought up from underwater. The water made it. That was what the canyon-cities never forgave Qesh, and what the Attuin never forgave it more: it sat on a true spring, an ancient welling of green water that should by every law of the desert have meant a temple and a discipline and a careful hoarded thirst, and instead Qesh had taken the gift of the spring and spent it like a

drunk heir, on fountains that ran for the pleasure of running, on the perfumed steam off a hundred bath-houses, on the wet roses some madman of a gardener kept alive in clay troughs on the rooftops at a cost that would have watered a caravan. The smell of Qesh was the smell of wealth doing exactly what wealth wants to do, which is announce itself: jasmine and roasting meat and the green river-rot of standing water and, under all of it, faint and constant, the salt the city pretended it had escaped.

The Three Wells stood at the top of the perfumers' street, three storeys of carved screen and cool stone, and its upper rooms were where the people who could afford the knowledge of what a thing cost came to forget they knew it. Kessa climbed to the upper rooms a little before the lamps were lit and took the long couch in the corner where the screen threw a lattice of shadow, and ordered the good wine, the dark Ochre vintage that tasted of stone and the inside of a cellar, and put her sandals off, and waited, and let the room arrange itself around her the way rooms did.

She was not veiled tonight. This is the first thing to understand about Kessa, and the city understood it about her the way prey understands a thing in the grass without being able to name it: an unveiled Edemre was a woman at her leisure, and a woman at her leisure was the safest creature in Qesh, and so the perfumed crowd in the upper rooms of the Three Wells parted around her and flowed back and bought her wine and flirted in her direction with the particular bravery of men who have heard the stories and do not believe, quite, that the stories could be sitting on a couch drinking their wine with her sandals off. They were right not to believe it and wrong to be brave. The veil was in her sleeve. The veil was always in her sleeve. The difference between the safest woman in Qesh and the last thing you ever saw was a single motion of one hand, and the men flirting did not know that the choosing of whether to make that motion was, to Kessa, the only genuinely interesting decision a person ever got to make, and that she made it slowly, and for her own reasons, and never for free.

A wine-merchant's son tried first, a soft handsome boy with rings on every finger and a laugh he had practised. He sat without being asked and told her she had the saddest eyes in Qesh, which was a line he had clearly used to good effect on women who wanted their eyes called sad, and Kessa let him talk for the length of time it took her to drink a measure of the Ochre, and then said, kindly, "Your father waters his wine. So do you." She said it without heat, the way you might tell a man his sandal-strap was loose, and watched the practised laugh fall off his face and something younger and more honest come up under it, and for that one second, before he gathered himself and stood and went away stiff with wounded dignity, she had liked him better than she had liked anyone all evening.

She drank, and she watched the door, and she did the thing that passed in her for patience, which was not patience at all but a kind of held stillness, the Edemre stillness turned down low and idling, her pulse slow as a sleeping animal's, the whole machine of her body ticking over at a fraction of its cost while the unimportant night went by. She had come for the king's brother, and

the king's brother had come, obligingly, to her.

She felt him before she saw him — felt the wanting come into the room, which was a thing she could do, read the temperature of a crowd's desire the way the Reckoning read a famine in the price of bread. There was a knot of disturbance at the stairhead, a man pretending not to look at the room while looking at all of it, and she let her eyes go to him last of everything, the way you save the one sweet at the bottom of the cup.

His name was Theron and he was pledged to the temple at Stonereach, which meant he wore the grey stone-collar and had sworn the long vows and was, by the law of Sun-and-Stone, a man who did not do the things Theron very much wanted to do, and the wanting came off him across the room like heat off the Pan. He was younger than she had expected and better-made, with his brother the king's heavy good looks worn lighter on him, a softness in the mouth that the collar had been put there to discipline and had not. He had come up the stairs in plain travelling grey with the collar showing, which was either great courage or great foolishness, a temple man letting himself be seen in a pleasure-house, and Kessa understood as she watched him stand there that it was neither, that it was a kind of honesty — he had not been able to make himself sneak. He had wanted to come, and so he had come, and he would wear the collar while he did it because the collar was true and the wanting was true and Theron, she saw, was a man being slowly torn down the middle by the fact that two true things could not both be kept.

She read him the way the order's women read, though she had left the order's women a long time ago and kept only the skills she liked: she read the fine sheen of sweat that was not the room's heat, the way his eyes did the inventory and then came back, ashamed, and then did it again; she read the collar he kept touching, the vow sitting on his throat like a hand; she read that he had decided, somewhere on the way up the stairs, that he would have this one transgression and confess it later and be forgiven, that he had already, in the ledger of his own soul, *budgeted* for her — and she felt the old cool amusement move in her, because that was the thing men like Theron never understood, that you could not budget for the Edemre, that the whole point of her was that she did not appear on any ledger a man kept; she kept her own.

He had to ask three different people who she was. She watched him do it — watched the first answer make him go still, watched the second make him touch the collar, watched the third, from a fountain-keeper who leaned in close and said something short, make the colour go out of his face and then come back doubled. The stories. He had got the stories now. *You don't come back the same.* And having got them he stood at the stairhead for a long moment in the lamplight with the whole of his torn life balanced on the rail under his hand, and Kessa watched him choose, and felt the small clean pleasure she always felt at watching a person choose a true thing, even a ruinous one, especially a ruinous one. He crossed the room.

He did it badly, which she liked. He came too fast and then stopped two paces off as if he'd walked into glass, and stood there with no idea what a man did with his hands when he had decided to ruin himself and arrived to find the ruin sitting up and looking at him with its sandals off.

"You're not what I expected," Theron said, when he had finally crossed the room, when the wine had done its honest work and the couch had become a thing for two.

"No one is. That's not about me. That's about expecting." She let him sit. She moved her foot a little to make room, no more than that, and he sat as though he'd been granted a throne. She let the silence do a little of the work, because silence was a tool and most people could not stand it and gave you things to fill it. He turned the wine-cup in his hands. He looked at the screen, at the lattice of shadow it laid across them both, at anything that was not her face. He filled it. They always filled it.

"They say —" He stopped. Touched the collar. Went on, lower, the brave foolish thing: "They say a man who — who goes with one of you —"

"Mm. They say a great many things." She turned on the couch, unhurried, and looked at him fully for the first time, the way she did almost nothing else fully, with the whole of her attention arriving all at once like weather, and watched him feel it land, watched the breath go out of him at simply being *looked at* that way, which was most of it, which was nearly all of it, the looking; the rest was only craft. She had spent fifteen years learning that nobody is looked at. People are glanced at, assessed, wanted, used, but the steady full arrival of one person's entire attention on another is so rare that most people go their whole lives without it once, and a man like Theron, raised in a temple that taught him his body was a debt and his wanting a flaw, had certainly never had it, not once, not from anyone, and she gave it to him now across the small distance of the couch and watched it nearly undo him before she had laid a hand on him at all. "You hear it as a warning. Or as a door someone left open."

He did not answer, because the answer was on him, in the open mouth and the held breath and the hand gone still on the collar at last, and she let him not answer, which was its own mercy and its own cruelty. She reached out and took the wine-cup from him, gently, and set it on the low table, because his hands had begun to need something to do and she would not let them do it with a cup. Then she did the thing she had come up the stairs to do, which had nothing yet to do with the veil in her sleeve, and everything to do with the slower instrument.

She gave him the long way round. She was in no hurry. She was never in any hurry; hurry was for people who feared the thing would be taken from them, and nothing was ever taken from Kessa that she had not decided to set down. She began with his hand, the one that had been worrying the collar all night — took it off his own throat where it kept returning, and held it, just held it, in both of hers, and let him learn what his own hand felt like when someone

held it as though it were worth holding. The temple had taught him to mistrust his hands. The temple had taught him to mistrust everything from the collar down. She unlearned it for him slowly, in the dark of the upper room, with the screen laying its lattice across them and the city running its wasteful fountains far below, reading him as she went — the catch of breath that meant *there*, the place the vow had wound him tightest, which was always, with these collared men, the place a hand had not been allowed, the place they had been told to be ashamed of so long that the shame had grown into the flesh like a vine into a wall — and she went to that place last and slowest, the long way round, and when she reached it she did not hurry through it and she did not perform tenderness she did not feel; she gave it attention, the same total weather-arrival of attention she had given his face, and felt under her hands the moment the vine let go of the wall.

What she did and how long she took over it is between Kessa and Theron and the god of Sun-and-Stone he had budgeted to confess it to. But she did not flatter him and she did not perform and she did not hurry, and she let him keep, the whole way, the thing the temple had taken and the wine-merchant's son had never had to give — his own choosing, his own hands, the power to close the last of the distance himself, which she made him do, would not do it for him, waited at the edge of the long unhurried middle of it until he understood that she would wait there all night if she had to, that nothing would happen to him that he did not reach out and take, and watched the understanding arrive in him like water coming up in a dry well, and let him take it. And somewhere in the unhurried middle of it the brave fool stopped being able to remember the shape of his own vows, and somewhere near the end of it he said her name like it was the only word the stone faith had ever actually taught him, and she let him.

Afterward, when he lay wrecked and astonished and not at all the same — they really did not come back the same, the stories were the one true thing in Qesh — she propped herself on one elbow and looked at him with the plain frank pleasure of a craftswoman who has done a true thing properly, and felt no tenderness and no contempt, only the clean satisfaction of the work, and the small old ache, far down and well-managed, of a woman who could give this and had decided long ago never to need it back. He had his arm over his eyes. His chest was still going hard. The collar lay where she had set it on the low table beside the wine, and he had not once reached for it.

“There. Now you’ve something real to confess.” She watched the arm over his eyes. “They’ve had you confess a hundred imagined sins. Bring them a true one. It’s a kindness. Priests get so bored.”

He laughed, helpless, an arm over his eyes, and the laugh broke a little in the middle and she let that go too. “You’re terrible.”

“I’m honest. It frightens people.” She lay back and looked at the carved ceiling, where some long-dead artisan had cut a pattern of interlocking circles into the

stone, the kind of patient lovely work nobody looked at any more. “Go to sleep, Theron. You chose well. That’s more than most men can say of a whole life.”

“My brother is a king,” he said, into the dark, the way men did at this hour, offering up the things they thought might make them more to her. “I could —”

“And in the morning you’ll put the collar back on. Because you’re a decent man, and a decent man keeps his word even when it’s killing him. That’s what I like about you.” She said it plainly, a true thing offered for a true thing. “Don’t offer me a king’s brother’s promises. I’m not in any ledger you keep. Go to sleep.”

And because she had told him the truth, he believed her, and because he believed her he stopped talking, and after a while his breathing went long and even, and Kessa lay beside the king’s brother in the cooling dark of Qesh and did not sleep.

She did not sleep. She watched the lamp burn down and thought about nothing in particular, which was a discipline like any other, the Edemre stillness turned all the way over so that even the mind ran quiet, idling, costing nothing. She thought about nothing, and the lamp ate its oil, and the fountains ran their wasteful music far below, and the wet roses on the rooftops drank the spring dry one cup at a time, and across the city somewhere a bath-house emptied and somewhere else a fight ended and somewhere else a child woke and was hushed; and Kessa lay in the middle of all of it, the last safe thing in Qesh, the veil in her sleeve, and let the hours go by until the lamp guttered and the screen turned from black to grey, and the grey hour came.

At the grey hour she dressed. She did it without a sound, in the Edemre way, every motion costed and spent and no more; she did not look at the sleeping man, because looking would have been a thing she did for herself and not for him, and she did not do things for herself at the grey hour. She left the wine. She left the silver collar on the table where it lay, untouched, for him to find and put back on, because the putting-back-on was his and not hers to spare him. And she went down through the cooling city to the low house near the salt-gate where the ledger was kept.

The walk sobered her, if she had needed sobering, which she had not. Qesh at the grey hour was the only honest version of itself — the lamps guttering, the fountains run down to a trickle while the keepers slept, the perfumed steam fallen flat, and underneath it all the salt coming up plain at last now that the wealth had stopped shouting over it for the night. The roses on the rooftops hung shut and dark. A water-seller was already abroad with his skins, walking the empty street with the patient tread of a man who knows the heat is coming and the thirst with it. He nodded to her, not knowing her, and she nodded back, and they passed, two early-rising strangers in the grey, the way the desert taught you to pass: *I see you; I wish you water; I will not trouble your road.* It

was the one courtesy Qesh had not managed to spend. Even here, the desert kept that one law: you did not trouble a stranger's road in the grey hour. The road was hard enough.

The low house by the salt-gate had no sign and needed none. It was older than the street it stood on, a flat-roofed nothing of mud-brick and salt-render with a single door and windows shuttered against the day that had not come, and it sat against the inner face of the salt-gate the way a tick sits against a hide, low and patient and full of someone else's blood. The Edemre had kept a house in Qesh since before Qesh was rich. The ledger lived where the salt-gate was, because the salt-gate was where the night-roads met the city, where the debts of the Deep came in to be weighed against the debts of the canyons, and a debt, like salt, like water, like every other thing the desert traded, had to be weighed somewhere the roads could reach.

Imani was awake, because Imani was always awake at the grey hour; it was the hour the Edemre kept for the ledger, the hour when the debts of the desert were entered and weighed and assigned, before the heat and the living got up and made their noise. She was at the long table with the book open and a salt-lamp guttering and she looked up when Kessa came in and read her, the way they all read each other, the whole of the night taken in at a glance — the loosened thing in Kessa's shoulders, the absence of the collar-smell of temple grey, the particular wrung-out satisfaction that came off her after good work — and what she read made her mouth tip at one corner.

"The king's brother," Imani said. "You look pleased with yourself."

"I am." Kessa shut the door behind her. The room smelled of the salt-lamp and old paper and the iron under-smell the ledger-room always had, that she had never named and never asked about. "Decent man. A vow was killing him slowly. I gave him one true night against it." She came and stood over the book. The lamp threw her shadow up the wall, long and bent at the ceiling. "And you sent for me at the grey hour. You only do that when the book's got something in it I won't like. So. Get it over with."

Imani did not get it over with quickly, because Imani loved her, in the un-jealous frank way of the Edemre, the way that had no walls in it and made no claims and was, Kessa had come to understand over a great many years, the only love she had ever fully trusted precisely because it asked her for nothing she did not freely set down. They had been lovers a hundred times across the years and were not lovers now and might be again or might not, and none of it touched the steadier thing under it, which had no name in the temple tongue and a dozen in the desert one, none of which Kessa would have said aloud. Imani sat with the book open and her two hands flat on the table either side of it, the way you sit with a thing you do not want to give to someone, and she looked at Kessa across the guttering light with the particular grief of a person who has read the worst of a page before the person it is about has read any of it.

"Sit down," Imani said.

“I’ll stand.”

“Kessa. Sit down.”

She sat. The bench was hard and cold against her. The lamp guttered and steadied. And because Imani loved her she did the kind thing, which with the Edemre was always the slow honest thing, and did not read it out and did not soften it and did not, worst of all, hesitate over it — she turned the book around on the table, slowly, so that the open page came about to face Kessa right-way-up, and laid one finger at the head of an entry, and took her finger away, and said nothing, and let Kessa read it for herself.

Kessa read.

It was an old entry. That was the first wrong note — old debts were settled debts, mostly, the ledger breathed in and out across a generation and balanced; an old entry coming live was the book reaching up out of the past to take hold of the present, and the past always wanted more than the present could comfortably pay. The hand was not Imani’s and not the hand of any ledger-keeper Kessa had known; it was a careful, old-fashioned hand, the letters formed the way they had been formed a generation gone, and the ink had gone the brown that ink goes when it has had twenty-five years to think about what it said.

It was a *blood-debt*. That was the second wrong note, and the worse one. A blood-debt did not settle in coin or service or salt; a blood-debt settled in a life, was sworn on salt against a life, and the ledger did not enter a blood-debt lightly or release one ever, because the whole terrible authority of the Edemre, the thing that made them more than expensive murderers, the thing that let them sleep, rested on the one iron law beneath all the others: *a debt entered is a debt paid*. They killed only against the book. But what was in the book, they killed. That was the leash and that was the dignity and Kessa had never once in fifteen years found the bottom of how much she both hated and needed it. She had wept over the leash and she had blessed it; she had stood over a man she had no wish on earth to kill and killed him because the book had his name, and slept that night, and had been able to sleep that night, *because* the book had his name and not her wishing — because in a world that traded everything, the one thing the Edemre did not trade was the kill, and the not-trading of it was the only floor she had ever found to stand on. They did not kill for hire and they did not kill in anger. They killed what the book had decided, in the grey hour, with two hands flat on the table, generations ago. It was the cleanest thing in a filthy world, and she had built her whole self on standing on it.

And it was entered against a name that was not a name.

The convergent child of the long water’s line.

She read it three times. The cold came on her slowly, which was worse than if it had come fast; it came the way cold comes up out of a well you have leaned over too long, a thing you notice you have been feeling for a while before you let yourself feel it. A debt sworn a generation gone, against a child not then born,

to be collected when the child came into what she was — a debt, Kessa saw, reading it with the cold dropping through her like a stone going down a dry well, that someone very long ago had been clever enough or frightened enough to write against a person who did not yet exist, so that when she finally did, the book would already own her death.

You could not, she thought, you should not be able to do this. You entered a debt against the one who had wronged you, or against the line that carried the wrong forward, blood for blood, and the line was a real thing with real people in it and you wrote it down and the book held it. You did not write a debt against a *condition*. Against a *prophecy*. Against a thing that might be born or might not, into a body that did not yet exist, for a crime it had not yet had the chance to commit and could not, by the look of the words, ever fail to commit, because the crime in the entry was not a deed. The crime in the entry was *what she would be*.

“The long water.” Her own voice came out level, which cost her something. The wandering people. The Deep. *Tamar of the long water*, the by-names ran, the salt-singers’ long-water lines, the old caravan blood that the Ru bred like spear-stock and the Attuin hated them for it. “A convergent child.” She looked up at Imani, and for once the reading went both ways and neither of them bothered to hide it; Imani let her be read, which was a gift and a grief, and Kessa saw on her the thing she had not let herself see on the page, which was that Imani had known what this was the moment she opened the book, and had sent for her anyway, and had sat with two hands flat on the table for an hour waiting for her to come up from the king’s brother’s bed, because there had been no one else the book could hand it to and Imani would not let it be handed to her by anyone but a person who loved her. “Tell me it’s a breeders’ ghost-story. Tell me there’s no such thing. Some old frightened woman wrote a nightmare in the book a generation ago, and it doesn’t get to be real just because she was scared enough to write it down.”

“You’ve heard the same rumour I have,” Imani said quietly. She had not moved her hands. “Off the same salt-roads. A girl who tells raiders to put down their spears.”

The cold finished coming up the well. Kessa had heard it. Everyone who kept an ear to the night-roads had heard it, three weeks running now, the way a true thing comes up the song-roads ahead of any rider — a raid gone wrong in the Deep, a circle of Spear-Sisters who had come down on a smaller caravan and then, the songs said, simply *stopped*; laid their spears in the sand at the word of one girl among the people they had ridden down, and stood there, and could not afterward say why, and were ashamed, and would not sing it themselves so that it had to be sung about them. Kessa had heard it and laughed it off in the way you laugh off the thing you are most afraid is true, because a girl who told trained raiders to put down their spears with a word was not a rumour. A girl who told trained raiders to put down their spears with a word was the Voice at a scale that did not exist, the thing the salt-law was written in corpses to

prevent, the convergence the Ban had been built to drown in the pans before it could draw breath.

“The Ru are sending someone to look,” Imani went on, in the same quiet voice, laying it down piece by piece the way you lay a body out. “Had it two days ago. The order can’t decide — Open Hand wants her crowned, Closed Hand wants her dead, and while they argue they’re sending some House of Salt initiate out into the Deep to *assess* her.” She said the word the way the Ru would have said it, dry and clinical and obscene. “To go and look at a girl and decide whether she’s worth the order’s trouble. And the book —” She stopped. She closed the ledger, gently, the way you would close the eyes of someone, and laid her palm flat on the cover. “The book won’t wait for them to finish arguing.”

“The book doesn’t decide. We decide. Someone decided.” Kessa’s voice stayed level. “Twenty-five years ago someone sat where you’re sitting and wrote a child’s death against a thing she hadn’t been yet, and now you’re telling me the dead get to reach up out of being dead and —”

“Yes,” Imani said. Not unkindly. “That’s exactly what I’m telling you. That’s what the book is. That’s what we are. You know it better than anyone at this table; you’ve made other people lie in beds the book made for them. A debt entered is a debt paid. You said it to me the first night I came here, frightened out of my skin, and you said it like it was the only true clean thing in the world, and you were right, and you have lived your whole life standing on it being right.” She reached across the table and laid two fingers, light, on the back of Kessa’s hand — the Edemre touch, the touch with no claim in it, the touch that asked for nothing and offered everything it had, which in this case was nothing at all but the warmth of two fingers and the truth. “It’s yours, Kessa. The line runs down to you. The book says you carry it.”

There it was. She had known it from the doorway — had known it, truly, from the moment the runner had not been sent to fetch her but Imani had waited up; you did not wait up at the grey hour to hand a woman a debt that wasn’t hers. The line of the debt ran down to her. The dead hand a generation gone had written a child’s death, and the writing of it had run forward through the years the way water runs through a song-road, finding the low places, and it had found her, because the line of the debt was *her* line, was Edemre, was the leash she had built her whole self on holding — and the leash had come round, at last, in the grey hour, and put itself in her hand and named the throat.

Kessa looked at the closed ledger in the guttering light. She did not take her hand out from under Imani’s fingers, which was its own kind of speaking.

Somewhere across the cooling city a king’s brother slept the ruined peaceful sleep of a man given one true thing, his collar untouched on the table beside him, learning even in his sleep the lesson she had taught him, which was that the body was not a debt and the wanting was not a flaw and a true thing was worth its cost. She had given him that. She had walked up the stairs of the Three Wells and given a frightened decent man one true night against the lie of

his whole life and called it charity and meant it, and she had meant it because it *was* — because she had spent fifteen years learning that the only thing worth giving anyone was the truth, and that the truth, given with the whole of your attention and none of your need, was a thing that could remake a person; and somewhere out in the Deep, past the salt-gate, past the night-roads, past the wasteful roses and the run-down fountains and the whole fat escaped city, a girl she had never seen sang badly at a fire and did not know that an old book in a low house by the salt-gate had her death written in it in a hand a generation dead, in brown ink that had had twenty-five years to think about what it said, against a crime that was not a deed but a being, a debt the line of which ran down through the years and through the leash and through the one clean floor Kessa had ever found to stand on, and ended, in the grey hour, in two fingers light on the back of her hand.

A girl who told raiders to put down their spears. A child the Ru would crown or kill, and could not decide which, and was sending someone to *look*. A convergent child of the long water's line.

And the truth — the thing Kessa traded in, the only thing in Qesh worth having, the knowledge of what a thing actually cost — the truth was that she did not want this one. She had killed men she had no wish to kill and slept after, because the book had their names and the not-wishing was beside the point; that was the whole dignity of it, that her wishing did not enter into the weighing. But she had never before sat at the long table in the grey hour and felt her own wish stand up in her like a thing with a spine, felt it look at the closed ledger and say, plainly, in a voice she did not recognise as her own: *not this one. Not a girl who hasn't done anything yet but be born the wrong shape. Not a death written before the child could draw breath. Not this.* And she did not know what to do with the wish, because she had built her whole self on the floor of not having one, and the floor had just spoken under her feet.

"Of course it does," Kessa said. The veil was in her sleeve. The veil was always in her sleeve. For the first time in a very long time, the only genuinely interesting decision a person ever got to make did not feel interesting at all. It felt like a stone going down a well, and no sound of water coming back. "Of course it's mine."

Imani's fingers stayed where they were. The salt-lamp guttered, and steadied, and burned, and outside the shuttered window the grey was going at last to the first thin gold of a Qesh morning, and the roses on the rooftops would open soon and drink the spring, and the city would get up and make its noise and go back to selling everything except the one thing worth having; and in the low house by the salt-gate two women sat over a closed book with a dead woman's writing in it, and one of them carried, now, written into her line in brown old ink, the death of a girl she had never seen, who was at that moment, far out in the Deep, asleep, or singing, or watching a fire, and who did not know, and would not know for a long time yet, that the veil had begun, very slowly, and for its own reasons, and not for free, to turn her way.

Chapter Four — The Stone Bed

The Red Gorge went down into the rock in shelves and stairs and shaded galleries, a city built in the cool of a wound the world had cut in itself an age ago, and Davec had been its king for eleven years and had loved it without once feeling adequate to it, which his father had told him on his deathbed was the only safe way for a man to love a thing larger than himself. *The day you feel adequate to the Gorge, the old man had said, is the day you've started to lie to yourself about it, and a king who lies to himself is just a slow way to bury a city.* Davec had been nineteen. He had spent eleven years trying to deserve the advice.

He was failing, lately, and he knew it, which was at least in keeping.

He stood now at the lip of the high gallery the kings of the Red Gorge had stood at for longer than there had been kings of the Red Gorge — it had been a watch-post first, his father said, before anyone thought to put a throne behind it — and looked down the throat of the city as the day let go of it. The Gorge went down in tiers, and the light went with it, leaving the upper shelves first, so that for a little while each evening the city below him drowned in shadow from the top down, gallery by gallery, while the deep cisterns at the bottom still held a coin of late gold on their black water. He had watched it ten thousand times. It still undid him a little, the orderly drowning of his city in shade, the way the dark filled it like water poured into a cup, patient and certain and from above.

Behind him, in the room that opened off the gallery, Selka had not moved from the deep window where the last of the light still reached. She had a page in her hands. She had had it in her hands for the better part of an hour, and they had said perhaps forty words between them in that hour, and most of the forty had been his.

“Read it again,” he said, without turning. “The middle. Where he stops being polite.”

He heard the small dry sound of the page lifting. Selka read it again. She was sitting in the deep window with the document held to the last of the gallery light, and she read the way she did everything, without waste, her voice giving the Stonefather's words back to him stripped of the incense they'd been written in so that the threat underneath stood up clean. That was the gift the order had sent him, eleven years ago, in the body of a wife: a woman who could take any pretty poisoned thing the world handed you and show you the poison without spilling a drop of it. He had been told, when they married him to her, all the things a young king is told about an Adima Ru wife — that she was sent to steer him, that her loyalty ran to Sett and not to him, that he should love her if he liked but trust her never. He had done it precisely backwards, and it had

been the saving of him, and the order had never quite forgiven either of them for it.

“‘It grieves the temple,’” Selka read, “‘that the succession of the Red Gorge rests, as it has these eleven years, upon a union the Rite of the Stone Bed has not sanctified, and the temple in its care for the people must ask whether an heir got outside the Rite can be held, in law, a true heir at all.’” She lowered the page.

Davec turned then, because he wanted to see her face when he answered, and found he could not — the window was behind her and the last light came through her and left her a shape, dark-edged, the page a pale rectangle held against the dimming sky. He said a word his father would not have approved of.

“Quite,” said Selka.

He came in off the gallery. The room held the day’s stored heat the way the rock held everything, slowly, grudgingly, giving it back through the night, and it smelled of the lamp-oil that had not yet been lit and of the dry sweet dust that was the smell of the Gorge itself, that he had stopped noticing years ago and noticed now because his whole skin had gone alert. He sat on the low bench across from her and put his elbows on his knees and looked at the swept stone floor between his feet for a while.

“The rest of it,” he said. “He didn’t write a letter to grieve. He wrote it to ask. What does he ask?”

“He doesn’t ask anything.” She turned the page over, found nothing on the back, turned it again. “That’s what’s clever. There’s no ask in it. A demand you can refuse — a demand puts a thing on the table and lets you push it back. There’s nothing on the table here. There’s only the table. And the knowledge that he could put something on it, on a day of his choosing, and you sitting across from it knowing that.” She set the page flat on the broad sill. “Korik never spends without buying. He’s spent a threat here — a real one, a true one, not a bluff. So he’s buying something. The whole question is what, and the whole cleverness is that he hasn’t told us. So you’ll spend the next month guessing. And a man guessing what another man wants has already started bargaining in his own head.”

“I’m not bargaining.”

“You’re sitting in the dark working out what would make him put the knife away.” Not unkindly. “What’s the difference?”

He had no answer to that, which was usual when she was right.

They had no heir yet — that was the cruelty of the timing, and it was not an accident of timing, nothing Korik did was an accident — but the threat did not need an heir to do its work. The threat was the principle. Eleven years ago, when Davec’s father died and the order sent Selka and the Gorge and the

Salthold drank at one another's wells, no one had asked whether a Ru marriage was sanctified by the temple, because everyone had always known the answer was *who cares*; the temple married whom it married and the orders bred whom they bred and the desert had run on that comfortable double bookkeeping for longer than the Stone Bed had existed.

"My grandmother," Davec said suddenly, "was a Ru match. My grandfather's, I mean. The old king's wife. Nobody ever once, in my whole boyhood, breathed a word about whether the temple had blessed it. There were songs about her. There's a *song*, Selka — you've heard it — the one about the queen who could weigh a man's grain by the set of his mouth when he claimed his harvest. That's her. That's my grandmother. And it never crossed a single soul's mind she wasn't the true queen, her sons not the true heirs. And now I'm to lie awake wondering whether I'm a bastard's father in the making." He laughed, and it came out wrong, with no air under it. "Three hundred years. The Rite is three hundred years old. The Gorge is older. The orders are older. My grandmother's barely cold and now her marriage is a question."

"The Rite is three hundred years old," Selka agreed, "and for two hundred and ninety of them it was a thing the temple did for the people who wanted it done — a blessing, a feast, a witnessed bed, a way of making a private thing public and a public thing holy. People liked it. It was warm. There's nothing wrong with a witnessed bed, Davec, in itself; half the Gorge is married that way and glad of it." She picked the page up again, held it the way you hold a thing you've decided is dangerous, by the edges. "It's only the last ten years it's grown teeth. Only the last ten years that *blessed* has crept toward *required*, and *required* toward *the only true one*, and the only-true-one toward *and everything outside it is false, and every heir got outside it a pretender, and every Ru-bred king in the desert a bastard sitting a stolen throne*. That's not the Rite. That's Korik, wearing the Rite like a robe. The Rite is old and most of it is kind. The teeth are new and they're his."

And now here was Stonereach, in a grieving and careful hand, proposing to make the Rite the *only* true marriage in law — which would, at a stroke, on a day of Korik's choosing, turn every king the orders had ever bred into a bastard, and every Ru wife into a concubine, and every careful century of the orders' breeding into so much sand.

"He can't mean it," Davec said, and heard how young it sounded, and hated it. "It's lunacy. Half the thrones in the desert run through a Ru marriage. He'd have to fight every king at once. The Ochre Gorge. The oasis-states, every one, Qesh most of all. He'd be telling half the desert its kings are pretenders and its sons nobody's. They'd burn Stonereach to the foundation stones."

"Would they?" Selka said. "Or would each of them, alone, in the dark, in his own high room with his own clever frightened wife, work out very quietly that the one way to keep *his* line true and *his* sons legitimate is to go to the temple, cap in hand, have the Rite done properly, renounce the marriage the

orders made for him, take a temple wife instead — witnessed and blessed and sanctified — and break with the orders to save his own line.” She let that sit in the dark room. “Not all at once. Not in a war. One king at a time, each one alone, each one choosing his own succession over a quarrel that looks like somebody else’s. That’s not a fire, Davec. That’s the tide going out. And no one ever burned a temple over the tide going out, because by the time you’ve noticed it’s gone you’re already standing on dry sand wondering where the sea went.”

Davec sat with that for a long time. The light was nearly gone now; she was a shape and a voice and the pale page. Somewhere a long way down the city was being lit, lamp by lamp, the small warm points coming up out of the drowned dark like the first stars.

“He’s not threatening to bastardise me,” Davec said slowly, getting there. “He’s threatening to make it *worth my while* to bastardise myself. He’s buying my hands on the knife.”

“There,” said Selka, and there was something in the single word, the schoolmaster’s pleasure when the slow clever boy gets there himself and gets there sound. “Yes. He doesn’t want to ruin you. He wants you to ruin the orders, one careful frightened king at a time, and feel virtuous the whole way, because you’ll be doing it *for your children*. He’s found the lever that turns a good man into his weapon — love of his own line — and he’s pulling it on every throne in the desert at once. Gently. In a grieving hand. So gently each man thinks the choice is his.”

It was a good answer and it was a frightening one and Davec felt the cold of it go down through him properly, the way cold water finds you slow and then all at once. But he had been married to Selka for eleven years and had learned to read the small weathers of her the way she read documents, and there was something in her stillness now that was not the stillness of his clever wife reaching the end of a clever reading. There was a held breath in it. She had stopped turning the page. She was looking at it the way you look at a thing you have just understood and wish you hadn’t, the quiet not of having finished but of having found something further down.

“That’s not all of it,” he said. “You’ve seen something else. Something you don’t want to have seen. What.”

She didn’t answer at once. She set the page down — precisely, as if it might leave a mark on the stone, as if it had weight beyond the weight of a sheet of dried temple reed — and she folded her hands in her lap, and Davec saw, with the part of him that had spent eleven years learning her, that she had folded them to keep them still, which she did when a thing wanted to be said and she was choosing whether to say it.

“How long,” she said, “do you think a man like Korik plans?”

“I don’t —”

“Guess. You’ve sat across a table from him. How long?”

Davec thought of Korik — the broad still hands, the slow voice that never hurried because it had never once in its life been interrupted, the eyes that listened to you with a terrible patient attention as if everything you said were being weighed against the stone and found, gently, to be sand. “Long,” he said. “He plans long. Years.”

“And to do what he’s doing — to make it *worth every king’s while* to break with the orders — he has to have something to offer in the orders’ place. You said it yourself. Half the thrones run through a Ru marriage. But it’s not the marriage they need, not really. A king can marry where he likes. What he can’t get anywhere but the orders is the rest of it.” She lifted one finger off her folded hands, the smallest gesture, counting. “Counsel. The marriages that move water across three generations, that he can’t read and we can. The memory — who owes whom, and why, and since when, that nobody writes down and the orders never forget. The seers.” She lowered the finger. “The disciplines, Davec. The things the orders can do that no throne can do and no temple can do. The real reason every king in the desert keeps a Ru wife and a Ru counsellor and a Ru debt he’d rather not have. Take those away and a Ru marriage is just a marriage. Korik can’t unmake the orders by making their marriages worthless in law. He can only unmake them by making the orders *themselves* worthless — by having, in his own hand, the thing only they have ever had.”

“That’s not possible,” Davec said. “Those are — the temple’s spent three hundred years calling them abomination. In a man. The Voice, the Stillness, the things the seers do — a man who tried it would be — Korik *himself* calls it the foulest blasphemy, I’ve heard him, the disciplines in a man, an unnatural —”

He stopped.

He stopped because Selka had not moved, and her not-moving had become enormous in the dark room, and he understood, the way you understand a sound you’ve been hearing for some time before you noticed it, that she had not been refusing to look at him out of distance. She had been refusing to look at him because of what was in her face.

“He’s training men,” Selka said.

She said it quietly and she said it to the window, not to him, the way you say the thing you have been refusing to say out loud because saying it makes it real.

“The temple’s always trained men. They’re priests. They —”

“Not letters. Not the calendar and the stars and the law.” She turned from the window finally, and the last light was behind her so he could not read her face, only the line of her, the held set of her shoulders. “The disciplines. The Voice. The Stillness. The things only the orders can do, the things the temple’s spent three hundred years calling abomination in a man so that no man would ever *try* — he’s training men to do them. In secret. At Stonereach. I’ve had it from

three sides and I didn't believe any of them until this." She touched the grieving careful page. "This is the move of a man who thinks he won't need the orders' marriages much longer."

"Three sides." Davec heard his own voice come out flat and careful, holding itself level the way you hold a brimming cup. "Tell me the three sides."

She was quiet a moment, weighing how much of the order's underside to lay open in front of him, and he saw her decide to lay it all open, and that — that she decided it without visible struggle, that she had crossed some line in herself before tonight and was only now letting him see she'd crossed it — frightened him more than the rest.

"The first was a girl," Selka said. "A temple servant. The kind of girl nobody looks at, which is the kind the order makes a point of looking at, because nobody-looks-at-her is the most useful thing a person can be. She carries water and empties pots in the lower cells at Stonereach, the old ones, the dry storerooms under the Kiln the temple stopped using for grain a generation ago. The order's had her eye for years, the way the order has eyes everywhere, costing nothing, waiting. A year ago she stopped sending her little nothings about who dined with whom. A year ago she sent up out of the south that the dry cells weren't dry anymore. That there were men kept in them. Young men, she said, who came in ordinary and went strange — who got quiet in a way she'd never seen a man get quiet, who could hold themselves so still she'd think a cell empty and then find a man in it, sitting, breathing slow, watching her, having watched her the whole time she swept. She didn't have a word for it. She's a girl who carries pots. But I have a word for it. You hold yourself that still, you learn to be that quiet inside your own skin — that's the Stillness. The first thing they teach us. The very first thing. She was describing an initiate's drill and didn't know it, and that's why I believed her. A liar would have known what she was describing. She didn't."

The lamp went unlit. Neither of them moved to light it.

"The second was a debt," Selka went on. "You don't need the shape of it; it's order business and it's old and it's ugly. But it came to the House of Salt that a man had been Voiced. A throne-man, a minor one, a clerk in the Ochre Gorge's revenue who one evening did a thing entirely against his own interest and his own nature and his own long habit — emptied a strongbox to a stranger and walked away whistling and could not, after, say why. Only that it had seemed at the time the most natural thing in the world to do. That a voice had said *give it him* and giving it him had felt like setting down a weight. We know that sound. *He heard the Voice and never knew it.* We have the saying because it happens; the order does it; I could do it to you, a little, on a tired night, if I were the kind of woman who would — and I'm not, and I'm telling you so you understand the weight of what comes next, which is: it wasn't us. The order keeps a tally of every time the Voice is spent, the way you'd keep a tally of every time a knife was drawn in your house. It wasn't any of ours. It wasn't an Edemre, and the

Edemre don't waste it on revenue clerks anyway. Somebody Voiced a man in the Ochre Gorge who wasn't one of us. And there are not supposed to be any of those. There have never, in three hundred years, been any of those."

Davec's mouth had gone dry. "And the third."

"The third I didn't want," Selka said, very low. "The third I'd have given a great deal not to have. The third was a name." She paused, and in the pause he heard her gather herself, and when she went on her voice had gone careful in a new way, gentle, the way you are gentle carrying a thing that is alive and frightened and small. "There's a boy at Stonereach. A young priest. Quiet, they say, gentle, the kind that gets given the soft duties because nobody fears him — the calendar, the sick, the reading to the old. And about two years ago he stopped being given the soft duties and started disappearing into the lower cells with the other ones, the ones the girl-with-the-pots watches go strange. His name's Oren." She said the name as if it cost her something to set it down in the room, as if naming him made him real and made what was being done to him real with him. "I have it from the debt and I have it from the girl and they don't know each other and they gave me the same name. There's a boy down there, Davec, a gentle frightened boy, being made into the foulest blasphemy his own faith has a word for — being made into it *by* the men who taught him the word — and the only reason I know his name and not just that he exists is that two people who hate the order enough to spy for nothing both thought I'd want to know there was a boy in it. As if a boy in it changed the arithmetic. As if it weren't the arithmetic." She stopped. "It doesn't change the arithmetic. It's the same disaster with a face on it. But I can't stop seeing the face."

The gallery had gone dark while she spoke. Somewhere below in the Gorge the night-fires were being lit and someone was singing, badly, a work-song, and a child was being called in to bed, and the city went about the ordinary business of being a city, eleven years of which Davec had loved without feeling adequate to it, and over which, he understood now, sitting in the dark with his clever frightened wife, some larger and older weather had been gathering the whole time, out past the rim, the way the beasts went still before a storm they could not yet see.

"You don't threaten to bastardise every Ru-bred king in the desert," Selka said, picking the thread back up out of the dark, steadying herself on the larger thing because the smaller one had teeth she couldn't blunt, "unless you think you're about to have something better than Ru-bred kings. He's not bluffing about the Stone Bed. He's *clearing ground*. He means to break us — the orders, the whole arrangement, the way the world's been split for three hundred years — and put something of his own in the gap. And he's found, or thinks he has, a way to do it that doesn't need a single one of us. The marriage-threat isn't the war. It's the ground being cleared before it. It's him making sure that when he's ready, the kings will already have stepped away from the orders' wells one careful frightened step at a time, so that when the orders look up there's no one standing with them. And then he won't need to fight us. He'll only need to be

the last well anyone's still drinking at."

"And the boys in the cells —"

"Are what he means to be drinking instead of us. A power no man can hold has been the orders' whole purchase on the world for three hundred years — it's why he kept you, it's why he kept every king, it's why the temple has had to grieve and bargain and witness beds instead of simply ruling, because there was a thing the women could do that the men could not, and so the men needed the women, and so the world stayed split and balanced and bound. He's spent his whole long patient life looking at that and deciding it's a tyranny. A power no man can hold. He's not wrong that it's a strange and dangerous thing, a power half the world's locked out of by birth. He's only wrong about the cure. He thinks the cure is to take it. And to take it he has to make it, in men, in secret, in dry cells under the Kiln, out of frightened gentle boys, calling it blasphemy with one side of his mouth and teaching it with the other — because he's decided the blasphemy's worth it if it ends the tyranny, and a man who's decided a sin is worth it is the most dangerous man alive, because he'll pay any price, since to him it isn't a price at all. It's a duty."

Davec stood. He didn't decide to; his body did it, the way it had stood up off the gallery wall when his father died, before he'd understood the news, a body knowing a thing was too large to be received sitting down. He went to the dark window and stood by her and looked down the drowned throat of his city, the night-fires coming up now in their hundreds, the small warm stubborn lights of people who did not know to be afraid.

"If you're right," he said slowly, "then everyone's about to be wrong about who the enemy is. The thrones will line up against the orders, or the orders against the thrones, because that's the old quarrel and it's the one everyone knows how to have. Every king in the desert is going to get a grieving careful letter, and half of them are going to read it the way Korik wants them to read it — temple against the women — and they're going to choose a side in that fight, the old one, the comfortable one, and they're going to choose it *hard*, because there's nothing a frightened man loves like a quarrel he already knows the shape of. And the whole time —"

Selka started to answer and stopped. She put her hand flat on the cold sill instead, as if she needed to feel it. "It was never the temple against the women," she said. "I sat in a room once at Sett and watched the order decide a girl's gift was too dangerous to leave in her — watched them decide it the way you'd decide to put down a lame horse. Kindly. Reasonably. Every voice in the room sure it was mercy." She stopped. Her hand stayed on the stone. "There's rot in Sett as deep as any in the Kiln. You've never met Vael; pray you never do. And there are good priests at Stonereach right now sick to their stomachs at what's being done in those cells — somebody up there is feeding nobodies the truth and that somebody wears a robe." She turned to him in the dark. "The line that matters doesn't run between the temple and the orders. It runs through

both. It always has.”

She came to him then, across the dark room, and that was rare; Selka spent her touch as carefully as her words, and when she gave it, it meant a thing. She put her hand against the side of his face, and he felt the cool dry certainty of her go, just for a moment, into something he had only seen a handful of times in eleven years — the woman under the instrument, the one the order had not managed to file all the way down.

“I was sent here to steer you,” she said. “You know that. You’ve always known that. They told me your weaknesses before they told me your name. They gave me a list of the levers in you — your father’s grief, your fear of the Gorge, your boy’s need to deserve a thing too big for you — and they trained me to pull them, gently, for Sett, so the Red Gorge would always, at the last, do what the order needed. I was very good at it. I was good at it for years. I’m telling you now, in the dark, where Sett can’t hear me, because you should know exactly what I was before you weigh what I’m about to ask.” Her thumb moved once along his cheekbone. “And somewhere in the last eleven years I stopped steering you for them and started steering you for *you*, and I don’t entirely know when. I’ve decided not to be ashamed of it. It wasn’t a day. I keep looking for the day. There isn’t one. It was a thousand evenings like this one, you asking me to read you the cruel part again because you’d rather know the worst than be comforted, and somewhere in the thousandth I looked up and found I’d been steering toward your good and not theirs for longer than I’d known — the way you found out tonight the war’s been coming for a year. It comes from above and from below, the dark and the knowing both. By the time you’ve noticed, you’re already standing in it.”

“Selka —”

“Let me finish, it’s hard and I’ll lose it.” Her hand stayed on his face. “Hear me as your wife and not your handler. Don’t pick the old quarrel. Whatever Korik does. Whatever the orders do. Whatever letter comes, however grieving the hand, however clever the lever, however much your own line and your own unborn sons seem to hang on choosing a side — everyone is going to spend the next year trying to get you to fight the wrong half of the world. The temple will tell you the women are a tyranny. The order will tell you the temple’s a heresy. They’ll both be telling you a true thing to make you do a false one. Don’t. Whatever it costs you. Don’t pick the old quarrel.”

“That’s going to be very hard advice to take,” Davec said, “when the wrong half of the world starts killing people. And it will. If you’re right it will. There’s going to come a morning when someone I love is dead and the only fast clean comfort on offer is to know whose fault it was and which way to point the spears.” He pressed the heels of his hands flat against the cold sill, knuckles white in the dark, as if the stone could take some of it. “And you’re asking me, on that morning, to stand in the middle and tell my grieving captains *no*, *not them either* — and what do I point them at, Selka? A spear wants a body.

Grief wants a body. You can't run a spear through a — through whatever it is you're calling it. Men can only kill men. So men kill men. It's the only enemy that bleeds."

"I know," said Selka. "I didn't say it was good advice. I said it was true." She did not take her hand away. "And I know what I'm asking. I'm asking you to be the one thing harder to be than a brave king — a king who won't be brave in the easy direction. I'm asking you to be the iron that lays itself down on the one morning it would feel like glory to come up swinging. I can't promise you it'll work. I can't even promise you you'll live to see it work. I can only tell you that the other thing — the comfortable thing, the picking of the old quarrel —" She stopped, and looked past him, out at the city going dark from the top down. "You watch it every evening and you think it's beautiful. Picking the old quarrel is letting it fill all the way to the bottom, gallery by gallery, and no one left to light the lamps."

And she stayed there, her hand on his face, the two of them not steering anything for a little while, in the dark, in the cool of an old wound in the world. Below them the city sang badly to itself, the work-song wandering off its tune and finding it again, the child long since called in, the night-fires standing in their hundreds against the drowned dark — the Gorge he had loved for eleven years without once feeling adequate to it, and felt, now, with the cold knowledge of the gathering weather sitting in him like swallowed water, less adequate to it than he ever had, and understood at last that his father had been telling him this exact thing, on this exact kind of night, with the city drowning in shade below: that the love was the only true thing, and the inadequacy was the proof of the love, and a king who ever stopped feeling the size of the thing he was failing to deserve had already begun, quietly, from above, to bury it.

He put his own hand up and held hers against his face, and they stood, and did not light the lamp.

Chapter Five — A Whisper in the Salt

The whisper came up the song-roads the way all the dangerous things came to the Salthold, slowly and from below, passed hand to hand by women who did not know they were carrying it, until it reached the only ears in the desert trained to hear what a thing meant rather than what it said.

It came the way the salt itself came — by night, in small loads, on the backs of the people who never owned the thing they carried. A grief-song sung over a fire two hundred miles out on the Deep, overheard by a water-broker who repeated three words of it to a cousin at a well; the cousin saying them to a trade-wife at Qesh because they had a pretty turn and meant nothing to him; the trade-wife who was more than a trade-wife folding them into a packet of ordinary news

and sending the packet north along the long-water caravan's route, the words riding inside a tally of hides and dates and the price of bitumen the way a single seed rides inside a fistful of meal. By the time the packet reached Sett, four mouths had carried the three words and not one of them had known what they weighed.

It reached Yenneth on a morning when she had not expected to live to hear anything new.

She was very old. She had stopped counting the years the way other women stopped writing letters to the dead — not from grief but from a sense that the correspondence had become one-sided. What she had instead of years was the Remembering, the long unbroken chain of it, mother to daughter to chosen daughter back past the Drying and the founding and the first cruel sensible rules, and she had carried more of that chain than anyone alive, and it was killing her now the way carrying water uphill for ninety years will eventually kill the strongest woman: not as a wound but as a settling, a giving-way, the body finally presenting its accounting. She did not mind. She minded only the timing, which was poor, as the timing of important things nearly always was.

The morning had begun, as her mornings now began, with an inventory she conducted lying flat. The left hip first — that was the worst of them, a deep wrongness that the Stillness could no longer wholly persuade to be quiet, only argue down to a dull civil conversation. Then the chest, where the breath had grown a small catch she had decided not to examine too closely, the way you decide not to count the water in a skin you already know is the last one. Then the hands. She flexed them under the coverlet and found them still hers, which was a daily mercy she had stopped expecting and never stopped being glad of, because a woman of the Remembering whose hands went strange before her mind did spent her last weeks unable to tell which fingers were closing — her own, or some grandmother's reaching up through the chain to take one last hold of the living world. Her hands closed clean. Good. She had the day.

She had been lying so, taking her accounting, when the girl came.

The girl was one of Hessa's, which meant she was clever and frightened in equal measure, the two qualities the Long Breath cultivated in its couriers the way other Houses cultivated beauty or stillness. She came in low and quick and quiet, the way they were trained, and knelt at the cot with her head bowed and her hands folded and every line of her saying *I am no one, I was never here*, and Yenneth, who had trained a hundred such girls in her time and buried more than she liked to remember, felt the old fondness and the old grief move in her together, which at her age were also the same disease.

"You've run a long way to kneel on my floor," she said. "Sit back on your heels at least. I'm dying, not deaf; you don't have to fold yourself up like a letter."

The girl sat back. Her eyes came up, briefly, and Yenneth read the whole of her in that one glance the way she read everything now, without effort, without

even the courtesy of pretending not to: the dust still on her at the hairline where she'd wiped fast and missed a patch, the particular tremor of someone who has carried a thing too important for too long and is terrified of setting it down wrong, the small defiant pride underneath the fear that she had carried it at all. Hessa chose well. Hessa always chose well; it was the one thing about Hessa that was not in doubt.

"Say it," Yenneth said. "And then — listen to me now — say it *again*, the second time slower. The first time you'll say what you think it means. I want that; it tells me about you. The second time you'll say what was *said*. That tells me about the thing."

The girl wet her lips. "There is a child among the Attuin," she said, "a convergent —"

"No." Gently, but it stopped her like a wall. "That's not the word that was said to you. That's the word that's been frightening you all the way north. Hessa didn't say *convergent*. She'd never put that word in a courier's mouth; it gets couriers drowned. You added it. You guessed, and the guess has been a coal in your chest for two hundred miles. I'm not angry. Put it down on the floor there, by your knees, and leave it. Now. The words. The exact ones. As they came to Hessa, as Hessa gave them to you."

The girl breathed. Yenneth watched her find the discipline, watched her go from the frightened clever child to the instrument the order had made of her.

"A salt-singer of the Attuin," she recited. "The long-water caravan, sent word south through the trade. She has a child of her road who hears the salt where there is no salt. Who answers the Reckoning a breath before it is asked. The salt-singer is afraid, and asks — she does not say of whom — whether the orders still drown what they cannot use."

The cell was quiet. Out beyond the small high window the Salthold went about its cold immaculate morning, indifferent as weather. Somewhere below, the initiates were at their drills; Yenneth could hear, faint and rhythmic, the call-and-stop of a Reckoning master walking a line of girls through a reading, the same beating-in she had received eighty years gone and could still feel in her own throat if she went looking — *read the hand, name the lie, say nothing, say nothing, say nothing until it pays*. Above her, in the high halls she would not climb again, the Circle was deadlocked, as it had been deadlocked for eleven years, Vael's silence and Ysolde's appetite grinding against each other over nothing, because there had been, until this morning, nothing.

Now there was something.

And the something was exactly, precisely, the thing she had spent the back half of her life arranging not to be surprised by — and she was surprised anyway, a small cold lurch under the breastbone that had nothing to do with the catch in her breath, and that told her she had grown careless, or hopeful, which at her age were the same disease wearing two coats.

She lay with the words and turned them in her hands the way she turned everything, slowly, looking for the seam.

Hears the salt where there is no salt. A figure of the Attuin, that one; they said it of a child too quick, too strange, who startled at things no one else could feel. It meant a sensitivity, an oversupply of the thing the orders drilled for and the spear-lines could not use. It meant *too-bright child*, the kind the swap sent to the salt. That alone was not new; that came up the song-roads twice a generation, and the order claimed such children when it could and the Attuin gave them up with a grief they dressed as mercy, and it had never once made Yenneth's breath lurch.

It was the second phrase that did it. *Answers the Reckoning a breath before it is asked.*

She turned that one for a long time.

A gifted child did the Reckoning *as* it was asked — heard the question, read the asker, gave the answer, all in the same fast beat that to the untrained looked like prophecy and was only attention. A prodigy did it faster, did it before you'd finished the sentence, and the orders loved a prodigy and kept her like a hawk. But *before it is asked* — to give the answer to a question that had not yet been framed, to read the want off the body of the asker before the asker's mouth had shaped it into words — that was not speed. Speed could not get there; there was nothing yet to be fast about. That was a different gift entirely, wearing the Reckoning's borrowed clothes. That was the Reckoning reading the want, yes — but answering the want, *moving toward it before it spoke*, the way a body moves to a command it has not consciously heard. That was the Reckoning and the Voice running together in a single child, each one feeding the other, and the child doing it the way a baby breathes: without being taught, which meant without anyone ever having taught her to *stop*.

The wall had a crack in it. Out on the Deep, in a girl who hears salt where there is no salt, the wall the orders had built across the one circle — three hundred years of careful mortared brickwork, every law a brick, every drowning a stone laid true — the wall had opened a hairline crack, and the crack was a *child*, and the child did not know she was one.

"Does Hessa know," Yenneth said, "that you brought this to me first?"

The girl's eyes flickered — there, the throat, the small swallow, the same tell the merchants showed and the queens and the dying, the body always telling the truth the mouth was deciding whether to. "No, Mother."

"You're sure. Think before you answer me a second time; I'll know if you're guessing."

The girl thought. Yenneth watched her actually do it, retrace her own steps, the satchel and the well and the long road and Hessa's hand on her shoulder in the dark. "She said the House of Salt," the girl said slowly. "The *House*,

Mother. Not you. I came to you because —” and here the fear came back into her, naked, ” — you are the House of Salt, in the end. Everyone says so. And it was so heavy. I wanted it in the strongest hands I knew. Not in a room.”

The strongest hands. The child had walked the most dangerous word in the desert two hundred miles and then, terrified, had chosen of her own untrained heart to lay it in the one pair of hands old enough and crooked enough to do something other than the obvious thing with it. The girl thought she had played safe. She had, in fact, just changed the future, and would never know it, and that was the only kind of mercy Yenneth had left to give her.

“Good,” Yenneth said. “Keep it so. You brought it to the House of Salt — me, the House, the same thing, you said it yourself. You found me alone, you said your piece, you went. You did not add a word and I did not give you one. You were never here in any way that matters. If Hessa asks, you tell her the House of Salt has the whisper and is considering it, which is true, and you let her read whatever she likes off your face, which she will, and none of it will be a lie. Can you do that?”

“Yes, Mother.”

“Then do it.” She let her hand fall to the coverlet, palm up, and the dismissal was in the gesture, gentle and total, a tide going out. The girl rose, hesitated — there was something she wanted, Yenneth saw it gather and not quite arrive, some word of blessing or comfort the child had carried two hundred miles half-hoping for and was too well-trained to ask. Yenneth gave it to her anyway, because it cost nothing and the girl had earned it and because a woman finishing her accounting can afford to spend the small coins freely. “You carried it well,” she said. “Heavier than they knew when they handed it to you. You set it down in the right place. Go and eat something and sleep, and forget you ever heard the word that’s lying there beside my cot. I’ll have it cleaned up before anyone comes.”

The girl’s eyes shone, just for a breath, and then the training closed over them and she was gone, low and quick and quiet, no one, never here.

And Yenneth lay alone with the thing she had spent forty years pretending she was only watching for, and now had to *do something about*, before the Circle did the something it knew how to do.

The House of Salt could sit on a whisper for a week, a fortnight if Yenneth herself ordered it, but Hessa had her own ears and her own terrors, and the Long Breath had spent fifteen hundred years aiming at exactly this and would not be able to keep its hands off the news that the arrow might have landed. The whisper would reach the high halls. And when it did, the Circle would do what a deadlocked thing always did when finally handed a question it could agree on: it would close ranks against the danger.

Yenneth could see it whole, the way the Remembering let her see most things whole now, every move already played by women a hundred years dead in halls

a hundred years gone. Vael would invoke the salt-law, calm and grieving and unanswerable, and she would be *right*, that was the horror of Vael, she would lay out the three hundred years of corpses with her dry exact voice and not one woman in the Circle would be able to say she was wrong, and at dawn a child would be walked out onto the White Pan in the order's grieving ranks, *this is mercy, this is the law*, and the crack in the wall would be sealed over with a small body and the wall would stand another age. Or — worse, because it wore a kinder face — Ysolde would reach for the child with both her bright open hands, would see in a convergent vessel not a danger but a *crown*, the chance at last to stop hiding, to make the order gods, to rule the desert in the open with a living miracle for a banner; and she would love the child while she used her, genuinely love her, which was the most dangerous thing Ysolde did to anyone. And either way — the drowning or the crowning, the salt or the throne — the one chance the desert had not had in three hundred years would be spent before a single soul understood that it had come.

Unless someone got there first.

She had known this morning would come — not the shape of it, you could never know the shape, but the *fact* of it, that a day would arrive when the whisper she had been listening for all her life finally reached her, and on that day she would have one move and the move would have to be already prepared, because an old woman dying in a cell does not improvise the future. So she had prepared it, slowly, the way she did everything now: not a plan so much as a readiness, a piece set quietly on the board years before the board needed it.

Someone the Circle trusted. Or rather, someone the Circle did not *suspect* — those were different things, and the second was the one that mattered. Someone too junior to be imagined as the holder of a design, gifted enough to make a true read of a strange child out on the Deep, sent under a cover so ordinary the Circle would forget it had been sent.

And — this was the part Yenneth examined now with the cold attention she gave to every move that cost her something, and this one would cost her, she could already feel the price gathering — someone with a wound in exactly the right place. A girl who could be sent to assess a child marked for drowning and would discover, out there with the read in her hands and no House standing over her, that she could not do it. That the assessment came back wrong because the assessor's own buried heart had turned it. Yenneth did not want a clean instrument. A clean instrument would make a clean read and hand it up the chain and the chain would do its work. She wanted a flawed one. She wanted a girl with a fracture running through her exactly where a fracture was needed, so that when the order leaned its weight on her she would *break the right way*.

She had been watching such a girl for four years.

She turned her hand over on the coverlet. *Gifted at the Reckoning. Obedient. A trace of pride the masters recommend pruning.* And, buried in an old roll she had asked for because she asked for everything: a list of the children the House

of Salt had taken out to the pans to watch, sixteen years gone, the morning they drowned the woman called Imel. A small name on a long list. *Sabra, age eight.*

She had remembered the name on the list the way she remembered everything, and she had set it quietly on the board and waited, and now the board needed it.

“Send for the initiate Sabra,” she told the steward when the woman came at midday with the broth Yenneth would not finish. “This afternoon. And have the long-water cover made ready — salt for the Attuin caravan, an initiate of the House of Salt riding out to learn the trade. Quiet. The Circle needn’t be troubled with so small a thing.” She let the smallest dryness into it, the institutional shrug that made the unremarkable invisible. “Beneath their notice.”

The steward bowed and went, and did not for a heartbeat suspect that she had just been handed the lever of the age, because that was the whole art of it, and Yenneth had been practicing the art since before the steward’s grandmother was weaned.

The summons came while Sabra was at the Reckoning, and she nearly fumbled the read because of it, which had not happened to her since she was fourteen.

She was working a merchant — a real one, a fat anxious salt-factor brought in for the initiates to practice on, who thought he was negotiating a tithe and did not know he was a lesson. He sat across the low table in the practice cell with his hands working a string of trade-beads and his whole soft history written on him for anyone trained to read it, and Sabra was trained, Sabra was very trained, and she had been taking him apart all morning with the quiet absorbed pleasure of a woman doing the one thing she does better than anything else.

She had his tells laid out for her like a hand of tiles. The throat first — he swallowed before a lie, always, a small drop in the apple of it that he’d never know he did. The left hand — the beads moved faster when she touched a true fear and stopped dead when she touched the fear *under* the fear, the real one, the bottom one. And the breath — he took a particular small breath, high in the chest, half a heartbeat before each untruth, a breath like a man stepping onto a stone he isn’t sure will hold. She had read the throat and the hand and the breath, and underneath them she had read the architecture they guarded: that he feared a debt he had not declared, that he wanted the order’s protection more than he wanted the silver he was haggling over, that the place where the fear and the want met was a brother-in-law in Qesh who held a paper this man would kill to burn. She had it all. She had the whole shape of him, and she was reaching for the bottom of it, for the brother-in-law, reaching the way you reach for a cup you have set down on the same table a thousand times, without looking, certain of the place —

— and the runner touched the door, and said, low, *Mother Yenneth*, and the cup was not where her hand expected it to be.

The certainty went out from under her like a stair that isn't there in the dark. For one whole second she was not reading anything; she was a girl in a cell hearing the most impossible two words in the order spoken about *her*. And the merchant, who had felt the air change without knowing what it was, took his small high breath and lied to her — *no, no other paper, no, only the one* — and lied to her successfully, the first lie all morning that she let go past her clean.

She let it go. There was nothing else to do; she could not chase it now. She gathered herself the way they were taught to gather, breath low, hands still, the warm coal of her pride banked down hard — *accuracy*, she told herself, not pride, only accuracy, the warm thing she carried that was hers and that the order would have wanted to prune out of her if it ever saw the size of it — and she finished the drill clean enough that the master at the wall made only a small mark and not a large one. Then she rose, and bowed to the merchant who would never know he'd been a lesson, and walked out into the cold corridors with her heart doing something undignified in her chest.

Because you were not summoned by Yenneth.

Yenneth was not a person you were summoned by; Yenneth was a fact of the order, like the salt or the law. Yenneth was the Remembering itself, the longest chain anyone had ever carried, the spine the whole sisterhood was built straight down. Yenneth was dying — everyone knew it, in the unhurried institutional way the order knew all its truths, the way it knew which queens were failing and which springs were going brackish, knowledge held without urgency and acted on slowly — and initiates did not get sent for by the dying spine of the world. Initiates got *assessed*, and *placed*, and *pruned*, and forgotten, and one day if they were very good and very fortunate they got raised, and Sabra had spent her whole obedient gifted life climbing toward that distant raising one careful read at a time. You did not skip the ladder. You did not get sent for.

The corridors of the Salthold ran cold even at midday — built windowless to the pan, all the order's eyes turned inward, salt-white walls that drank the heat and gave back a dry chill that got into the joints of the old and the bones of the young. Sabra walked them with her sandals whispering on the swept stone and her mind running its useless frightened circuits. *What did I do. What did the file say. Did the master mark me down, did Hessa speak against me, am I being pruned, am I being placed, am I being sent away.* She passed an alcove where two younger initiates were drilling the Stillness, sitting so motionless they might have been carved, one of them with a sheen of sweat on her lip that meant she was holding her pulse down past where it wanted to go, and Sabra felt a stab of something that was almost homesickness for the simple terror of being thirteen and only afraid of the obvious things.

She reached the cell. She stood a moment outside the door with her hand not yet on it and made herself breathe — low, even, the practiced breath, the one the merchant took before his lies and she took before her truths — and then she went in.

The cell was small and bare and smelled of salt and old skin and the particular dry sweetness of a body finishing, a smell Sabra knew from the infirmary wing and had not expected to meet here, in this room, attached to this name. There was the cot, and a stool, and a small high window letting in a blade of white pan-light, and laid out on the cot under a thin coverlet was a ruin. That was the first thing — the body. It was so reduced, so neatly diminished, the great spine of the order folded down to a few sticks of woman, that Sabra felt the floor tilt under the simple wrongness of it, the way you feel the wrongness of a felled tree you have only ever seen standing.

And then the eyes opened on her, and the ruin had nothing to do with the eyes.

They were the most awake eyes Sabra had ever been looked at by. They came open without haste and found her standing in the doorway and *took* her — there was no other word — the way Sabra herself took a merchant, except that what Sabra did across a morning this woman did in a single unhurried glance, and did to a *trained* reader, which should not have been possible, which the Reckoning master said was *never* possible against an alert adept, and here it was being done to her. Sabra felt every tell she owned lift off her body and arrange itself for inspection. The dust she'd missed, the fast pulse, the pride banked down — she felt it all rise and lay itself out like a hand of tiles for a player who had invented the game, and there was nothing she could do, no stillness fast enough, no defense; she stood in the doorway being read all the way down, and understood for the first time, completely, what it was she did to the fat frightened merchants, and felt sick with it.

"You're frightened," Yenneth said. The voice was thin but it was not weak; it came up out of the ruin like clean water out of a poor well. "Don't be ashamed of it; you'd be a fool not to be. A girl who walked in here calm would tell me she didn't understand where she was, and I'd send her away. Sit." A glance at the stool. "Down. I won't have you bleeding tells onto my floor the whole time. It's untidy."

Sabra sat. Her knees were glad of it.

"Now," the old woman said, and let a silence stretch — not an empty one, a working one, the silence of a master deciding where to set the first cut. And then she set it exactly where Sabra had no defense at all. "Tell me what you remember of the pans. When you were small. The morning they made the House of Salt take the children out to watch."

The warm coal of Sabra's pride went cold in an instant, all the way through, from the inside out, the way a coal goes when you pour the night's water over it before sleep.

Because that was the one thing in her she had folded so small and put away so deep that she had nearly succeeded, across sixteen years, in not knowing it was there. The white blinding morning. The crust of the pan so bright it hurt to look, the heat already standing up off it though the sun was barely clear of

the gorges. The order in its grieving ranks, robe-white against salt-white, the whole House of Salt drawn up in a long line with the children placed in front so they would see and not be able to look away, eight years old and her hand held too tight by an initiate she didn't know who was crying without sound. The woman walked out across the crust, small and getting smaller, not dragged — that was the thing Sabra had folded down deepest, the thing that had made it unbearable — not dragged, *walking*, on her own feet, because they had Voiced her just enough to keep her walking and not enough to spare her knowing, so that she went out to her own drowning upright and aware. *This is mercy. This is the law. Watch and understand.* And eight-year-old Sabra had watched, and had not understood, and had carried the not-understanding sixteen years like a stone swallowed whole.

And Yenneth had reached down into her past the throat and the left hand and the practiced breath, past every defense Sabra had spent her life perfecting, all the way down to the folded thing at the very bottom, and picked it up, and turned it to the light.

"I —" Sabra said. Her voice came out wrong.

"You remember her name," Yenneth said.

Sabra's whole body went still — not the trained Stillness, the other kind, the animal kind, the rabbit under the hawk's shadow.

"They didn't tell it to you," the old woman went on, unhurried, gentle, merciless. "Nobody told an eight-year-old the name of the woman on the pan; it wasn't the kind of thing the House said aloud. You remember it anyway. You heard it somewhere, in a corridor, behind a hand, before or after, and your child's mind took it the way a child's mind takes the one thing it's not supposed to, and you have carried it for sixteen years, and you have never once said it. Not to a friend, not to a lover, not into your own pillow in the dark. Because you understood, even at eight — *especially* at eight, children understand these things better than we let ourselves remember — you understood that in this House her name was the dangerous thing. The body was the law. The name was the crime. So you swallowed the name." The awake eyes did not soften. If anything they sharpened, into something that was almost tenderness and almost a blade, and Sabra could not have said which frightened her more. "And that, Sabra, is why I sent for you. Not your Reckoning, though it's very good, better than your masters write down, which means you've been hiding the size of it from them, which I also know. I sent for you because you kept her name."

Sabra found she was gripping her own knees. She made the hands let go. They did not entirely obey.

"There is a child on the Deep Sand," Yenneth said, "out with the long-water Attuin, who may be what they walked that woman onto the pan for being. You don't need more than that yet; more than that is weight you'd carry badly. But that much you'll carry, because I'm putting it on you with my eyes open. The

Circle, when it learns — and it will learn — will want to do to that child the thing the House of Salt did the morning you were eight. Or it will want the other thing, the thing that looks like the opposite and is the same death dressed up for a feast: it will want to *use* her. To make her a banner. To love her into a crown and spend her like coin.” A small dry breath, the catch in it audible now. “Drowned or crowned. Both are the pan, Sabra. I have watched this House do both for ninety years and I am telling you they are the same morning.”

“Why me,” Sabra said, and was surprised the words came; they came up out of the same deep place the name had lain in, and they came out steadier than she felt.

“Because I am going to send you to find out what she is,” Yenneth said. “Quietly. Under a salt-trade — there’s a cover already made, an initiate of the House of Salt riding out to learn the long-water trade, a nothing, a thing the Circle won’t look at twice. You’ll go because you’re gifted and you’re junior and you’re beneath suspicion, all three, and because of them you can ride out the gate to a child the order means to kill, and no one will think to wonder why I chose you.” The eyes held her. “And you will make me an honest read. You’ll go out there with your Reckoning and your training and that warm proud accurate thing you carry that the masters keep recommending we prune — don’t, by the way; let them write what they like, but don’t ever let them prune it, it’s the best of you — and you’ll read that child true, the way you read the merchant true before my runner spoiled your morning.”

“You knew about the merchant.”

“I know about most things. It’s tedious. Don’t interrupt.” But there was the ghost of something at the corner of the ruined mouth, gone before it arrived. “You’ll read her true. And then —”

“And then?” Sabra heard herself ask. The two words hung in the dry cold air of the cell.

“And then,” Yenneth said, “you’ll tell me the truth, and we’ll both find out what you’re made of. Which neither of us knows yet — no, don’t argue, you don’t know, you only know what you’ve been able to do so far inside walls that decided in advance what you’d be allowed to want. Out there it’s different. Out there a read isn’t a drill. Out there you’ll have a child’s whole life sitting in your two hands and a House behind you that’s already decided what it wants the read to say, and somewhere in the middle of that you’ll find out whether you’re an instrument that hands its reading up the chain, or something else. I don’t know which. That’s the truest thing I’ll say to you today: I have watched you four years and I do not know which you are. That’s *why* you. A clean instrument I could predict. You I can’t, quite. And the desert doesn’t need a clean instrument just now. It needs the other thing, whatever the other thing turns out to be.”

She closed her eyes. The audience was ending; Sabra could feel it end, physically,

the way you feel a tide turn at the very moment of the turn, the great slow withdrawal beginning.

“Go to the steward,” Yenneth said, eyes shut now, the voice going thin and far. “The cover’s arranged. Salt for the long-water caravan. You leave at dark; the night-roads, the reversed clock, you know all that. Don’t pack like an initiate going to a posting; pack like a junior factor’s clerk going to learn a trade and be slightly bored by it. Be bored. Boredom is the best veil there is; no one looks twice at a bored woman.” A pause, long enough that Sabra thought it was over, thought she should rise, and was already shifting her weight to do it when the old woman spoke again, so quietly Sabra almost missed it under the dry rasp of her own held breath.

“Her name was Imel.”

Sabra went absolutely still.

“The woman on the pan.” The eyes did not open. The voice came out level and small and final, a thing being handed over. “Imel. Carry that one out the gate with you, instead of leaving it in here to rot in the dark where you put it. Say it to yourself on the night-road when the salt’s bright under the moon and there’s no one to hear. It’ll keep you honest where even the Reckoning can’t, because the Reckoning reads other people and a name like that reads *you*. Now go. I’m tired, and I’ve a great deal of dying still to organize, and you’ve a child to ride toward.”

Sabra rose. Her legs held her, which surprised her. At the door she stopped, with her hand on the cold frame and the corridor’s chill already reaching for her, because there was something she wanted to say and no permitted shape to say it in — *thank you*, or *I’m afraid*, or *who was she to you*, or the realest one, *what have you just done to me* — and the training closed all of them down before they reached her mouth, the way it had closed the runner girl’s blessing down before hers, the order teaching itself silence in every generation the same way, mother to daughter to chosen daughter, the way it taught everything.

And from the cot, eyes still shut, the ruin that was the spine of the world said, “Say it now. Once. While I’m here to witness it, so it’s witnessed and you don’t have to carry the first saying alone. Her name.”

“Imel,” Sabra said.

The word came out of her cracked and strange, sixteen years old, salt-rough, and it filled the small cell, and it was the most dangerous thing she had ever said aloud inside these walls, and the saying of it loosened something in her chest she had not known was clenched, a fist she’d been holding so long she’d taken it for the shape of her own heart.

“There,” Yenneth said. “Now it’s said, and the sky didn’t fall, and the House didn’t hear, and you’re still alive, and so am I, for a little. Go and learn the

salt-trade and be bored at it. And come back and tell me the truth. Whatever it is.”

Sabra went out into the cold corridor with the name in her mouth like salt — *Imel*, she said it again, silent now, to herself, just to feel the new strange permission of it — and the order’s immaculate morning going on all around her exactly as before, the swept stone, the whispered sandals, the call-and-stop of the Reckoning master walking his line of girls through the beating-in: *read the hand, name the lie, say nothing, say nothing*. And for the first time in her obedient gifted life Sabra understood that the wall she had been raised inside had a name carved into it that no one was permitted to read, a whole chain of names, a woman walked upright onto the bright crust on her own Voiced feet sixteen years ago and a hundred women before her and a child somewhere out on the Deep being lined up to be the next, and that she had just been handed a chisel by the oldest hand in the order and pointed at the wall and sent out the gate, toward a girl who could hear salt where there was none.

She went to the steward, and asked, in a bored voice, about salt for the long-water caravan, and was told to be ready at dark.

She was ready at dark.

Chapter Six — The Warm Half

Sabra had been taught that the Attuin were children — charming, useful, undisciplined children, who carried the warm Remembering the way a beast carries pollen, without knowing what they did, getting it everywhere, fertile and witless. She had been taught this by women who had never spent a night on the Deep Sand, and she understood her error before the first night was out, which was at least faster than most of her teachers would have managed.

The error was this: she had been taught that warmth was the absence of discipline. The Attuin were the most disciplined people she had ever been among. It was only that their discipline pointed the other way.

She came to understand it the way she understood most things — not in a sentence, but in a sequence of small undeniable observations she could not make stop. On the first morning she watched a girl no older than eight measure water into the cook-pot. The child did not measure it carefully, the way a Salthold initiate would have, with the held breath and the level eye and the small terror of being seen to err. She measured it *fast*, by a flick of the wrist that had clearly been drilled into her so young it had stopped being a skill and become a limb — and she measured it exactly right, and then she licked the last bead from the lip of the gourd before she capped it, because on the Deep you did not spill so much as a tear of water onto the sand, and the licking was not parsimony, it was reflex, it was a thing her body did the way Sabra’s body held a cup wrong.

In the Salthold, discipline meant subtraction — you took a girl and you pared away from her everything that was not the order, the appetites and the noise and the soft uncalled places, until what was left was an instrument that did not feel the hand that played it. On the Deep, discipline meant the opposite. It meant a caravan of two hundred souls moving across a country that wanted them dead, every day, all of them, by water-discipline and song-discipline and the brutal arithmetic of how much a camel could carry and how far, and they did it *loudly*, arguing and laughing and grieving out loud and coupling out loud behind too-thin hides, spending themselves on each other with a generosity that Sabra's whole training told her should have left them empty and instead, baffling, left them full. They had nothing. They wasted nothing. And they were not, by any measure Sabra had been given to measure with, poor.

She tried, the way she always tried, to find the lie in it. There was a part of her — the trained part, the part the order had pared her down to — that simply could not believe in a generosity that did not cost the giver. Everything cost. That was the first law she had ever learned, before the Voice and the Stillness and the Reckoning, before she could read a throat: *there is no free thing; find who is paying*. So she watched the long-water caravan move, and she looked for the one who was paying, the one quietly bled to keep the warmth running, the way every warm thing in the Salthold was secretly a cold machine — and she could not find her. She watched an old man give his second blanket to a younger woman who had lost hers in a wind, and she waited for the ledger entry, the debt that would fall due, the obligation dressed as mercy that she knew, *knew*, every kindness concealed. There was a debt. She found it three days later. It was that the younger woman would sing the old man's death-song when he went, and that this was understood to be the greater gift, and that everyone in earshot knew it, and that the old man had given the blanket precisely so the debt would run the other way. They kept ledgers, the Attuin. They simply ran them toward each other instead of away.

It made her tired in a way she had no word for.

She had ridden in under the salt-trade cover, and the long-water caravan took her in the way the desert took anyone who came with goods and without obvious malice — fed her, watered her camel before they watered themselves which shamed her more than any insult could have, and then more or less ignored her, which she had not expected and did not know what to do with. She had braced for suspicion. She got hospitality and indifference, which between them were a far better defense than suspicion, because suspicion you could work and indifference you could not, and Sabra, who had been sent precisely to work them, found her instruments lying useless in her hands.

The hospitality came first and it nearly undid her before the work had even begun. The caravan-mother — a wide, unhurried woman named Dasel, with hands like cured leather and a voice that carried without rising — had met her at the edge of the firelight on the first night and performed the greeting Sabra had read about in the Salthold's archives and had assumed, in the way of the

archives, to be a quaint survival. It was not a survival. It was a living thing, and Dasel did it with the gravity of a rite and the ease of breathing both at once: she had Sabra sit, and she had a child bring the bitter tea, and she did not ask Sabra's name or her business or where she had come from. She asked, instead, for *news* — what had Sabra seen on the road, what wind, what other caravans, was the Ochre cistern still sour — and then she asked *where there is water*, and Sabra, who had come down through the night-roads precisely to find a particular child and make a particular read, found herself reciting the location of two springs and a seep with a thoroughness she had not intended, because the question was so old and so true that lying in answer to it felt like spitting in the tea.

Only after the tea, after the unhurried sharing of it, after the silence that the Attuin held the way the Salthold held a closed door, did Dasel ask her business. And by then Sabra had been handled. Not interrogated — *handled*, the way you handle a frightened animal, with patience and a low voice and no sudden movements, gentled into telling more truth than she meant to, and the appalling thing, the thing she lay awake over, was that Dasel almost certainly had not been working her at all. The woman had simply been doing what her people did. The most effective interrogation Sabra had ever sat through had not been an interrogation. It had been courtesy. *We don't make a temple of it*, she would learn to hear, later, in another voice. They didn't have to. They had built it so deep into the body that it ran without a priest.

So Sabra let the indifference do her concealing for her, and she did the thing she did best, which was watch, and say nothing until it paid, and try not to think about how much it unsettled her that for once the watching gave her so little back.

It was the warrior who would not ignore her.

"You hold your cup wrong," Tamar said, the second night, dropping down across the cookfire from her without invitation. "Like someone's going to take it." She tipped her chin at the camp. "Nobody wants your cup, salt-woman. We've all got cups."

She had appeared the way the Attuin all appeared, without the small social announcements Sabra was used to, the throat-clearing and the angling and the permission asked with the eyes — she was simply *there*, folding down onto her heels across the low flames, near enough that Sabra could see the firelight find the old white scars on her forearms and the newer pink one along the line of her jaw, and Sabra's training did the thing it did before her conscious mind caught up, which was to gather the woman in and read her, fast and total, a sweep from the crown of the head to the set of the feet.

She was — Sabra performed the Reckoning on her automatically, the way she breathed, and got back almost nothing, which was itself information — she was a Spear-Sister, that much was plain from the way she sat, weight already gathered, a body that had decided long ago that comfort was a thing you took in

stolen moments between readiness. Sabra read it in the feet first, the way they were planted under her even at rest, ready to take her weight in any direction without a wasted instant; and in the hands, which never quite settled, never lay flat and idle the way an untrained person's hands lay, but kept a small constant readiness of their own, the fingers loose and curled toward a haft that was not there. A killer's economy. The order priced that economy and bred for it and never once, in all Sabra's years, had it occurred to anyone in the Salthold that the people they bred it *out of* might prize it more, and hold it warmer, and not call it killing at all.

Lean and scarred and not pretty in the way the order priced pretty, which was to say not soft, not arranged, nothing about her composed for another person's eye. And yet Sabra found she could not stop looking, and could not have said, under questioning, what she was looking *at*, except that it was alive in a way the beautiful arranged faces of the Salthold were not, a face that was clearly going to do exactly what it felt like doing and dare the world to bill it.

"I hold it the way I was taught," Sabra said.

"Then you were taught by people afraid of something."

She said it lightly, picking a thread of meat from her teeth, but her eyes did the flick down to the hands and back, and Sabra realized with a small cold start that she was being *read* — badly, by instinct rather than training, but read all the same. There was a difference between the two readings and Sabra could feel exactly where it lay. Sabra's own Reckoning was a scalpel; it went in clean and came out with the precise thing it had gone in for, the lie in the throat, the fear in the hands, the pregnancy in the gait. What the warrior was doing was blunter and broader and somehow more dangerous, because it was not after a fact. It was after *her*. Tamar was not reading Sabra to learn a thing she could use. She was reading her the way you read weather — to know what was coming and whether you wanted to be out in it.

And the Attuin warrior had just told her, more or less to her face, that she had clocked Sabra for someone raised by frightened people, and was not going to make anything of it, and wanted Sabra to know she'd seen.

"You read," Sabra said, before she could stop herself.

Tamar grinned. It changed her whole face; it was a disreputable grin, a thief's grin, and Sabra felt it somewhere unprofessional, somewhere low and warm that she had been trained to regard as a tool and not a place where things happened *to* her.

"Everybody on the Deep reads. You'd die in a season if you didn't. We don't make a *temple* of it." She said *temple* the way you'd say a word for something you'd scraped off your boot, and Sabra heard in it the whole architecture of the Attuin's contempt for the orders, not the loud contempt of an enemy but the easy dismissive contempt of a free people for the elaborate prisons other people built for themselves. "That's your lot and ours. You took a thing every

grandmother does and you built walls around it” — she made a small shape in the air with her hand, four flat walls, a box — “and started drowning the girls who did it too well.”

She watched Sabra’s face when she said it, openly, the way you’d watch a pot to see if it boiled.

And Sabra — who had spent her life being unreadable, who had walked out of the Salthold three nights ago carrying a drowned woman’s name in her mouth precisely because no one was allowed to read it — felt the pot boil. Just for a breath. Just the smallest betraying tightening around the eyes.

She knew it the instant it happened. That was the worst of it. The Reckoning that read others read her too, from the inside, the way a swordmaster knows the cut was bad even as the blade leaves the hand; she felt the muscle around her right eye contract by some fraction no untrained watcher could have caught, felt it the way you feel a stone turn under your foot on a ledge, the small wrong motion that tells you you are about to fall before you have begun to fall. The name was there behind her teeth. *Liani*. A girl two years older than Sabra, House of Salt like Sabra, gifted at the Remembering the way Sabra was gifted at the Reckoning, who had begun, in her seventeenth year, to show the capacity. Sabra had not seen it done. They did not let initiates see it done. But she had been in the Salthold the night it was done, had lain in her cell and felt the building hold its breath, and in the morning Liani’s cell was a clean empty room and her name was a thing no one said, and Yenneth had found Sabra three days later staring at the empty doorway and had said, in that dry old economical voice, *carry the name out the gate with you. It’ll keep you honest where the Reckoning can’t*. And Sabra had carried it. She was carrying it now, here, across this fire, and the warrior had walked up out of the dark and put her thumb directly on it without knowing it was there, and the pot had boiled.

And Tamar saw it, and the grin went out, replaced by something quieter and far more dangerous to Sabra’s purpose, which was interest.

“Huh.” Tamar set the thread of meat down on her knee, a small abandoning of carelessness that Sabra clocked and hated herself for clocking. The warrior’s whole attention had narrowed, the way an animal’s attention narrows when the wind brings it something it had not expected to smell. “So you do know about it. And you didn’t like that I said it.” She tilted her head. The firelight slid along the scar at her jaw. “You’re not a salt-trader.”

There it was. The thing Sabra had crossed two hundred leagues of night-road to prevent, said out loud across a cookfire by a woman she had known for two days, and said not as an accusation but as a simple correction of fact, the way you’d tell someone they had the wrong end of a rope.

Sabra had been here before — not this fire, but this place, the moment when a careful structure of lies takes its first true weight and you learn whether it holds. She had been trained for it. There was a whole drilled discipline for the

moment of exposure, a sequence: do not deny too fast, the fast denial is itself a confession; give them a smaller truth to feed on so they stop being hungry for the larger one; turn the question gently back, make them work to keep hold of it, make the effort of suspecting you cost them something. She felt the discipline come up in her like a held breath, smooth and cold and entirely automatic, and she used it.

“I’m a salt-trader who knows her order’s history,” Sabra said, smooth, recovering, the instrument back in her hands. She let a little weariness into it, a little of the careful resignation of a decent person ashamed of her own people. “We’re not taught to be proud of all of it.”

Tamar looked at her for a long moment across the fire.

And Sabra had the unfamiliar and deeply unwelcome experience of not knowing whether her lie had landed.

This was new. This was, she realized as the silence stretched, the precise center of what had been wrong since she rode in — the thing that had been pulling at the edge of her since the first night and that she had been too disciplined to look at directly. In the Salthold, even among the masters, Sabra had always known. That was the gift; that was the engine of her power. A lie went out from her and she watched it land and she read in the listener’s face whether it had taken root, the small softenings and tightenings, the unconscious tells the body could not suppress, and she adjusted, and pressed, and won. She had won her whole life this way. She had won out of the gate three nights ago, against the Veil-watcher at the second well, against the caravan-mother’s questions — no, not against Dasel, she amended, but everyone else. She always knew whether she had won.

She did not know now. The warrior’s face had closed in a way that gave Sabra nothing, gave her back her own trick — not the trained closing of a Salthold adept, which Sabra could read *as* a closing and reason backward from, but a different closing entirely, the closing of a person who had decided, for her own reasons, that she was done showing Sabra her thoughts, and who had the animal capacity simply to *stop*, the way the Attuin seemed able to stop spilling water, the way the child had licked the gourd. Tamar had read Sabra’s flinch and then Tamar had closed, and what was behind the closing — belief, disbelief, amusement, the warm beginning of something, the cold beginning of a report to her caravan-mother — Sabra could not see, and the not-seeing was vertiginous, was a foot finding no floor where the floor had always been.

She found she was reading harder, leaning her whole instrument into it, the way she imagined a blind woman might lean toward a sound, and getting nothing, and the getting-nothing was itself a kind of message: *you don’t have me. You’re not going to have me by the means you have. Whatever happens between us, salt-woman, it isn’t going to be a thing you win.*

And then Tamar shrugged, and stood.

She did it the way she did everything, the unfolding of all that gathered weight in one easy motion, no hand to the ground, no shifting for balance, the whole long body coming up off its heels and into standing as if standing were simply the next thing it had decided to do — and Sabra, who had spent fifteen years learning to make her own body lie, who could hold a pose for a day and pass for dead and slow her heart until a physician despaired of her, looked at that single unconsidered motion and felt something she had not felt in a long time, which was envy. Not of the strength. Of the *carelessness* of it. Of a body so at home in itself that it had nothing to manage.

“Sleep where they put you, salt-woman who knows her history,” Tamar said. “We move before light.”

And she walked off into the dark between the fires.

Sabra sat alone with her wrongly-held cup and the disorienting certainty that she had just lost an exchange she had been trained since childhood to win.

She corrected the cup. She caught herself doing it — caught her own fingers shifting on the warm clay, loosening, letting it sit in the open palm the way the Attuin let their cups sit, as if no one were going to take it — and she stopped, deliberately, and held it wrong again, the way she’d been taught, because she would not be peeled by a warrior’s offhand observation in two days, she would not, and the small defiance of holding her own cup the cold way felt, even as she did it, exactly as childish as a child refusing to eat. She looked at her hand around the cup. It was a good hand. It was an instrument’s hand, kept soft where softness was useful and hard where hardness paid, the nails clean, the calluses placed by intention rather than accident. It was nothing like the warrior’s hand, with its accidental geography of scar and use. She thought, unbidden, that she would not have known where to begin reading a hand like Tamar’s, because every mark on it was true and none of it was *placed*, and the Reckoning had no purchase on a thing that was simply, helplessly, what it was.

She put the cup down and went to sleep where they had put her, and did not sleep much.

She told herself it was the cold, which was real — the Deep gave back all its day-heat to the black sky the moment the sun was gone, and the cold came down out of that immense star-crowded dark with a totality that had nothing of malice in it and was somehow worse for that, an indifferent subtraction of warmth from a world that had been, an hour before, trying to kill you with heat. She lay shivering under a borrowed hide that smelled of camel and woodsmoke and the particular human warmth of whoever had slept under it before her, and she listened to the caravan breathe around her.

Two hundred people and their beasts. She had never in her life slept among so many and felt so little watched. In the Salthold she had slept in a cell with a door that locked from the corridor side, in a building where every sound was catalogued and every catalogue was held against you, where the night itself was

an instrument the order played, the deep hours of dark turned over to the slow careful work of listening to what the sleeping let slip. Here the night was not an instrument. The night was just the night, full of the small unguarded sounds of a road-camp — a child fussing somewhere off to her left and a low voice answering it, not the practiced soothing of a nurse but the rough sleepy love of a parent who would rather be asleep; the shift and grumble of the couched camels; a man coughing; the soft constant friction of two hundred bodies turning in their hides under the cold.

And, nearer than she would have liked, two voices, low and unhurried behind a hide, doing the long way round and not caring who heard.

Sabra lay very still and listened to them because she could not not listen — because the Reckoning did not have an off, because her ears caught the rhythm of it the way her eyes caught a flinch, automatically, before any choosing — and what undid her was not the sound itself, which the Salthold had a word for and a discipline for and a codified studied *art* of, the pleasure-craft kept on the high shelf beside the Voice, taught as a tool, examined and practiced and graded. What undid her was the *unhurry*. There was no performance in it. She would have heard performance; she had been trained to hear precisely that, the catch of breath produced rather than caught, the sound made for the sound's sake, the whole economy of a woman spending her body to buy a thing from the man she spent it on. There was none of that. There was only two people taking, in the cold, in the dark, between a day's killing march and another's, the long way round with each other, slow and unhurried and generous, because they had decided — the way the old man had decided about the blanket — that the spending was the having, that you did not run the ledger away from the one you were with but toward them, and to spend was to be made full.

The Attuin had a word for it. She had learned it her first day, the way you learn weather, without trying. *Dasha*. My-salt. The one you're vowed to. The voices behind the hide were not road-love and they were not a contract and they were not, God help her, a *discipline*; they were two people who were each other's salt, in the literal sense, in the only sense that mattered out here where salt was oath and permanence and the holy thing you swore on, and they were taking the long way round, and they did not care who heard because there was nothing in it that needed a closed door, because the door, the lock, the corridor-side latch, the cell, the wall, were all things the Salthold had built and the Deep had never needed and would have laughed at if it ever stopped to think of them, which it would not, because it had better things to do, which were these.

And somewhere in it, the warm Remembering doing its endless unconscious work of holding a people together across a country that wanted them dead. A woman somewhere singing very softly to a camel in labor — Sabra could just make out the shape of it, a song with no melody to speak of, more breath than tune, the kind of thing that was not performed and could not be performed, that had been sung to laboring camels for three thousand years and carried in it, Sabra knew now, knew with the clinical certainty of her training, the whole memory

of how a camel labored and how you eased it, passed mother to daughter not as a lesson but as a *song*, so that the knowing and the comforting were the same act and neither could be separated from the other. The Salthold kept the Remembering in the dark, in the cold, catalogued, controlled, in the House of Salt, passed at a death-rite under conditions of the most exacting discipline, fenced about with the Ban, and a daughter who proved too able to hold it was drowned in the salt for the safety of all. And out here it was a woman singing to a camel in the dark, getting it everywhere, fertile and — no. Not witless. Sabra struck the word out of her own head where it had risen automatically, the way she had struck *drowning* off her face and failed. Not witless. The opposite. The whole of a people's mind, awake and unafraid and unwalled, doing in the open and for love the thing the Salthold did in the dark and under guard and at the cost of its own daughters.

She thought of Liani. She made herself think of Liani, here, in the cold, with the camel-song going, because Yenneth had told her to carry the name and she found she could not stop. She thought: *they would not have drowned her*. The Attuin would not have drowned Liani. They would have let her hold what she could hold and sung beside her when it grew too heavy and grieved her with their own mouths when it broke her, if it broke her, and the breaking would have been a grief and not a procedure, and there would have been a song afterward, a real one, with her name in it, instead of a clean empty room and a silence everyone agreed to keep. The thought arrived whole and it had no defense against it, no instrument that could turn it, no smaller truth she could feed it to make it stop being hungry. It simply sat in her, true, in the dark, and she lay under it and shook, and told herself it was the cold.

And somewhere in it, the child. The reason she was here.

Hears salt where there is no salt. That was all the order had — that and a bloodline reckoning so improbable, so heretical, that Yenneth had not put it on paper and had not said it aloud in the Salthold but had drawn Sabra into the dead-quiet of the salt-store on the last night and breathed it to her in the dark, three orders in one body, the thing the Ban was written to prevent, the thing the Long Breath was not supposed to be able to do and might have done anyway, out here, by accident, in a spear-line that did not know what it carried. Sabra was sent to find the girl and make the read and tell Yenneth the truth — not to take her, not yet, not to do anything but *know*, which was the most dangerous thing of all, because once it was known it could not be un-known and the order would do with the knowing what the order did, and Sabra had walked out the gate with a drowned girl's name in her mouth precisely because Yenneth had wanted her to remember, every step of the road, exactly what the order did with a daughter it could not hold and could not let live.

She had not found her yet. She had been here three days and had not let herself look too obviously, had let the caravan's indifference do her concealing for her, had moved through the camp with her eyes down and her instrument quiet, gathering the long water-talk and the gossip and the names, building the map

of the caravan the way she built the map of a room she meant to work, slowly, completely, before she touched a single piece of it. Tomorrow she would begin, properly, the work she had been sent to do — find the girl, make the read, tell Yenneth the truth. She knew already, from the gossip, the shape of where to look: a young one, kin to the Spear-Sister, the one they called — and here the camp's talk had gone fond and unbothered, the way it went around a child who was a little strange in a way that cost the caravan nothing and so was simply hers — the one who *hears the weather off people*, who said things she shouldn't know and was right too often and wrong sometimes too, badly, certain when she was wrong, which was the part that made the older women shake their heads, not the rightness but the *certainty*, a child who did not yet know that the gift could lie.

Kin to the Spear-Sister.

Sabra lay in the dark and did the arithmetic she had been avoiding doing, because the arithmetic was easy and she was a coward, suddenly, about the easy thing. Kin to the warrior. The girl she was sent to find — to read, to *know*, and so to hand to the order and to whatever the order would do with three bloodlines in one body — was the warrior's kin. The warrior who had walked up out of the dark and put her thumb on the one true thing behind Sabra's teeth and then closed her face and refused, the way no one in Sabra's life had refused, to be a thing Sabra could win.

She lay in the cold and thought, against her will, about the warrior's grin, and about how it had gone out when she'd seen Sabra flinch, and how that — the going-out, the interest, the warrior choosing to *notice* her rather than to use what she'd noticed — was the most dangerous thing that had happened to Sabra since she walked out the gate, and that she had no instrument for it at all.

Because that was the shape of it, wasn't it. Tamar had read her — badly, by instinct — and seen something, and what a Salthold adept would have done with the seeing was bank it, file it, hold it for the moment it would pay; and what the warrior had done with it was look at Sabra with interest, with the beginning of something warm and unhurried and entirely without calculation, the way she did everything, the way her people sang to camels and gave away blankets and took the long way round behind too-thin hides. She had not used it. She had noticed Sabra and decided, apparently, to keep on noticing her, to be *out in the weather* of her, and there was no defense for that in all of Sabra's training, no smaller truth to feed it, no counter, no win, because it was not an attack. It was the opposite of an attack. It was an offer, made without the offerer seeming to know she'd made it, and Sabra — who could feel a Voice coming and brace, who could hold her heart still under a truth-drug, who had walked out the gate of the most dangerous house in the world carrying its worst secret behind a face that gave nothing away — had no idea at all how to brace against being, simply, *seen* by someone who did not want to use her for it.

Carry the name out the gate with you, Yenneth had said. It'll keep you honest where the Reckoning can't.

Sabra lay awake and discovered the old woman had told her only half of it. She had been sent to be honest about the girl. The Deep had started, immediately and without permission, being honest about *her* — peeling her, one warm indifferent day at a time, the way water peels salt, until the instrument the order had pared her down to began, frighteningly, to feel like the part that wasn't really her.

She thought of the cup, and her own hand correcting itself on the warm clay, and her stopping it. She thought of the camel-song, and the two unhurried voices, and the old man's blanket, and Liani's clean empty room. She thought of the way the warrior had stood up off her heels in one motion, at home in a body that had nothing to manage, and how Sabra had spent fifteen years learning to make her body lie and had never once, not for a single hour, been at home in it.

The cold came down out of the enormous dark. The caravan breathed around her, two hundred souls moving across a country that wanted them dead, loudly, generously, holding each other up with song and quarrel and the long way round, wasting nothing, poor by no measure she had been given to measure with. Somewhere out there in it was a child who heard salt where there was no salt, who was the warrior's kin, who carried in one body the thing the order's oldest law was written in three hundred years of corpses to prevent — and Sabra was going to find her, tomorrow, properly, and make the read, and tell Yenneth the truth, because that was the work and she was the instrument and the instrument did the work.

She lay under the borrowed hide that smelled of someone else's warmth and she shook, and she told herself it was the cold, and the lie did not land, not even on herself, not even with all her training, because somewhere on the second night she had stopped being able to know whether her lies were landing, and that — she understood now, lying awake under the stars the Salthold's windows never showed her — was not a thing the warrior had done to her.

It was a thing the Deep was doing to her. And she had three more days of it, at least, and then however many more it took to find the girl, and every one of them she would lie down in this cold among these warm unhurried people and be peeled a little further from the instrument toward the woman, and there was no instrument in all her training for *that*, and she did not, lying there, entirely want there to be.

She closed her eyes. The camel-song went on, low and tuneless and three thousand years deep. Before light, they would move. She would rise when they rose, and water her camel before she watered herself because she had already, without deciding to, begun to do it their way, and she would hold her cup wrong out of spite and then forget, halfway through the tea, and hold it right.

She slept, a little, toward the cold gray edge of morning. She did not dream of the Salthold. She dreamed, as far as she could tell of it afterward, of nothing at all — only of being warm, which was its own kind of accusation, and which she carried with her out into the rising light when the caravan-mother's voice went down the lines and two hundred souls came up off the sand to walk again into the country that wanted them dead, singing.

Chapter Seven — The Long Way Round

It took nine days for the warrior to ask, and the nine days were the asking.

Sabra understood that much, eventually, though it took her most of the nine days to understand it, because she had been raised in a House where desire was a tool you reached for and a thing you watched other people be moved by, never a weather you stood out in yourself. In the codified arts the order taught its daughters, want was a lever. You learned the shapes of it the way you learned the Reckoning — you learned to produce it in others and to perform it without feeling it and above all to never, ever, be caught inside your own, because a woman inside her own want was a woman who could be steered, and the Adima Ru did not get steered. Sabra had been a good student. She had believed, walking out the gate, that she had no real wants of her own — only appetites, manageable, occasionally satisfied in the order's discreet sanctioned ways, never permitted to become a lever someone else could reach.

She had not understood, leaving Sett, that she was carrying that belief into a country with no walls.

The first day she had watched Tamar the way she watched everyone — for the tell, the lever, the angle of approach. It was reflex by then, older than thought. She catalogued the warrior the way she had been trained to catalogue a target the moment she was seated across from one: the scarred hands that never quite stilled, always working at a strap or a blade or the long braid of hide-cord she carried for no reason Sabra could find; the gait that put weight forward, ready, even at rest; the eyes that moved across a camp the way the Reckoning moved across a room, cataloguing, except that Tamar's reading came up warm where Sabra's came up cold. She had filed all of it under *use*. She had assumed, the way the order had taught her to assume, that the warm easy attention the Spear-Sister turned on her was the opening move of a negotiation whose terms would clarify themselves in time.

The terms never clarified, because there were none. That was the first thing that did not fit.

On the second day Tamar had brought her a hide without being asked. Sabra had been sitting at the edge of the firelight with her arms wrapped around her knees, cold the way the desert nights made everyone cold, the heat of the

day fled all at once into the black, and she had been managing it — she could lower her own awareness of cold a little with the Stillness, enough to keep from shivering, enough to keep her face composed — when a weight dropped over her shoulders, rough-cured and smelling of smoke and animal and the lanolin the Attuin worked into their leathers, and Tamar was already three steps gone, back to her own fire, not waiting for thanks. Sabra had sat there under the unasked-for warmth and run the read on it three separate ways and could not make it come out as a move. There was no follow. There was no glance back to see if it had landed. The warrior had simply seen that she was cold and made her less cold and walked away. The simplicity of it had been almost frightening.

On the third day there had been the cup.

It was a small thing, and that was why it stayed with her. They had stopped at midday in the shade of a wind-cut rock the colour of dried blood, the caravan folded down into the patches of shadow the way the desert taught everything to fold, and old Misha had passed the bitter tea around the circle in the chipped clay cups the Attuin carried, and Sabra had taken hers wrong. She had not known it was wrong. She had taken it the way the Salthold took everything, by the rim, two fingers and a thumb, the grip of a woman who had never in her life been told there was another way to hold a cup. And she had felt — not seen, *felt*, the Reckoning catching the ripple of it around the circle before her eyes confirmed it — the small flinch in the others, the quick averted not-looking, the way you don't look at a stranger's error to spare them the knowing of it. Among the Attuin you held the cup from beneath, palm cradling the base, because the desert taught you that a thing of water was a thing you held the way you'd hold water itself, with the whole hand, with care. She had taken it by the rim like a woman handling a tool.

She had felt the heat come up her neck. She had reached, automatically, for the instrument — for the smooth recovery, the small self-deprecating word that would turn the error into charm and put the circle back at ease and, not incidentally, put Sabra back in control of how she was being seen. She had the instrument half-drawn.

And across the circle Tamar had simply taken her own cup from beneath, slow, deliberate, holding Sabra's eye while she did it — not a correction, not a lesson, just a hand showing a hand how — and then looked away to say something bawdy to Misha that made the old woman cackle and broke the circle's attention clean off Sabra entirely, gave her the cover to set her grip right unwatched. Tamar had never mentioned it. Not that day, not after. She had simply handed Sabra the knowing of it and then made certain no one was looking while Sabra used it.

Sabra had spent the whole of the third afternoon turning that over, riding at the rear of the line where the dust was worst and the talk thinnest, and had not been able to make it come out as anything but what it was, which was a kindness given so cleanly it left no debt. In the Salthold there was no such thing

as a kindness without a debt. A kindness was an investment; you logged it; you collected. She had been taught to be suspicious of generosity precisely because generosity, in the order, was the most expensive thing you could be offered. The free gift was the deepest hook. She kept waiting for the hook. The hook did not come.

By the fifth day she had stopped looking for the lever and started, despite herself, looking at the woman.

It was disorienting, looking at someone with the Reckoning and not for the angle. She had not known she could do it. She caught herself watching Tamar mend a saddle in the long copper light of evening — the scarred hands sure and unhurried, the awl going through the leather with a small grunt of effort each time, the warrior frowning down at the work with the particular total absorption of a person who was wholly inside whatever she was doing and nowhere else — and Sabra had felt the read turn into something she had no name for, some attention that wanted nothing back, that simply liked the looking. She had looked away fast, the way you pull a hand off a stove. She had been trained out of exactly this. *A woman inside her own want is a woman who can be steered.* She drilled the cold back into herself that night with the discipline of long practice and slept badly.

Tamar reached for no lever. That was the thing that undid her, in the end. Across nine days the warrior simply *paid attention* — to where Sabra was cold and brought her a hide; to the wrongly-held cup and never mentioned it again; to the way Sabra flinched, on the sixth night, from the open coupling behind the hides.

That had been its own slow education.

The Attuin made love the way they did everything, without a wall around it. It was not display — there was nothing performed in it, no one watching to be watched — but neither was it hidden, and the first night the sounds of it had reached Sabra across the camp she had gone rigid as a drawn wire. Not from prudery. She had been raised in the order that kept the codified arts of pleasure as a studied discipline; she had been taught the geography of it with the same clinical thoroughness she had been taught the reading of a throat. There was nothing about the *act* that could shock her. What had locked her spine was something deeper and harder to name — a kind of vertiginous unfamiliarity, the sense of standing at the edge of a country whose language she had been taught to read but never to *speak*, where the thing she had only ever performed from outside was happening, all around her, from inside, by people who did not seem to be managing it at all. People who were simply in it. The artlessness of it had frightened her more than any art could have. She had lain very still in her own hides and breathed the long slow breath of the Stillness and willed her heart back down and not understood, then, why it had needed willing.

Tamar had felt the flinch. Of course she had. She felt everything. But she met it not with mockery and not with the careful pity that would have been worse,

met it instead with a kind of patient, amused, unhurried *room* — the room you give a half-wild thing to come to your hand on its own clock or not at all. She had not pressed. She had not pretended not to have noticed; that would have been its own kind of lie and the warrior did not seem to carry lies. She had simply, the next morning, said one thing, easy, over the tea: “You sit like a woman waiting for the blow.” A beat, eyes on the tea. “Nobody out here asks you for what you don’t hand over. We’re not your lot.” And then she had gone back to the tea and let it lie, and the *let it lie* had been the gift again, the room again, the distance left in Sabra’s keeping.

She did not perform want at Sabra. That was the whole of the strangeness. In the Salthold, want was a thing you aimed; Sabra had spent her childhood learning to aim it and to feel it aimed at her, the slow pressure of a seduction laid down move by patient move, the architecture of a campaign. She had assumed that was simply what desire *was* between people who understood themselves — a kind of warfare conducted in a velvet register. Tamar conducted no campaign. She let Sabra see that the want was there — banked, certain, in no hurry, the way a coal is certain under ash — and then she left the whole of the distance in Sabra’s keeping, every span of it, which was a generosity so total and so unlike anything in Sabra’s training that it took Sabra the better part of nine days to recognise it as desire at all and not some new and disorienting form of kindness.

She had thought, around the seventh day, that she had it figured. That the warrior was simply patient the way a hunter was patient, that the room was a technique, that even this — *especially* this — was a long slow seduction more sophisticated than anything the order had taught her, the seduction that consisted of appearing to want nothing. She had felt almost relieved to have placed it. It fit the shape of the world she knew. And she had tested it, the way she tested everything, on the eighth night — had let her own awareness sharpen and turned the read on Tamar full, hunting for the campaign underneath the ease, hunting for the move she knew must be there.

There had been no move. There had been only a woman across a fire who wanted her, plainly, and was content to want her, and had decided — Sabra could read the decision in the set of the warrior’s shoulders, in the unhurried hands, in the warm steady regard that did not push — that wanting was Tamar’s to carry and crossing was Sabra’s to do, and that if the crossing never came, Tamar would carry the wanting anyway and not begrudge it. There was no campaign. There was only the truth of it, laid out in the open where Sabra could not pretend not to see, the way the Attuin laid everything in the open, loudly and without subtraction.

It had undone something in her, the reading of that. Worse than a lever would have. A lever she could have answered. This she had no answer for at all.

On the ninth night Sabra crossed the distance herself.

She had not decided to. That was the part she would turn over afterward with something close to wonder — that a woman who decided everything, who

had been built to decide, who had been told from her first year in the House that the decision was the only thing that was ever truly hers, found her body up and moving toward the warrior's fire before the deciding part of her had been consulted. As if some older self under the pared-down instrument, some self the order had buried but not killed, had simply gotten tired of waiting for permission it was never going to grant itself, and stood up, and walked.

She felt the cold air on her face. She felt the salt-grit of the ground through the soles of her feet — she had not stopped to put on her boots, she noticed distantly, she who never moved without her boots, who had been trained to be ready to run at every breath. The fires of the caravan were low all around, banked for the night, the great black sky enormous overhead and crusted edge to edge with stars, more stars than the Salthold's narrow windows had ever let her see. Somewhere a beast shifted and grumbled in its hobbles. The night smelled of smoke and dung and the deep mineral exhalation of the cooling sand, and under it, as she came near, the particular smell of the warrior herself — leather and woodsmoke and clean sweat and the lanolin worked into her hands.

Tamar was mending a strap by the low coals.

She looked up. And she read Sabra's face the way she read everything, fast and unschooled and accurate — the read that came up warm where Sabra's came up cold — and whatever she saw there made her set the strap down very carefully, the way you set down a thing when you are about to need both hands for something that matters. The awl went down beside it. The warrior's whole attention came up and settled on Sabra, and it was a weight, that attention, a physical thing, and Sabra understood for the first time what it was like to be on the receiving end of a regard that wanted nothing back but you.

"Salt-woman," Tamar said. Quiet. The thief's grin she wore most hours was nowhere on her face. "Be sure."

Sabra stood at the edge of the firelight and could not make her mouth work.

"I mean it." Low, even. "I don't do this halfway. And not for less than you've got." A pause. "If you've come over to spend something small — a night, a thing to take home and study — go back to your fire. We'll say you got cold. No shame in it." She held Sabra's eye in the orange light. "But I'm not small. I'm not a thing you do to find out what it's like. I've wanted you nine days. I can want you nine more and it'll cost me nothing. So be sure of what you're crossing for. I'll meet whatever you bring. I'd rather you brought nothing than a lie."

It was the longest she had spoken to her in nine days. And Sabra, who had a hundred answers — who had been built to have an answer for exactly this, the smooth deflecting word, the half-truth that bought time, the instrument that turned the moment back to her own control — found that she had reached for the instrument and it was not there. That she had reached, in the place where the smooth thing lived, and her hand had come back empty. And so she said

the true thing instead, because there was nothing else left in her hand to say.

“I don’t know how to do it any way but halfway.”

It came out of her bare, without an instrument anywhere near it, the truest thing she had said since she left the Salthold, and hearing it in the open air was like hearing someone else confess. “I was made halfway. I was —” She stopped. Started again, and this was harder, this cost something, and she felt the Reckoning catch the small tremor in her own throat the way it would have caught it in another’s, and could do nothing about it. “They taught me the whole of it is how you get killed. To give the whole of yourself. To be all the way inside a thing, nothing held back to watch with. Drilled it out of me so young I don’t remember being any other way.” Her hand moved at her own chest, once. “There’s a wall in me where the rest of you keep that. I built it the way I was told. And I don’t — I don’t know if there’s anything behind it anymore.”

The coals ticked. A beast sighed in the dark.

Tamar looked at her for a long moment, the firelight moving on her scarred face, and then she did the most disarming thing anyone had ever done to Sabra in the whole of her gifted, guarded, weaponised life: she smiled. Not the thief’s grin. Something slower and warmer and somehow sadder, a smile that had grief folded into the tenderness of it, the smile of a woman who had heard, in what Sabra had just said, the shuttered look of others taken too young by the orders and bred for use.

“Then we’ll go the long way round,” she said. “All of it. Slow as you need.” She shifted on the hide, made room, but did not reach yet, left the reaching where it belonged. “We don’t have to find out tonight whether there’s anything behind your wall. We’ll knock. Gentle. See if anybody answers.” A breath. “And you can stop it anywhere. You hear me? Anywhere. And I’ll mean the stopping as much as the rest. I won’t sulk, I won’t make you pay, I won’t think less of you for the wall — somebody put that wall in you. You didn’t ask for it.” Her voice dropped lower, gentler, and there was iron under the gentleness, the kind of iron that protects rather than threatens. “That’s the only way I know that isn’t halfway. The long way round. Where the stopping counts as much as the going on, and nobody’s keeping score, and you don’t perform a single thing, because there’s nobody out here to perform for. Just me. And I already want you. There’s nothing left to earn.”

She held out her scarred hand, palm up, and left it there, in the firelight, the distance once again entirely in Sabra’s keeping. The hand did not reach the last span. It waited.

“Come learn the difference,” Tamar said.

And Sabra took the hand.

What happened after, she had no training to hold.

It began with the hand. Tamar drew her down onto the hides slow, no hurry in it, and the first thing the warrior did — the thing Sabra would remember longest — was simply hold her face. Both scarred hands, rough-palmed, cradling Sabra's jaw the way the Attuin held a cup of water, with the whole hand, with care, and look at her. Just look. Long enough that Sabra's training screamed at her to do something, to take control of the moment, to make it a thing she was conducting and not a thing that was happening to her; long enough that the scream crested and Sabra had to physically not move, had to hold still under the warrior's regard the way she'd hold still under a blade; long enough that the scream, finding nothing to push against, finally — strangely — began to quiet.

"There," Tamar murmured. "There you are." And kissed her.

It was unhurried past the point of Sabra's endurance and then past it again. The warrior made love the way the Attuin did everything — loudly and generously and without subtraction, all of herself present and none of it held in reserve as a lever — and she required, gently but she did require it, that Sabra be present too. That was the unbearable part. Sabra knew how to give a body what it wanted. She had been taught the whole catalogue of it, the slow building architecture of pleasure laid down stroke by deliberate stroke, and she could have performed any part of it flawlessly, could have made the warrior come apart under her hands while standing entirely outside the act in the cool watching place where she had always lived. She reached for that place out of pure reflex the moment the heat began to climb in her — reached for the outside, the management, the part of her that stood apart and steered.

Tamar felt her go.

The warrior stilled. Drew back just far enough to find Sabra's eyes in the dark. "You left." Not an accusation. An observation, soft as the others, the cup, the hide. "Where'd you go?"

Sabra opened her mouth and found she could not lie about it. "Outside," she whispered. "I went outside it. To watch. To manage." A breath. "It's where I'm safe."

"Mm." Tamar's thumb moved along her cheekbone, slow. "Come back. Nobody out there worth watching. Nothing to manage. Just you and me and the long way round." And she waited — actually waited, did not move on until Sabra had come back, until Sabra had let the watching place go and dropped, terrified, back into the simple unbearable present of being touched, of feeling instead of observing the feeling, of being inside her own skin with no exit. "There," Tamar said again, when she felt her return. "Stay. You keep leaving. Stay with me."

It happened a dozen times across the dark of the ninth night. Each time the heat rose high enough to frighten her, Sabra's training tried to assert itself, tried to make the thing a performance she could stand outside of and survive; and each time Tamar felt it — the way she felt the cold, the way she felt the wrongly-held

cup, the way she felt everything — and stopped, and drew back, and waited, patient as the nine days had been patient, and brought her back. *Stay*, the warrior would murmur into the hollow of her throat, into her hair, against her mouth. *Stay with me. Nobody watching but me, and I'm not grading you. I'm not your House. Just be here.*

And Sabra, who had spent her entire life watching, who had never once in an act of love been only and wholly inside it, found herself dragged back again and again into the simple terrible present — into a body that was being attended to with a reverence she had no defence against, by a woman in complete and easy possession of her own power, a woman who gave the whole of herself without subtraction and required only that Sabra be *there* to receive it. There was no campaign. There was no lever. There was no angle she could find to grip, no move underneath the move, nothing to manage because nothing was being done *to* her in the order's sense, the sense of an act conducted upon a target. It was being done *with* her, and the *with* was the thing she had no training to hold, because the order had never taught her *with*. The order had only ever taught her *upon*.

The fire burned down to coals and then to embers. The cold of the deep night came down on the bare skin of her back and Tamar pulled a hide over them both without ever quite stopping, and the warmth of the warrior's body and the cold of the sky and the slow relentless tender attention all wound together until Sabra lost the thread of where the watching place even was, lost the map back to it, and somewhere in the dark of the ninth night the thing she had been taught was how you got killed happened to her anyway —

— she let go of the watching. All of it. The instrument, the distance, the part of her that stood outside and managed and survived, the cool exit she had kept open all her life. For one long undefended span she was nothing at all but a woman being loved — present and porous and undefended, with no exit kept open, no watcher in the high cold place, nothing held back to grade or steer or save herself with — and the heat that had been building broke over her like the breaking of something structural, something she had not known was holding strain, and she heard herself make a sound she had never made, a sound with no instrument in it anywhere, a sound she could not have performed because it came from below the place where performance lived.

And it did not kill her.

She lay in the long shuddering aftermath, and the thing the order had spent her whole childhood teaching her to mistrust, drilling her against, walling her away from — not because it was weak but precisely because it was strong, because it was the one thing they could not weaponise and could not lever and could not turn to the House's use, and the Adima Ru did not let a daughter keep anything they could not turn to use. They had taken it from her so young she had not known it was a theft. They had told her the wall was protection. She lay in the dark with the truth of it breaking open in her chest and understood that

she had been robbed before she was old enough to know there was anything to rob, that the thing behind the wall had been there all along, waiting, alive, this whole time — and that a Spear-Sister with scarred hands and an open face and a refusal to do anything halfway had just gone the long way round and knocked, and someone had answered.

She wept, after. And was not ashamed of it, which was itself new — she who had been trained that tears were either a weapon or a failure and never simply a thing a body did when something inside it broke open clean. She wept the way she had made the sound, from below performance, the tears coming without permission and without management, and Tamar held her and did not ask why and did not make it a thing. Just held her in the cold under the black enormous sky and let her be undefended a while longer, one scarred hand moving slow and steady along the length of Sabra's spine, again and again, the way you'd gentle a beast that had run itself near to death and was only now, shaking, beginning to understand it was safe.

After a long time, Tamar said, low, into the dark: "First time you've been all the way here." Her hand kept moving, slow. "Not the bedding. The being here. Nothing kept back."

And Sabra, who could have lied — who had a hundred smooth instruments for exactly this moment, who could have turned it light, turned it away, kept the last span of distance she had kept her whole life — used none of them.

"Yes," she said.

"Good," Tamar said. And there was no triumph in it. None. Sabra ran the read on the word out of pure unkillable habit and found, where the order would have put the collected debt, the logged investment, the small private satisfaction of a campaign won — found only a fierce and uncomplicated tenderness, the warm half of the world taking in something the cold half had thrown away and discovering, with something near to anger on its behalf, that it had been whole all along. "Stay as long as you can, then," the warrior went on. "I know your lot always go back. I won't ask you not to — I'm not fool enough to think I can keep a woman the Salthold's got hooks in. I'm just asking you to be *here* while you're here. All the way. Because halfway's an insult, and I told you. I'm not small."

Sabra lay against her in the dark and did not say, then, what she could not yet say.

She did not say that she had come to this caravan under orders — that she carried a charge sewn into the lining of her own purpose, that she was here to find a child and run a read on what the child was and carry the truth of it back across the pans to an old woman dying in the salt. She did not say that she had crossed a thousand small distances in nine days — the hide, the cup, the room, the held boundary, the slow undoing of the watcher in the high cold place — and the largest distance of them all tonight, the distance between *upon* and

with, the distance she had been built specifically never to cross. She did not say that lying here in a Spear-Sister's arms on the open Deep Sand, undefended for the first time in her remembered life, she could feel — with the Reckoning she could not switch off even now, even here, even spent and weeping and held — that some load-bearing wall inside her had taken a crack tonight too. That water had gotten into the crack. That she did not know yet whether the crack would let the light in or bring the whole structure down around her. Only that there would be no mortaring it shut again. That she had seen the difference now between a lever and a hand, and a woman who had seen that difference could never again, for the rest of her life, pretend not to know it.

She had been sent to assess what a girl was.

She lay in a warrior's arms on the cold sand under the wheeling indifferent stars and assessed, with dread and with something that was almost gratitude and that she had no other word for but the new enormous unschooled word she had just learned in the dark, what *she* was. And found, to her astonishment — she who had thought she knew the precise dimensions of her own narrow weaponised self down to the last logged span — that the answer was larger than the category she had been issued. That she was not the pared-down instrument the order had made of her. That she was something wider and warmer and, she understood with a small cold thrill that was not entirely fear, more dangerous to the House that made her than any read she could ever carry home: a woman who had been shown the difference between a lever and a hand, and a woman who knew that difference could not be trusted, anymore, to hold the lever.

She thought, distantly, of the old word for it — the temple's word, *left-hand love*, the love the men's law would not record, the love the desert had taken and made a badge of. *I am her left hand and her right*. She had always heard it as a thing other people said, warm people, Attuin people, people who lived without walls. She had not known, until tonight, that it could be a thing about her. That she could be a person who loved this way. She turned the discovery over in the dark and found that it did not frighten her the way she would have expected — found, in fact, that it settled into her the way the read clicks home when the inference finally fits the facts. She had thought she knew the shape of her own wanting. She had thought it was a narrow managed thing, sanctioned and discreet, aimed where the order permitted. She found it was wider than that. She found it had been wider than that all along, perhaps, and that she had only ever let herself want inside the lines the House had drawn, and that the lines, like the wall, had been a thing done to her young and called protection. There was no crisis in the finding. That surprised her too. It came as the wall had cracked: clean, and like dawn, and like grief for the years before it. *I am drawn to her*, she thought, simple as the cup held from beneath. *Not to a category. To her. To this. To the whole of a person who would go the long way round for me*. And the thought sat in her chest beside the joy, unfraught, and was true.

"Why?" she said, after a while, into the dark, the question coming up bare like everything else tonight. "Why go to all that trouble. For someone you've known

nine days. Someone whose lot raids yours, breeds you for the spear.” She felt the warrior’s hand pause on her spine, then resume. “You should have used me. It would’ve been smarter. Spent nine days making me want you, then had something the order wanted. That’s what we’d have done. What I’d have done, the other way round.”

Tamar was quiet for a moment, and Sabra felt the slow rise and fall of her breath, felt her decide how to answer.

“Maybe,” the warrior said at last. “Maybe that’s the smart of it, your way. But I’ve watched your lot do that smart thing my whole life. Watched you reach for the lever every time. Turn want into a tool and people into stud-books and never once let yourselves have the plain thing — the warm thing, the thing that’s right there if you’d just stop trying to *use* it.” A breath. “And you know what you all are? Cold. Cold to the bone, every one of you. Cold like the pan’s cold at night, and you carry it like it’s strength. It’s not. It’s a wound nobody let you grieve.” Her hand moved, slow, down the long line of Sabra’s back. “I didn’t go the long way round to get something off you, salt-woman. I went it because I watched a cold woman get colder for nine days managing a kindness she couldn’t make come out as a move, and somewhere in there I stopped wanting to bed you and started wanting to *thaw* you. Different hungers. The second one doesn’t take payment. That’s the whole of it. Write it in your ledger if you like. It won’t be worth anything to the order. It’s not for them.”

Sabra lay very still under the truth of it.

“You’d let me carry it back,” she said. “Whatever I read here. You’d let me go.”

“I told you. I’m not fool enough to keep you. The hooks are in deep.” A pause. “But I’ll tell you a thing for free. You can do what you want with it. You came out here a woman who could only want inside the lines they drew you. You’ll ride back across those pans a woman who knows there’s a country outside the lines. Knows what it costs to live in it. Knows what it’s worth.” The warrior’s voice went very low, very certain. “And a woman who knows that’s no good to them anymore. Not all the way. There’ll always be a crack now where the warm got in. They’ll feel it the day you walk back through their gate. You won’t be able to hide it. And that’s the most dangerous thing in the world to be, in a House like yours. So be sure, I said. I meant more than the bedding. You’ve crossed a distance tonight you can’t uncross. And it’s not the one between your fire and mine.”

Sabra closed her eyes against the enormous indifferent stars.

She knew the warrior was right. She had felt the crack take, felt the water get in, felt the structure shift and resettle around a fault that had not been there at dawn. She thought of the gate at Sett, the salt-white windowless walls with all their eyes turned inward, and she thought of walking back through it carrying this, carrying a thawed place at her center that Yenneth would read in a

heartbeat and Vael would read in less, and she felt the dread of it move through her cold and certain — and underneath the dread, refusing to be drowned by it, the joy, still, the plain enormous unschooled thing, unkillable now that it had been let out, water in the crack, light or collapse, no way to know yet which.

She did not sleep. She lay awake in the warmth and the cold, the warrior's slow breath against her hair, the warrior's scarred hand gone still and heavy at last on her spine with sleep, and she watched the cold stars wheel their slow indifferent wheel across the black, and she let herself — for the first time in her obedient, gifted, weaponised life — simply *want* something with the whole of her and not be steered by it. Not aim the want. Not manage it. Not log it. Just hold it, the way Tamar had taught her to hold the cup, with the whole hand, with care.

Chapter Eight — What the Salt-Singer Fears

Naia heard the salt before anyone said the word.

She had always heard it. She had thought, when she was small, that everyone did — that the faint high singing under the day, the way the ground told you what it was made of if you only held still and listened past your own blood, was simply a thing ears were for, the way eyes were for light. The first time she remembered it clearly she had been very young, lying on her belly on a stone still warm from noon while the caravan ate, and she had pressed her ear flat to the rock and heard it rise to meet her — not loud, never loud, a thread of sound thinner than the whine of a midge, pitched so high it was almost a feeling in the teeth — and she had laughed out loud, delighted, because the stone was *talking*, and she had run to tell the nearest grown woman that the ground was singing and would she please come and hear.

The woman had not come and heard.

That was the first time she saw it, the careful look. It crossed the woman's face like a cloud-shadow crossing the dune-sea, there and gone, and behind it the woman's surface went smooth and bright and false the way water goes smooth over a stone that will break your ankle. *Did it, little one. Did it sing you a song.* And Naia, six, had understood with the awful clarity of children that she had said a wrong thing, the kind of wrong thing that did not get you slapped but got you *watched* — and she had stopped, mid-delight, and looked at her own small dusty hands.

She had been six before she truly understood that the others did not hear it, and she had understood it the way children understand the things that will mark them: by the silence that fell when she mentioned it, the careful look that passed between the grown women, Amma Reshi's hand coming down warm and

quick on her shoulder, *hush now, little road, that's a singer's thing, we don't say it to the others.*

That hand had been a mercy and a sentence both. *Hush now.* It told her she was not mad — that there *was* a thing, that it had a name, that a person she loved knew the name and would not be afraid of her for it. And it told her, in the same breath, to fold the thing away where the others could not see it. So she had folded it away. She had learned, the way she learned everything, fast and certain and once, that there were things about herself that made the air go careful, and she had become a small expert in the art of not making the air go careful — which is to say she had become, very young, a watcher of faces, a reader of the tiny weathers that crossed them, because if you were going to keep a thing hidden you had to know the instant it began to show.

That was its own gift, growing in the dark under the first one, and she did not know yet that it had a name in the cities, or that the cities drowned children who had it too well.

She had spent her sixteen years being, to everyone's relief and her own private bafflement, almost ordinary. A good scout — better than good; she could find water by the set of the birds and read a dry watercourse for where it had last run, and once, on the bad crossing two summers gone, she had stopped the whole caravan with a raised fist because the salt under the night-road had changed its song from a hum to a thin sick whistle, and they had gone the long way round, and three days later they passed the place where the crust had given and there were the bones of someone else's beasts standing up out of the broken pan like the fingers of a drowned hand. Nobody had asked her how she knew. They had thanked her, and gone careful, and Tamar had cuffed her round the head with rough love and called her *little witch* in a voice with too much in it, and Naia had grinned and ducked and felt the loneliness move under the grin like a fish under ice.

A passable hand with a spear, better with a sling. Quick. Too quick, sometimes — the words out of her before the asker had finished. *You knew I was going to say that,* the other young ones would complain, half-laughing, half-uneasy, breaking off a tease before its end because she'd already answered the end of it. And Naia would shrug it off, would make a joke of it. *I'm a singer. We cheat.* Because what else? You did not say *I heard the shape of it coming off you like heat off a stone.* That made the air go careful. So she let them think it was luck, or wit, or a singer's small showing-off, and she paid for the place she earned that way in the only coin she had: she was a little too useful, a little too quick to volunteer for the bad watch and the dry stretch, a little too willing to take the load nobody else wanted, earning over and over a place she could not quite believe was simply hers to have.

Because that was the thing she could not fold away, no matter how she tried. Not the salt-hearing, not the quickness. The *wanting.*

She wanted to belong so badly it was a hunger in her like thirst — the kind of

thirst the Deep taught you not to show, because showing it made you weak, and weakness on the Deep got the whole caravan killed. She loved the long-water people with a fierce embarrassing totality, loved the smell of the cook-fires and the grief-songs over the salt and the way a circle of them would close, laughing, around a story, and she was never, quite, sure they loved her back the same way — because she could *hear* the careful air around her, could read off the people she loved most the tiny hitch of unease that her quickness put there, the half-beat of hesitation before they made room for her at the fire. It was never refusal. It was never cruelty; the Attuin were not cruel to their own, and they had raised her since before she could remember, and if you'd asked any one of them they'd have said of course she belonged, she was theirs, what a question. But she heard the half-beat. She had spent her life inside the half-beat. And so she had made herself indispensable, the way a person who is not sure of the ground builds a bridge of her own bones across it, and she did not yet understand that this too was a thing the road would use against her — that the hunger to belong was the softest place in her, the place every faction in the desert would in time press its thumb.

It was Amma Reshi who finally named it, on the night after the salt-trader crossed the largest of her distances.

Naia had seen that, too.

She had been on the high watch, perched on the cold lip of a dune with her sling coiled in her lap and the whole sweep of the camp below her laid out like coals in a brazier going down to ash — and she had felt it move across the dark, the enormous thing, before she'd seen it with her eyes. She had felt the salt-woman rise from the edge of the firelight and cross the camp toward Tamar's fire, and the feeling of it had come off the two of them so strongly that Naia had turned her head as if to a sound, the way you turn toward thunder before you know you've heard it. Two weathers meeting. Tamar's, which Naia knew the way she knew her own heartbeat — that bright fierce warm front of her, the one she'd grown up under, the one that called her *little witch* and meant it as *mine* — and the salt-woman's, which was a held thing, a cold high pressure with something straining under it, and which, when it came near Tamar's, did not clash with it. It *folded into* it. Naia had no word for what she felt happen between the two of them across the whole dark camp. It was like watching two song-roads she'd thought ran separate turn out, at one unmarked place in the sand, to be the same road.

And she was glad. That was the strange thing, the thing she would turn over later: that her first feeling, watching Tamar walk toward the thing that would change all their lives, was the clean uncomplicated gladness of a young person who loves an older one and wants her happy — *good, good, let her have it, whatever it is, she deserves a warm thing.*

And then, underneath the gladness, sharp as a blade slid in between ribs while

you're laughing, the loneliness. Because she could hear *their* weather, hers and the salt-woman's, the way she could hear everyone's — could hear it so clearly across so much dark that it was almost indecent, like seeing into a tent whose flap had blown open — and no one, not once in sixteen years, had ever heard hers. She sat on the cold dune with the whole loud silent night singing under her and felt, with the particular completeness of the young, that she would die unheard. That she was a vessel built all of ears, a thing made to listen, and that nothing on the Deep was made to listen back.

She did not cry. The Deep did not teach you to cry where the watch could see. She sat very still and listened to the salt instead — out past the last fire it sang loudest, a great patient chord that ran on under everything, and she leaned her listening into it the way other girls her age leaned toward a particular footstep coming up the dark, and let it hold her, because it always had, because it had been telling her things since before she could walk, and it, at least, never went careful.

That was where Amma Reshi found her.

"You'll catch your death out here," the old woman said.

She came up the back of the dune the slow way, the safe way, announcing herself with the small grunts and curses of a body that had carried the warm Remembering across the Deep for seventy years and felt every season of it in the joints, and she lowered herself down beside Naia by stages, a hand on the girl's shoulder for balance, settling into the sand with a long exhalation that was half complaint and half prayer.

"Or you would. If you were anyone else's child." She looked out at the pale shine of the pan under the stars, and her old face, in the starlight, had nothing careful in it at all. "It likes you."

Naia went very still.

She had heard the salt say a great many things in sixteen years. She had never once heard a human voice say *it likes you* as though it were the simplest fact in the desert, as though it were the kind of thing you might say about a dog that had taken to someone. No one ever said it plainly. The whole architecture of her life was built out of no one ever saying it plainly. She sat with her sling forgotten in her lap and did not breathe, the way you don't breathe when a wild thing has come close and you are terrified of frightening it off, except the wild thing was the truth, and Amma Reshi was holding it out in her open palm.

"Amma —"

"I've always known. I'm a singer; it's my work to know." The old woman did not turn her head. "No use going careful with me. I taught you the careful. I can hear it in you the way you hear it in everyone else — yes. I know you do that too. I've watched you do it your whole life. Reading us off our faces and

our breath since you were small enough to ride in the saddle-pack, and thinking you were being so clever, and you *were*. That's the trouble." A dry small sound that might have been a laugh. "There's no salt-singer in three generations heard the ground as young as you. And I've spent sixteen years glad of it and afraid of it in the same heartbeat, and put off saying so for every one of those years. Because I'm a coward. And because I love you. And the two aren't as different as I'd like."

The wind moved over the pan. The salt sang on under it.

"What I've been putting off," Amma Reshi said, "is what to *do* about knowing it. And I've run out of road." Here at last she turned, and her eyes found Naia's in the dark, and there was nothing soft in them now, only the steadiness of a thing finally being met head-on. "That salt-woman by Tamar's fire. She's not a salt-woman. And you know that. You've heard it off her."

Naia had.

She had heard it off the salt-trader from the first night the woman walked into the firelight with her crate of salt-blocks and her too-good silence. She had heard the wrongness of her like a wrong note held under a song — the held thing, the woman whose surface and whose depths did not match, who *moved* like the salt-blocks she sold, like a thing pressed hard into a shape it had not grown into. On the Deep that meant one of two things, and they were usually the same thing: a liar, or someone in terrible danger.

"She's hiding what she is." The words came out small. "Like me."

"Not like you." Amma Reshi said it gently, and the gentleness was somehow worse than sharpness would have been; it was the gentleness of a healer touching the place that is going to have to be cut. "She's hiding a thing she *chose*. You're hiding a thing you *are*. They're not the same. And the difference between them is the most important thing I'll ever teach you. So put your sling down."

Naia put her sling down. She turned to face the old woman fully, the way she had turned to face the thunder, and Amma Reshi reached over and took her hand. The grip was dry and strong and shook, only a little, the way a long-strung bow shakes at full draw.

"There's a warm Remembering," Amma Reshi said, "and a cold one. One root once, whatever the cities say, whatever we say — one root, split, and both halves grown to hate the other the way only halves of a broken thing can. The cities took the cold one. Built walls around it. Made it a weapon and a law. They keep ledgers. They breed daughters the way you and I breed beasts for the long water — for a trait, for a use. And when a daughter does the work *too well*, when she reaches too far —" The old hand tightened. "They drown her. In the salt. Their own. To keep a law they swore on the same salt. And they tell themselves it's mercy, and some of them weep doing it, and that's the worst part. That's the part I want you never to forget. The people who'd do it to you would *weep*."

Naia's mouth had gone dry. She had grown up on stories of the cold sisters the way city children grew up on stories of the things in the dune-sea — the schemers, the Edemre with their kill-veils, the cisterns of memory under the Salthold. She had not, until this moment, understood any of it to be *about her*.

"And I think," Amma Reshi went on, very low, "I've thought for sixteen years — you'd be one of the children they drown. Not because you're wicked. By the First Mother, you're the least wicked thing I've ever raised; you'd give your water to a stranger and lie to me about it after so I wouldn't fret. No. Because you're *too much*. Because you don't just hear the salt." She drew breath, and Naia felt the old hand shake harder, felt the held thing in *her*, the singer's own careful air finally cracking. "You hear the salt, and you hear the question before it's asked, and that's two, child. That's already two of the four. And there are stories — there are *laws* — about what they do to a girl in whom even two of them wake strong. But I've watched you. Once or twice. When you were frightened and didn't know I was looking. And I've seen you do a third thing."

The salt sang on. The wind moved. Somewhere far below them a fire popped and sent up a single coal that rose and died.

"I have no name for it," Amma Reshi said. "I've prayed I imagined it. I'm too old to lie to myself well, and I haven't managed to believe I imagined it. Not once. Not in two years." Her eyes were wet and steady, both at once, the way the pan was bright and dead at once. "You remember the night the crust gave under little Davu's beast. When you were fourteen."

Naia remembered. She remembered it the way you remember the inside of a fever: in fragments, lit too bright, with the middle missing. Davu's pony going down screaming into the broken pan, the boy half under it, the whole crust around them turning from solid to slurry as the salt-water came up — and the men shouting, the rope not reaching, and a thing in her chest going *no*, a thing that had no words and was bigger than words, and then —

— and then the boy was out. On the good crust. Coughing brine, alive. And the middle was missing. She had never been able to find the middle of it.

"You don't remember how he got out." Amma Reshi watched her face. "No. I didn't think you would. Nobody does. The men who were there have made up six different stories and none of them's true and all of them are about a rope. There was no rope, little road. The rope was four arm-lengths short the whole time. I measured it after. On my knees in the dark. Because I'm old and afraid and I needed to *know*." She let go of Naia's hand and pressed her own to her own chest, as if it pained her. "And I felt the ground change. I'm a singer. I felt the salt under that whole stretch go from a hum to a *scream* and back in the space of one breath — your breath — and when it was over the boy was on the good crust and you were on your knees bleeding from the nose and you didn't know how either. And I looked at you. And I thought: *there it is. There's the thing the cities drown them for. And it's mine to raise.*"

She stopped. The night held them.

“I don’t know what it is,” she said at last, more quietly. “That’s the truth, and you’re old enough now to be given the truth. I don’t know what the third thing is. I don’t think it’s wholly the salt-hearing, and I don’t think it’s wholly the reading-of-faces, and I’ve a singer’s old fear in my bones that it’s the two of those and something *else*, all braided into one cord — and that the something else is the thing the cold sisters spent a thousand years building walls to keep from ever being braided. I think you’re a thing that’s not supposed to be possible. And I’ve loved you since you were a squalling scrap in a salt-trader’s basket. And I’m going to do the only thing I know how to do. Which is sing you a road through it.”

She straightened her old spine, and the careful air came back into her voice — not the false careful, the hiding kind, but a different careful, the careful of a person picking up a thing very heavy and very precious and meaning not to drop it.

“I’m going to teach you the warm Remembering. Not the way they’d teach you. The song-roads, the holding-together — the part that’s love and not a lever. The part the cities cut away and called soft and threw on the midden. How a people *carries* itself across the dark instead of how one woman *uses* another. Because if you’re going to carry what you carry — and you are, I’ve no power to stop it, no one has, I’ve watched it grow in you like a second spine — then I’ll not have you carry it cold. I’ll not have you carry it alone the way they’d make you. In a stone room. In a ledger. With weeping women holding your head under the brine. You’ll carry it warm. You’ll carry it *sung*. Whatever else comes.”

Naia’s throat had closed. She had wanted, her whole life, for one person to look at the whole of her — not the useful part, not the quick part, the *whole* of her, the part that heard salt and read weather and did, sometimes, in the fever-bright missing middles, a third thing with no name — and not go careful. And here was the person, old and shaking and unafraid, looking at the whole of her in the starlight, and Naia found she could not speak, only nod, only grip the old hand back hard enough to feel the bones in it.

“But I need you to promise me one thing.” Amma Reshi’s voice changed. It went down into the register Naia had only ever heard her use over the grief-songs, the one that came up out of seventy years and was not asking. “And I need you to mean it the way you mean a thing sworn on salt. Not a child’s promise, the kind you make to get the asking over. A salt-oath. The kind that costs.”

“Anything, Amma. Anything.”

“When you are frightened.” The old hand turned Naia’s so their palms lay together, the Attuin gesture, *be sure*, the one Tamar used. “Truly frightened. Not the small frights — the big one. The one that comes someday whether we want it or not, because it always comes, the desert always sends it, and it will

be worse than anything you've yet felt and you will feel it in the place the third thing lives. When that day comes —" Her grip went hard, harder than her old hand should have been able to manage, and Naia felt the shake in it become a tremor of pure will. "— you will not reach for the third thing. The one you have no name for. Whatever it costs you. You will run. You will hide. You will let them take you, let them put their hands on you, let them do worse than that, before you reach for it. Because I have heard what happens to the ground when you so much as *flinch* toward it, child — I heard it under Davu's pony, I have heard it once since when you woke screaming from a dream and didn't know I was near — and I am old, and I am afraid, and I would rather lose you to flight, to capture, to the brine itself, than to *that*."

"Amma—"

"Promise me." The old eyes burned. "The third thing stays sealed. Always. No matter what. No matter who they have. No matter what they do. You run, you hide, you fall, you *break* — but you do not unseal it. Swear it to me on the salt, the way I'm telling it to you, so that when the day comes and you've forgotten my face you'll still hear my voice saying it under the fear."

And Naia — sixteen, and aching to belong, and at last, at last, being seen plainly and wholly by someone who loved her and was not afraid of any part of her — promised. She promised easily, the way you promise a thing you cannot imagine ever wanting to break, the way you promise to give back a borrowed knife you have not yet learned you will need. She turned her palm against the old palm and she said, with the whole hot full force of her young untested heart, *I promise, Amma. On the salt. The third thing stays sealed. Always.* And Amma Reshi let out a breath that seemed to take some of seventy years with it, and bowed her head, and held the girl's hand against her own chest where the warm Remembering lived, and did not say — because how could she say it, how could anyone say it to a child under the singing salt — that she had just made the girl swear the one oath the road would, in the end, make it impossible to keep.

The salt sang on under both of them. It did not care what was promised. It never had.

She met the salt-woman properly two days later, and it was not what either of them expected.

Naia had meant to be wary. She had Amma Reshi's warning in her like a swallowed coal, *she's hiding a thing she chose*, and she had the cold sisters' whole architecture freshly built in her mind now — the ledgers, the drownings, the breeding of daughters for a trait — and she knew, with the certainty that was her gift and would one day be her ruin, that the held thing in the salt-woman had something to do with *her*, that the woman's careful surface bent, when Naia came near it, the way a current bends around a stone, that whatever

the woman had crossed a thousand distances carrying, the answer to it was sitting in the camp wearing a girl's face. So she meant to be wary. She had practised it. She had decided how she would hold her own surface smooth and give nothing, the way you give nothing to a stranger at the bitter-coffee until the third cup.

It did not survive the first look.

The salt-woman — *Sabra*, Tamar called her, and Tamar said the name the way you'd cup water in your two hands on a dry stretch, careful not to spill any, the name gone soft and new and astonished in her warrior's mouth — the salt-woman looked up across the morning fire as Naia came round the cook-tripod, and for one instant, one unguarded instant, her whole careful surface dropped.

It dropped the way a kill-veil drops, all at once, the held thing let go — and what was under it came off her so plainly that Naia, who had spent her life reading weather off the faces of people working hard to hide it, was struck nearly breathless by the sheer *legibility* of it. The woman wasn't trying to hide, in that instant. She had forgotten to. And the Reckoning came off her — Naia had no city-word for it yet, but she felt it leave the woman and reach toward her — not as a lever, not as the cold quick measuring Naia had braced for, the appraising-a-beast-at-market she'd half-expected. It came off her as *recognition*. One hidden thing seeing another. One whole-life loneliness seeing its mirror across a fire and not being able, for one instant, to pretend it hadn't.

And what was underneath the recognition was not malice at all.

Naia stood very still and read it the way you read a song-road off the dark — fast, certain, the whole shape of it landing in her at once. There was fear in the woman. A great cold lake of it, very deep, and old. There was grief sitting on top of the fear like ice on a winter cistern. And underneath both of those, surprising them both — surprising the woman most of all, Naia could feel the surprise of it, could feel the woman flinch at her own weather the way you flinch at a hand that moves without your telling it to — there was a fierce, reflexive *protectiveness*, aimed at Naia, that the salt-woman had plainly not authorized and could not call back.

It was the protectiveness that undid Naia's wariness. You could brace against a measuring look. You could not brace against being, suddenly, on the morning's far side of a fire, *defended* — by a stranger, against a thing the stranger would not name, before either of you had spoken.

"You hear it," Sabra said.

Her voice was low, and dry, and she had got her surface back up before the words came — Naia felt her do it, felt the careful air close over the lake again like crust re-forming over broken pan — but it was too late, the surface was up over a thing already seen, and they both knew it. The salt-woman said it the way Amma Reshi had said *it likes you*: as a fact laid down between them, palm up.

“The salt. Heard it your whole life. Never been able to tell anyone what it is.”

Naia should have lied.

She was good at the careful air. She had practised the smooth surface for this exact moment. She had Amma Reshi’s coal in her gut, *a thing she chose*, and every instinct the Deep had drilled into her said *give nothing to the hidden stranger, not until the third cup, not until you know what she carries*. The lie was right there, easy, on her tongue. *Hear what? It’s cold; I came for the coffee*. The careful air. The smooth water over the breaking stone.

Instead — for the first time in her whole listening life — she told the truth to someone who was not Amma Reshi.

She told it because the woman across the fire had told it to *her* first. Had handed over her own hidden thing before asking for Naia’s — had dropped the veil first, even if by accident, had let the lake show before reaching for the answer. On the Deep that meant something. That was how you offered the distance: palm up, your own thing first, *be sure*. Tamar’s gesture, the one that had raised her. The salt-woman, whatever else she was, had made the offer the right way round, even if she hadn’t meant to, and Naia found she could not answer an honest thing with a lie. The wanting in her — the great hunger to be heard, sixteen years of it, the loneliness of the vessel made all of ears — rose up under the wariness and simply drowned it.

“Yes,” Naia said.

And then, because she had begun, because the dam once broken does not hold the second stone: “What is it? Do you know what I am?”

She heard, the instant the words left her, what they cost. She heard it land in the salt-woman like a thrown thing.

Because the woman across the fire — and Naia read all of this in the half-beat before Sabra answered, read it off the lake and the ice and the unauthorized fierce protectiveness all at once, read it the way she’d read the boy’s pony going down, the whole terrible shape arriving complete — the woman across the fire had crossed a thousand distances to answer exactly that question. *Do you know what I am*. She had it. Or she had enough of it. Naia could feel that she had it the way you can feel water behind a wall of rock, the pressure of a held thing wanting to come through — the answer was *in* her, and it was a heavy answer, the heaviest in the desert, and the woman knew it was heavy, knew it was the kind of answer you could not give a child across a morning fire without changing the child’s whole life and probably ending it, and Naia felt her *not give it*. Felt the wall she’d been raised inside — Naia could feel the wall now, could feel it as a real cold thing in the woman’s depths, an architecture, a place she’d been *built* — grind against the thing she’d become at the warrior’s fire over the question of this exact girl. Felt the two halves of the salt-woman, the cold-raised and the newly-warm, the ledger and the lake, the wall and the woman, lock against each other over Naia’s head and refuse to move.

Sabra looked at the girl who could hear salt where there was none.

And did not answer.

And Naia heard the not-answering. Heard it more loudly than any answer could have been said. Heard the enormous careful weather of it — the woman holding the heaviest thing in the desert behind her teeth, holding it out of fear and out of grief and, most strangely, most newly, out of *love*, that reflexive unauthorized love that had come off her in the first unguarded instant and would not be called back.

She felt the first cold breath of it then. The thing that had been coming for her down the song-roads her whole life — the thing Amma Reshi had heard under the boy's pony and prayed she'd imagined, the thing the cold sisters built walls to keep from being braided, the thing she had sworn on the salt two nights ago to keep sealed and could not yet imagine breaking. She felt it the way you feel the change in the air before the dune-sea moves, a pressure-drop, a held silence under the singing, the desert gathering itself far off to send the big fright she'd promised to run from.

The salt sang on. It did not care what it would cost. It never had.

But for the first time, listening to it, Naia was afraid of what it knew.

Chapter Nine — The Hunt's First Breath

Kessa had killed eleven people in her life and remembered all of them fondly, which Imani said was the single most disturbing thing about her, and Imani had a long list.

It was a good list, too. Imani had been keeping it the way other women kept a tally of a man's debts or a child's milestones — quietly, with patience, never lost — across the eight years they had ridden the ledger's roads together, and she added to it the way she did everything, without heat and without forgetting. *You name your blades.* That one was old. *You eat the heel of the bread first because you say the soft middle's a coward's reward, which is mad.* Newer. *You will not sleep with your back to the open desert, even now, even after all this, even with me lying between you and it.* That one she did not say aloud. That one she kept. But the topmost entry, the one she trotted out the way you press a bruise to be sure it still hurts, was this one, and she pressed it now.

"You don't remember them *fondly*," Imani said. They were lying up through the worst of the day's heat in the blue shadow of a leaning rock two days behind the long-water caravan, sharing out the last of the good water and the bad gossip, and Imani was cleaning her blades, which she did the way some women prayed — unhurried, eyes half-down, the cloth going over the steel in long even strokes that had nothing in them of fear and everything of habit. The light came in

under the rock's lean low and bruise-coloured, and laid itself along the flats of the knives in turn as she turned them, so that for a breath each one was a little blue line of fire and then was only steel again. "You can't be fond of a man you put in the salt. The word's got edges. You can be fond of a fire that warms you, not of the same fire burning your house. It doesn't reach all the way to a dead man."

"It reaches where I send it," Kessa said.

She was lying on her back with one knee up and her head pillowed on her own folded arm, watching the underside of the rock, where the heat-haze of the open Deep had no purchase and the stone held the night's cool the way a cistern holds water — meanly, and not for long, and you took what you could before noon stole it. She had her veil down around her throat, loose, the way she wore it when there was no one to wear it for, and her face without it was a thing few people living had seen and lived ordinary lives afterward: a wide, clever, mobile face, made for laughing and for the precise opposite of laughing, with eyes that went over a thing once and kept it.

"I'm fond of the *work*," she said. "I'm fond of *them* the way a singer's fond of a song she sang well. You don't hate the song for ending. You don't grieve the note that's done. You're fond of it — the whole shape of it, start to finish, the breath you took before the hard part and the way the hard part went easy because you'd taken the breath. That's all fondness ever was. Theron, now." She stretched, catlike, in the shade, every long line of her unfolding and resettling, and grinned at the underside of the rock the way she'd grinned at the man, which was to say like something that has decided to be patient with you and wants you to enjoy the patience while it lasts. "Theron I'm extremely fond of, and I didn't even have to kill him."

"Here we go," Imani said, to her knife.

"Left him alive and *ruined*, which is so much more flattering to everyone involved." Kessa turned her head to look at her, because this was the part that wanted an audience and Imani, gods love her, was the only audience in the world she trusted to hear it whole. "A dead man's a closed account. He doesn't suffer; suffering's for the living. But a *ruined* man wakes up every morning of a long temple life and finds the ruin still there, fresh, waiting, like a debt that compounds while you sleep. He'll never be able to *tell* anyone what's missing — he'd have to tell them where he learned it was possible. He'll wear that under his robes like a stone in his sandal forever. Every step. Every prayer. Every time some soft temple-bred wife lays a dutiful hand on him and means well by it, he'll think of me, and hate that he thinks of me, and the hating'll be a fresh little knife each time." She laced her hands behind her head, deeply content. "That's not a kill. That's a *monument*. The boy's a shrine to me now, and the lamp in it'll never go out, and he didn't even cost me a debt."

"He cost the temple a true believer," Imani said.

She set down the long knife and picked up the short one, and the cloth started again, and she did not look up, and that was how Kessa knew the gossip had turned and the work had come into the shade with them.

“Which is why,” Imani went on, even and unhurried, “we’re two days into the Deep on a debt that smells wrong, eating the last of the good water and starting on the bad, because the great Kessa of the Veil couldn’t keep her veil on for one season. Nine other men in that gorge you could have ruined. Decent, useless men. Men whose ruin nobody would have written down. You picked the king’s own brother. Temple-pledged. You picked him *because* it would cost something, and now it’s cost something, and the cost is sand under my nails for two days and counting.”

That sobered the shade a little, because it was true, and they both knew it was true, and the particular flavour of their long quarrel was that it was always, underneath, about something truer than the thing being quarrelled over. Imani was not angry about Theron. Imani had no use for Theron and a great deal of use, eight years’ worth, for the woman who’d ruined him. What Imani was, lying there cleaning blades two days into the wrong end of a job that smelled bad, was *afraid*, in the cool flat way the Edemre were afraid, which had nothing of trembling in it and everything of attention; and the fear had no face it could fix on yet, so it had fixed for now on a temple boy and a season’s haste, because those at least could be named.

Kessa heard all of it. Hearing all of it was the work too.

“You’re right,” she said, which stopped the cloth.

Imani looked up.

“About Theron. About the season. I picked him because it would cost.” Kessa was not grinning now. “I’ll not pretend I picked him for the temple’s sake or the order’s or anyone’s but my own. A man that hard to have is worth the having. I wanted to find the bottom of him, and I found it, and the cost is exactly the cost you say. Sand under your nails and a debt at the end I don’t like the look of.” She held Imani’s eyes. “I’m not sorry. But I’ll not lie there’s nothing to be sorry for. There’s a difference. You taught it me. Don’t go forgetting you taught it me.”

The cloth started again. It was as near to a truce as the two of them ever signed, and they had signed it so many times they no longer needed to read it through.

The ledger had handed Kessa this one, and the ledger did not explain itself.

She thought about that as the worst of the heat broke and the shadow under the rock began, grudgingly, to lengthen back toward something a body could move in. The ledger was the spine the whole order was built down — the long unbroken accounting of who owed whom in blood, kept where no fire could reach it and no king could buy it and no grief could rush it — and a veil was a veil.

You did not ask the ledger *why* any more than you asked the well why it had water. The ledger gave you a name, a face, and a sum, and you went and you collected the sum, and the order's whole terrible honor was that the sum got collected, always, even against the order's own; a debt once entered was *paid*; that was the leash and that was the dignity, and the two were the same thing, which was the part the thrones never understood. They thought the Edemre were knives for hire. The Edemre were the only people left in the Saltlands who paid what they owed.

So Kessa did not, on principle, mind being pointed at a stranger and told to make her dead. That was the job. That was clean. You could see the bottom of a thing like that.

This one she could not see the bottom of, and that was the whole of her trouble, and she turned it over now the way she turned the token, looking for the catch.

"The debt's old," she said.

Imani had her blades away and was eating, neatly, a strip of the salt-meat that was the last of the food that did not need cooking, and she made the small grunt that in eight years had come to mean *I know, but tell me again, because you tell it better than you think*.

"That's the first wrong note," Kessa said. "Most veils are fresh. A killing avenged. A betrayal paid out. The books squared inside a generation, while the grief's still warm and there's somebody alive who knows the *shape* of why. There's a widow somewhere who'll spit when she hears it's done and sleep better that night. The debt's *attached* to something. Roots in the living world." She drew her knee up again and laid the worn token on it, on the flat of her own thigh, and looked at it. "This one's got no roots I can find. Came down my own line. Mother to daughter to me. Three generations sworn. And an inherited debt — you know this, you've carried two — nobody alive remembers the *why* of it. Only the *who*. The why goes into the salt with the woman who entered it, and what's left is the obligation, naked, like a vow with the lover dead. You carry it because carrying it is who you are. You don't get to ask it what it's for."

"And the who," Imani said.

"And the who," Kessa agreed, "in this case, is —"

She stopped, because she'd said it a dozen times in two days and it didn't get easier, it got worse, the way a stone in a sandal gets worse with the walking and not better.

"A girl," she said. "It's a girl, Imani. The veil's for a girl among the Attuin. Sixteen, seventeen. And here's the second wrong note — the ledger says I'm to know her *when I see her*. Those words. *You'll know her when you see her*. Which is not how the ledger talks. The ledger gives you a name and a face and a sum. Three things, hard as salt. So there's no mistaking and no mercy and no

room for a tired killer to put the veil on the wrong throat. It does not tell you you'll *know*. Knowing's a feeling. The ledger has no use for feelings. And yet there it sits, three generations old, in my grandmother's hand and my mother's after: *you'll know her when you see her.*"

"Maybe she's got your mother's nose," Imani said.

It was a kindness, that. It was Imani holding the door of the joke open in case Kessa wanted to step back out into the lighter air for a moment. Kessa loved her for it and did not take it.

"Maybe," she said, and did not laugh.

She was looking out now past the lean of the rock at the white glare of the Deep, north, where the caravan was, the long-water caravan with its by-name and its grief-songs and its girl, and the funny had gone out of her face for a moment — wholly out, all at once and leaving the room a different shape — and that happened so rarely that Imani stopped chewing to watch it happen.

"I don't like a debt I can't see the bottom of," Kessa said. "I've told you why. I'll tell you again, because it's the whole of my craft in one sentence and you should have it by heart in case I'm ever not here to say it." She picked the token up off her thigh and held it to the failing light, turning it, the way she'd turned it ten thousand times until the device worn into it was more a memory of a device than a device. "You can't *price* a thing if you can't see the bottom of it. That's all the Reckoning I've ever needed, that one law. Everything has a price. A kill, a ruin, a kindness, a betrayal — everything's got a sum at the bottom of it, and the work, the whole work, the only work, is *seeing the sum* before you act, so you know what you're spending and what you're buying and whether the trade's worth making. A veil you can price is a veil you can survive — you go in knowing the cost, you pay it, you come out lighter by exactly that much and no more. But a veil you *can't* price." She closed her hand around the token. "A veil you can't see the bottom of is a veil that's going to cost more than it pays. Always. Every time. Because the cost you can't see is the cost that ruins you, and a thing my mother couldn't explain is a cost I can't see."

She was quiet a moment. The light went on dying. Out on the pan the heat-shimmer was easing, the air over the white going from a thing that lied to the eye to a thing that merely glared, and soon the long blessed hours would come when the Deep was a road and not an oven.

"*Finish it,*" Kessa said, low, and Imani went still, because she knew these words too; she'd not been there, but Kessa had given them to her once, in the dark, the way you give someone the one thing you cannot carry alone. "That's what she said. My mother. At the end. She had my hand and she pressed this into it — pressed it so hard the device left a mark in my palm I could read for a day after — and she said, *finish it, Kessa. It's the last thing we carry. Finish it and the line's clean.*" She opened her hand and looked at the token again. "She didn't say who. Didn't say why. Didn't have the breath, or didn't have

the words, or had both and chose not to spend them — which is the one I like least. My mother chose her words the way I choose mine. She didn't waste a single one her whole life. I can't make myself believe she wasted her last." Kessa tucked the token away, into the place against her ribs where it had lived since the day her mother put it in her hand, warm now from her own skin. "But it's sworn. Three generations sworn. So we finish it." The grin came back, then, a little thinner than usual, with the lamp not quite all the way relit behind it. "We just finish it with our eyes open. Come on, Imani. The day's letting go of us." She rose in one long uncoiling motion that put no weight anywhere it could be heard. "I'm dying to find out what my mother got us into."

They moved by the dying light and then by no light at all. The Edemre moved like the Attuin, like everything that wished to cross the Deep and live had learned to move: not against the desert but inside it, taking its silences for cover and its cold for company, going by the stars the salt-singers sang and the killers stole. Two days behind a caravan is a careful distance — close enough to read its dust by day and its fires by dark, far enough that its outriders' outriders never quite caught the wrongness of you on the wind. Kessa had held this distance for two days the way a hawk holds a thermal, doing nothing, spending nothing, waiting on the moment the work asked for.

The moment came at dusk.

She had gone forward alone — Imani back with the water and the beasts in a fold of dune that would hide a hundred women, let alone two — gone forward on her belly the last stretch the way you went forward when you meant to look and not be looked at, and she had found her dune, a good one, lee-side to the camp, its crest a clean line against the dying sky that would show nothing of her if she kept below it, and she had settled in to the long Edemre patience that could hold a body still for an hour while the light died and the cold came up out of the sand and the muscles forgot they were muscles and became only part of the dune. She breathed slow. She let her pulse down. She had not, in two days, let herself want anything, because wanting is a thing that moves, and now she let herself want only this: to see the girl, once, clean, and read her, and begin to find the bottom of the debt.

The caravan made its evening below her in the blue.

It was a good camp, an old one's camp, set the way people set a camp who had set ten thousand of them and buried friends for getting it wrong — beasts in the centre, fires banked low and bright, the watch already drifting out to the edges with the unhurried competence of people for whom the dark held no terror it had not already long ago made friends with. The smell came up to her on the cooling air: dung-smoke and date-spirit and the particular green sweetness of the herb they threw on the cookfires of an evening to drive off the biting things, and under it all the salt, always the salt, the breath of the dead sea they all lived on the floor of. Somewhere a child laughed and was hushed and laughed again.

Somewhere a woman began, low, the first few notes of a grief-song and then thought better of it, or finished privately what she'd begun, and let it go. The fires found faces and lost them. It was, Kessa thought, lying in the cold sand with her veil up now and her whole self gone to the still careful nothing of the work, a *warm* place. She did not have many words for the thing it was. She had spent her life among people who went careful around her, and the going-careful had been the air she breathed so long she'd stopped tasting it; and here below her was a great loose family of people who went careless around each other, careless and close, the way you can only be careless with people you are sure of, and the wanting she'd let herself feel turned over in her chest and showed her, briefly, a face she did not look at.

Then she found the girl, and the work stopped being the work.

She found her by the cookfire, which was the wrong place to look for the one you'd been sent to kill — you looked at the edges, at the watch, at the ones who held themselves apart — but Kessa's eye had gone over the camp once, the way it went over everything, keeping what it found, and what it had found and kept was a girl by the central fire among her people, doing nothing, being nobody, a good plain Attuin face with nothing written on it that any throne would pay a copper to read. Sixteen, seventeen. Brown and sun-dark and ordinary. A girl you would not look at twice.

And Kessa knew her.

She knew her exactly the way the ledger had promised and exactly the way the ledger never talked, and it was the worst moment of Kessa's professional life, and the badness of it had nothing in it she could have explained to Imani in the morning, which was its own kind of bad, because Kessa explained everything to Imani in the morning.

It was not the face. She made herself check, the way you check a knot you've already tied because checking is who you are: she went over the face again, feature by feature, looking for the thing the ledger meant, the family resemblance or the birthmark or the way of holding the head, the *evidence*, and there was none, there was a plain girl by a fire, and the not-finding of the evidence did not in the least lessen the knowing. The knowing sat under the evidence, below it, the way the salt sits under the sand.

It was the stillness. The girl sat in the careless warmth of her kin with a held quality to her that Kessa's whole body recognised before her mind could, the way you recognise your own gait coming back at you off a wall — the reader's listening stillness, the watchfulness worn so long it had stopped looking like watchfulness and started looking like calm. Across two hundred strides of cooling sand Kessa read it the way she read a throat for a lie: the set of the shoulders that was a fraction too composed for a girl among friends; the eyes that went over the fire-circle once and kept what they found. Kessa had spent twenty years training the thing she was now watching a child do without

training at all, and against two days of discipline she felt her own body answer it — the prickle at the back of the neck, the wanting to turn the head.

And then — this was the part that put Kessa's heart to doing a thing it had not done in years, a fast hard wrong thing she had to take in hand at once or be heard for — the girl went still in a different way.

By the fire, mid-nothing, doing nothing, the girl went still the way Kessa herself went still: all at once, all over, the stillness of an animal that has just understood it is not alone. And she lifted her head. And she looked.

Not at Kessa. Kessa held to that, after, the way you hold to a rail in the dark — *she did not look at me, she could not have looked at me*. The light was gone. The dune was good. The crest was a clean line and Kessa was below it and Kessa had not survived eleven kills by being seen, by anyone, ever, in any light. The girl could not possibly have seen her. And the girl looked anyway — looked up, and out, and *toward*, straight up the line of the danger, the precise bearing of the held wrong thing on the dune; not the way a girl looks up idly at a noise, but the way Kessa herself looked when the back of her neck told her a thing her eyes had not yet caught, the deliberate cold turning of the whole attention onto the one wrong place in a quiet world.

The girl looked at the *wrongness* of her. At the veil. At the held breath two hundred strides off in the dying dark.

And Kessa, who had been afraid perhaps four times in her adult life and could name all four, lay in the cold sand of a good dune behind a clean crest and understood three things at once, fast, the way you understand things that are going to change your life — not in words, the words came later, lying-up the next dawn, the words were for Imani; in the moment it was three cold doors opening one after another down a corridor she had not known was there.

The first door: she knew the girl when she saw her because the girl was *like her*. A hidden thing. A reader. Something the orders made out of a child and then feared in the woman, the rare animal that hears what cannot be heard and knows what it has no right to know — and the debt that came down Kessa's line, three generations sworn, the unexplained sum her mother could not or would not name, was tangled up somehow, root and branch, in *that*, in whatever this girl was. Not a killing avenged. Not a betrayal paid. Something older. Something the order's whole spine had been built to forbid, and her own dead women had carried a piece of forward in the dark without telling her what it weighed.

The second door, opening on the heels of the first: the girl was not a mark. A mark did not feel you coming. A mark you could see the bottom of, price, collect, survive. A mark was a sum. And no sum in the world reached up across two hundred strides of dark and *turned its head*. The girl had just felt a veiled Edemre at the edge of the light, in the cold, behind a clean crest, and Kessa did not know what you called a thing like that — there was no entry for it in the ledger, no name for it in eight years of Imani's list, no price she could set

against it that did not lie — but she knew, with the part of her that had kept her alive eleven times, that you did not call it *prey*.

And the third door — the one that opened slowest, and would not close again, the one that sat down in Kessa's chest and made itself at home and complicated the simple inherited debt past all squaring, past all pricing, past all hope of seeing the bottom — was the girl's *face* when she looked up the line of the danger.

She was not afraid. That was the wrong of it, the whole wrong of it, the wrong that undid two days' work and three generations' sworn straight line in one dusk instant. A hunted thing that feels the hunter looks *afraid*; the body floods, the eyes widen, the hands come up; Kessa had read that look on eleven faces and a hundred more she'd let live, and she knew it the way she knew her own name. This was not that. The girl looked up into the dark, straight at the held death on the dune, and she looked *lonely*. She looked the way Kessa had felt at exactly that age and never once told a living soul — the one reader in a world of careful people, the child everyone loved a half-step too gingerly, the girl who heard the room go quiet around her and learned to call the quiet *respect* because the other word was unbearable. The girl looked up at the wrongness on the dune not as at a threat but as at the only other thing in the whole warm careless camp that was made the way she was made. She looked the way you look at a light in a far window when you have walked a long time in the dark and were sure you were the only one still awake.

And for one cold dusk instant, across two hundred strides of cooling sand, through no sense either of them had a clean name for, the killer and the girl she was sworn to kill recognised each other — completely, instantly, helplessly, the way only two of the same rare animal ever do in a world that holds almost none of them — and it was the most naked moment Kessa had had with another person in eleven years, and she had not so much as moved a finger, and the other person was a child she was three generations sworn to put in the salt.

Then the girl's people called her in.

A woman's voice, warm and unbothered, rising over the fire-noise with the easy carry of someone who has called this name across a thousand camps — calling the girl in to eat, to the warmth, to the careless close circle of people who loved her gingerly and did not know what walked on the dune above them. The girl held the dark one moment more. Then she turned, the way you turn from a far light when someone you love calls you to the fire, with one last glance up the line of the danger — one last, and Kessa felt it go through her like cold water poured down the spine, that last glance, *I know you're there, whatever you are, and I'm not afraid of you, and I wish I weren't alone* — and then she went in to the fire, to her people, to the warmth, and was only a girl again, a brown ordinary girl among brown ordinary kin, and the held quality eased out of her, and the night closed back over it.

Kessa lay where she was for the length of a full Edemre patience, not because

the work asked it now but because she did not entirely trust her body to obey her if she asked it to move. When at last she let out the breath she'd been holding, it came ragged at the very end, a thing she'd not have permitted in front of a mark, and she discovered, sliding back down off the skyline slow and low into the dark below the crest, that her hand — her knife-hand, the steady hand, the hand that had never once betrayed her in eleven years — was not entirely steady.

“Well?” Imani murmured.

She was where Kessa had left her, in the fold of dune that would hide a hundred women, the beasts couched and quiet beside her and the waterskins arranged by feel in the dark, and she had heard Kessa come back the way she heard everything, which was to say not at all until Kessa wanted her to. There was no light to read a face by. Imani read the silence instead, and the silence told her enough that her voice, when it came, had lost its dryness.

“Did you know her when you saw her?”

“Yes,” Kessa said.

She settled into the sand beside Imani, close, closer than the work wanted, close enough that their shoulders touched and stayed touching, and Imani did not pull away and did not remark on it, which was its own kind of speech between them. Kessa pushed her veil down off her face into the cold and breathed the open dark a moment, and her face — though Imani could not see it — had gone to the still careful nothing it wore when she was thinking past where the words went, the look that meant the Reckoning was running ahead of the tongue and the tongue had better catch up before the thinking arrived somewhere it could not come back from.

“Imani,” she said. “The debt’s wrong.”

“You’ve been saying.”

“I’ve been saying it the way you say a thing you suspect. I’m saying it now the way you say a thing you’ve seen.” Kessa drew her knees up and wrapped her arms around them, a child’s posture, one Imani had seen perhaps twice in eight years and both times after the work had handed Kessa something the work was not built to hold. “Not the kind we can walk away from. Don’t think it. Three generations sworn, my grandmother and my mother and me, *finish it and the line’s clean* — there’s no door in that wall, and I’d not use it if there were. Then I’m not what I am. I’m just a woman who killed eleven people and broke faith on the twelfth, and I’d rather be the thing I am.” She turned her head toward Imani in the dark. “It’s the *other* kind of wrong. The kind that’s going to ask me for something the ledger never priced in. The kind I came out here afraid of and have now gone and *met*.”

“Tell me what you saw,” Imani said. “Plainly. The way you’d want it told to you.”

So Kessa told her — plainly, in the dark, with the cold coming up out of the sand and the stars wheeling slow overhead in the patterns the salt-singers sang and the killers stole. She told her about the warm camp and the careless circle, because Imani needed the shape of the place. She told her about the cookfire and the plain face and the not-finding of the evidence and the knowing that sat under the evidence like salt under sand. And then she told her the three doors — the reader’s stillness she’d watched a child wear without training, the turning of the girl’s head two hundred strides off in the dark behind a clean crest, the loneliness in a face that should have held fear; and Imani, who did not interrupt, who had never in eight years interrupted a telling that mattered, listened with her whole still body, and when Kessa was done there was a long quiet under the stars in which the only sound was a couched beast shifting and one far thread of an Attuin grief-song carrying down the cold air from the camp that did not know they were near it.

“I came to put a veil on a mark,” Kessa said at last. “Eleven veils on eleven marks and I could see the bottom of every one. Every single one. Even the hard ones. Even Theron, who I didn’t kill — *especially* Theron, I could see clear to the floor of that boy. There’s no mark up there, Imani. There’s no sum I can set. There’s a child who’s *exactly what they make me out of* — a reader, a hidden thing, the rare animal — only raised by people who *love* her, gingerly, the way mine never quite dared, raised by people who’d grieve her instead of by people who’d drown her in the salt to keep their law; and there’s a debt my dead mother couldn’t explain or wouldn’t, pressed into my hand with her last breath; and somewhere underneath all of it, root and branch and tangled through the both of them, there’s a *why* that nobody in my line has said out loud in three generations, a why that went into the pans with my grandmother and never came up.”

She uncoiled, then. She reached, in the dark, and found her kit by feel, and began to check it for the night’s move — the buckles, the skins, the blades by their named hilts, brisk, decided, her hands steady again now that they had work in them, because work was the floor she stood on and she had found it. And it was in the middle of this, with the ordinary competent sounds of a killer making ready going on between them in the dark, that she said the thing that would, though neither of them knew it yet, neither of them could have known it, bend the whole long Hunt off its sworn straight line and turn it slowly, over four years and a continent of salt, toward the forgiveness that waited at the far end of it.

“We don’t take her yet,” Kessa said. “We watch.”

Imani went very still beside her. It was not what the work said. The work said you closed when you’d confirmed; you did not lie up beside a confirmed veil and *watch* it; watching was how a clean job went long and a long job went wrong.

They both knew it. Imani did not say it. Imani waited, because eight years had taught her that Kessa changing the rule was rarer and more worth hearing than Kessa keeping it.

“I want to know what she *is* before I decide what this debt costs,” Kessa said. Her hands had stopped on the buckles. She was looking north again, out across the dark and the cold toward the firelight she could no longer see and the girl who had heard her coming. “Everything has a price, Imani — you’ve heard me say it till you could say it back to me — everything has a sum at the bottom, and the work is seeing the sum before you spend. Two days I’ve been telling you this debt’s a sum I can’t see the bottom of. Tonight I went and looked, and the thing I learned looking is worse than not seeing the bottom.” She found the words she’d been hunting since the dune, and they came out quiet, and once they were out the night was a slightly different shape, the way the room is a different shape once the lamp goes out, or once it’s lit. “I’m starting to think the thing my mother handed me to finish isn’t a killing at all. *Finish it*, she said. *The line’s clean*. And I took it to mean a throat. Three generations I took it to mean a throat. But that girl up there is no throat I can cut and have done. She’s a *question*. The question my grandmother couldn’t answer and my mother couldn’t either, the *why* none of us ever said out loud, walking around alive in a plain Attuin face by a cookfire, lonely as I was at her age and braver than I ever managed. And I’ve put a veil on eleven people in my life, Imani, and I’m fond of every one of them, and I have never once, not one single time, in all the years and all the salt —”

The grin came back then, in the dark, where Imani could not see it but could hear it, hear the blade’s edge that had got onto it, turned now somewhere new, somewhere neither of them had a map for yet.

” — put a veil on a *question*. And I find I haven’t the first idea how it’s done.”

She buckled the last buckle. Out on the pan the cold deepened and the stars came on hard and white, the road of them the singers sang, and far off the grief-song finished itself at last and let go into the silence, and somewhere under all the salt of the world a thing that had been sworn straight for three generations began, very quietly, with two women lying up in a fold of dune two days behind a caravan, to bend.

“Come on,” Kessa said, and rose without a sound. “We’ve a girl to watch. I’m dying to find out what my mother got us into.”

Chapter Ten — The Circle

The Salthold of Sett kept its eyes turned inward. Yenneth had lived inside that fact so long she had stopped naming it, but tonight, climbing the worn stair to the Circle chamber on legs that no longer believed in her, she felt the building’s

blindness as a kindness. No window faced the White Pan. The great house turned its bare salt-white back to the desert and looked only at its own dim halls, its own dim daughters. A thing that does not look out cannot be looked into. The first law of the order, stone before any of them swore it on salt.

She let the climb cost her what it would. There was no Stillness left worth spending on a stair.

The treads were worn to a shallow trough down their centers, three hundred years of feet, and her own among them for sixty. She knew the seventh from the top was the loose one, the way she knew the smell of the place — old lamp-oil, old salt, the dry mineral breath of brick that had never in three centuries been rained on. The walls sweated nothing. The desert outside might be a furnace or a frost and inside the Salthold was always this: the cool, the dim, the inward quiet of a thing that had decided long ago to be its own only weather. She rested at the seventh tread, not because she chose to but because her body chose for her, and let her hand find the wall, and waited for the floor of her chest to stop heaving. Sixty years she had climbed this stair without thought. Now it was a negotiation. She paid what it asked and went on.

The chamber was round, because of course it was, a low dome of pale brick the lamplight turned to bone. Five seats, no head and no foot — a courtesy the Circle had kept three hundred years to disguise the fact that someone always ruled the room and it was never twice the same someone. Four seats were filled before she reached the fifth. She let them watch her cross. Let them count the steps.

She had learned that trick when she was younger than any woman in this room: that an entrance made slowly is an entrance made on your own terms, that the dying have one advantage and it is that the living do not know where to put their eyes. So she crossed the dome at the pace her ruined legs would give her, and felt four gazes ride her the whole way, and gave each of them nothing — not a wince, not a glance, not the small grateful sag a frailer woman might let them see. The lamps had been set low. Someone had ordered that. Vael, almost certainly; Vael understood that a room half in shadow makes a knife of every silence.

Vael rose. That was the discourtesy chosen for the evening — to stand for the Salt Mother as one stands for the dying, all solicitude, the velvet laid thick. “Mother. We could have brought the Circle to your rooms.”

“You could have.” Yenneth sat, and felt the relief in her spine like cold water. “Then everyone would say I rule from a bed. And you’d have to pretend to disagree.”

A breath of something near laughter from Ysolde’s side of the dome. Vael’s mouth did the thing it did — a small composure, the face a woman makes filing a remark away to weigh later. She sat. The folds of her gown settled without a whisper. Vael had spent fifty years learning to make no sound she did not

intend, and the silence she carried into a room was itself an argument: *I waste nothing. I am all economy. Watch how little I need to be the most dangerous thing here.*

All here, then. Vael of the Closed Hand, narrow and immaculate, her hands folded as if around a held coin. Ysolde of the Open Hand across from her, broad and warm and dressed a shade too well for a private chamber, because Ysolde was never not performing and knew it and made you forgive her for it — tonight a deep wine-dark weave at the collar, a ring on the third finger that caught the lamplight when she gestured, and she gestured often, the open palm, the spread hand, the body that wanted always to be seen wanting. The Veil's seat held a woman whose name the order pretended not to know, veiled even here, even among sisters — present because what they discussed tonight might end in someone wearing the veil for someone. She sat as the Edemre sat, which is to say she did not seem to sit at all; she occupied the chair the way still water occupies a cistern, and the only proof she breathed was that the lamp did not quite catch the cloth across her mouth the same way twice. And the fifth, the Long Breath's chair —

The Long Breath's chair held Hessa, and Hessa was wrong.

Yenneth read it before she had finished sitting, the way you read a horse gone lame from across a yard: shoulders too high, breath shallow in the top of the chest, the hands not folded but gripping, one thumb working at a knuckle until the skin shone. Reckoning was not prophecy. Reckoning was only this — noticing, and saying nothing, and waiting to be paid. Yenneth had been paid by Hessa's hands a hundred times across the years and had never once expected the bill to come due tonight.

She let the rest of the reading run while there was time. The set of Hessa's jaw, clamped against something that wanted out. The way her eyes went to Vael and away, to Vael and away, a needle returning to north. A woman who thought in centuries did not fidget; the Long Breath were the most patient creatures the order grew, gardeners of bloodlines who would not live to see their own plantings flower, and patience was the whole of their craft. To see one of them with a thumb working raw at a knuckle was to see a glacier sweat. Whatever sat in Hessa tonight had been sitting in her for a very long time, and the room had finally grown warm enough to melt it loose.

She kept her face old and tired, which cost nothing because it was true.

"The initiate's report," Vael said. No preamble. That, too, was chosen. "Sabra of the House of Salt was sent to assess a possible talent among the Attuin. The cover held. She sent word." A pause weighed out like a measured dose. "Not the assessment."

"She sent that there was much to assess," Ysolde said, and turned a hand over, lazy, the ring flashing. "Which from an initiate of the Reckoning means she is certain and frightened of being certain. I have read green girls my whole life.

The reports get shorter. The hand that wrote pages a month ago sends you four lines, and the four lines are true and the truth has been gutted out of them like a fish. She buried the lede because the lede terrified her.”

“Or she’s been turned.” Vael did not look at Ysolde. She looked at the seam of pale brick between them, as though the answer were written in the mortar. “An initiate, weeks among the warm people. You know what they are. They sing at you until you forget yourself. Feed you off the same plate, call you sister by the third night, put their arms around you under the grief-songs — and a girl raised in this house has never in her life been held like that, and does not know that being held is also a craft. We taught her the Reckoning. We did not teach her that warmth can be aimed.”

“They sing,” Ysolde said. “Yes. How dreadful. Imagine a people who enjoy their own lives.”

“Imagine an initiate who comes home enjoying hers and brings a convergent talent home in her arms because some Spear-Sister taught her to.”

There it was. The word, dropped early, dropped deliberately — the way a surgeon shows you the knife before he uses it so the rest of the conversation happens around its gleam. *Convergent*. The Veil’s veiled head turned a fraction toward Vael, the first motion the killer had made since Yenneth entered. Hessa’s thumb stopped working at her knuckle and went very still, and that stillness was the loudest thing in the room, and Yenneth alone heard it. A held breath has a sound, if you have spent sixty years learning to hear the things people do instead of speaking. Hessa had stopped breathing the way a hare stops in open ground.

“Say the rest of it, Vael,” Yenneth said. “You’ve never made me wait this long for a knife. It’s unbecoming.”

Vael lifted her eyes. Whatever else lived in this woman, and a great deal did, cowardice had never been among it. “A talent has surfaced among the Attuin who carries the Voice, the Stillness, and the Reckoning together, and is being taught the Remembering by a salt-singer as we sit here. Three becoming four.” She laid the count down like coins on a table, one, two, three, and let her hand hover where the fourth would go. “The convergence.”

She let it land. She did not raise her voice; she never had to; the room did the work for her, the dome catching the word and folding it back down over them all.

“There is a law older than this Circle,” Vael went on. “Sworn on salt at every raising. I swore it. You swore it.” Her gaze moved, deliberate, to each chair in turn — Ysolde, the Veil, Hessa, and last and longest to Yenneth. “We all swore it, with the salt on our tongues and the names of the dead read out before us so no woman could ever say she had not understood the price. The girl who reaches for the convergence is bound or returned to the pans, and there is no third reading of the salt-law, because the third reading is a hall full of the dead.”

Her hands opened, just once, palms up — the gesture of a woman showing she holds no coin. “I am invoking it. She must be returned to the pans.”

The lamps did what lamps do. Somewhere below, a door closed, and the sound came up the dome and died.

Yenneth had known it would be this. She had walked into the room knowing the shape of the evening down to its last brick, and still the words sat in her chest like swallowed stone. *Returned to the pans*. She knew what the words hid, because she had spent the hiding. She had said them herself, once, over a girl of twelve at dawn with the salt eating the light, and she could still call the morning up entire if she let herself — the cold that comes off a pan before the sun, the way the child’s bare feet had found the crust and not flinched, because the child had been told it was an honor and had believed it, God help them all, had believed it to the end. She had held another girl by the shoulders that morning and made her watch, so the order would have a witness who remembered the cost. Sabra. She had chosen Sabra for that, too, had chosen her young and chosen her hard and never once let the girl see the choosing. She had been choosing Sabra for a long time, for reasons she had told no one and intended to tell no one, and the symmetry now — Sabra in the Deep, the new girl in Sabra’s arms, the salt waiting — was not lost on her. She had built it.

“You move very fast,” Ysolde said, “for the woman who spent forty years teaching us we must never move fast.” She turned in her seat to take the whole dome, the performer finding her room, and the lamplight loved her as it always did, finding the strong line of her throat, the easy breadth of her, the calm of a woman who has never once in her life doubted she belonged in the center of any room she entered. “Sisters. We have spent three hundred years hiding what we are inside marriages and debts and other women’s beds. Do you know why?” She let the question open. “Because we never had a card worth playing in the open. The Voice fails on the trained and shouts itself across a dinner table like a drawn knife. The Stillness wins you a knife-fight nobody must ever know happened. The Reckoning lets you be appallingly clever in a corner. We are *clever in a corner*, sisters. That is the whole of our three-hundred-year empire, and we have called it wisdom because we had nothing else to call it.”

She leaned forward. The warmth went out of her, and what was under the warmth was not unwarm — it was something worse, conviction, the radiant certainty of a woman who has loved an idea so long she can no longer feel where it ends and she begins.

“Now there is a girl who can do all of it at once. A girl who could stand in front of an army and the army would lie down.” She let each word fall separate. “Not be bribed. Not be married. Not be steered by some daughter we slipped into the king’s bed twenty years ago to whisper at him over breakfast. *Lie down*. On the salt. At a word. And our answer — the keepers of the longest game ever played by anyone — is to drown her in that same salt before the men ever learn we made her?”

“We did not make her,” Vael said.

“Didn’t we.” Ysolde let the question hang, mild, and Yenneth watched Hessa’s face come apart in increments, the way a wall comes down — not all at once, a brick, a brick, a falling. Ysolde did not see it; Ysolde was looking at the room she was winning. But Yenneth saw the Long Breath woman’s throat move on nothing, saw her eyes drop to her own working hands as though they belonged to someone else.

“The temples are training men,” Ysolde went on, gentler now, the velvet returning over the iron. “Crudely. Brutally. They lose three for every one who lives, and the ones who live are broken in ways even they have not the wit to catalog. But they are doing it. And one day they will do it well, because that is what men with a grievance and a generation always do, they grind at a thing until the thing gives way. And on that day three hundred years of cleverness-in-a-corner ends, because the corner is the only place we were ever safe and the corner requires that we be the only ones who can. We are not going to be the only ones much longer.” She spread her hands, the open palms, the ring. “So I say we stop being clever. I say we crown her. Let the desert look at what a woman can be, once, in the open. Not a queen behind a king. Not a wife sent to steer. *Her*. In the light, on a height, with the whole salt-world watching. And us behind her, in the light at last.”

“You would make her a god,” Vael said.

“I would make her *ours*.”

“She is twenty years old and does not know her own name in the order’s books, and you would put the desert in her hands.” Vael had not moved. Her hands were folded again, around the held coin that was not there. “You are not crowning a girl, Ysolde. You are crowning the convergence. You are crowning the thing the law was written to bury, and you are doing it because you are tired of the dark, and being tired is the worst reason in the world to do anything that cannot be undone.” Vael’s voice never rose. That was the terror of her. The room leaned in to catch the words and the words refused to come up to meet the room. “I have buried gifted daughters. You have not. You sit there hungry for the open, and you have never once walked a child onto the pan at dawn and held her steady while she understood.”

“Vael—”

“I have.” It came out flat, final, the way a stone is set in a wall. “It does not get easier. I will tell you the thing none of you who have not done it know. It does not get easier, and the part of you that swears each time will be the last is lying, because there is always one more, and the law does not let you say no. So you go. You stand on the salt. You hold a child’s shoulders. You feel the moment the Stillness she does not yet own loses its grip on her fear, and you hold her through that too. It gets into the salt and the salt gets into you and you carry it.” She turned her head, just enough, to take in the whole dome. “I am not

invoking the law because I love it. I am invoking it because I have read the dead who reached for what your girl is. Every one of them remembered. Every one a hall of corpses, or a mind drowned in a thousand voices that were not hers, or a body that did the impossible once and broke for it forever, and lay after in its own filth knowing exactly what it had done and unable to die of the knowing. The law is not superstition. The law is three hundred years of people exactly as certain as you are, Ysolde, that *this* one would be different. That *this* one they had at last bred or trained or loved into being strong enough. The law is a wall built out of their certainty. It is the only thing we ever made that the centuries could not knock down.”

Yenneth said nothing. She could feel the weight of them now, in the cold place under her sternum where she kept the dead, and the dead did not argue with Vael. The dead agreed with her. That was the trouble.

“Mother.” Vael turned to her at last, and the whole room turned with her, the way water turns toward the lowest place. “You hold the center. You always hold the center, and the Circle has not decided a true thing in forty years because you will not let it tip. Marriages, debts, the placing of a girl here, the removal of an obstacle there — yes. Small things, the things that keep the machine warm. But a true thing — never. You let it hang. You let us argue until we are tired, and then you say something old and unanswerable, and we go down the stair having decided nothing, and you call it wisdom and we let you.” Something moved under her composure, very fast, and was gone. “I am asking you to let it tip. One word. The salt-law is the order’s oldest oath and you are its keeper above all of us. *Confirm it.*”

And there it was, the knife she had been waiting for since the stair.

Not the girl. Her.

Yenneth saw it whole in the instant Vael set it down, the way you see the shape of a trap the moment the second jaw shows. Vael had not come to win the girl. The girl was real and the law was real and Vael believed every word she had spoken with the whole of her hard, grieving, correct heart — and the girl was also bait. Vael had come to make the dying Salt Mother choose, in front of the Circle, in the open, between the order’s oldest law and whatever the Circle had begun to suspect she was protecting. Because a Salt Mother who confirmed the law was a Salt Mother who had spent her last authority on Vael’s word, and could be honored into the grave as a thing already settled. And a Salt Mother who would not confirm the salt-law — who hedged, who delayed, who held the center one time too many — was a Salt Mother the Closed Hand could finally, cleanly, name as the danger she was, and move against, and replace. Clever. Clean. Vael had read her as surely as she had read Hessa, and had moved first, and there was a cold professional pleasure in it that Yenneth would have enjoyed enormously if it had been pointed at anyone but herself.

Yenneth let the silence go long. She was old; long silences were one of the few weapons left to her, and the trained could not Voice each other, and the

Reckoning could only watch a face, and so she gave them her face — tired, ancient, unreadable as the pan itself — and let them all lean toward it. The lamp nearest her had begun to gutter, the oil low, and the flame wavered and threw her shadow long and shaking up the curve of the dome. She did not move to trim it. Let them watch the shadow shake. Let them wonder whether it was the lamp or the woman. A guttering lamp was a card too, if you knew how to hold it.

“You want me to confirm a law,” she said finally, “over a girl no one in this room has met. We are deciding the death of a stranger from a chamber with no windows.” She let her eyes go around the dome, slow. “There is a certain honesty in that. It is exactly how we do everything. We have always killed at a distance, sisters. We have killed by marriage and killed by debt and killed by the quiet word in the right corridor, and never once had to smell it. The pan is the only place we ever go to do it with our own hands, and we send our youngest, and we call it an honor for them too. I have stopped being able to tell which of our mercies are mercies. That is the disease of being very old. Bear with it.”

“Mother—”

“I have not finished, Vael. You have waited forty years; you can wait the length of my breath.” She breathed. The breath cost her, a real cost, the air going down ragged into a chest that had begun, this last season, to keep some of every breath for itself. She did not hide the cost. She spent it where they could see. “The law is real. The dead are real. I walked a child onto the pan myself, before most of you swore in, and I have carried what Vael carries, and I will tell her now in front of the Circle that she carries it more truly than any woman here, and that I have never once thought her cruel, and that this is precisely what makes her terrible. I will not pretend the Open Hand’s hunger is wisdom, because it is not.” She turned her tired face to Ysolde, and gave her the blow square. “It is appetite wearing wisdom’s robe. You are not tired of the dark for the order’s sake, Ysolde. You are tired of it for your own, because you are a sun and you have spent your whole life in a windowless house, and you have at last found a reason to throw the doors open that you can almost believe is about all of us. I have watched appetite burn this order before it ever got near a throne. I watched it the year you swore in. I am watching it now.”

Ysolde’s chin lifted, taking it; she could take a blow, that one, it was half of why she was dangerous. The other half was that she could take it and not stop smiling, as though the blow itself were a kind of attention and attention was the only thing she had ever truly wanted.

“And the law is also a wall,” Yenneth said, and felt the room change, felt the cold go up Vael’s spine across the dome, because this was the thing the Closed Hand had been afraid she would say. “I have spent sixty years carrying more lines of the Remembering than any woman alive. Sixty years with the dead going about inside me, generation on generation, more voices than a single skull

was ever built to hold, and I have begun to wonder, in the place where I keep them, whether some of those walls we are so proud of were built by people frightened of the wrong thing.” She held up a hand before Vael could move. “I do not know yet. Hear me. I am not certain. I am the last woman in this room who has any right to be certain about anything, because I have all the dead in me and they do not agree, they have never once agreed, and the day I let one of them speak louder than the rest and called it knowing — *certainty is the disease that killed every woman the law remembers*. Vael said it herself, in other words, a moment ago. Every one of her dead was certain. I will not catch it on my last legs to make this Circle comfortable. I will not confirm a law tonight because I am too tired to keep holding the center, and I will not deny it because a girl with arms full of song made an old woman wonder.”

She set her hands on her knees, palms down, the gesture Vael’s opposite, the woman who shows you she is done holding anything.

“So this is my word. I will send for the assessment — the true one, not the initiate’s frightened silence. I will send a hand the initiate cannot charm and the salt-singers cannot sing to, and that hand will bring me the girl as she is, and not as any of us wants her to be. And the Circle will decide a real thing about a real girl, for the first time in forty years, when it knows what the girl is. That is my word. It is the only word a keeper of the law has any right to speak.”

“That is not a word,” Vael said. “That is the absence of one. That is what you always do. You make the delay sound like rigor and we thank you for it and nothing tips.”

“It is what keeps you all alive,” Yenneth said, “while you decide whether to start killing each other. You’re welcome.”

And Hessa stood up.

She had not meant to; Yenneth saw the body do it before the will arrived, the chair scraping back across the brick with a sound that the dome seized and threw around the circle three times before it let it die. The woman of the Long Breath was on her feet in a chamber where one did not stand without the room’s leave, swaying a little, her face the grey-white of the pan at noon. The Veil’s veiled head came round, slow, the killer’s whole attention arriving like a change in air pressure. Ysolde’s reasonable mouth fell still. Vael had gone very straight, reading the standing woman the way Yenneth had read her at the door, and finding — Yenneth watched her find it — that she could not read it, that whatever was coming was not in any ledger Vael had prepared.

And Hessa, who had spent her whole long life thinking in centuries and saying nothing, opened her mouth and let the brick fall.

“You did not make her,” Hessa said to Vael, and her voice came out wrong, too high, scraped raw, a thumb worked bloodless at a knuckle now wringing the other hand as though she could press the words back in through her own skin.

“No. We did.” She swallowed, and the swallow took a long time, the throat working against itself. “The Long Breath made her. On purpose. We have been making her for fifteen hundred years.”

The dome did nothing. The dome had heard everything in three hundred years and gave nothing back. The lamps burned. The low one guttered and steadied. Far below, water moved in a cistern, the long slow breath of the house, and somewhere in the walls the brick ticked as it gave up the day’s faint heat to the night.

“Hessa,” Yenneth said, very gently, because there was nothing else now to do but be gentle, “sit down.”

“I will not.” She was crying, Yenneth saw, without weeping, the water just standing in her eyes and not falling, the Stillness holding it because a lifetime of training would not let even grief out of its discipline — and that was the worst of it, that even now, even in the breaking, the order’s hand was on her, would not let her have the simple animal mercy of tears. “There was a faction. Before any of us. Before Vael’s grandmother’s grandmother swore on the salt. A bloodline aimed — *aimed*, sisters, do you understand the word, the way one aims a thing, the way a sister of the spear aims down the length of a cast — at convergence.” She had begun, now that it was moving, to move faster, the words a thing long dammed and let go. “The Attuin spear-line. The memory-line, ours. Even the debt-line, the Edemre’s own blood, threaded in three generations back through a marriage no one questioned because no one was meant to. Braided down the centuries, marriage by marriage, well by well, each strand laid in by women who did not live to see the next, none of them knowing they were the loom, none of them, only the few of us at the top of the House who held the whole pattern and passed it mouth to mouth and burned every record. We did not breed for queens.” The water still would not fall. “Not for counsel. Not for the Voice. Not for strong daughters to place in strong beds. We bred for *her*. For one vessel that could hold all of it. The thing the salt-law forbids — we did not stumble into it. We did not fail to prevent it.”

She stopped. She made herself say the last of it slow, each word set down separate, the way Vael set down coins.

“We *cultivated* it. The law in one hand and the loom in the other, for fifteen hundred years, and the order never knew, because the order was never meant to know, and the keepers of the Ban have spent three centuries drowning gifted children on the pan to enforce a law that the deepest room of the House was breaking on purpose the whole time. I have carried that since I was younger than the girl is now. I was shown the pattern at nineteen and told it was the holiest trust the order kept and made to swear on the salt I had just watched a child die under, and I believed it, sisters, I believed it for thirty years, and I cannot carry it onto the pan with her. I cannot.” Her voice broke at last, and even broken it did not let the tears go; the Stillness held them to the end, monstrous. “I will not be the one who holds her shoulders. I have held the

whole design steady my entire life and it has eaten me from the inside the way the salt eats a body left out on the white, and I am done. I am done. Drown her if you drown her, but you will know what she is. She is not a breach in the wall. She is the order's own child, sown on purpose, and you will not be able to tell yourselves otherwise while you do it."

Silence. The true kind, the kind that has a floor, the kind you can feel your own pulse against.

Yenneth looked at the faces and read them and felt, under the cold weight in her chest, something almost like grief and almost like its opposite. Vael's composure had gone to something rawer — not surprise, Yenneth thought, *recognition*, the face of a woman who has just learned that the thing she was preparing to drown was sown by the very order sworn to drown it, and is doing the arithmetic of that obscenity in real time and finding it has no remainder, no clean number at the bottom, only the long ugly fraction of it going on and on. The Veil's veiled head had not moved again, but the stillness had changed quality; the Edemre were owed nothing in this and judged everyone, and Yenneth could feel the weighing going on behind the cloth, cool and total.

The Long Breath had achieved the unachievable. They had built, on purpose, across fifteen hundred years, longer than any throne had stood, longer than the legitimacy-doctrine that the temples called ancient, the one capacity the order's oldest oath existed to erase — and built it into the body of a girl who right now, somewhere in the Deep under the same stars that fell on the windowless house, did not know her own name in the books, and had a salt-singer teaching her to sing the night-roads.

Ysolde began, softly, to laugh. Not cruel. Wondering. The laugh of a woman who has just been handed the thing she wanted and understood, in the same breath, that wanting it might damn them all — and could not, even so, even knowing it, stop the wonder.

"She is not a breach," Ysolde said, and the laugh was still in it. "She is the *harvest*."

"She is a crime," Vael said. Her voice had found its flatness again, but it had cost her; Yenneth heard the place where she had had to put it back. "She is our crime. Which changes nothing about the law and everything about the order, and I do not yet know which of those will kill us first." She turned to Yenneth, and for the first time in forty years there was something in the Closed Hand's eyes that was not strategy. A question, an honest one, naked as a child on a pan, asked of an old woman who held more of the dead than anyone living, asked because Vael had run out of every other place to put it. "Did you know?"

The room held its breath with her. Even Hessa, swaying on her feet, turned to wait for it. Even the Veil. The whole circle bent toward the dying woman in the fifth chair, and the guttering lamp threw her shaking shadow up the wall, and outside the windowless house the great white pan lay under its stars, and

to the north of it, under it, a thing waited.

Yenneth held the dome with her tired face. The Reckoning was only noticing. The Voice could not touch the trained. And a long silence, on her last legs, was still the best weapon she had — and she used it now, used it to its end, let it stretch until even Vael's discipline frayed at the edge of it, and gave them, at the last, not the answer to the question they had asked but the answer to the one they should have.

"I have known a great many things for sixty years," she said, "and told this Circle almost none of them, and that is the only reason any of you are still alive to be angry about it." She put her hands to the arms of the chair and rose, and let the rising cost her, and let them see it cost her, the long climb up out of the seat that her body made into its own small ordeal, because even the cost was a card and she had never in her life left a card unplayed. "You want to know if I knew the Long Breath aimed the loom. You want to know if I have been protecting her. You want to know whose Salt Mother I have been, all these years, behind this face." She let her eyes finish their circuit of the dome, and rest, last, where they had begun, on Vael. "Decide nothing tonight that you cannot unmake at dawn. That is all the answer the law lets me give, and it is more than the law gives most of you."

She moved toward the door and the worn stair beyond it, slow, and the chamber let her go, because no one in it yet knew what else to do — Vael with her arithmetic that would not resolve, Ysolde with her wonder that was already, Yenneth could see it, hardening back into a plan, the Veil with her judgment kept like a coin under the tongue, and Hessa, still standing, emptied, the brick fallen and the wall it had been holding still somehow upright, for now.

"Send for the true assessment," Yenneth said, at the threshold, not yet turning. "Bind no one. Crown no one. Drown no one. Not until the Circle knows what walks toward us across the Deep, and knows it true, and not as a frightened girl half-said it or a hungry one wants it or a grieving one finally screamed it." She put her hand to the cold frame of the door. "We have three hundred years of practice at killing things we never bothered to meet. Let us not, for once, be quick."

At the threshold she paused — old woman, old house, no window facing the pan, the whole order built to look only inward at itself, and built, she now understood better than any of them, to look away from the one room where the truest crime had grown in the dark like a thing under a stone.

"And someone," she said, not turning, "had better reach the girl before the men do. We are not the only ones who count in centuries, and we are very far from the only ones who have learned to be patient. The temples have grievances older than their doctrine and a faction inside them that has stopped being patient at all, and they will not ask the girl her name before they decide what to make of her." She let the door take her shadow. "Sit with Hessa. She has carried it longer than any of you, and she carried it alone, and that is a thing this order

does to its daughters that no salt-law forbids and every one of us has done. Sit with her. It is the cheapest mercy in the house and we still ration it.”

She climbed down into the blind heart of the house, one careful step at a time, the seventh tread loose under her foot where it had always been, the lamp-oil and the salt and the dry old breath of the brick rising to meet her. Behind her, in the dome, four women sat with the loom laid bare between them and did not speak — and one stood, and after a while, Yenneth heard it even from the stair, a chair moved, someone going to her; she did not let herself wonder which, because to wonder was to hope, and she had given up hope as a luxury her body could no longer afford. And far to the north under the White Pan a thing waited that had a name only Yenneth had let herself think, the name she kept furthest down, under all the dead, in the one room of herself she had never opened to any sister of the Circle. She thought it now, climbing, one careful step at a time toward a bed she did not intend to die in yet.

Cradle.

The salt got into you. It got into the salt-law and the loom and the long, long patience, and it got into the children they drowned and the children they grew, and it got into you, and you carried it, because that was the whole of what the order had ever truly taught: how to carry a thing too heavy to put down, and keep your face, and climb the stair.

She carried it down the stair.

Chapter 11 — The Weight of the Pans

The bird came at the worst hour of the day, when the caravan slept out the noon and only the mad and the salt-singers kept their eyes open.

Sabra was neither, and she was awake, and she knew it for the Salthold’s bird before it had finished folding its wings against the awning-pole. A grey courier-pigeon, white band at the throat, bred at Sett for the long crossings, indifferent to heat the way only a thing made by the order could be indifferent. It walked the pole with the proprietary stupidity of all its kind and waited to be relieved of its cargo.

It had come a long way to be so calm. She watched the dust of the Deep still settling out of its feathers, the salt-glaze gone matte on the dun barbs, and thought of the chain of hands it had passed through — Sett, a relay-cote on the lip of the White Pan, a second somewhere out in the canyon-country, each woman lifting it from the dark of a carrying-basket and feeding it and casting it up into the glare again, each of them part of the long machine that had reached, without hurrying, all the way out into the open sand to find her. The order did not run. The order arrived. That was the whole of it in a single sleepy bird.

She did not move at first. She lay in the striped shade of Tamar's tent with Tamar's breath slow against the back of her neck and one of Tamar's hands open on her hip — open, not gripping, the warrior's hand laid down even in sleep, and she had learned in these weeks what that openness had cost to learn — and she watched the bird and let herself have one more breath of not knowing.

It was a poor breath. The Reckoning soured it before it was halfway taken. That was the Reckoning, even off-duty. You did not get to set it down. She knew already, from the colour of the band and the hour and the simple fact that the order did not send birds to say *well done, take your time*, more or less the whole of what the little brass tube would hold. The Reckoning gave you the answer and then made you walk all the way to it anyway, so you could pretend, for the length of the walk, that you might be wrong.

She let the pretending run a moment longer than was honest. *A recall. Hessa's report heard and shelved, home before the Hunt thickens the roads. Mercy.* She knew it was none of those even as she shaped them. The order did not spend a long-crossing bird on mercy. Mercy travelled cheap, by ordinary post, in the velvet noun. The thing in the tube had been worth the bird.

She slid out from under Tamar's hand. She did it the way she did everything now, slowly, against the held weight of her own care, so as not to wake her — and Tamar made a sound, a low question-shaped thing, turned into the warm Sabra had left, and did not wake. Sabra knelt up onto her heels and stood over her a moment in the heat.

Tamar slept like the dead and the unworried, mouth a little open, one arm flung out into the space Sabra had been keeping warm, fingers loose. A thread of old scar ran silver along her jaw where a Saltlands man had once thought he was faster than she was. There was sand in her hair and a healing nick across one knuckle and a smell coming off her of leather and date-smoke and the particular salt of her skin that Sabra had learned the way you learn a road, by walking it until it was in the body. *Dasha*, the Attuin said. *My-salt*. The one you were vowed to; never gendered; not spent the way the order spent everything. They had not said the word to each other. The Attuin did not rush a word like that. You let it stand at the edge of the firelight for a season, two seasons, until it had earned its place by the fire — and then someone said it once, and that was the vow, and it never needed saying twice.

Sabra did not have it to give. That was the truth, and the Reckoning made her hold it. She had been built to give nothing she could not later weigh and trade. But she had thought the word, lying awake with Tamar heavy and trusting against her in the dark, more than once now, thought it and turned it over and found it did not frighten her the way it should have — and that, the Salthold would have called a symptom. A defection of the body before the mind had voted. The order would have a woman in to talk to her about it, kindly, and the kindness would be a knife. *You are letting the work get into you, Sabra. The Reckoning turned tender is still the Reckoning. Read her if you must — but do*

not be read.

Too late, she thought, and went out to meet the bird.

She took the tube from its leg. The little clasp was Sett-work, cold even in the noon, machined to a tolerance no caravan smith could match, and her fingers found the catch without her looking — another thing the order had put into her hands and never asked back. The bird, relieved, lost all interest in her and began to preen, working its beak down through the dusty barbs as if the message it had carried halfway across the world had been a burr to be combed out and forgotten. She envied it that, briefly and fiercely. To carry a thing and not have to read it.

She did not open it in the tent.

She walked out into the white noon, into the part of the day the desert keeps for the dying. The light came up off the pan-edge in a sheet and the air over the far sand boiled into false water, the long silver lie of the heat-shimmer that had killed more thirsty men than any Edemre blade. Her sandals scuffed through the hot grit. She passed the dogs lying like dropped rope in the shade of the water-cart, ribs going slow, one yellow eye opening to track her and closing again when she proved to be only Sabra. She passed two of Tamar's spear-sisters dicing in the lee of a wagon — Dessa and the broad one whose name she still mangled — and they lifted their chins at her, neither friendly nor not, the cool courtesy the Attuin gave a Ru woman who slept in their warrior's tent and had not yet been decided about. She lifted her chin back. The dice rattled and they returned to their game, and she went on, out past the last tent to where the dun of the caravan gave way to the open glare of the Deep, and there she stopped, with the heat coming up through her soles into the bones of her feet, and broke the seal with her thumbnail.

The order did not waste words on a courier-tube. A trained woman could read a whole page in the choice of the cipher, and Sabra read it before she had unrolled the slip far enough to see a single letter.

It was Yenneth's cipher.

Not the House hand, not the Circle's formal cant, not even the Salt Mother's public seal. The old one. The private hand of the House of Salt, the one Sabra had been taught the winter she was raised, sitting across a low table from the oldest woman she had ever met while the Salthold creaked in the cold and the lamp guttered and Yenneth said, in that dry economical voice that spent no breath it did not have to, *this is for between two women who trust each other to burn the slip. Learn it tonight. We will not speak of it again, and you will use it perhaps four times in your life.* This was the third. Sabra remembered the other two and wished, standing in the noon, that she did not.

That was the first thing the slip said, before a word of it: *this is from me, and only me, and you are to understand it as a thing between us.* The Salt Mother, dying, deadlocked, with the whole Circle's weight on her, had reached

past the order's own machinery to send this in the one hand that meant *I am not the Circle, I am Yenneth, and I am speaking to the girl I raised*. Sabra felt the kindness of that go into her like warmth into cold hands, the relief almost shameful — and then she felt the second thing under it, the cold exact thing, and her stomach turned over. The kindness was a hook. The Salt Mother knew exactly how well-set a hook a kindness was. You did not rise to be the master of the longest game alive by being warm where warmth did not also work. The private hand was a gift and a leash in the same stroke. *I trust you. Now do the thing only a trusted woman could be asked to do.*

The words themselves were nine.

Confirm convergent. Deliver to Sett by the dark moon. Quietly.

She read them once and the noon went very far away.

She read them four times.

The Reckoning, uninvited, took the words apart in her hands the way it took everything apart, and laid the weight of each one out for her to look at whether she wished to or not.

Confirm. Not report. Not assess. *Confirm* meant the thing was already believed and they wanted it witnessed — meant Hessa's report had reached the Circle and the Circle had not been able to leave it lying, that the deadlock between the Open Hand and the Closed had cracked far enough to let the word *convergent* up out of the dark where it had been kept for three hundred years. *Confirm* meant: we have decided to act, and your eyes are the warrant. Sabra's Reckoning was its own testimony before the order — a thing they had spent years sharpening precisely so that her *yes* could be a stone laid on the scale that decided whether a girl was the order's salvation or its oldest crime made flesh. They were not asking her to discover anything. They were asking her to sign.

Convergent. They had written it. In a cipher, yes — but written, committed to a slip, set on a bird and flown across the open Deep where a hundred hands might have fumbled it. The order did not commit dangerous truths to paper. It carried them in the Remembering, in the heads of women trained to die before they spilled. That they had written *convergent* at all told her the deadlock had broken not a crack but a chasm, that whatever fragile silence had held the Circle since Hessa first opened her mouth had gone, and that frightened her more than the order itself. A silent order was a controlled order. An order that had begun to *say the word* was an order moving.

Deliver. She turned that one over longest, because the order had a hundred velvet nouns for what it did and had chosen, here, the freight-word. Not *escort*. Not *bring*. Not *advise her home*. *Deliver*. You delivered cargo. You delivered a debt. You delivered a body to the pans. The order did not waste a word like that by accident; the order never wasted any word; the Reckoning that read the lie in a throat read the truth in a verb, and the truth in this one was that the

thing at the far end of *deliver* was no longer wholly a person. It was a parcel the order wanted in its hands.

By the dark moon. Eleven days. That was not a wish; it was a route. You did not name a deadline unless a thing was already in motion to meet it — relays placed, water cached, escorts walking the night-roads at the dark-moon pace, the long machine already extending its arm across the Deep toward this caravan, toward this tent, toward the old woman in the deepest shade and the girl who could not leave her alone for an hour. Her *yes* would not start that. It was already started. Her *yes* would only tell it where to close its hand.

Quietly. There it was, the whole order in a single word, the velvet drawn back over the iron so smoothly you could almost mistake the drawing for tenderness. *Quietly* meant: bring her in before the Attuin know she is gone. Before Ysolde and the Open Hand can crown her a god. Before the temple can learn what she is and burn her for it. Before anyone — before the order itself — has to stand in the open and look at the thing it is choosing to do. *Quietly* was the word the order said to itself so it would not have to hear itself. *Quietly* was a girl walked out onto the pan at dawn, before the heat, before the camp woke, so the others would not have to hear it.

And there, of course, the noon opened under her like a salt-crust over a sink-hole, and she went down into the thing she had spent twelve years not going down into.

She thought of the prologue of her own life.

She had been twelve. They had made her stand in the front rank — the House of Salt believed a thing seen young was a thing learned deep, and they had been right; she had learned it all the way down, past the place where you could ever again pretend you had not seen it. The morning had been cold the way only the pan was cold before the sun, a cold that came up off the white flat and got into the teeth. The order had stood in its rows in the grey light, robed, hooded, breath smoking, every face composed into the pleasant nothing they were all so good at, and at the front, between two women of the Veil, had stood the girl.

The girl had been called Mira. Nobody said her name after. Sabra had kept it the way you keep a stone in your shoe, on purpose, so as never to walk easy.

Mira had not screamed. She was past screaming by then; she had been held three days in another woman's Stillness, the living paralysis turned to mercy or to convenience or to both at once, her pulse slowed, her terror banked, walking only because a will not her own walked her — and so when they brought her out onto the pan she went the way they made her go, upright, unhurried, the salt-water rising. Sett's pan flooded thin in the cold months, a finger of dead sea come briefly back, and they used it. The water came up over Mira's sandals and her ankles and her knees while the order recited the salt-law in the loving, level, terrible voice they kept for the dead — *no adept may hold more than two; the convergence does not care whose hand it burns; we are the hand that does*

not reach — and it came up over her waist, and Mira's slowed face stayed slack and far away, and the only sound the girl made in the end was a small one. A child's one. *Oh.* When the water was at her chin and the cold and the world tilted and some last animal thing under the Stillness understood, for one held instant, what was happening to it. *Oh.* And then the order went on reciting, level and loving, and the water closed, and Sabra went on watching, because a hand was on her shoulder, and the hand belonged to a woman she loved, and the woman had not let her look away.

She had been good, after. She had not wept where it showed. The Stillness was already in her, half-trained, and she had used it on herself the way they wanted her to, brought her own pulse down and her own face level, and a woman had touched her cheek and said she had done well, that watching was the hardest of the disciplines and the truest.

And later, gently, the way you explained weather, they had told her why.

She showed the capacity to converge, they had said. *We tested her three times. Always sure.* And then the rest, level and unhurried: a thing none of them could have held, a thing none of them can hold reaches for everything and burns down the hall it stands in, and they had the dead to prove it. *We do not do this because we hate what she was. We do it because we love what she might have been.* And the last of it, the part that was meant to stay: *Remember her, Sabra. That is your work now. To remember her. All your life — so that no one in this order ever forgets why we hold the line.*

And Sabra had remembered. Of course she had. She had been built for it; she was House of Salt; remembering was the discipline they had grown in her like a tree against a wall, trained into the one shape that served. The order made you the keeper of its own crimes. You had loved Mira better than the salt had. You had given her the only afterlife the order allowed: a place in a faithful mind. And so the order's hand on the back of your neck became, over twenty years, your own hand, and you held yourself in the rows, and you watched, and you did not look away, and you called the not-looking-away *love*.

The Reckoning, which did not spare her, finished the sum she had been refusing to do.

Mira had been the *kind* answer.

Mira they had drowned because she *might one day* be too much — a capacity, a forecast, a probability run cold and found unacceptable. They had killed a possibility. They had grieved it, even, in their level way.

Naia was the thing itself. Not a forecast. Not a capacity that might bloom. The convergence, awake, already, walking the Deep, learning the warm Remembering from an old woman who loved her, laughing at Tamar's bad jokes around the fire, putting her finger in the seam of a Ru woman's made soul and saying *you're not as made as you think you are, Salt-girl*. Mira had been a shadow on the order's wall. Naia was the woman casting it.

And the order's word for the thing itself was the same word it had used for the shadow. *Deliver. Quietly. Returned to the pans.* The salt-law did not have a louder voice for a louder crime. It had only the one voice, level and loving, and it would use that voice on Naia exactly as it had used it on Mira, and the order would stand in its rows and recite, and someone twelve years old would be made to watch from the front rank so the order would never forget why.

Unless Ysolde reached her first.

Sabra had thought, until very recently, that being made a god was the better fate. She no longer thought so. She had read the Open Hand's reasoning in the Circle's reported words and run it cold, the way she ran everything, and found it kinder on the surface and no different at the bottom. Ysolde's *deliver* wore a crown instead of a shroud, but it was still *deliver* — still a girl made a thing the order owned, a weapon pointed where the order pointed, a god the order kept and fed and aimed. The Open Hand would not drown Naia. The Open Hand would *spend* her, gloriously, lovingly, until there was nothing of the girl left in the goddess — and they would call that salvation, and mean it, and that was the part that frightened Sabra most, because she could see how they could mean it.

Her gut turned and she reached for the Stillness without deciding to, the way you catch yourself on a falling rail before the mind has even named the fall — her gut went quiet, her pulse came down off its high thready beat, her breath lengthened, and her face composed itself, all on its own, into the order's pleasant nothing. She stood there in the killing noon mastering herself like the well-made instrument she was, and the mastery disgusted her more than the nausea would have.

Look at you, the cold under her thought, in a voice that was hers and the order's together and no longer easy to tell apart. *Look how quietly you take it. Pulse at sixty. Face like still water. You'd walk her out onto the salt with your face exactly like this.* That was what they built. That was what she was. The perfect small chamber of the order's calm — a woman who could watch a girl say *oh* and not let it move her hands.

Because that, in the end, was the only question. Not what the order had asked. The order had asked, and the asking was finished; the words were nine and they meant what they meant and no parsing would change them. The question was the one the slip did not contain. *What will you do?*

She made herself stand inside it.

She did not flinch from the order's side of it, because the Reckoning would not let her, and because flinching was a lie and she had had enough of the order's lies to want, here, at the end, to do at least the cold thing honestly. So she stood inside what she was.

She was Adima Ru. Not a coat she had put on and could take off in a tent in the Deep. The architecture of her. The order had taken a clever, proud, motherless

girl — sharp-edged, hungry to know, easy to hurt and good at hiding it — and it had *built* her, beam by beam. The Reckoning that was her sight. The Stillness that was her spine. The long patience that was her temper, the cool that let her wait three years for a thing and take it in an afternoon. The way she loved knowing — the place she was most herself. All of it Sett's. She owed the order her mind, owed it the very faculty she would have to use to refuse it, and there was no clean place to stand where that was not true.

And the order was not a lie. That was the part the temples never understood, the part Korik's hard sincere men could not see and so could never beat — and the part Sabra herself could not unknow. The Adima Ru were *right* about the world more often than anyone alive. They had kept the desert from burning for three hundred years. They bred and steered and remembered and brokered the water and held the debts and married the kings, because someone had to carry the continuity no throne could carry, no caravan could carry, no faith could carry — and the price of that holding was that sometimes, rarely, with grief, in the grey cold, they walked a girl out onto the salt. Vael was not a monster reciting a monster's reasons. Sabra had stood in rooms with Vael; she had watched the woman's hands when she spoke of the Ban, and the hands were not the hands of someone who enjoyed it. Vael had buried daughters. It had cost her each time; you could read the cost in the set of her mouth, in the way she did not look at the pan on a flooding morning. And she did it anyway, because she had run the Reckoning all the way to the end, past where Sabra's nerve usually failed, and seen what one un-held convergence had done — not as a story, as *the dead*, three hundred years of named and faithfully-remembered dead, a hall full of women who had died in the reaching or been killed by the woman who reached — and she had weighed that against any one girl's life and found the one girl lighter. That was not insanity. Run cold, it was almost wisdom — and the Reckoning kept snagging on the *almost*, the way a thread snags on a thorn and will not pull free clean.

Because run cold was exactly the trick. Run cold, you could justify the salt. Run cold, you could justify the breeding-book — the Attuin treated like a stud-line, bred for the spear-talent the way a herd was bred for milk, Tamar's grandmother's grandmother a name in a ledger at Sett beside a noted trait and a desired cross. Run cold, you could justify the child-swap, the too-bright children sent to the salt and called gifts. Run cold, you could justify Mira's small *oh*. The order's whole genius, the thing it had perfected over three hundred years, was that it had taught itself to run cold and call the cold *love* — to draw the velvet over the iron so smoothly that the women holding the iron believed their own glove, said *we only advise* and meant it, said *we do this because we love what she might have been* and wept, a little, level tears, and went on holding the iron. The order lied beautifully. It lied best to itself. And Sabra had been raised to be a perfect small chamber of that lie — and here was the proof, in the noon, that the raising had nearly worked: she stood with the warrant in her hand and her face composed, doing the order's arithmetic, weighing a girl she had eaten flatbread beside against three hundred years of dead, and finding

— to her horror, to the very bottom of her — that she could *see how the sum came out the order's way*.

She could see it. That was what she could not forgive herself for in advance. She was good enough at the Reckoning to *understand* Vael — to follow the cold all the way down, link by link, and find no broken link in it, find it sound, find it almost beautiful in its terrible economy. And a part of her, the made part, the Sett part, the part that was the order standing up inside her wearing her own face, *wanted to be relieved by that*. Wanted permission. Wanted to find the reasoning sound so that she could lay her own grief down and write back the one clean word and let the long machine do the quiet thing it did so well, so that the rest of them — so that she — would never again have to stand in the rows and watch. *Confirmed*. So easy. Five letters. The cipher knew her hand. The bird would carry it and the machine would close and the girl would go to the salt or the throne and Sabra would go home to Sett and be made into something the order had a use for, and the cold would close over all of it the way the water had closed over Mira, level, loving, done.

She turned and looked back at the caravan.

It lay in the heat-shimmer like something dreamed, like the lie of water made solid: the dun tents going to nothing at their edges in the rising air, the carts, the dogs, the wash-line slack in the windless noon, the smoke-thread of a banked fire standing straight up into the white sky, the whole improbable living town that walked across the killing sand on the strength of nothing but knowing how. No walls. No cisterns it owned, no canyon it held, no law but the road and the salt and the open hand. It should not have been able to exist out here and it did, daily, by grit and song and the carrying of obligation like water, and it was the warmest thing Sabra had ever been let near, and she had been let near it by accident, by being sent to spy on it, by Hessa's word and the order's long reach — and somewhere in it Tamar slept with her hand open in the place Sabra had left warm.

Somewhere in it Amma Reshi sat in the deepest shade with her eyes shut and a thousand grandmothers behind them, holding the warm Remembering the order had spent three hundred years trying to clinical and catalogue and own. And beside her, almost certainly — because the girl could not leave the old woman alone for an hour, drank her in, sat at her feet like a child who had found at last the grandmother the order had never let her have — Naia.

Naia, who had decided, on no evidence and with the bottomless arrogance of the young and the unbroken, that Sabra was worth saving. Who saw the cold in her and did not recoil from it the way the spear-sisters did, did not give it the cool courtesy, but reached *past* it — the way you reached past a thorn for the bloom, careless of the blood — and had said three nights ago, around the fire, watching Sabra fail to laugh at something Tamar said and then, a beat late, laugh anyway, because the warm had got into her and she had not noticed in time to stop it: *You're not as made as you think you are, Salt-girl. They left*

a seam. Said it grinning. Said it with a date in her cheek and the firelight on her and no idea, none, what it was to a House of Salt woman to be told she had a seam. Insufferable. Exactly right. The Reckoning in the blood, untaught, untrained, raw as a wound and twice as accurate, and it had read Sabra all the way to the bone and found the seam the order had left, the one place the building had not gone all the way down — and put a finger in it, gently, the way you tested a healing wound to see if it would hold weight.

And Sabra's *yes* on a slip of paper, in Yenneth's private hand, would put that girl in the salt.

Or on a throne, made a weapon, made a god, spent gloriously to nothing — Ysolde's velvet *deliver*, no kinder at the bottom. Either way the word was the same and the bird was the same and the machine was the same and the hand that wrote *confirmed* in the cipher only two women alive could read would be hers. Her hand. The one Tamar had laid hers open over in the dark, trusting.

She looked down at the nine words, and found that the cold had a bottom after all.

She had thought, standing in the rows at twelve, that the worst thing in the world was being made to watch. She had carried that for twenty years as the worst thing — the front rank, the grey cold, the small *oh*, the hand on her shoulder. She had thought wrong. She knew it now, in the noon, the way you know a thing you have always known and only just let surface. The worst thing was not being made to watch. The worst thing was being made to *decide* — and being good enough to see all the way down the order's reasoning, link by sound link, and *still* feel the wrongness of it like a second pulse. A beat under the trained beat. A thing the order had not been able to build out of her, because it was older than the order, older than Sett, older than the salt-law and the rows and the level loving voice — the warm un-walled thing Amma Reshi sang from in the deep shade, and Tamar slept inside of with her hand open, and Naia had put her finger on three nights ago through the seam they had failed to close.

You're not as made as you think you are.

No. She was not. She found that out fully now, in the killing light, with her whole made self lined up on one pan of the scale and one girl's small *oh* on the other — Mira's, or Naia's, it did not matter, it was the same *oh*, it had always been the same *oh* — and the scale was not even close. It was not close at all. The made self had three hundred years of dead in it and the reasoning of the longest-lived order in the world and the architecture of everything she was, and it weighed nothing. One *oh* weighed it down to the salt.

She would not confirm. She would not deliver. The Reckoning had given her the answer the moment the bird folded its wings against the awning-pole, and then, as it always did, made her walk all the way to it — out past the dogs, past the dicing sisters, out to the open glare with the heat in the bones of her feet — so that she could not pretend, after, that she had not chosen with her

eyes open. Whatever the order had built in her, beam by beam, with grief and patience and love and the loving level terrible voice — it had not, in the one place that mattered, in the seam, finished the work.

The relief of it nearly took her legs out from under her. She felt it go through her like cold water, like the first swallow after a dry crossing, and she had to set her feet against the loose sand to keep standing.

Then the second thing came, riding in behind the relief the way it always did with the Reckoning — cold, exact, unforgiving, refusing her even this. *Deciding is not doing.*

She had refused the slip in her own heart, alone in the noon, on the open pan, where it cost her nothing and saved no one. The bird would not write itself. The cipher would not refuse itself. The escorts Yenneth's word implied — the relays, the cached water, the dark-moon pace — were already crossing the Deep toward this caravan, and they would arrive whether she answered or not, because her *yes* had never been the thing that started them; it was only the thing that would have told them where to close. They would close anyway. And when they came she would have to stand in front of them — in front of the order that had built her, in front of women who had taught her the cipher and the Stillness and how to hold her own pulse while a girl drowned — and be a thing she had no name for yet. A defector. A thornless rose, except she was not thornless; that was the order's lie about a woman who would not serve it. A salt-girl who had drunk at the wrong well, in the wrong tent, of the wrong people. She would have to put her body — her made, valuable, order-built body — between the order that made her and the people who never had.

She had refused the Call. She had not yet paid for refusing it. The paying was all still ahead of her, in the dark, with knives in it and the level loving voice in it and, very possibly, the pan and a small *oh* of her own.

But she had refused.

She knelt down in the hot sand at the edge of the Deep, and she dug.

She worked fast with her bare hands, the grit scalding her fingers, scooping a small hole the way she had watched Attuin children scoop for cool sand to lie their wrists in at noon. And when it was deep enough she laid Yenneth's nine words in it, the slip already going limp with the heat and the salt-damp of her own palm — and she did not burn it.

Burning was the trained instinct. The tidy instinct. *Leave no slip.* House of Salt to the bone: a thing remembered, a thing destroyed, never a thing left lying for another to read. The whole order in that reflex — burn it, hold the memory, control who knows. She had reached for the flint at her belt before she had thought, the made hand moving to do the made thing.

She did not burn it. She buried it.

She buried it the way the Attuin buried things — the way you returned a thing to the salt, gave it back to the sand and the silence and the long patience of the Deep that took everything in the end and asked nothing. She pressed the hot sand flat over the Salt Mother's private cipher, smoothed it level with her palm, and held her hand there a moment, flat against the warm grit, the way you hold a hand over a small grave when there is nothing left to say and you say it anyway.

I remember her, she thought — Mira, the oh, the silver cold, the front rank. Twenty years, the way you taught me. And I am done being the place your crimes go to be loved.

Then she stood, and brushed her hands clean against her robe, the grit rasping off her palms, and turned back toward the caravan dreaming in its heat-shimmer. The smoke-thread stood straight up. The dogs had not moved. Somewhere in it Tamar was awake — Sabra knew it the way she knew most things, by a shift too small to name, the particular quality of a stillness that has just stopped being sleep — awake and reaching across the warm Sabra had left and finding it cooling, and beginning, slow and unworried still, to wonder where she had gone.

She walked back in to find her, and to begin the much harder thing, which was not refusing the order.

It was telling the truth.

Chapter 12 — The Kiln's Mercy

The audience hall of the Red Gorge had been cut from the living rock by men who understood that shadow was a kind of wealth. Davec had grown up beneath this ceiling — a vault of red stone fluted by ancient water, cool as a cistern at the hottest hour, the light falling in long bronze blades from the high slots where the masons had let the sun in on purpose, a little, the way a careful man lets a creditor into his house. He sat the salt throne with his hands loose on the arms of it and watched Stonefather Korik climb the steps from the floor. *The day a priest forgets to ask leave before he climbs is the day you've already lost the room.*

Korik had not asked leave.

The throne itself was a slab of old salt-marble the colour of clouded honey, worn pale where a hundred kings had set their hands, and Davec had spent the morning aware of it the way a man becomes aware of an old wound when the weather turns. His father had taught him to use the cold of it, to let it travel up through the palms and settle the blood, so that whatever heat a petitioner brought into the room had nowhere to land. *A throne is a position, not a chair,*

his father had said, more than once, with the particular flat patience he kept for lessons that had cost him something. *You do not sit it. You hold it.* Davec held it now and watched the priest come.

He came up like a man going to his own altar, robe the dull grey of unfired clay, and behind him two temple wards led a third man on a cord. Not a rope. A cord — soft, plaited, the kind a woman braids into a child's hair — and that was the first thing Davec's gut disliked, before his mind had reasons. You bound a prisoner with iron or you bound him with nothing. The cord was theatre. The cord said *this man is gentle; see what we have made.*

The detail of it caught and held him longer than it should have. Someone had chosen that cord. Someone had stood in a temple cell with a chest of bindings and reached past the iron and the hemp and the leather and selected the soft plaited thing, and that someone had been Korik, or a man thinking the way Korik thought, and the choosing was the whole argument made small. *Look how little we need to hold him. Look what we have done to a man, that this is enough.* It was the most efficient sentence in the room and not one word of it had been spoken aloud.

"My lord of the Red Gorge." Korik inclined his head the precise depth owed a king and not a finger's-width more. "I bring you a thing the temple has kept too long in the dark. Time the thrones saw what the dark has bred against them."

Selka was not in the hall. Davec had sent her to the upper gardens with the morning's correspondence when Korik's request came — *correspondence* being their word for *get clear of this man and tell me later what I missed.* She'd be furious to have missed it. She'd also read in one glance the thing it would take him an hour and a mistake to read. He missed her the way you miss a hand — the small constant absence of a thing you'd never had to think about until it was gone, the steadying you only notice when you grope for it and close on air. Somewhere above him, three turns of stair and a long colonnade away, she was sitting in the green with a stack of sealed letters in her lap and her cold clever mind already turning over what kind of show a priest mounts when he forces an audience, and she was right, and he was here without her, and he set the loss down and kept his face still.

"The temple keeps many things in the dark, Stonefather." Davec kept his voice idle. "I've never asked to see your accounts."

A thin sound from the priests at the foot of the steps — not a laugh, they did not laugh, but the held shape of one. Korik did not turn. He had the gift of all men certain of their ground: he did not need to know what stood behind him. The room arranged itself around his back without his attention, the way water arranges itself around a stone, and Davec marked that, and disliked it, and filed it with the cord.

"This is not an account. This is a man." He gestured, and the wards brought

the third one up into the bronze light.

He was young. That was the second thing. Davec had braced, somewhere, for a monster — a temple-bred horror with dead eyes, the thing the women's orders were always whispered to be when men frightened each other late at the wine. What stood blinking in the light was a boy of perhaps two-and-twenty, narrow through the shoulders, with the soft hands of a man who had spent his life with ink and not a spear, and a face that wanted very badly to be somewhere else. He held himself wrong. That was the third thing, and the one Davec could not name, only feel — the boy held himself *too still*, the way a cup held too full holds itself, the surface trembling against its own edge, the meniscus standing proud of the rim by some trick of its own skin and waiting only for a breath to break it. His eyes went to the high light-slots and flinched. Went to the wards and flinched. Came to rest, at last, on the floor, because the floor at least did not look back.

Davec had seen men afraid in his hall. He had seen the sweating fear of debtors and the proud cold fear of envoys and the animal fear of a man brought up from the cells to be sentenced. This was none of those. This was the fear of a thing that had been hurt so many times in so orderly a fashion that the hurt had become a kind of weather, expected, scheduled, survivable only by holding very still until it passed. Davec knew that stillness. He had worn a smaller version of it himself, a boy in this same hall under his father's flat patient eye, learning that the safest thing to do with a feeling was to put it somewhere no one could reach it and stand very straight over the place where it was buried.

"His name is Oren," Korik said. "Given to the temple at seven. Too many sons, not enough water. We taught him letters. The calendar, the courses of the stars, the law of the Stone Bed." A pause, weighted. "And the disciplines, my lord. What the women's orders have held to themselves three hundred years, and used on us, and entered in their counsel as if it were advice."

There it was. Davec felt the morning rearrange itself under him, the way sand goes from footing to nothing in the space of a step — that lurch in the gut when the dune you're standing on remembers it is not stone. *He's not bringing me a prisoner. He's bringing me a weapon, and he wants me to thank him for it.*

"You trained a man in the disciplines," Davec said.

"We restored to a man what was always a man's to have." Korik's voice did not rise. That was the worst of him — he never reached for heat, he simply set each stone of his certainty atop the last until the wall stood over you, and you found you had been listening so long for the crack of anger that you'd missed the slow rise of the masonry. "Watch, my lord. It resolves itself in the watching."

He turned to the boy. "Oren. The one on the left."

Davec's gaze followed. A ward, the younger of the two who'd led the boy in, standing easy now by the wall with his thumbs hooked in his belt and his weight cocked on one hip — bored, the way men get bored guarding a thing that has

never once tried to run, his eyes drifting along the carved frieze where the old water-channels ran, his mind plainly half on his dinner. He had a young man's face, open, unfinished. There was a smear of something on his sleeve, dust or grease from the road. He scratched at his jaw with one thumbnail. He had no idea, Davec saw, that he was the one. He thought he was furniture.

"Stonefather—" The boy's voice was low and it shook, and the shaking was not weakness; it was the surface trembling, the full cup, the held thing pressing at its skin. "Please. Not again. He's done nothing—"

"That is not what I asked of you."

"He has a daughter, you told me he has a—"

"*Oren.*" And Korik did not raise his voice even now, only laid the name down flat and final — not a shout, not a threat, simply the boy's own name set on the stone between them like a coin on a counter, *here is the price, pay it* — and Davec watched something go out of the boy like water from a tilted jar. The held fullness lasted one heartbeat longer, the meniscus standing impossibly proud. Then it broke, and what came out was not loud.

It was a word. One word, and Davec, who sat eight steps up and twenty feet off, did not even hear it clearly — felt it more than heard it, a pressure behind the breastbone, a wrongness in the air of the room like the change before a storm comes over the rim of the gorge, gone before he could name the note of it. His own body, eight steps up and untrained, flinched toward obedience to a command not aimed at him and let go again, and the small involuntariness of that — his own flesh leaning, for half an instant, toward a stranger's will — frightened him more than anything the priest had said.

The ward on the left sat down.

Not fell. *Sat* — folded straight down onto the stone, legs going from under him not as a man stumbles but as a man obeys, his bored face still arranged in boredom for the half-second it took his body to betray him, the thumb still half-hooked in the belt, the dinner still half in his mind — and then arranged in nothing at all. His thumbs slid from his belt. His head tipped back against the wall and his eyes were open and his chest rose and fell and rose and fell and his hands lay palm-up where they had fallen, and he did not move them, and he did not move them, and he did not move them.

The hall was very quiet. Up in the light-slots a desert swift went by with a thin scream, and the sound of it was enormous in the silence, a small ordinary thing from a world that had not just buckled.

Davec found he had counted the man's breaths. Four. Five. The chest rose. The eyes, open, tracked nothing — or tracked, perhaps, the ceiling, the red fluted stone, the same vault Davec had grown up under, and there was no way to know whether the man behind the eyes was screaming or praying or simply enduring, because the leash held the screaming in along with everything else.

The palms lay open. A man's hands, palm-up, are the most undefended thing about him; an infant sleeps that way, and a corpse. This man was neither. He was a guard in his own house in front of his king, and he could not close his hands.

"He sleeps?" Davec heard his own voice from a distance, and despised the hope in it. He wanted the man to be sleeping. Sleeping he could understand.

"He is awake." Korik watched the king and not the fallen man, and Davec understood, in that watching, that *he* was the experiment here — he and the throne behind him, the whole watching weight of the thrones gathered into one chair and one man's face; the boy and the ward were only the instrument, the proof laid on the bench, and the priest's clever stony eyes were taking the king's measure the way a physician takes a pulse. "He hears us. He cannot rise. Not until the boy releases him, or until the boy tires — which costs the boy." A small motion of one grey hand toward Oren, who had not lifted his eyes and was breathing in the short shallow pulls of a man who has just done a thing he'll dream about for the rest of his life. "It costs him a great deal. You see how it costs him. That is the leash. That is why he is safe to put before a king."

Safe. Davec looked at the boy's wet face and the fallen ward's open eyes and the soft braided cord coiled now on the steps where the wards had let it fall, and the word turned over in him like a stone with something living under it. He had used the word himself a thousand times. *The road is safe now. The cistern is safe. The marriage makes the border safe.* It had always meant a thing held quiet by a force you trusted. He understood, looking at the boy, that he had never once asked what the holding cost the thing held quiet.

"You did this to him," Davec said. "The training."

"We gave him—"

"I heard what you gave him." Davec stood. He had not meant to stand; the throne was a position one held — his father had drilled that into him, *a king who stands has conceded the floor*, drilled it with a flat hand on the back of a boy's neck pressing him down into the chair until he learned to keep himself there — and he stood anyway, because the alternative was to sit at his ease, cold salt-marble under his palms, while a frightened boy was made to fold a man like wet cloth for his instruction. His father would have stayed seated. His father would have been right, by the cold arithmetic of the room. Davec stood, and felt the floor concede, and did not care, and that not-caring told him something about the morning he would have to examine later.

"You took a child with too many brothers and spent eighteen years making him into a thing that can do that, and you call the wreck of him a *leash*. You call it safe because you broke him first."

"I call it *necessary*." And here, finally, a thread of heat — the first Davec had drawn from him, and he marked it, banked it, the way you note the one stone in a wall that gives a little when you lean: Korik could be moved on this one ground,

that the work was righteous. The wall stood on a single foundation, and that was it. “For three hundred years the orders have done exactly this — exactly *this* — to every throne in the Saltlands, and we have called it marriage and we have called it counsel and let them carve our fates in the dark. The woman in your gardens this hour was *bred*, my lord. The way you breed a falcon. And *sent*, the way you send one. And you call her your wife.” He let it land. He was good. Davec hated, in the cold back room where a king keeps his real accounts, how good he was — how he reached past the argument straight into the soft place under it and set his thumb there, gently, with the confidence of a man who has found that place in a hundred other men and knows it is always, always there. “They have held the knife since before your great-grandfather was whelped. I have put one in the temple’s hand. That is the whole of the irregularity, and I’ll see it entered straight. Now the matter can be settled between equals.”

And the terrible thing — the thing Davec carried out of that hall and could not set down for the rest of the season, the thing that lay under his ribs at night with its small living weight — was that some narrow true part of it was *true*. Selka had been bred and sent. He had read the contract; he had been a younger man, newly throned, frightened in a way he’d had no Oren’s stillness to hide, and he had read every clause of it under the temple seal and the Ru cipher both, and he had signed it, and he had been the falcon as much as she had been the falconer — a stud-king with the temple’s witness on his marriage-bed and the orders’ centuries of patience coiled around his throat like the soft plaited cord around the boy’s wrists. The love that had grown between them since — slow, unlooked-for, a green thing pushing up through stone — was the love of two prisoners who had decided, one ordinary evening over a dull dispatch and a shared cup, to be kind in the same cell, and had gone on choosing it every day after until the choosing became the truest thing either of them owned.

Korik was not wrong about the cell. He was only wrong, completely and irredeemably wrong, about how you got out of it — and Davec watched the boy wipe his face on his shoulder because his hands were not free, the small graceless animal gesture of a creature with no other recourse, and watched the ward on the floor begin, very slightly, to weep — not a sound, only a wet shine gathering at the corners of the open eyes and sliding back toward the ears, the only motion the man’s body was permitted, tears wrung out past the leash because grief, it seemed, the boy could not hold down.

His jaw was tight. The wrongness sat behind his breastbone where the Voice had brushed it. There was only the man weeping on his floor without leave to wipe his own face, and the cold rising in Davec that wanted to put Korik through the wall, and underneath both a thing that would not come clear yet and did not need to.

“Release him,” Davec said.

Korik did not move.

“Release the man.” Davec came down a step. The salt-marble was behind him

now, the cold gone from his palms; he was on the open stone, conceding the floor, his father's voice flat in the back of his skull and overruled. "Stonefather. There's a guard of mine sitting in his own water on my floor. Awake. In his own house. In front of his king. Tell the boy to let him up, or I'll have the boy cut free of that pretty cord and let him decide it himself — and I think we've both seen which way he'd decide."

For a moment the two of them held it — the king two steps down from his throne, the priest two steps up from the floor, level, which was perhaps the only honest geometry the morning had offered, the salt-marble above and the wet stone below and the two of them caught in the bronze light at the meeting of the two. Davec watched the priest weigh it. Korik's face gave very little, but a man who has spent his life reading petitioners learns to read the small accountings behind a still face, and Davec saw the priest set the cost of obeying a king's order in his own demonstration against the cost of being seen to refuse it, and find the balance.

Then Korik turned his head a fraction.

"Oren. Enough."

The boy's breath went out of him. Davec saw the release as a thing of the body, not the word — the awful held fullness dropping out of Oren's posture all at once, the trembling surface finally given leave to spill, shoulders coming down off his ears where they'd been hauled up tight, the head bowing, the spine curving like a thing that had been held straight against its own will and was let, at last, to bend. And on the floor the ward gasped like a swimmer breaking up from deep water and dragged his palms in off the stone — the first thing he did, before he breathed twice, was close his hands, claw them in against his chest as if to be sure they were his again — and curled around them and shook. No one went to him. The other ward, the elder, stood at attention against the far wall, eyes fixed on the carved frieze, jaw working, a muscle jumping in his cheek, and Davec marked that too, and it told him the last thing he needed to know about the temple's gift: *they are afraid of the boy*. The temple's own men, hardened, road-dusty, sworn, were afraid of the temple's own weapon. They would not go to their fallen comrade because going to him meant turning their backs to Oren, and not one of them, certain as Korik was of the leash, was willing to do it.

There was no glove on this fist at all. There was not even a hand he could see — only a frightened boy and a word you couldn't quite hear and a man on the floor who would never again stand a watch without listening for it, who would startle at every quiet voice at his shoulder for the rest of his life.

"Take your guard out," Davec said to the elder ward, low, pitching it under the ringing silence. "Wine. A quiet room. Don't let anyone make him talk. Tell the steward it comes from me. If a physician's wanted, send for old Hessom. Not the temple's man."

The ward moved to obey, and gratitude and horror were at war in his face —

gratitude that someone had named a thing to do, horror that the king had seen him fail to do it himself — and he crossed the floor with his eyes carefully away from the boy and got his shoulder under his shaking comrade and hauled him up and walked him out, the two of them lurching together toward the high doors, the fallen man's feet not quite finding the floor. The wet they left behind caught the bronze light and held it, a long bright smear on the red stone pointing back toward Oren like an accusation, like a road, like the thin shining track a snail leaves to say *something passed here and was changed*.

Davec looked at Korik. "What is it you want."

"War." Korik said it as another man might say *water* — not relishing it, simply naming the necessary thing, the thing one carries home from the well. "Not for its own sake. I'm not a butcher; you mistake me for one and I'll let you, because the mistake is convenient to you and I've learned to spend men's mistakes like coin." He had not moved from his step. He stood easy in the grey clay of his robe, hands folded, and spoke as a man speaks who has rehearsed a thing not for the words but for the years. "I want the women's monopoly *broken*. I want the thrones to stop being the saddle and start being the rider. For three hundred years we have been ridden, my lord — sat, and steered, and spurred toward wars and away from them by women in salt-white houses who never once asked us where we wished to go. I watched it from inside the Kiln my whole life. Watched it take me, a boy with the calendar in my head, and set me to copying marriage-rolls so the orders could check their breeding against the temple's seals. I know the shape of the saddle. I have felt it on my own back."

He let that sit, and Davec heard, under the certainty, the old wound it was built on — every wall is built on a wound — and did not let it move him, because a wound in a man does not make the wall he builds of it any less a wall.

"There is a thing surfacing in the Deep." Korik's voice dropped, and grew, if anything, more certain. "You've heard the whispers. I have more than whispers. A girl the orders bred against their own oldest law — a convergence, the very horror their salt-law exists to drown, the thing they have been quietly murdering their own daughters to prevent for three centuries, made on purpose, in secret, by a faction of their own breeders who decided the law did not bind them. When it breaks into the open — and it will, these things do not stay buried, the salt always gives up its dead — every throne in the Saltlands will have to choose: be ruled by it, or rule. Be the saddle one last and final time, or be the rider at last." He gestured, one grey hand, toward the dimming smear on the floor. "I have spent eighteen years making sure that when the choice comes, the thrones are not standing there empty-handed in the old shame, hats in hand, asking the salt-mothers please to be gentle with us. I have made us a hand. I offer it to you first because the Red Gorge is the strongest gate and your name carries furthest. Stand with the temple. Declare the Ru marriages void under the Rite of the Stone Bed — every Ru-bred king a bastard, every Ru-steered throne illegitimate at a stroke — and be free men for the first time since the Drying."

Every Ru-bred king a bastard. Davec heard the law turn under the man's righteousness like a blade turning in cloth — the small wet sound of an edge inside a wrapping, the thing you feel before you see — and at last understood the whole of it, the thing Selka would have seen at a glance from the door and named to him in three dry words before the priest had finished his second sentence.

"My grandmother drank at my grandfather's well by the old rite," Davec said slowly, and watched the priest's face as he said it, and watched the priest already knowing. "Before the Stone Bed was law. My father's claim runs through her. So does mine."

The smallest pause. The priest's folded hands did not move. "The temple can resolve irregularities of the past, my lord. For friends of the temple."

There it was, naked at last, the iron with the cloth fallen off it. *Stand with me and your blood is clean. Stand against me and I unmake your house with the same law I'll use to unmake the orders'.* Davec felt the trap close around him in the cool red dark with no sound at all, a thing that had been built and laid and baited long before he ever climbed these steps, before Oren was given to the temple at seven, perhaps before Davec himself was born — the legitimacy-doctrine was not a wall around the women's power, the way the thrones had always comfortably told themselves it was, a fence around the orders' breeding-games that happened, conveniently, to keep the salt-mothers' kings legitimate. It was a wall around *everyone's*. It bastardised a Ru queen and, with a comma's change, the king who married her. The same law. The same cell. The same cord, only longer, only softer, woven so fine that the thrones had worn it three hundred years and called it a crown. And Korik held the only door, and he was offering to let Davec through it for the price of becoming the kind of man who broke boys for keys.

They had only ever shown him the women's half of the bars. He had spent his whole reign squinting at the orders' half of the cell, the bred-and-sent wife, the patient debts, the counsel that was a knife — and never once turned around to see that the wall at his back, the temple's own holy law, the Rite of the Stone Bed his fathers had welcomed as a check on the salt-mothers, had been the other three walls all along, and the ceiling, and the floor.

He thought of Selka in the upper gardens with the morning's letters, bred and sent, who had chosen, anyway, against all her cold careful training, to love a stud-king in a cell — who had laid her head against his shoulder one night a year into the marriage and said, into the dark, with the dry wonder of a woman discovering a thing she'd been told was impossible, *I was not supposed to do this* — and who would lose her name and her son's name and the marriage that had become her one true rebellion the instant Davec took the hand Korik held out. He thought of the boy, a child with too many brothers and too little water, who had said *he has a daughter, you told me he has a daughter*, trying to use the priest's own words against him, trying to find the seam of mercy in a man who had none, and been answered with his own name like a closing door.

“You’ve made me a generous offer,” Davec said.

Korik waited, and a softening moved across the priest’s hard face, the ease of a man who has set out a long careful argument and watched it land where he aimed it, and Davec understood that this was the other half of the man’s certainty, the part that made him not merely formidable but tragic. He could not, finally, imagine a king choosing the cell over the clean blood, the woman over the throne, the broken boy over the strong gate. Korik genuinely did not believe there was anyone in the room but two prisoners arguing over who got to hold the key. To him the morning was simple: he had offered a fellow captive the means of escape, and only a fool or a coward refuses the file in the bread. He was sincere. He was devout. He had spent eighteen years on a child’s ruin and believed, with his whole stone heart, that he was the only one in all the Saltlands willing to do what justice cost — that the others, the squeamish, the merciful, were merely letting *him* carry the sin so their hands could stay clean. That was what made him terrible. Not that he lied. That he didn’t. A liar you can catch. A true believer you can only outlast or destroy, and Davec was not at all sure, that morning, that he could do either.

“I’ll give the temple my answer in three days,” Davec said. “Leave the boy.”

The warmth went out of Korik’s face the way the bronze light was going out of the smear on the floor — not all at once, just a slow draining toward grey. “Oren goes with me.”

“The boy stays in the Red Gorge as my guest while I consider the temple’s offer.” Davec smiled, and it was his father’s smile, the one his father had used on creditors and envoys and once, that Davec had seen, on a man whose execution he had already signed — the velvet laid carefully over the thing his father had kept where his heart should have been, and that Davec had sworn as a boy he would never learn, and had learned anyway, because a king learns the tools to hand. “You’ve shown me a great wonder, Stonefather. A man who can fold my guards like wash, made by your own hand, sworn to your own faith. You can’t ask me to weigh a wonder like that and answer you in the same hour. I’d be a fool — and you’ve not come to me thinking me a fool. You’ve come because the Red Gorge is the strongest gate. Your own words. A strong gate is a slow gate. You’ll want him where I can see him while I consider what he means. Surely the temple, which has held him eighteen years, can spare him three days to a friend who is *considering*.”

He watched Korik do the arithmetic — watched it move behind the stone face, the weighing of the insult against the prize, the risk of the boy in a king’s keeping against the chance of the king’s gate swinging open for the temple’s army. Watched the priest decide that a man who was *considering* must be courted and not crossed; that to snatch the boy back now would be to confess he did not trust the king, and a man you do not trust is a man you have already lost. The grey head bowed its precise depth and not a finger more, the same depth it had given on entering, the courtesy weighed out to the grain.

“Three days, my lord. I’ll send a ward to attend him.”

“You’ll send no one. The Red Gorge will attend my guest.” Davec held the priest’s eyes until the priest looked away first — a small thing, a thing of an instant, the flick of a gaze toward the high doors as if remembering the road — but it was the priest who broke it, and it cost the priest something, and it was meant to. “Good morning, Stonefather. Mind the wet on the steps.”

He let that land too. *The wet your work left on my floor. Mind it on your way out.*

Korik went. He went without haste, the two wards — the one returned now from settling his shaking comrade — falling in behind him, the soft plaited cord left coiled on the steps where it had fallen, abandoned, because the demonstration was done and the cord had only ever been theatre. The high doors took them. The boom of the doors closing came back off the vaulted stone and rolled away into the cool dark, and then the hall was only Davec and the boy and the long fading smear on the red floor, and the desert swift gone, and the bronze blades of light shifting a hand’s-width as the sun climbed toward the cruel hour.

The king came the rest of the way down the steps. He stooped and took up the cord from where it lay — it was soft in his fingers, softer than he’d expected, the plaited strands worn smooth, and he turned it over once and understood that it had been used many times, that some patient hand had bound and unbound those gentle wrists with this gentle thing again and again until the cord itself had gone supple as a thing much loved — and he carried it to the boy and untied the knot at his wrists himself.

The boy flinched at the touch like a struck dog, a full-body flinch that he caught and arrested half a heartbeat into it, then went rigid with the effort of not flinching, holding himself straight under the king’s hands, offering the bound wrists with his face turned away and his eyes shut, braced. And Davec felt the wrongness in him again, close up now, near enough to feel the heat coming off the boy’s skin and the fine fast tremor running through him — the held fullness, the trembling surface — and understood, with his hands on the boy’s bound wrists and the knot giving under his fingers, that it was not menace. It had never been menace. It was terror, wound so tight over so many years that it had nowhere left to go but inward, packed down into stillness, and the stillness was the most dangerous thing in the room, and it stood there with its eyes shut expecting to be hurt and braced to endure it without a sound.

The knot came free. The cord fell away. Davec coiled it in his hand and did not give it back to anyone.

“It cost you,” Davec said quietly. Not a question.

Oren’s throat worked. For a moment it seemed he would not answer, or could not. Then the words came, low, in barely any voice at all, and they came broken.

“He’ll wake screaming. A month, maybe. The first night for certain.” A breath.

“Then it comes less. Then it comes — wrong times. A quiet voice behind him. Someone telling him to sit. Anything that’s — the shape of it.” He stopped. The freed hands hung at his sides, useless, not knowing what they were for; he had been bound so often that being loosed was its own kind of disorientation. “I’ve seen what’s — after. The ones I’ve—” He didn’t finish it. Swallowed. “The first one. In the training. A beggar. Three coppers and a meal, and I didn’t — I didn’t know it would. Didn’t know I *could*. And he stopped. His heart. I made him and I didn’t even—” He shut his mouth on it, hard, the way a man shuts a door on a room he can’t bear to keep looking into. The tremor in him peaked and held. “And the masters were *pleased*.” Something went out of him on the word. “They call it a gift. The First Mother’s, turned right-way-round. Given back. They’ve a whole story for it.” His voice cracked, finally, and what came out was small and bitter and entirely his own. “It’s not a gift. A gift is a thing you’d give back.”

And Davec, who had come down those steps thinking he was sheltering a weapon from the man who’d forged it — a tool he meant to keep out of Korik’s hand for three days while he found a way to refuse the war without losing his throne — looked at the boy’s wet ruined frightened face, *a gift is a thing you’d give back*, and felt the morning’s geometry turn one last time under him, the dune going to nothing under his foot, the whole landscape resolving into a shape he had not let himself see.

Korik had brought him proof that men could be made to hold the women’s power, and had meant it as a thunderclap of war — *see, we are armed now, the spheres are equal, choose your side*.

It was a thunderclap. Korik had only mistaken which way the lightning ran.

Because if a boy with too many brothers and a soul too soft for the work could be drilled into this — if the disciplines lived in a temple-bred man, an ink-handed son of the Kiln who had never held a spear, as readily as in any salt-mother’s daughter raised from the cradle to the craft, and cost him the same wreckage, and gave him the same terrible reach, the same word you couldn’t quite hear that folded a man like wet cloth — then the whole tall story the world told itself, men on the thrones and women in the dark, the gift apportioned by birth and bound by sex and sworn upon by both spheres in their separate certainties for three hundred years and three hundred before that, the salt-law and the temple-law alike standing guard over a border each side believed in absolutely — all of it was a wall built across a thing that had never had a seam in it at all. A line drawn down the middle of one whole circle and called a horizon. The temple’s secret weapon was the temple’s secret heresy, and Korik had carried it into a king’s hall and set it blinking in the bronze light and demanded the king admire the proof of his own undoing.

Oren was not proof that the men should take the women’s power. He was proof there had never been two powers to take. There had only ever been the one, and the wall, and the long patient lie on both sides of it that the wall was the

world.

Davec did not say any of that. He was a king; he had learned in his cradle, under his father's flat hand, that the thing you say is never the thing you know, that a man who speaks the whole of his mind has handed it to the room to use against him. He held the truth where he held the cold of the throne and the velvet over his father's smile and all the other things a king keeps below the waterline. He laid a hand on the boy's narrow shoulder instead — the way you'd gentle a horse beaten by its last man, slow, where it can see the hand coming, no quickness in it — and felt Oren hold still under it, not relaxing, never relaxing, but holding, waiting for the blow that men's hands had always meant, his eyes coming up at last, wet and red and bewildered, to the king's face, trying to read what was wanted of him so he could give it and survive.

"No one's going to make you do it again under my roof," Davec said. "That's not a king's promise — you've learned to mistrust those, and you're right to. I've broken a king's promise and slept well enough after. That's the trade. That's the throne. This is a man's. Those are worth more and cost more and I don't make them often." He took his hand from the boy's shoulder before the touch could become its own demand. "Come. You'll eat — you look like a man who forgets to. You'll sleep somewhere with a door you can bar from the inside, and I'll see the bar's a good one. And in three days I'll lie to a priest about you, a long careful lie I've been building since you sat that poor man down. We'll see what we can make of being two men in the same cell."

The boy looked up at him, and there was no understanding in his face — only a wary, exhausted attention, the look of a creature that has learned every kindness is a longer setup for a worse hurt and cannot yet make this one fit the pattern.

He would, in time.

He took the boy up the stairs with him. He did not give back the cord.

Chapter 13 — Convergence

The Attuin called it the hour of no shadow — that flat span before dusk when the sun stood low enough to bleach the dunes white and the world lay open in every direction, nowhere to hide a man and nowhere for a man to hide from. Kessa had always liked it. You could see who was coming for you.

She lay belly-down on the lee of a dune three hundred paces north of the caravan, veil loose at her throat, watching the smoke of the cook-fires go up straight in the dead air. The light did strange, honest things at this hour. It stripped the world of its kindnesses. The dunes that wore long blue shadows at dawn lay naked now, every ripple of them the same chalk-white as the pan beyond, so that the eye lost its grip on distance and a woman crawling toward you at a

hundred paces looked the same size as a stone at ten. The Edemre trained in this light because it lied to everyone equally. Lie back to it correctly and you became one more bleached fold in a bleached country, and the lie worked for you instead of against.

Imani lay beside her, chin on her crossed forearms, chewing a stalk of dune-grass with the unhurried insolence of a woman who had decided how the evening would go and was waiting for the world to catch up. She had a way of lying in ambush that made it look like idleness, like a cat dropped boneless in the sun. It was one of the first things Kessa had ever hated about her and one of the last she'd come to love.

"Doubled the night-watch," Imani said. "Two on the water, two on the picket. The big one with the scarred forearm — spear under the blanket. Not under her hand. Under the blanket." A beat. "Been woken wrong before, that one."

"Tamar," Kessa said.

"You know her name."

"I make it my business to know who'll cost me blood." Three days she'd been reading this caravan the way an Adima Ru read a city's bread prices. You did not look at the thing you wanted to know. You looked at everything around it until the shape of the thing stood up out of the gaps. So she had not watched the girl, not at first. She had watched the water-discipline and the picket rotations, the order the children were fed in, which beasts were favored and which were worked to the bone, the worn places on the camp's pathways that told you where its life actually moved as opposed to where it pretended to. She had watched a hard-faced young woman in a salt-trader's robe sit too straight at the fire and watch the girl too steadily and think no one saw. *That* one was no salt-trader. A salt-trader sat the way the desert taught you to sit, slack against the long heat, joints loose, ready to be still for hours. This one sat with the spine of a woman who had been corrected for slouching in a stone hall. Kessa had marked her the first hour and said nothing to the ledger. A Ru initiate playing scout. Interesting, and not her debt.

The girl was her debt. Naia. Twenty years old, give or take, and there was a thing wrong with her that Kessa could not name and would not stop noticing.

She moved like a girl. She laughed like a girl — a real laugh, head back, the whole throat in it, the kind of laugh that had never once had to be measured for who might hear. And once, two evenings past, when a hobbled camel had spooked and lunged at the water-cart, she had said a single word. Kessa had been too far to hear it, only the shape of the mouth: a short word, two beats, the lips closing hard on the end of it. And the beast had locked rigid at the sound of it — not balked, not shied, but *obeyed*, four feet planted and forelegs braced, the great ugly head trembling at the end of its neck, the white showing all round the eye, the whole animal straining against a command that had gone in under the level where a beast decides anything. A drilled thing. A trained

reflex jumping a fence in the animal it had never been set in. And not one person at the fire had thought it strange. A child had laughed. An old woman had clucked and gone back to her mending. They were *used* to it. That was the thing that turned Kessa's stomach in a way no kill ever had — not the power, but the ease of it among them, the way a household grows used to the smell of a thing that would stop a stranger in the doorway.

"You've gone quiet," Imani said.

"Working."

"You're brooding. There's a difference and I've shared a bed with both." Imani spat out the grass. It landed in the sand a hand's breadth from Kessa's face, deliberate, an old provocation. "Say it."

Kessa watched a child carry a waterskin from the cistern-cart to Tamar's fire and not spill a drop. The skin was nearly as long as the child. The child walked the whole forty paces with the careful gravity of the very young given a task that matters, and set it down at the Spear-Sister's feet, and the woman with the scarred forearm reached out without looking and cupped the back of the small head once, briefly, the way you'd test a melon for ripeness, and the child's face lit up.

"The debt's a hundred years older than the girl," Kessa said. "Grandmother's grandmother owed a life. The ledger doesn't forget and it doesn't care the one who pays was a baby when it fell due. That's the whole —" She stopped. "That's us. Only ones in the desert who can't be talked out of anything." She rolled onto her back, careful to keep below the crest, and looked at the white sky. There were no birds in it. There were never birds at this hour; they knew better than to be caught between the heat below and the cold coming. "Should've done it the first night. Veil up, in and out. Clean."

"And you didn't."

"And I didn't."

Imani said nothing, which was Imani's cruelest trick. She let a silence sit until you furnished it yourself, until you'd hung your whole heart on the empty walls of it just to fill the quiet, and then she looked at what you'd hung there and you had to look at it too.

"There's a thing wrong with her," Kessa said finally. "Not wrong. *More*. I've killed nine people for the ledger and never once needed to understand them first. The man in Qesh who'd sold three caravans to the slavers and laughed about it at his daughter's wedding — I didn't need to know what made him. I needed the angle of his throat. The Ru factor who'd had her own sister entered in our books and then wept at the funeral she'd —" Kessa's jaw set. "I found the angle and I left the rest. That's the mercy of us. We don't have to know them. We pay what's owed and leave the knowing to whatever god the temples are pretending about this season." She closed her eyes against the white. "With her

I keep — I keep wanting to know what she is before I close it. And a woman who wants to know her mark is about to make a mistake she'll die of."

"Or," said Imani, "a woman who's noticed the ledger pointed her at something that isn't a debt at all."

Kessa turned her head. Imani was watching the smoke too, dark eyes calm, the small private smile she wore when she was about to be unbearable. Road-love and rivals and something with no name in any tongue for nine years, and the thing Kessa loved in her and the thing she could not forgive were the same thing: Imani did not believe in the ledger. She paid it because she'd sworn on salt, the way you'd pay a tax to a king you despised, with exact correctness and not one grain of reverence. *A debt is a story the dead tell to keep the living obedient*, she'd said once, with a knife in a man's kidney, the words coming out flat and conversational while the man sagged, and Kessa had loved her so hard in that moment she'd nearly missed the second angle and let him turn.

"Don't," Kessa said.

"I haven't said anything."

"You're about to forgive her for me. Don't." Kessa sat up on one elbow now, the heat of the argument moving in her chest the way it always did when Imani went at this stone. "The ledger's the only clean thing the four orders have ever held. The Ru lie — lie so well they've forgotten it's lying. Call it counsel, call it the long game, and breed women like beasts and drown the ones who frighten them. The temples lie; carved a rite out of nothing three hundred years ago and now the Stone laid it down at the start of the world. The Attuin sing pretty songs over the same graves and call it remembering. Everyone in this desert's running a lie that lets them sleep. We're the only —"

"You always come round to this."

"Because it's *true*," Kessa said, harder than she meant to, and pulled the voice down because voices carried at this hour the way they carried over still water. "We pay what we owe and we owe what we say and there's nothing under it but salt. Take that away and I'm a woman who kills people she dislikes. Which is what the Ru have wanted us to become ever since they made us and learned they couldn't unmake us. A tool that chooses its own targets, they can't account for. A tool that kills by a ledger they can read — that they can use. Convenient."

Imani's smile widened. "You've thought about this a great deal," she said, "for a woman who was going to do it clean the first night."

Kessa opened her mouth to answer her, and did not, because down the back of the dune, from the north, a smell had come to her on the dead air that did not belong to the desert.

The desert had its smells and she knew all of them — the iron-dry scent of hot sand, the faint sweetish rot where a beast had died and the salt had taken it, the wood-and-fat of the cook-fires, the green ghost of the dune-grass crushed

under their own bodies. This was none of those. This was oil. Lamp-oil, the heavy kind the temples burned, refined and scentless to a city nose but to hers as loud as a shout — and under it, when she drew the air slow through her open mouth the way you tasted poison, the cold iron-and-leather of men who had carried it a long way and sweated into their harness and let it dry and sweated into it again.

She went very still. Not the trained Stillness, not yet, just the animal stillness of a thing that has caught a scent and does not yet know which way to run.

“What,” Imani said, no smile in it now.

“Men,” Kessa said. “North. A lot of them.”

She found them an hour later, in the blue dusk, by going to the high dune and lying flat and letting the Stillness slow her until her own pulse stopped being a sound in her ears.

This was the discipline at its quietest and, she had always thought, its truest. Not the killing edge of it. The listening. She brought her breath down and down until it was a thing that happened to her instead of a thing she did, lengthened the spaces between heartbeats until each one was a soft separate event a long way off, and the great roar of being alive — which no one notices because no one ever turns it off — went down to a hush, and into the hush the world came pouring. The tick of cooling sand. The far complaint of a camel. The wind that wasn't wind, just the desert breathing out the day's heat through a thousand small mouths. And under all of it, when the body stopped drowning it, the things you'd come to hear.

From the crest she could see two camps where there should have been one, and the second was wrong in every line of it.

A temple cadre. Sun-and-Stone livery gone to dust-grey for the crossing, but you could read the discipline in how they'd pitched — square, walled, a man on each corner standing the way temple men stood, like a fence post that resented being asked. They had dug a fire-pit deep so the light wouldn't carry, and screened it on three sides, and that alone told her these were not raiders or pilgrims. Twenty of them, she counted, the way she'd been taught — not by trying to count moving men but by counting the fixed things, the bedrolls laid in their grey rows, the spears stood in their bundles, the picketed beasts — and reading the men off the gear. Twenty, maybe more in the dark beyond the pit's small reach.

And among them, set apart, three robed figures who did not stand like soldiers and did not move like priests. The priests of the Kiln moved with a particular unhurried weight, men who had spent their lives in stone halls where nothing needed to be done quickly because the Stone had all the time there was. These three stood the way a held breath stands. And one of them was very young

and held himself as though his own body were a thing he'd been handed that morning and not yet learned to drive.

Kessa knew the look. She had worn it herself, the first year, when the Stillness was new in her and she could feel her own heartbeat as a separate animal she'd been given charge of, a wild creature she could quiet but not yet trust to stay quiet. The boy stood at the pit's edge with his hands not knowing what to do, and when a soldier dropped a billet of dung-fuel onto the fire and it cracked, he flinched — and the flinch was wrong. Too fast. Too whole. A soldier's flinch was a soldier's, a tightening, a turn of the head. This was the flinch of a body that felt the small explosion of sound arrive in it from a hundred directions at once, every grain of the dark coming in at him sharp-edged, because someone had pried his senses open past the human seal and not yet taught him how to close them again.

The temple is training men.

She'd heard the rumor in Qesh the way you heard everything in Qesh — as a joke, in a perfumed room, two factors laughing about it over date-spirit; as a horror, from a Ru go-between who'd gone grey saying it; as a price, once, when a man with very still eyes had asked her in a doorway whether she'd ever consider teaching, and named a sum, and she'd thought he meant something filthier than he did and only understood later, on the road, what she'd been offered and refused. She had not believed it, because believing it was too tiring. The world had enough horrors that were certainly real without her adopting one that might not be.

Now she lay in the cold sand — the day's heat all gone out of it now, the chill coming up through her robe — and watched a boy who could not be twenty stand among temple soldiers and flinch at the night the way a trained adept flinched, and the rumor stopped being a rumor and became a fact she was lying three hundred paces from.

So it was real. And the Ru would not let it be. She thought it through the way she'd been taught to think a thing through, following it past where it got uncomfortable. The Ru held the disciplines the way the thrones held the cisterns: as the one thing that made them necessary. A man who could Voice, a man who could go to Stillness, a man trained to the killing edge — that was not a curiosity to the Ru. That was the end of the only argument they had ever won. They would do something about a trained temple man the way a body did something about a splinter: not deliberate, not even quite a decision, just the immune blind violence of a thing protecting itself.

Which meant —

She heard them before she saw them. She would not have, had she not spent her whole life learning to hear women like herself. There is a particular silence that bodies in full Stillness make moving over sand — not silence exactly, but an absence-of-sound that is louder to a trained ear than any footfall, because the

world has a baseline hush and these women had cut a hole in it, were carrying a pocket of wrongly-perfect quiet across the dunes the way a thief carries a shaded lantern. She caught the edge of that hole moving and turned her head a slow degree at a time and found them.

They came from the east, low, four of them, veils up.

Edemre. Not hers. She knew it in her chest before she knew it in her head — the way you know your own name is not being called even in a crowd of the half-deaf. Four. House of the Veil had sent a *team*, and a team meant the order wasn't asking for the girl back. The order had decided. One Edemre is a message: *come quietly, the debt can yet be discussed*. Four veiled in the dark is not a message. Four is the sentence already passed and the only thing left the carrying out.

The glove was off.

Kessa lay very still between two camps that did not yet know about each other — the temple to the north with its screened fire and its frightened boy, the order's killers to the east coming low through the grass, the caravan in the bowl below with its straight smoke and its picketed beasts and its child who didn't spill a drop — and she did a thing she had not done in nine years of paying the ledger.

She did not think about the angle of a throat. She did not think about wind or footing or the merciful place under the ear. She lay in the cold and thought about who she did not want to die, and was so unused to the thought that for a moment she did not recognize it as her own.

Tamar knew the shape of trouble before she had a word for it, the way she'd always known weather.

It came as a pressure behind the breastbone, a thing she'd given up trying to explain to people who hadn't felt it. A wrongness in how sound carried. The fires popped the way they always popped and the beasts shifted the way they always shifted and somewhere a baby was being hushed back to sleep, and all of it was ordinary, and all of it was sitting wrong, like a song where one singer has drifted a hair flat and you can't find which one but the whole thing aches now and won't stop. Eleven years dancing the spear, and the lesson under all the other lessons — under the forms, under the throws, under the long murderous patience of the scout — was that the body knew first and the mind came stumbling after with explanations and was usually too late and always took the credit.

She was at the picket, running a hand down the foreleg of the gelding that had spooked two evenings back, gentling it for no reason she could have named except that her hands wanted something to do, when the salt-trader came to her.

Sabra. Who was no salt-trader. Whom Tamar had bedded twice in the long crossing and laughed with and lain easy beside in the dark, and not once — not for one heartbeat — been fool enough to fully trust, because Tamar had been raised by women who'd taught her that the Ru sent their loveliest knives and the cut you felt last was the one that came in soft. She had known Sabra was Ru the way she knew weather. She had let her into her blanket anyway, with her eyes open, because a Spear-Sister who only bedded the safe ones would die a virgin, and because there had been something in the woman — under the schooled spine and the careful watching — that wanted out so badly Tamar had felt it like heat off a stone.

Now Sabra came fast and low through the firelight, and her face was the color of old bone.

"Killers in the dark. East side. Edemre." She stopped. Swallowed. Her throat moved. "I can hear them. The not-sound of it. The way they breathe when they don't want to be heard — it's a thing we're taught to hear. Three nights I've been lying awake. Tonight it's moving."

Tamar took her hand off the gelding's leg. The animal felt the change in her and went still. "How many."

"Four. At least four. They fan — two to draw the eye, two to take. I've watched it drilled. I've —" Sabra's eyes went past Tamar to the salt-singer's tent, where the lamp still burned low, where Naia would be at Amma Reshi's knee learning the songs that were also roads, the long sung maps of the night-crossings that lived nowhere but in the throats of old women. "They want her. The order sent a *team*. You know what that is. Nobody sends a team to ask a question."

Tamar reached over her own shoulder and took the spear off her back, slow, and held it across her body, and let the firelight find the head of it, and looked at the woman she had laughed with in the dark.

"You're Ru," she said.

"Yes."

"Did you bring them."

It was a fair question and she asked it with the spear already turned a few degrees, the way you'd open a door a few degrees on a sound in the night, and she watched it land on Sabra like a slap — watched the Ru woman's head go back a fraction, watched the hurt of it cross her face and then the understanding that the hurt was earned, that of course this was the question, that there was no version of this night where it was not. And then Tamar watched the thing that decided it.

She watched Sabra not lie.

It would have been so easy. Tamar knew it would have been easy because she'd seen Ru lie before, had been on the wrong end of it twice and the right end of

it once, and they did not lie the way ordinary people lied, with the eyes sliding off and the voice climbing. They lied with the whole instrument tuned, the face doing exactly what an honest face would do, the breath even, the small true gesture supplied at the right moment, so that the lie came to you wearing all the clothes of the truth. Sabra had been raised in a house of liars so good they'd made an art of it, a discipline of it, and she could have stood in this firelight and built Tamar a truth out of nothing and Tamar might have bought it and they might both have lived a little longer for it.

Instead Sabra stood there and let her face do the truth instead. Let it be afraid where it was afraid. Let it be ashamed. She did the one thing the Ru were trained out of: she let her body tell on her.

"I was sent to find out what she —" The word stuck. Sabra's hand had come up, open, between them, and it was shaking, and she looked at it as if it belonged to someone else. "What she was. That's all. The breeders suspected. Confirm, report, go home, never speak of it — and someone better than me would come for the —" She stopped. Her jaw worked, the muscle standing out at the hinge of it. "For whatever needed doing. And I found out what she is. And then I —"

She didn't finish it. Couldn't, for a breath. Started again, harder, the fear burning off into something flat.

"I should've lit the lamp an hour ago. Three times. Light the lamp, stand aside. That was the order. That's what I'm *for*." Her voice cracked across the middle of it and she let it crack. "I'm standing in your fire instead. So — no. I didn't bring them. This is me betraying them. Right now. In front of you. And I'd be obliged if you'd keep up. I don't think I can say it twice."

Tamar looked at her a moment longer. The fire popped between them.

Then she put two fingers to her mouth and whistled — not loud, a thing low and shaped, the rising note and then the fall of it, the call that every child in the caravan learned before they could walk and that meant, in the old wind-and-breath grammar of the Spear-Sisters, *to me, quiet, weapons*. And the caravan that had looked asleep came awake without a single shout.

It was a beautiful thing and a terrible one and Tamar had given her life to it and never tired of seeing it. Women rolled out of blankets with spears already in their hands, having gone to sleep with the haft along the body the way you slept beside a lover, no fumbling, no startled noise, just the long smooth practiced waking of people who had done this since girlhood. The children went toward the center the way water goes to the low place in a floor, drawn by no command anyone spoke, the older ones gathering the smaller without being told, a flock folding inward. The fires were not put out — you did not put out the fires, that announced you — but the people went out of their light, stepped sideways into the dark and were gone, so that to a watcher the camp would look the same and be entirely changed. And at the salt-singer's tent the low lamp died, snuffed

between an old woman's fingers, and the square of glow that had marked where the girl was went black.

"East side," Tamar said. "And you'll stand where I can see you."

"There's worse. Temple men. North." She said it the way you confessed a second wound after the first, almost apologetic. "Smelled the oil an hour ago. The heavy kind they burn. Told myself I was wrong. One of ours. Jumping at the dark." She laughed — a horrible little sound, no laughter in it. "They're here for the same reason we are. Two halves of the world that hate each other above all things, both come the same night across the same pan for the same girl. They'll trip over each other in the dark and decide they're allies. Because they want the same thing dead. That's all it takes. They'll never speak of it after. But tonight they'll fight on the same side of the same fire and call it coincidence."

Tamar set the butt of her spear in the sand and looked at the bowl of the camp she'd lived her whole life in — the cisterns on their carts, the picketed beasts, the small fires burning down now with no one at them, the dark where her people had gone and stood with their spears and their held breath — and at the dark crawling toward it from two sides, the not-sound from the east and the oil-smell from the north, converging on one black tent and the girl inside it.

"Then they pay salt for her," she said. "Every one of them. Every step." She glanced at the Ru woman, once. "You fight?"

"I can do worse than fight." Sabra's voice had gone flat and strange, a place under the fear where something colder lived. "If they come close enough to hear me. One word, the right word, in under their guard — and the body drops the thing before the mind catches up. It only works once a man. After that they brace. But the first word's free." Her throat worked. "It costs me, after. But it's free for them."

Kessa moved before she had decided to.

This was the thing she would think about afterward, in the part of her that came back: that the decision and the doing were one motion, that there was no moment where she chose and then acted, no clean little hinge of will between the two. There was only the moment where she found she had already chosen, where her body was halfway down the eastern slope behind the order's four killers with her weight already committed to the descent and her veil already coming up over her face, the cloth settling against the bridge of her nose with the small familiar pressure that had meant, every other time in her life, that someone was about to die at her hand for cause entered and witnessed. Tonight it meant something else and her body had not waited for her to find words for what.

The veil was for the caravan. Let them see it. To see an unveiled Edemre is

to be safe — every child in the desert knew the saying — and Kessa did not want, tonight, to be the thing the caravan was safe from. If she was going to do this insane thing she would do it veiled, so that whatever they saw of her in the broken light they would not have to fear it.

The four ahead of her were good. She watched them in the last of the light and could not have faulted a stroke of it. In the long grass at the camp's edge they had fanned exactly as Sabra had said, two forward to draw the eye and two set back to take, the textbook of it, the very form she'd drilled a thousand cold mornings on the salt with the wind taking the skin off her face. They moved in the pocket of wrong-quiet, the Stillness on them, breath gone down to nothing. They did not hear her because they were not listening behind themselves. Why would they? No one comes up behind the Edemre. It is the one direction from which the Edemre have never had to learn to fear, and so it is the one direction they cannot guard, and Kessa had known that her whole life and never once thought she would use it.

She took the rearmost first.

It was the merciful one — she told herself that, going in, and it was even true. A hand over the mouth, the heel of it sealing the breath, and the knife in under the ear and up, into the place where the great vessels gather, the place where even a woman in full Stillness cannot seize the dying because it happens faster than the body can convene its argument. The woman went heavy all at once. No struggle. No sound but the small wet one Kessa's own hand muffled against her palm. She lowered the corpse into the grass with a tenderness that was its own kind of horror, both arms taking the weight so it would not fall and rustle, easing a sister of her own order down into the dune-grass like a mother laying a child that had finally, finally slept.

The second turned at the wrongness of the air. They always knew, in the last quarter-second — some animal under the training felt the held breath behind them go out, felt the disturbed quiet, and turned. This one turned, and Kessa met her eyes over both their veils, the only part of either of them showing, and watched the recognition land in them. Not fear first. Recognition. *One of us*. The eyes above the veil went from soldier-flat to wide with a thing that had no name in the order-cant because the order-cant had never needed a word for it: the look of a woman betrayed in the one place she had been promised she never could be. And she did not understand, in the half-breath she had left, why one of her own was killing her in the dark, and Kessa did not have the words to give her, had no time and no language and no business explaining, and gave her the knife instead. It was not the merciful place this time. There was no time for the merciful place. Kessa would carry that one too.

Two left, and they knew now. The dying woman's body going down had made enough sound, and the two forward had felt the fan come apart behind them, and they came round low and fast and one of them said into the dark in the order-cant, the trained murmur pitched to carry only to ears like theirs, flat and

reasonable as a clerk:

“Sister. Not your debt tonight. We read your line in the book before we came. Stand down, the ledger holds, none of this is entered against you. Interfere, and we enter you ourselves — and you know what you’re worth then. Walk away. The girl was always going to die. Doesn’t have to be your name beside hers.”

And Kessa, crouched over a body she’d made, the warmth of it still coming up off the grass into the cold air, veil to her eyes and her knives wet to the guard — Kessa found she was laughing. A real laugh, low and helpless, the exact laugh Imani dragged out of her at the worst possible moments, the laugh that had no respect in it for anything including her own life.

“Enter me,” she said into the dark, soft, in the cant, so they would hear it the way they’d hear nothing else. “Please. I’d dearly love to read what I’m worth. Wondered my whole life.” She shifted her weight, found her footing in the soft sand, felt the long muscles down her back come awake. “Send your best clerk.”

It went to noise then, the way these things always did — the long held breath of it and then all at once the world breaking open, the held quiet failing all along its seams like ice going out on a spring river, everywhere at once.

A spear took one of the two remaining killers from the caravan side. Tamar had read the grass — the wrong stillness in it, the dark fold that was a crouching body — and thrown blind and true across forty paces of dusk, and the woman folded around the shaft with a sound like a door closing on a far room. The last Edemre of the team did not stop, did not even check, because she had been sent for the girl and the ledger does not forgive a job half done, and she came up out of the grass and went into the camp anyway, low and savage and fast, faster than Kessa, younger than Kessa, the Stillness fresh and terrible in her the way it is fresh in the young who have not yet learned what it costs —

— and from the north, into the firelight, into the breaking-open, came the temple men.

They came in a wall. Shields up, short spears level, that grinding stamping discipline that the canyon-kings paid for and the temples improved on, twenty men who had crossed the worst pan in the world to put out a fire and did not care which half of the burning world had lit it first. They came across the picket line and a Spear-Sister rose to meet them and went down under the shields, three of them taking her at once the way dogs take a single wolf, and the children screamed in the dark center of the camp, the high thin sound of them cutting up through the deeper noise of grown people killing each other. Tamar was suddenly everywhere along the line, her spear a thing of weather, no throw in it now, all the close brutal work, and she moved through the temple wall not like a soldier meeting a wall but like wind finding the gaps in a fence, here and gone, and where she had been a man was clutching himself and folding. And Sabra stood at the dark mouth of the salt-singer’s tent with her arms spread

wide as though her own body could be made into a wall, between the girl and all of it.

And somewhere in the churn the boy — the trained temple boy, Oren, though no one in that camp knew his name and would not for a long while yet — stood frozen at the very edge of the violence he had been carried across the world to make. His sword was in his hand. He could feel his own grip wrong on the hilt, too tight, the way they'd drilled out of him the first month — *loose, boy, a strangled blade is a dead arm* — and he could not make the hand obey. The screaming came in at him sharp-edged from every grain of the dark, that pried-open hearing he'd never asked for, and under it some lower voice in him reached for the dawn-prayer of the Kiln, the one his father had said over the lamps, *Stone hold the corners of the world* — and got three words in and lost the rest, because no one had drilled him in what to do when the corners of the world were old women's lamps going dark and children screaming in the center and a Spear-Sister he'd never met dying under his own side's shields. The prayer went nowhere. His whole face was open with it.

Kessa came up out of the grass and into the firelight with her veil at her eyes and her knives wet, and found the last Edemre — *her sister, her own, the order's living hand* — three steps from the salt-singer's tent. Three steps from the girl. Blade already drawn back, the body already committed, the beautiful trained line of her uncoiling toward the kill. And Kessa did the unforgivable thing twice in one night and put her down from behind. Hand and knife, the merciful place this time because she'd reached it in time, and she felt the young body's Stillness try to seize against the dying and fail because the dying was faster, and she lowered this one too, the last of them, into the trampled sand at the foot of the tent.

Then she turned, and there in the broken light was the girl.

Naia stood in the mouth of the dark tent with the old salt-singer's hand fisted in the back of her robe, holding her, an old woman's whole strength gone into a grip on a child she would not let be taken. And the temple wall was coming on across the picket and the Spear-Sisters were too few and falling and the night was full of men who wanted the girl dead and women who wanted her gone, and Kessa watched the girl's face change.

She had seen fear on a hundred faces. It was, in a sense, her trade — to bring fear to a face and read in it the moment before the end. She knew the whole kingdom of it the way a salt-singer knew her roads, every province and border of it: the bright animal fear that runs, the grey fear that freezes, the wet collapsing fear that begs. This was none of those. This was past all of them. This was the place past the breaking line — and Kessa knew it because she had stood there herself, once, in the Stillness, on the worst night of her training, when her body had decided in the deep wordless dark below choosing that it would not die, that it would not, and had reached for something it should not have been able to reach, some last sealed door, and put its hand on the door, and the cost

of what came through it she was still paying years later in the things her body could no longer quite do.

She saw the girl's eyes go to that door.

She had time for exactly one thought, and the thought was: *Imani was right. It was never a debt.*

And then she dropped her own veil — let it fall from her face into the firelight, the cloth she had not let fall before a target in nine years — and she turned her back on the girl. Turned the whole of herself the other way, put her body between Naia and the temple wall coming on, because if the child was about to do the thing Kessa thought she was about to do, the thing three hundred years of dead women in the salt had been killed to prevent, then the only mercy left in the whole salt-bitten night, the last small grace Kessa had to give, was to not be looking at the girl's face when she did it.

“Down!” she screamed — at Tamar, at Sabra, at the falling Spear-Sisters, at all of them, in plain desert speech, no Voice in it, nothing in it but a woman's own raw splitting throat. “Get *down* —”

The air went wrong.

Chapter 14 — The Cornering

They came in the hour the Attuin call the dead water — that flat trough of the night when even the herd-dogs sleep with their noses tucked, when the fires have gone to coals and the cold comes down off the dunes like a held breath let go. Tamar had stood watch through worse and felt nothing. She woke into this one already knowing.

She had not known she was sleeping. That was the first wrongness. A Spear-Sister slept the way the desert slept, with one ear left out in the dark to listen, and the part of Tamar that listened had not made a sound — no jolt, no half-dream of footsteps — and yet here she was, eyes open on the underside of her own bedroll's flap, the cold pressed flat against her cheek, every nerve already strung tight as a drawn bowstring. The body knew before the mind. The body always knew first. She lay still for one breath and let it tell her.

It was the camels. Not a cry — the absence of one. The south string should have grumbled and shifted, the way camels do at any small wrongness, the eternal low complaint of beasts that have decided the world owes them better and means to make their feelings known about it. They had grumbled at the cold an hour ago. They had grumbled at a moth. And now there was a silence shaped exactly like men moving among them. Men who knew to put a hand flat on a beast's shoulder and breathe slow against its neck so it would not call. Men who knew the trick of pressing two fingers just behind the jaw, where the

great vein ran, until the animal went stupid and trusting. Someone had taught them that. You did not learn it raiding. You learned it from a woman who learned it from a woman, in a cold white house on the lip of a dead sea, and somebody had paid for the teaching, paid in salt or in blood or in a daughter, and Tamar's mind put all of that together in the space of a single slow breath and went very quiet and very clear.

She was up with the spear in her hand before she'd finished the thought. The haft was warm where her body had lain against it through the cold — she always slept with it, the way other women slept with a lover or a knife — and the warmth of it was the only friendly thing in the dark. No cry from her, either. You did not spend the first breath on a warning the enemy would hear too. The first breath you spent on counting. Where the moon was — gone, down behind the western dunes, the dead-water dark at its blackest. Where the wind was — off the Deep, at her back, which meant it carried her scent toward them and theirs toward her, which meant the dogs upwind would not wake and the men downwind already knew which tent was hers. They had planned for the wind. They had planned for everything. She filed that, too, in the cold place, and moved.

She crossed to Behda's tent on the outsides of her feet, the way you cross a salt-crust you don't trust, and put her mouth to the seam where the flap laced shut. The felt smelled of smoke and old sweat and the rosemary Behda packed her clothes with against the moth. "Up," Tamar breathed into it, no louder than the wind. "South string. Quiet, then loud."

Behda's eyes opened in the dark, already awake — old raiders slept that way, slept the way a struck flint waits for the steel. Tamar saw the gleam of them find her through the gap in the lace. A hand moved under the blanket and found a hilt with the unhurried certainty of fifty years. No questions. There would be time for questions later or there would be no later, and either way the questions could wait. Behda's lips shaped a single word back at her — *Naia?* — and Tamar gave the smallest shake of her head, and Behda's face closed like a fist around what that meant.

Down the line, without a word, the camp came alive the way water comes through sand: invisibly, then everywhere. A flap-seam parting here. The whisper of a blanket folded back there. The particular small clink — once, bitten off — of a spear lifted from the rack of crossed staves where the Spear-Sisters kept them, point-up, against exactly this. Tamar counted the soft sounds of her sisters waking and was, for one breath, fiercely glad — *we wake like this, you fools* — the joy of the thing you have trained your whole life to be good at, arriving at last. And then she was past gladness and into the cold place where the spear lived, where there was no Tamar and no joy and no fear, only the work and the geometry of the work, and she went.

She went toward the south string low, reading the ground through the soles of her feet — the give of churned sand where the camels had been disturbed,

the harder pack of the path, a wet patch she did not stop to name and that smelled, as she passed it, of an animal's voided fear. She put the camp behind her eyes like a map and walked it in the dark without looking. The salt-singers' wagon, hunched and dark on its great wheels at the camp's soft heart, where the old women slept among the rolled mats of inherited song. The children's tent beyond it, low and round. And against the supply cart, jammed into the wind-shadow where the canvas met the wood, Naia's lean-to — the girl slept there by her own choosing, curled into the smallest space she could find, tucked against the cart's iron-bound wheel the way a creature tucks against a wall so the world can only come at it from one side. The girl slept like something that had never once felt safe and did not expect to start. Tamar had watched her do it a hundred nights and never once said anything, because there was nothing to say that wouldn't be a lie, and the Attuin did not lie to children about the desert.

She read the channel before she saw a single man. That was the trade. Men who fight a caravan always leave a gap and call it mercy and mean it for a killing-ground — a way out the panicked beasts and the panicked people will run toward, because terror runs downhill, terror runs toward the dark and the open, and the men with the long knives wait in the dark and the open and reap. She found the gap with her mind: it ran between the south string and the cook-fire's banked coals, and it did not point out into the Deep where mercy would point it. It pointed *in*. It bent, the way a snare bends, and the bend of it ran straight to the supply cart and the lean-to and the girl curled against the wheel.

Not the camels, then, the cold place said. *Not the water. You.*

Thirty paces out a shape rose between two kneeling camels — rose too fast, the way a man rises who has been crouched too long and whose knees have gone to fire, betraying himself in the rising — and she put the spear through it before it had its weapon clear. She felt the whole length of the haft report back to her hands the story of what it met: the brief resistance of the leather jerkin, the easy give of the man under it, the small grating check as the point found a rib and slid past, and then the soft deep purchase of the thing that does not come back. The man folded around the haft with a sound like a sack of meal set down by a tired arm. No soldier's death-cry. No oath. Just the surprised exhale of a body learning it has stopped. Tamar read the death the way she read everything: *too slow, too loud in the rising, jerkin not mail, knife not sword*. A hired knife, then. Qesh men off the bazaar-end where the work was dirty, or worse — the kind that came out of the canyon stews with no past and no people and would cut a throat for the price of a meal and the promise of more. She wrenched the spear free against the suck of the wound, set her heel and pulled, and the night came apart.

Sabra woke to screaming and to the part of her the Salthold had built, telling

her in Mother-of-Salt's dry voice, *this is not your fight; an initiate observes; an initiate does not bleed for the assessed.*

For a moment she did not even open her eyes. The voice was older than her own thoughts, worn smooth as a step trodden by ten thousand feet, and it spoke before she could, the way it had been trained to: in the gap between waking and choosing, in the half-second where a person is still soft, it laid down the law. *Observe. Report. Survive to deliver the report. You are the order's eyes; the order does not send its eyes into a knife-fight.* She lay in the borrowed dark of the salt-singers' wagon — they had given her the dry corner by the song-mats, a courtesy from the old women that she had not earned and did not deserve and had taken anyway — and she listened to the doctrine and let it order the world for her one last time, and as it ordered the world she understood three things at once, with the terrible clarity the Reckoning gave her at the worst possible moments, when she least wanted to see.

First: this was no raid. She had read raids — in the ledgers of the House of Salt, in the dry accounts the order kept of every caravan struck and every bride-price disputed across two hundred years of attrition, and once, when she was fourteen, from the inside of a wagon very like this one, lying still while older sisters did the killing. Raiders came for camels and water and the joy of it; they came loud, because the loudness was half the point, the terror was the loot; they came in the gray before dawn when men are at their lowest and most likely to break and run and leave their goods. They did not come in the dead-water hour with their beasts' mouths held shut and the moon down on purpose. They did not come quiet. The quiet was the whole of it. The quiet said *we do not want the camp; we want one thing out of the camp, and we want it before the camp can decide to keep it.* This was a *taking*. Someone wanted a person out of this camp, alive or returned to the pans, and had hired the kind of men who would not be told which until the moment came, and did not care.

Second — and this was the one that stopped her breath in her chest — the order's hand was in it. She had not finished her assessment. She had been here eleven days and sent back nothing, three pigeons released into the white morning carrying nothing, because every day she did not write the words was a day the words did not have to be true, and she had told herself she was being thorough. She had told herself the order valued thoroughness. But the Circle did not wait on thoroughness when the Closed Hand smelled a convergent vessel breathing in an Attuin camp. The Circle read silence the way it read everything — as data, as answer, as a daughter gone soft on the assessed — and Vael had done what the Closed Hand always did, which was remove the problem before it could be debated into existence, before the Open Hand could make it a prize, before anyone had to vote. Quietly. Deniably. With hired knives off the Qesh bazaar-end who could be blamed on the war of attrition if they were caught and would tell no tales if they were not. *Returned to the pans.* The phrase she had carried since she was twelve and made to watch — made to stand at the white edge in the dawn-cold with the other initiates while the House of Salt did the

thing the Ban required, the thing the order called *law, not cruelty*, which was so much worse. The phrase that still smelled, to her, of dawn and white crust and a girl's dark hair fanning out in the brine, lifting and settling, lifting and settling, while a voice she had loved said the words over her that made murder into mercy. *Returned to the pans*. They had meant to do that to Naia in her sleep. They had meant for Sabra to sleep through it.

Third — and this was the one that moved her, when the first two only froze her — thirty paces off in the dark, Tamar was fighting.

She knew it was Tamar before she knew how she knew. The Reckoning gave it to her out of the dark in a hundred small reports she could not have named: the particular rhythm of the war-cry that had gone up and been bitten off, the cadence of feet she had spent eleven days learning to love the sound of, a grunt of effort with a shape to it she would have known among a thousand. Tamar, who laughed with her whole body. Tamar, who had pressed a date into Sabra's palm on the second day and said *you eat like you're being graded on it — here, eat this like nobody's watching*, and had watched, openly, grinning, while Sabra ate it. Tamar, who was fighting four-to-one in the dark for a girl the order had sent Sabra to confirm and condemn.

She got up.

Her body was already out from under the song-mat, already at the wagon's tail-board with her bare feet finding the cold iron step, and the doctrine came apart behind her like a cut tent-rope whipping back, and she was out into the cold with her heart going like a struck drum and nothing at all in her hands.

She stopped at the wagon's shadow and made herself breathe and made herself think, because a fool who runs into the dark dies in the dark and helps no one. *An initiate of the House of Salt carries no spear*. She had never held one. The order did not teach the spear; the order taught that the woman who needed a spear had already lost, had let the situation become the kind a spear could solve, had failed at the real work, which was making sure the knives stayed sheathed. She carried the Voice, and the Stillness, and the Reckoning, and a small curved knife she had been taught to use on fruit — on the ceremonial paring of a pomegranate at the salt-feasts, the seeds counted out into the bowl, each one a year, each one a daughter. That was the whole of her arsenal against four men with long blades in the dark.

She drew the knife.

It looked, in her hand, exactly as useless as it was. She closed her fingers around it anyway and went toward the fighting, low, the cold sand burning the soles of her feet, and the part of her that was the order's eyes watched her do it and could not stop her and, for the first time in her life, did not know what she was.

Tamar killed her second and her third close together, in the press by the supply cart, and that was when she understood.

The second was easy and the third was not. The second came at her openhanded, trying to grapple, trying to take her down into the dirt where his weight told and her reach did not, and she let him come and ducked the spear-haft low and brought the iron-shod butt up under his chin so hard she felt the teeth go, and while he was learning about that she reversed the spear in her hands the whole length of it, the old drill, the figure Amma Reshi called *the windmill* and had made her do five hundred times in the cold dawns until her shoulders screamed, and put the point down through the meat where his neck met his shoulder. He went down kicking. The third had a sword, not a knife, a real curved canyon-blade, and he knew which end to hold, and they traded two passes in the dark that Tamar felt more than saw — the wind of the blade past her ear, the rasp of it down the spear-haft, the spark where edge met the iron binding — before she got inside the arc of it and put her elbow into his throat and her spear-point into his belly and rode him down, twisting, the way you twist to be sure.

And on her knees over him, with the work of him done and her breath sawing, she finally read the whole of it.

They had aimed the entire thing at the lean-to.

The gap was not a killing-ground for the caravan. She had read it wrong — not wrong, but small, she had read it as one read a raid, and this was not a raid. The gap was a *channel*, and it did not bend toward where the people would run. It bent toward where one person already was. It ran straight to the supply cart, and four men were already in it, moving up it with the awful patience of men paid by the head and not the hour — not fighting, not raiding, just *advancing*, stepping over their own dead with no more feeling than a man steps over a dog, their eyes fixed past her on the dark mouth of the lean-to and the girl curled against the wheel inside it.

She put herself between them and the cart. She got up off her dead man and crossed the three steps and put herself in the channel's throat with the spear leveled, and she could not be in four places, and she knew it, and they knew it.

"*Attuin!*" She roared it now — the loud half of quiet-then-loud, the war-cry torn up out of her chest with everything behind it, and it cracked in the middle the way it always did, because the Attuin war-cry was half a grief-song and had been since the first dune, because her people had always known that the two were the same thing, that you screamed for the dead and the killing in one breath because you would be doing both before the dawn. The answer came back ragged from the length of the camp — Behda's voice, and young Sera's higher and wilder, and others, scattered, *scattered*, each of them pinned by knives in their own patch of dark, fighting their own two and three, none of them able to come to her. The channel had been dug for that, too. Split them. Pin them. Run one clean line to the prize while the desert's best fighters each

fought for their own lives in the dark and could not see that they had already lost the only fight that mattered.

The four in the channel did not even look at her. That was the thing that told her how bad it was. A raider looks at the Spear-Sister; a raider is afraid, and the fear makes him look, makes him want to know where the spear is. These four had been told what she was and told not to care. They knew a Spear-Sister would have to come *to* them, into the narrow, where their numbers told, where her reach was a curse and not a blessing, where four blades could take her from four sides at once and the desert's best would die a fool's death in a slot between a cart-wheel and a dead camel.

So she came.

The first she took clean — high, under the arm where the leather gapped, the spear-work Amma Reshi had drilled into her when she was nine and furious and certain she knew everything, certain the old woman was a fool to make her practice the same dull figure into the dark until her hands bled. *The gap is always under the arm*, Reshi had said, *because a man cannot armor the place he needs to swing*. The man's swing died half-born and so did he. The second got inside her reach — quick, this one, the quickest of them — and there was no room for the spear so she used the body, broke his nose with the iron butt and felt the gristle give and the blood come hot, broke his knee with the stamp of her heel turned sideways the way you break a green branch over a stone, and left him screaming and folding in the dirt.

And that was the mistake. That was the half-second. She knew it even as she did it — *leave him, leave him, the dead don't scream and the screaming aren't dead, finish or pass on, never leave a thing half-done in the narrow* — but he was screaming and thrashing and for one half-breath he had her ankle, and in that half-breath the third put a long blade into her side, in under the ribs, where the leather of her own jerkin gapped exactly as she'd been taught a man's would, and she felt it go in the way you feel cold water find a seam in your boot on a winter crossing: at first only wrong, a wrongness, a cold finger where no finger should be — and then, a heartbeat later, all the way wrong, the whole of the wrong arriving at once, the heat of it and the depth of it and the terrible intimate knowledge of exactly how far in it had gone.

She did not fall.

The Attuin did not fall from one blade. The songs would not have it; she had sung the songs herself over other women, *she took the blade and turned upon the haft, she did not give the salt her knees*, and she would not be the verse they had to change. She turned on the spear-haft, made it her third leg, made it the thing that held the world up, and brought the point across in a flat low sweep that had no figure-name because Reshi had never drilled it, because you only learned it the once, the night you needed it — and felt it meet bone and bite and the third man went down across his own dead and stayed.

But the cold-water wrong was spreading now, climbing up under her ribs and down into her hip, and the night had taken on the soft furred edges it should not have, and somewhere her body had begun a negotiation with the ground that her will was losing. The fourth was past her at the lean-to, ducking low under the slanted canvas with a hand reaching into the dark where the girl was, and Tamar's legs had chosen this moment, this exact and unforgivable moment, to discover the existence of the ground and lie down upon it.

"*Naia.*" It came out of her smaller than she wanted, so much smaller, a cracked thread of the voice that had just torn the night in half. She got a hand flat on the cold sand and pushed and the sand gave back nothing. "*Run—*"

Sabra came around the supply cart and saw it in one held frame, the way the Reckoning froze the world so she could read it: the whole thing laid out as still and complete as a painting in the order's halls, and as terrible.

Tamar down on one knee — no, going down past the knee, the proud spine bending, the spear-arm she had loved to watch sinking under a weight Sabra could not see and the Reckoning named in a breath: *a blade between the false ribs, low, the dark wet of it already past her hip, that is not a wound she walks away from, that is a wound that has a clock on it and the clock is short.* The man already inside the lean-to, ducking, a hand out into the dark, his weight forward and committed, a heartbeat from his fist closing on whatever it found. And behind Sabra, in the channel she had just come up, the broken-kneed one dragging himself upright against the cart-wheel with murder bright in his face and a knife found again and gripped in a fist gone white at the knuckle.

Two breaths, maybe. She did the arithmetic of them without choosing to, the cold clean reckoning that the order had built into her bones and that did not care, now, for the order at all: she had bent it to a new master and it served him just as well.

The broken-kneed one cannot cross the distance before I act; he can throw the knife but his hand is shaking and his eyes are wet with the pain and he will miss; leave him. The one in the lean-to is the clock. Read him. And she read him, all of him, in the space between two of her own heartbeats — the way the Reckoning could read a stranger from across a market in the time it took him to scratch his nose. Untrained: the set of his shoulders all wrong for the work, hunched and grabbing, no economy in him. Tired: the tremor in the reaching hand, the rasp she could hear in his breath even over the screaming, a man at the far end of his wind. And afraid — afraid under the bravado, the particular high pitch the three words he'd snarled into the dark had carried, *give her here, girl*, the pitch of a man who has come past the part of the work he was paid to enjoy and into the part that frightens him, that he does not understand, the part where the air goes strange around the thing he was sent to take. In every way the order measured these things — and the order measured them precisely, the order had three centuries of corpses to calibrate the measurement — he was

ripe. He was the tired, the afraid, the untrained. He was exactly and only the kind the Voice would take.

To draw the Voice on a person in front of another adept was an atrocity. A knife drawn at the dinner table. The first lesson and the deepest: not *the Voice is forbidden* but *the Voice is a courtesy you owe the witnessing world*, you do not draw it where it can be seen, because the power was only powerful, the order was only the order, so long as no one watched it used and lived to say *I saw a woman speak and a man's body betray him*. She had spent her whole life being taught that the secret was the substance. That to be seen was to be ended. That a thing seen could not be unseen, and a woman seen to do this was a woman the world would hunt to the salt and beyond.

She filled her chest. She felt the air go down into the bottom of her, into the place the Stillness lived, the deep place she had been taught to find and hold, and she gathered all of it — the eleven days, the date pressed into her palm, the girl's dark hair in the brine, the doctrine snapping behind her like a cut rope, the whole wall of her whole life — and she put every part of it behind one word and aimed the word the way you aim a thrown stone, low and flat and meant to break something.

“STOP.”

It went into him before his mind could wall up. She felt it land — not heard it, *felt* it, the way you feel a struck bell through the floor — the small full-body lurch of a man whose nerves obey a command that arrived before he knew it was coming, the reaching hand snapping to a frozen claw-curl an inch from the dark where Naia was, the whole frame seizing and shuddering, locked rigid against its own intent, a body and its owner suddenly two separate things and the body winning. He stood there in the lean-to's mouth and shook, fighting a command that had already happened, that had finished happening in the meat of him before the man who lived in the meat could object, and his face when it wrenched around toward her was an animal's face in a trap it cannot see, cannot understand, cannot believe is real.

That was me, some far cold part of her said, appalled, standing very still in the wreck of the wall. *I did that. In the open. Where the world can see*. And the wall of her whole life came down behind that single word, came down all at once and without sound, the way a great thing falls when its base is cut — and she had no time at all to mourn it, no time to stand in the dust of it, because the Voice held a body for a breath and not a minute, and a breath was already half spent.

She was already moving. She went past the frozen man — close enough to smell the rank fear-sweat coming off him, close enough that if he had been his own he could have shot out a hand and broken her neck before she drew another breath — and into the lean-to, ducking under the slant of canvas into the dark and the smell of the girl's sleep, and there was Naia.

Awake. Pressed flat to the back wall of canvas, every line of her drawn up small against the cart-wheel, against the one solid thing, the way she always slept and the way she now waked. Her eyes were enormous in the dark, swallowing what little light there was, and her whole small body was coiled — not with the flinch of a hunted thing, not anymore, but with something gathering in it, something winding tighter and tighter toward a release Sabra had spent her life being trained to recognize and fear.

“Not yet,” Sabra said, fast, low, the way you talk a horse off a ledge it has already half-decided to take. “*Not yet*. I have you. Stay your hand — look at me — stay your hand.”

Because she had seen, in that frozen frame, what was beginning behind the girl’s eyes. The thing Amma Reshi watched for in the firelight when she thought no one saw her watching. The thing the whole prologue of Sabra’s life had been written to prevent — every year in the Salthold, every cold lesson, every drowned daughter, the entire dreadful purpose of the House of Salt — and it was stirring up out of the girl now like silt off a stream-bed when a hoof comes down, billowing, darkening the clear water, the air around them already going wrong with it, tight and strange and singing at the edge of hearing in a register that was not sound. The wall of the world — not Sabra’s small wall, the great one, the one the orders had built across the whole of creation and called law — that wall was leaning. She could feel it lean, feel the world tip toward the place it must not go, and she knew with the cold certainty of the Reckoning and the colder certainty of a woman who had stood in the dawn and watched a child drowned in salt for showing one tenth of this, that if Naia reached for it now — here, half-blind, terrified, in the dark, untaught, with the people she loved bleeding out around her —

She did not let herself finish it.

“I have you,” she said again, and put her empty hand out, palm up, slow, into the small space between them, the way you offer a hand to a thing that has every reason to bite it. “I broke faith with everything I am to stand in this tent. Everything. There’s nothing of me left out there to go back to. Believe me. *Naia*. Stay your hand.”

Behind them, in the mouth of the lean-to, the held man came unstuck. She heard it happen — the breath go out of him in a sob, the frozen frame release all at once into shaking life — and then the scramble and slap of feet as he bolted, away, out, into the dark and the Deep and gone, and Sabra let him go. She had not bought him to keep. She had bought a breath and spent it and here she was.

But the breath was over. Out in the channel the broken-kneed one had got himself onto his feet against the wheel, dragging the ruined leg, the knife still in his fist; and beyond him, through the channel’s throat, more shapes were coming now, unhurried, the second wave, the ones the whole bent and bloody channel had been dug to deliver — the ones Tamar’s three dead and one broken

had been only the toll for. And Tamar was on both knees now in the spreading black of herself, one hand flat in the sand and the arm above it trembling with the whole weight of her, and she was not getting up. The spear lay where it had fallen. She was not getting up.

Naia made a sound.

Not a word. There were no words in it. It was the sound a person makes when the one thing they have ever loved without fear — the one warm certain thing in a life of curling small against walls — is dying ten feet away in the dirt and there is a knife coming and nothing, nothing, *nothing* in the whole turning world that can be done. And Sabra felt the gathering surge behind it, felt it crest, felt the air go strange and tight in a way it had never once gone in all her careful trained and *legible* years of power, in all the cold clean disciplined years where the Voice was a courtesy and the Stillness was a leash and the Reckoning was a tool you set down when you were done. This was none of those. This was the thing under all of them, the thing the Ban was written in corpses to forbid, the convergence stirring awake in a frightened child, and Sabra felt the great wall of the world lean past the point of leaning, and crack down its whole length with a sound she felt in her teeth, and begin — terribly, unstoppably, the way the held breath of the dunes lets go at last — to fall.

“Naia—”

But the girl was already past hearing. The girl was looking at Tamar.

Chapter 15 — The Foreshock

The man with the broken nose had a daughter. Naia knew it the way she knew the wind would shift before dawn — by the way he favored his left hand even now, the calluses worn smooth at the base of three fingers where a small grip had ridden them. A child’s fist closed around her father’s thumb a thousand times. She knew it and could not stop knowing it, and that was the trouble. She had always seen too much. The salt-singers called it a gift. Amma Reshi called it a window with no shutter, and a window that will not close is just a hole in the wall the cold comes through.

She had been laughing not an hour before.

That was the thing the knowing always did to her — it set the laughter beside the killing and would not let her keep them apart. An hour ago she had been crouched at the cook-fire with Tamar’s spear-sisters, watching the youngest of them, a girl barely older than Naia and twice as loud, try to balance a hot flatbread on the back of her hand and lose it into the coals to a chorus of jeering. The fire had been low and orange and good. Reshi had been humming under it, not a song yet, just the place a song comes from, the old woman’s hands

working a length of leather she would never finish. The night had smelled of dung-smoke and date-spirit and the cold clean iron of the deep sand cooling after the day's white murder of heat. Naia had felt — for an hour, for once — like a girl among her people and not a window the cold came through. She had let herself stop watching. That was the only mistake she would be able to name afterward. She had let herself stop watching, and the watching was the only thing that had ever kept her whole.

Now the man with the broken nose came at her across the trampled sand with a curved knife, and he was afraid.

That was the other thing she could not stop seeing — the boy under the man, the ledger of his life laid open in the set of his jaw, in the way his weight stayed back on his heels when a man who meant it would have come forward off the ball of the foot. He had not wanted to come. Someone had told him there was coin in it, or salvation, or both, and now here he was in the dark with a blade and a girl who would not die quietly, his daughter sleeping somewhere south under some other woman's roof, and he was going to do this thing because turning back cost more than going forward. She understood him completely. She read the whole arithmetic of him in the space of a breath — the debt that had bought him, the fear that drove him, the small private prayer he was saying behind his teeth that this would be quick, that the girl would not look at him, that he would not have to carry her face. She understood him completely, and it was the worst thing about her, because understanding a man does not unmake the knife in his hand.

Behind her Tamar was screaming her name. Not in fear — in command. *Down. Down, Naia* — the voice of a Spear-Sister who had drilled the word into a hundred raiders and meant it to move a body before the mind could argue, and for one breath Naia's body wanted to obey it, the way her body always wanted to obey Tamar, who was kin and warmth and the surest thing in her small world. But Sabra had her by the arm, hauling, fingers dug in hard enough to bruise, and there was blood on Sabra's face that was not hers — a fan of it across one cheek, black in the firelight, somebody else's whole life sprayed across the face of a girl who six weeks ago had never seen a man die. The night was full of bodies moving wrong. That was how Naia's eyes took it in, not as battle but as wrongness, as the set of the whole world thrown off its true: people who should be sleeping were running, people who should be running were down, and the directions everything moved in were the directions of panic and not of purpose.

The caravan was burning at its edges. Two tents gone to flame, the felt curling back off its frames in black petals, the fire licking up the guy-ropes with a sound like tearing cloth. The goats were loose and shrieking, blundering between the wagons in their stupid terror, and one of them had caught and was a running torch for three strides before it fell. A Spear-Sister was down with her spear still in her hand and her eyes open to the stars — Lesha, who had laughed at the flatbread an hour ago, who had a gap in her teeth and a son three caravans over she was always threatening to fetch home. Down now, and still, and the stars

in her open eyes. Naia saw it and filed it where the window filed everything, in the cold clear place that did not look away, and a part of her that was still a girl made a sound she did not hear herself make.

Reshi's wagon stood untouched at the center, and the old woman was on her feet at the wheel of it, singing. Not a grief-song, not yet — but the long low note that gathered the dead toward the salt, sung early, sung over the living, because she already knew. Naia heard it the way you hear a thing you have heard all your life and never until now understood: the gathering-note, the road sung open for whoever the night would take, and the old woman had begun it before a single body had fallen. She had begun it, Naia understood with a lurch, looking at someone. She had begun it looking south, into the dark where the killers had come from, and then she had turned and begun it looking at *her*.

The temple men had come with the order's enforcers. Which should have been impossible.

Naia's eye, even now, even in the fire, could not stop reading it. The temple men wore the stone-grey under-robos of Stonereach's hardline current, the cut she had only ever heard described, the close weave that took dye badly so that even their black went the color of old ash. And among them — moving *with* them, not against them — were women in the unmarked travelling-dark of the order's enforcers, the ones the Adima Ru sent when a thing needed doing quietly and far from Sett. Two hands that had hated each other for three hundred years, that had bled each other dry across the pans and stolen each other's children and sworn on salt to see each other ended — closed now into one fist around one girl. They moved through the camp in their joined hatred and took what they could reach, and the impossibility of it was a worse cold than the fire's heat. *They agreed*, some calm corner of her noted, even now cataloguing, even now unable to stop. *Whatever I am, they agreed. They hate each other less than they fear me.*

A spear took one of the temple men through the throat and he sat down in the sand with a child's surprise and did not get up, his hands coming up too late to a wound that was already past hands. It was not enough. There were too many. She counted them without meaning to — past fifty, more coming out of the dark beyond the firelight, and the Attuin were a caravan of maybe thirty fighting women caught asleep, and the arithmetic of it was as plain and merciless as the arithmetic of the man with the daughter. The caravan would not hold. The caravan was already not holding. The only question the night was asking was how many of the people she loved would be in the sand by morning, and the night did not much care about the answer.

The man with the daughter reached her.

He came in low and ugly, the way a frightened man comes who has decided not to feel the thing he is doing — knife held back along the forearm so she could not catch the blade, his free hand reaching for her hair, his eyes fixed on her collarbone and not her face because he could not do it to her face. She saw all

of this. She saw it and her body, drilled by Reshi in the Stillness but never in the killing, gave her nothing to do with the seeing. She was a window, not a wall. She could read his death in him and could not stop her own.

Sabra got between them.

Sabra, who had never held a blade in earnest, who had been taught the Reckoning and the Stillness and the codified arts of the order and not one single thing about a knife in the dark — Sabra of the Salthold, Sabra of the cold sisterhood, Sabra who had been sent six weeks ago to *assess* Naia like a sum to be totted and instead had cracked open against her like a seed against water — put her body in the way. She did not think about it. Naia, who read everything, saw that there was no thought in it at all; saw that Sabra's whole careful, calculating, frightened self simply stepped aside and let the thing under it move her, the thing that had no name in the order's catalogue because the order did not keep it, did not breed for it, could not bind it. Sabra put her body in the way because Naia was behind it.

The knife went into her.

Naia heard it go in — a sound like a spade in wet ground, soft and final, and she would hear it for the rest of her life, would hear it in the silence between Tamar's breathing in the dark of every night they had left, would hear it over cook-fires and under love and at the bottom of every quiet. Soft. Final. A spade in wet ground. And Sabra made a noise she would hear forever too, a small *oh*, surprised, almost polite — the sound of a well-bred girl who has been handed something unexpected — and folded down over the man's fist, her hand coming to his wrist not to fight it but almost to steady herself against it, her knees going, her weight pulling the blade down through her as she fell because the man had not let go and did not know to let go.

And something in Naia came open that had no shutter and never had.

It was not rage. People would say after that it must have been rage, and she would let them say it, because the truth was worse and she had no words for it that didn't sound like temple sermon. It was not even a decision. It was a window thrown wide in a wall she had spent twenty years pretending was sound, and through it poured everything at once — every dying woman in her blood she had never met, every line of memory the salt-singers swore she was too young to carry, every drilled and forbidden thing that had been waiting in her since before she was born for exactly a night like this one — and her own body went very still and very cold.

The pain switching off. She felt it go — the torn place in her own throat where she had been screaming without knowing it, the burn of smoke in her chest, the ground-glass terror in her belly — all of it dimming at once, not soothed but *shut*, the way a door shuts on a room.

The fear switching off. That was stranger and worse. The fear had been the floor she stood on her whole life, the constant low hum under the world, and

it went out like a snuffed wick and left her standing on nothing, weightless, the camp gone suddenly very clear and very far away as though she watched it down a long bright tunnel of perfect calm.

The *Naia* of her switching off, last, like a lamp in a window seen from a long way across the dark — the girl who had laughed at the flatbread, the girl who wanted to belong, the girl who knew the man had a daughter and could not bear it — that small particular light guttered and went small and went out, or went down, down under the flood, and what was left looked out through her eyes with the patience of three hundred years and opened her mouth.

She did not shout.

That was the thing the survivors could never explain, the detail that broke them when they tried to tell it, the place where every account fell apart and the teller went quiet and reached for the date-spirit. They expected to say *she screamed and the night came apart*. They could not say it. Because she did not shout.

She *said* —

and her voice went into them the way water goes into dry ground, under the thought, under the will, into the old animal floor of the body where obeying lives before the mind ever wakes to argue. There was no volume in it. There was no force a man could brace against, no shout to flinch from, no blow to ride. There was only a word arriving already inside you, in the place that makes the hand pull back from fire before you have decided to be burned, in the place that flinches at a raised arm, in the deep wet root of the body that was old before the mind was dreamed of. Every untrained body within earshot of it did what the word told it to do before a single one of them could choose otherwise.

Stop.

They stopped.

All of them. The temple men with their ash-black robes, the order's enforcers in their travelling-dark, the man with the daughter — his fist still buried in Sabra, his weight still pressing her down into the sand — every one of them locked rigid mid-motion, their own muscles seizing against the throw, the step, the lunge each had begun, the word arriving in the deep floor of the body and clamping the limbs before the mind could send them on. A woman stood with her spear-arm cocked to throw, her whole body straining against an order her muscles had already taken, the arm locked in its arc and refusing to finish it — and then the seizing held one beat too long, her grip slackened with the body's own confusion, and the spear slid from her open fingers and stuck quivering in the sand. A man running for the dark took two more steps because he was already committed to them, his body finishing the strides it had begun before the word found him — and then he stood, swaying, mid-stride, one heel lifted, his chest heaving against a command his body had already obeyed and his mind only now arriving to find the door bolted from the inside.

The whole camp went still. The fire did not. The fire went on tearing at the tents, and the goats went on screaming somewhere past the light, and Reshi's low note went on under it all, threading through the terrible silence of fifty frozen men, and for one heartbeat Naia stood in the center of a held world and it was almost peace.

And she had not said only *stop*.

She did not know, after, everything she had said. That was part of the horror — the worst part, the part she could never give to Tamar whole, could only hand over in fragments across years. It had come up out of the flood not as her words but as a thousand women's words at once, a chorus pitched into the nervous systems of fifty men, and her own mouth had been only the gate it came through. Some of what poured out was *stop*. Some of it was older, and it was not kind.

The flood did not love these men. The flood had no reason on earth to love them. It remembered — she felt it remember, felt the memory move through her like a current through deep water — every death down the line, every sister returned to the pans, every daughter drowned in the salt by the loving order to keep the loving law, every mother who had gone into the dark afraid, three hundred years of women who had been ended by men exactly like these and by women exactly like the ones in travelling-dark, three hundred years of grievance with no grave deep enough to hold it. The flood had no shutter either. It looked out through Naia's switched-off eyes at the men who had come in the night to take one more daughter, and it knew them, and it spoke.

The man nearest the burning tent went rigid where he stood.

The word that had stopped him had not stopped only his step. The flood reached down past the frozen limbs into the old animal floor of him — into the place the Stillness draws on, the place a trained adept reaches to draw down her own pulse and pass for dead — and it found his heart and drew it down. He had no training to find the bottom of that falling and no leash on it. His face stayed slack and untroubled. His knees folded and he lay down in the sand by the fire with no mark on him at all, his heart gone quiet under a stillness he had never trained for and could not survive. The fire's heat washed over him and he did not flinch from it, because there was no longer anyone in the body to flinch. The window did not look away. It only filed it, in the cold clear place, with Lesha's open eyes and the spade in wet ground.

Another beside him went the same way, the strings of him cut all at once between one breath and the next, down into the sand, no blood, no fire, nothing a witness could point to and name a wound. Gone. Returned to the pans by a girl who had only wanted them to *stop*.

She felt it cost her. Far below the cold mastery, in the body she had switched off, something tore at the speaking of it — the Last Word was not a word the flesh gives for free, and even the flood, even three hundred years of borrowed

strength, paid for the saying. She felt the bill begin to come due in her own chest, a wrongness, a draining, as though some part of her own falling had gone down with theirs and would not all come back. The flood had a name for what it had done. Reshi had once said it over a cookfire long ago with her face turned deliberately away from the firelight, said the way you say a thing you wish you did not have to teach — *the Last Word* — and Naia understood, dimly, far down, that she had not chosen it. The flood had reached for it through her, the way a drowning body reaches, and the reaching had taken something out of her she would not get back.

She was beautiful in that moment.

Tamar told her this later — much later, a year and more, on a night when Naia could finally bear to hear it and Tamar had finally found the nerve to say it. *The most terrible and beautiful thing I ever saw*. Naia standing in the broken camp with the firelight running gold and red along her, fifty grown men frozen at her word and the dead lying easy among them, and the girl moving through them now. Not with her own clumsy young grace — Naia had always been a colt, all elbows, forever putting her shoulder into a tent-pole — but with something old and economical and exact, every gesture pared down to the single necessary motion, the distilled mastery of every woman who had ever lived and died in her blood worn now like a borrowed robe that fit her terribly well. She knelt by Sabra without seeming to bend, folding to the ground in one unhurried movement, and even kneeling in the blood she was beautiful, and that, Tamar said, was the worst of it — that the thing wearing Naia's face was beautiful, and was not Naia, and she had loved it and feared it in the same breath and never been able to pull the two apart since.

She took the man's wrist. The man with the daughter, the broken nose, the calluses worn smooth. She closed her old borrowed fingers around his wrist where his fist was still buried in Sabra, and his hand opened. It opened because she told it to, *not that hand*, and it released the knife, and the blade slid free of Sabra and fell into the sand wet to the hilt, and the man wept. He wept frozen, unable to move anything but his eyes and the tears that came out of them and ran down into his broken-nosed face, because she had not let him go. She had only told him *not that hand*. His body obeyed and his mind watched from the bolted room behind his eyes, and he understood — Naia saw him understand, saw the whole horror of it arrive in him — that he was a passenger in his own flesh, and the tears came faster, and he could not even sob aloud, because she had not given his throat back to him.

She could have killed him.

The flood wanted to. She felt it want to — felt the want move through her, vast and patient and entirely without cruelty, which was the terror of it; it did not hate him as a man hates, hot and personal. It wanted him dead the way the tide wants the shore, as a fact, as a settling of accounts older than his life. She felt the Last Word rise toward her tongue again, felt three hundred years

of grievance reach unhurried for one more throat, felt the chorus draw breath to draw the silence down into his chest the way it had into the other two —

and somewhere far down under the cold, the small lamp of her that had been switched off flickered once.

It flickered, and in its small light she saw — not with the window's cold cataloguing eye but with her own, with the eye of the girl who had laughed at the flatbread — she saw the calluses worn smooth at the base of his three fingers.

A child's fist. A thousand times.

She did not kill him.

It was the only mercy she could find in the whole drowning flood, and she had to fight the flood to find it, and the fighting nearly took her under for good. The voices did not want to give him back. They surged against the small held window of her own will with the whole weight of three hundred years — *he came for one of ours, he is one of theirs, they have taken so many, they have given us nothing, nothing, give us this one* — and Naia, the girl, the one small lamp, set her shoulder against the gate and held. *Not him*, she said into the flood, with the last of herself, with the only words that were certainly her own. *Not him. His daughter. Not him.* And the effort of it was the effort of holding a flood-gate shut against a river with her bare hands, ankle-deep and then knee-deep and then waist-deep in a thing that wanted past her, and she felt her own body, somewhere far below, begin to pay in earnest.

The Stillness she had borrowed past every line her flesh could survive began to render its bill.

She had switched off the pain. She understood now, dimly, far down, that the pain had not gone anywhere. It had only been shut out of a room that was filling. And now the room was full and the door burst and the pain came back not as warning but as collapse, all at once, the whole arrears of it falling due in a single breath — something tearing low in her belly, deep, a wrongness with no name she wanted to give it, a wetness spreading warm down the inside of her thigh, a heat where there should be no heat. The cold mastery drained out of her so fast that the world tilted on its axis and the frozen men slid sideways across her sight. Blood came from her nose, a hot sudden runnel of it over her lips, salt and copper. And from somewhere deeper, somewhere she could not see and did not want to, more blood, the body's protest written in the only ink it kept. She had run her body like a horse off a cliff — had borrowed a stillness no untrained nineteen-year-old should hold and held it past every line, lending it out to men and drawing it back and spending it like water in a place with no water — and the body was only now, mid-air, understanding that it had left the ground and there was nothing under it but the fall.

The men were still frozen. She could not hold them. She felt the holding slip in her grip the way a wet rope slips, fiber by fiber, and she understood with the last clear corner of her mind that she had two choices and no time to weigh

them: let them go, or die holding them. And she did not yet know how to let them go gently — the flood had never taught her that, the flood did not believe in gentle — so she let them go the only way she knew, the way you drop a weight you can no longer carry. All at once. Everything. The whole held world released between one heartbeat and the next.

The camp came back to life screaming.

Fifty bodies unlocked at once, and every one of them came back into itself in the middle of the motion the word had caught — the woman with the cocked arm staggered as the throw she had never finished finally let go of her muscles; the man mid-stride pitched onto his lifted heel and went down hard; and all across the camp men reeled and gasped and clutched at their own chests to be sure their hearts still ran, and found that some of their hearts did and two did not, and the two that did not lay still in the sand and would not be roused. The smell of the burning tents rolled across the camp on the heat and reached every nose at once, and the two dead men lying easy and unmarked among the living, more than the fire, broke them.

The man with the daughter fell on his face in the sand the instant she released him and crawled. Actually crawled, on his belly, dragging himself away from the impossible thing, away from her, his broken-nosed face full of sand and tears, his curved knife abandoned wet in the dirt where her command had dropped it — and he made for the dark on his elbows like a thing with its spine broken, and he was sobbing, and Naia understood that he would crawl until the firelight let go of him and then he would get up and run and he would never in his life stop running, that whatever he had owed and whoever had bought him, the debt was paid in full now in the only coin that mattered, the certainty he would carry to his grave that he had been inside a girl's word with no way out.

And the others who could still run, ran.

They abandoned the dead. They abandoned the burning. They abandoned the purpose that had brought two hating powers into one fist across the pans, the order's enforcers and the temple's men together, all of it, dropped where they stood and fled into the Deep, because there is no coin and no salvation worth the place where bodies obey before the mind can argue. They had come for a girl. They had found the bottom of the world, the old animal floor under all of them, and a girl standing on it who could open it like a trapdoor with a word said quietly in the dark, and no faith and no pay is proof against that. The camp emptied of its enemies in the space of a hundred heartbeats, and the only ones left in the firelight were the Attuin, and their dead, and the dead Naia had made, and Naia.

Naia stood in the middle of it and felt herself coming apart.

It was not the body, though the body was failing — though her own blood was running down her chin and down her thigh and the world had begun to swing slow and sick around her like a wagon with a broken wheel. It was that she

could not find her name. She reached for *Naia*, reached into herself for the one word that should have been bedrock, the word she had been called across the cook-fires of her whole life, and her hand closed on nothing, on a hundred names, on a thousand. Women dying in childbirth in narrow desert beds; women dying on knife-points in alleys in Qesh; women dying of old age, slow, the breath getting smaller and smaller until it was not there; a girl her own age dying in salt-water with the order's hands on her shoulders, held under, drowned by the loving sisterhood for the crime of being what Naia was — all of them in her, all of them speaking at once, all of them reaching for the mouth that was hers and was no longer only hers. She did not know which mouth was her own. She had opened a window and the window would not close and the cold poured through, and the cold was *people*, the cold was every woman she had ever been who had never been her, and she stood among the dead she had made and could not remember her own hands. She looked down at them, at the two hands at the ends of her arms, blood-streaked, old in their borrowed grace, and she did not know whose they were.

Sabra.

There was Sabra on the ground. The knife was gone from her now — fallen wet in the sand where the man's opened hand had dropped it — but the wound it left was not gone, and Tamar was over her, both hands pressed down hard into Sabra's side, leaning her whole weight into it the way you lean into a wound to keep a life from running out the hole. Tamar's hands were dark to the wrist. And Tamar was looking up at Naia.

She had never seen this face on Tamar. Not in two months of knowing her, not in all the firelight and the road and the bawdy songs and the fierce sure laughter — she had never once seen Tamar Spear-Daughter afraid. Tamar was not afraid of the temple. Tamar was not afraid of the order or the Edemre or the open pans at noon. But Tamar was looking up at Naia now with fear in her face, and it was not fear of the enemy. The enemy was running into the dark. It was fear of *her*. Fear and love braided so tight together that you could not pull one strand from the other without taking both — the warm half of the world, the one who had claimed her, who had said *you are my people's blood and I will not give you up* — looking at the thing the salt-singers and the order and three hundred years of corpses had all warned about, the convergence made flesh, and finding that it was someone she loved. Finding it wore the face of the colt-girl who put her shoulder into tent-poles. Finding it standing in the firelight beautiful and terrible with two dead men at her feet who bore no wound, and loving it still, and being afraid of it, and not being able to stop either one.

Tamar, Naia tried to say.

She did not know if the word came out in her own voice. She could not be sure it was her own mouth that shaped it, or whose, out of the thousand. She heard a voice say *Tamar*, small and cracked and very young, and she hoped it was hers, she hoped with everything the flood had left her, and she could not know.

She took one step toward them.

The ground was not where she had left it. It came up under her foot too soon and then was not there at all, and the firelight tipped, and the whole burning camp swung up and over like a wagon going off the night-road into the dark.

The last thing she saw was Amma Reshi turning from the wheel of her wagon.

The old salt-singer turned slow, the gathering-note still on her lips, the low long road-song she had begun too early because she had known. Her face was wet — wet with the song, with the grief that had been in the song from the first note, the grief she had carried to the wheel before a single body fell because she had known what the night would take and could not stop it, only sing. And Reshi's eyes met Naia's across the burning camp, and in them there was no horror at all. Naia had braced for the horror. She had seen it dawn in fifty men and seen it braided into Tamar's love, and she had thought the old woman's eyes would hold it too, would hold the thing-that-should-not-be looking back at her. They did not. Reshi's eyes held only grief. The oldest grief there was — the grief of a woman who has seen this very thing before in the deep memory she carried, seen it down some other line in some other dark a hundred years gone, who had known the night it would come round again and known she could not stop it, who could only stand at the wheel of her wagon and sing the road open for whoever the night took, the dead and the living and the girl going down between them. *I knew you*, the eyes said, without a word, across the fire. *I always knew you. I am sorry. Go down easy. I will sing the road.*

Naia went down into the sand among the men she had killed.

She did not feel herself land. The cold had her by then, and the voices, and the blood, and she fell out of the burning night into a deeper dark that the flood filled with its thousand drowning names. And the last clear thing she carried under with her was not the dead, and not the fire, and not the man crawling on his belly into the Deep, and not the wide-open window that would never again quite close.

She had only wanted them to stop.

And the desert, for a hundred miles in every direction, had heard a thing it would not unhear — that somewhere in the Deep a girl had spoken once, in the dark, and a field of men had obeyed her before they could choose to die.

The veil was torn. There was no drawing it back.

Chapter 16 — The Thornless Hour

Dawn came the way it always came to the Deep — no mercy, no apology, a grey line in the east that turned the salt-haze the color of old bone. Sabra had

not slept. She didn't think anyone had. She sat in the wreck of the caravan's heart-circle with her back against an overturned water-cart and counted the dead, because no one else had the stomach to start, and the part of her the Salthold had built knew that counting was a discipline you could hold to when nothing else would hold.

She counted the way she had been taught to count: not in horror but in columns, the body kept doing the work the mind could no longer steer. There was a way to walk a field of the killed so that you saw it whole instead of one wound at a time — a slow box-pattern, corner to corner, the eyes moving in a grid the way they'd move down a ledger. The instructors at Sett had drilled it into a row of twelve-year-old girls over a bullock carcass and a slaughtered ewe, and called it *seeing without flinching*, and Sabra had been good at it, the way she was good at all the cold things. She walked the grid now. Corner to corner. The eyes doing their grid-work while the salt crunched under her bare soles and the cold came up through them into her ankles and stayed there.

Nineteen. She had counted nineteen.

Eleven were the men who'd come in the dark for Naia — temple-cadre in stone-grey, two of the order's own enforcers veiled in Edemre black, a handful of sellswords the Closed Hand had paid in salt and never named. Those she did not mourn. She'd been trained out of mourning the people who came to a camp at night with rope and blade, and for once the training and the truth agreed and lay down quietly together, and she did not have to fight herself over it. She read them once, fast, the Reckoning ticking off the grey cloth, the rope still coiled at one man's hip, the salt-paid bootleather that didn't match the temple cut — confirmed what she already knew, *these are the ones who came for the girl* — and moved her eyes off them and did not come back.

Eight were Attuin.

That was the number she kept arriving at and flinching from and arriving at again. Eight of the warm people. The grid kept delivering them to her one after another, and the grid could not be argued with, and so she had them all: eight. And of those eight — she made herself look, made the Reckoning do its filthy honest work even now, because the alternative was not to know, and not-knowing was the order's other gift, the one she would not take — only three had died with a wound on them.

She found the three first because they were the easiest to read. A woman past middle age with a spear-cut opened across the meat of her shoulder and down into the lung, the kind of wound that drowned you slowly even as it killed you; she'd died with one hand still closed on the haft of a broken spear, and the Reckoning read the broken haft and said *she got at least one before they got her*, and Sabra was obscurely glad of it and despised herself for the gladness. A boy not yet grown, an arrow through the throat, fallen face-down. A man Tamar's age with three knife-wounds in a tight cluster under the ribs, the work of someone who knew exactly where the body kept its dying — an Edemre's

signature, clean and economical and without rage. These three had died fighting, or died trying to. The spear had taken them, or the blade, or the arrow, the way the spear and the blade and the arrow had taken people on the Deep since before the seas dried, and the Attuin had songs for that. A grief-song for the one who fell with her face to the raid. Tamar's people knew how to hold that kind of death. It was terrible and clean and it had a shape, a shape you could pour the grief into so it didn't flood everything.

The other five had no mark on them at all.

She crouched by the nearest. She didn't have to; she could have read him standing, the grid would have given him to her column-clean from her feet. But she crouched, because some part of her that the Salthold had not managed to scrape out wanted to be down on the salt with him, level with him, the way you came down level with a frightened animal or a frightened child. A young man, nineteen or twenty, near Naia's age, a herd-tender by the calluses — by the way the Reckoning read the wear on his hands, the particular hardness across the inside of the fingers where a lead-rope rode, the soft places worn off the palms but not the right places for a spear. He lay on his side in the churned salt with his knees drawn up like a sleeper, face peaceful, eyes open, the rime already gathering at the corners of them, fine and grey and growing the way frost grew on a thing that would never be warm again. No wound. No blood. Nothing the eye could find, nothing the desert could blame.

His heart had stopped because a girl had told it to, and his heart had not known the difference between her and his mother and the sun coming up, and it had obeyed before he could be afraid.

The Last Word, the Salthold-voice said in her, flat and clinical, the way it named everything, robbing things of their edges by giving them their proper terms. *The Voice turned on the body's own engine. At scale, indiscriminate. The command goes where the air goes; it does not choose its listener; the trained brace and the untrained obey, and the untrained are always more.* The voice in her recited it like a child's lesson, and it was a child's lesson — she had learned it sitting cross-legged on a cold floor in Sett, eleven years old, while a teacher with kind eyes walked them through *the forbidden applications* so that they would recognize a monster when they met one. They had not told her she would meet one she loved.

She reached out and closed the young man's eyes with two fingers, the way you did, drawing the lids down over the rime so the salt could not finish what it had started, the way her own hand had been guided once over a body she was not allowed to weep for — a small hand inside a larger one, the larger one warm and certain, a voice at her ear saying *gently, gently, like this, you do it gently* — and she found her hand steady. Two fingers. The lids came down. The rime broke and resettled. Steady.

That was the worst thing about her. Even here, the order's poise held her level while everything underneath it screamed. She knelt over a boy her order had

as good as killed and her hands did not shake and her breath did not snag, and somewhere far down beneath the still surface she could hear herself coming apart, distantly, the way you hear a thing fall in another room.

She wiped her two fingers on her own thigh, slowly, not because they were soiled but because she needed to feel cloth under them, needed the small ordinary friction of the world, and she rose, and walked her grid to the next.

Naia was sitting where they had carried her, against the side of Amma Reshi's tent, knees up, arms around them, looking at nothing.

She had been beautiful in the dark. Sabra would not lie to herself about that; she had watched it happen and would carry the watching the rest of her life. For the length of the foreshock Naia had moved like every woman who'd ever lived in her blood had reached up through her hands at once — impossible, economical, more than human and not-quite-herself, the salt-light off the pans making her terrible to look at, and Sabra, who had been raised to read every flicker of a body the way other people read weather, had been unable to read her at all. There had been nothing to read. The girl had gone somewhere behind her own face. The hands had done things the hands could not know how to do — a turn of the wrist that disarmed a man without seeming to touch him, a step that put her shoulder exactly where a swung blade was not, the whole economy of a master who had drilled for forty years compressed into a body that had drilled for none. And then the mouth had opened.

Now she was a girl in a torn shift with blood crusted in the seam of her nose and at one ear, hands shaking with a fine continuous tremor she could not stop, and when Sabra knelt in front of her the eyes that came up were not entirely the eyes of anyone Sabra had met. There were others in there. Sabra could not read Naia, but she could read *that* — the way the gaze surfaced and submerged, a word that would start in one cadence and finish in another, older one, the girl's right hand making a small precise gesture, thumb to the pads of the fingers in sequence, that no one had taught Naia and someone, somewhere down the line, had done ten thousand times until the body could not forget it.

"Did I—" Naia's voice came out husked, as though she'd been screaming, though she had not screamed. She'd only spoken, and the speaking had been worse. She wet her lips, and the tongue moved slow, the body running short on everything. "Vesh. By the carts. Did I—"

"Don't." Sabra took her wrists. The Stillness wanted to come up in her, the trained reflex, automatic as a hand thrown out to catch a falling cup — *find the pulse through the wrist-skin, match it, slow it, breathe her down with you, ease the body off the tremor, manage it* — and she felt it gather behind her own breastbone, ready, the most natural thing in the world to do for a person shaking apart in front of you. And she refused it. She held the refusal like holding her breath. That was the order's hand, the soft competent order's hand

that reached into a body and arranged it, and the order's hand had no place here, on this girl, on this morning, over these dead. She would not arrange Naia. She let her own bare frightened humanity hold the girl's shaking wrists instead, two cold hands on two cold ones, no craft in it, nothing but holding. "Naia. Not by name. Not yet. Look at me."

"They were *ours*." The tremor climbed up out of her hands into her voice and broke it open. "They came to help me. Vesh — he ran with a spear he didn't even know how to hold, he had it backward, almost, I *saw* it, he didn't — he just ran toward me, because the grey men—" She had to stop and breathe and the breath came ragged. "And I said *stop*. I just wanted them to stop. The men with the rope. The rope. The night. All of it—" Her face came apart, all of it at once, the whole architecture of it going. There was no beauty in it now; only a child's wreckage, snot and salt-water and grief, the rose with every thorn turned inward, drawing her own blood with the very thing that should have been her defense. "I didn't choose. *It doesn't choose*. It just goes out. Over all of them. It can't — it doesn't know who — it can't *tell*—"

"I know."

"You don't *know*—"

"I watched it." Sabra held the wrists and did not look away, which was the only mercy she had and the cruelest one, and she felt the cruelty of it like a blade held the wrong way, the edge in her own hand. "I watched your mouth move and a field of men lie down. The ones in grey dropped their knives because their hands stopped belonging to them, and I was glad, Naia. I was glad in that moment. I'm not pretending I stood there pure. And then I watched Vesh." She made herself say the name. She had decided, somewhere in the grey, that she would not let the girl be the only one who said the names. "Running toward you. With the spear held wrong. I watched him fall down between two of the grey men and never get up, and there was no telling them apart. The grey men and Vesh. They went down in the same breath. Because the Voice can't tell them apart. That's the whole horror of it. Not that you aimed wrong — that there's no aiming. And you're going to want, a hundred times, a thousand, to make it smaller than that. You'll tell yourself you panicked, that anyone would have, that it was them or you. And every one of those will be true and none of them will make it smaller. So I'm asking you. Don't."

"Don't what." Barely a sound.

"Don't make it a thing you can survive by lying about." Sabra's thumbs pressed once against the insides of the wrists, not the craft, just pressure, just *here, I am here*. "Because you can survive a lie for a while, I've watched people do it for fifty years at a stretch, my whole order is built out of people surviving on lies they told themselves young. And then the lie costs more than the truth would have. Every time. You'll need to survive the real one, Naia. Start now, while it's still bleeding, while you can still feel it. The longer you wait the harder the lie sets."

Naia looked at her, ruined, the wet face streaked with grey salt-grit, and something in the look was so old it did not belong in a face that young — one of the voices behind her eyes surfacing, an old woman looking out of a girl's grief, going under again. "Why the cruel thing," she said, and it was almost wondering, almost the question a child asks. "Tamar, the others — they keep wanting to put a blanket on it. Why are you the one—"

"Because I've been raised by people who tell you the kind thing," Sabra said, "while they walk you out onto the salt."

She had not meant to say it. It came out before the order's editor could catch it, the editor that lived behind her teeth and approved every sentence before it left her — and the sentence was past her teeth and into the cold air before she'd checked it, and once it was out the rest of it rose with it, the prologue she never spoke of, rising in her like bile. The morning. She had been very small. There had been a hand on her shoulder, warm, certain, a woman's hand she had trusted with the whole of her small life, and the hand had turned her gently to face the white flat and made her watch. The loving voices all around her. *She's not afraid, see. We don't let them be afraid. We are gentle, that is what makes us different, we are always gentle.* And a girl not much older than Sabra had been then walking out onto the White Pan with two Sisters of Salt on either side of her, walking easy, walking unafraid, because they had been so very gentle, because the gift in her had bent toward the convergence and the salt-law is the salt-law, and the girl had not come back, and the small Sabra had not understood, and the warm hand had stroked her hair and said *now you have seen how we keep the world safe.*

And she understood, kneeling here, twenty years too late and exactly on time, precisely and finally what she was looking at. Her order's oldest law, made of corpses, was made of *this*. This field. These five with the rime in their eyes. This was what the Ban remembered. Three hundred years of drowned daughters to keep the desert from ever, ever waking to a morning like the one drying on the salt around her. The girl on the pan. The boy named Vesh. The same horror, prevented one way and unleashed the other, the same horror at both ends of the same law.

And her order was right.

That was the thing she could not get past, could not go around, kept walking into in the dark like a wall she had forgotten was there. The Closed Hand was *right* about the danger. Vael was right. Five people with no mark on them lay in the salt with their eyes filling up with rime, and Vael would have walked Naia out onto the White Pan years ago, gently, lovingly, a Sister on each side, telling her she was not afraid — and those five would be tending herds this morning, and Vesh would be holding a spear the wrong way at a feast somewhere and being teased for it and laughing. The order's monstrousness and the order's wisdom were the same act seen from two sides, the same coin spinning, and you could not have the one face without the other. Sabra had chosen her side now,

irrevocably, somewhere in the dark with a skinning knife in her hand and her own voice screaming at men twice her weight — and choosing it had not made the other side wrong. It had only made the other side *hers to refuse*. That was the whole of what she had won by choosing. Not rightness. Refusal.

“Sabra.” Naia’s hand turned in her grip, and gripped back, and the strength of the grip was startling, the trained body still in there under the wreckage, holding on. “Am I the thing they kill?”

The honest answer was *yes*. The honest answer was the one Sabra had just spent her own bleeding heart demanding of the girl: *by your order’s oldest law you should already be dead. You are the thing the Ban was written against, the thing it spent three centuries drowning to prevent. I have seen them do it, gently, and I helped you live instead, and I would do it again, and I do not know whether that makes me a traitor or the first sane woman my House has made in a hundred years, and I cannot be both of those things at once and I am, this morning, both of them at once.*

She had asked the girl not to make the truth smaller. She owed the girl the same.

But there was a difference, she thought, between making a truth smaller and choosing which true thing to set down in front of a person who was drowning. The order had taught her the trick of it — the trick of answering the question that wasn’t asked, the velvet sentence laid over the iron one, *we only advise*. She had spent her childhood watching her House do it to kings. She knew the move in her hands the way she knew the Stillness, the same reflex, reach in and arrange.

“You’re the thing I stayed for,” Sabra said.

Which was a different answer, and a true one — truer than the *yes*, in the only way that mattered this morning — and the most Adima Ru thing she had ever done, to put the true sentence in the place of the asked one, velvet over iron. Except that for once the velvet hid no grip. There was no fist inside this glove. There was no House behind it, no design, no long game, no advising. Only a girl holding a girl in a field of salt and the dead, and a thing said because it was the load-bearing true thing and the other true thing could wait until the body could carry it.

Naia’s face did something complicated and then simply broke the rest of the way, and she went forward into Sabra’s shoulder, and Sabra held her, both arms now, the wrists released, the whole shaking weight of her taken on, and did not slow her pulse, and did not ease her breath, and let her shake.

Kessa watched the whole of it from the lip of the dune, flat on her belly in the cold sand, veil down, an arrow’s flight away and entirely unseen, and she did not draw.

That was the thing she kept returning to, the tongue gone back to an aching tooth. She did not draw. She had three clean lines on the girl from where she lay — through the gap between the water-cart and the tent, over the burnt-out cook-fire, and the long one straight down the heart-circle's spine if either of them shifted a hand-span left. She had checked all three before the light was good enough to use them, the way you checked you still had your hands, automatically, before thought. Three clean lines and a debt that said *take one of them*. And her bow lay flat in the sand under her flat hand and she did not lift it.

She'd felt the foreshock crawl across her own skin in the night like a draft from a door opened onto a winter she had not known existed — the Voice going out at a scale she had not known a throat could make, not a command thrown at one mind but a *condition* laid over the whole bowl of the camp, the air itself gone wrong, gone *instructed*. Her own trained body had locked down against it the instant it touched her, the Stillness slamming shut every soft place it could reach, every door in her swinging closed at once, the discipline doing in a heartbeat what twenty years had built it to do. She had braced. The brace had held. And *still* — this was the part she turned over and could not set down — still her hands had wanted to lie down flat in the sand and be done, and her heart had wanted, for one whole beat, to simply *listen*, to let the true thing in the air be true of her too. An Edemre. Veiled. Trained against exactly this since she was a child young enough to still cry for her mother and old enough to be told to stop. For one heartbeat the girl's voice had reached even her, had brushed the edge of her like a single finger laid against the great vein of the throat, just resting there, just *present* — and then let her go. And in that heartbeat Kessa had understood, completely and without sentiment and without any need to walk down and look, exactly what those five markless corpses out there were going to be when the light came up.

She'd seen the Voice used as a knife. She had used it herself — the small ledger-sanctioned cuts, *be still, drop it, sleep* — a tool, the way her blades were tools, a thing with an edge that you aimed and that did one clean thing where you aimed it. She had never in her life seen it used as *weather*. A thing with no edge at all, that killed not by being aimed but by simply being *true in the air*, the way cold was true, the way the noon pan was true, indifferent, total, killing whoever was standing in it because they were standing in it.

The debt was good. That was the irritating part, the part that wouldn't lie down. She ran it again now, lying in the cold, the way she'd run it a hundred times in the night, because running a thing was how she kept her hands empty when her hands wanted work. Clean. Entered properly in the ledger by a hand long dead, witnessed, sworn on salt, a quarter-century old. Paid down her own line, mother to daughter, a debt that had come to rest in *her* hand the way water comes to rest at the bottom of a cistern — by gravity, by the shape of things, no choosing in it. A debt that pointed at this girl as surely as dawn pointed away from where it rose. An Edemre kills against a debt in the ledger,

never for free, never for rage, and a debt once entered is paid — *even against the order itself*, even against the Ru who made the Edemre and could no longer hold their leash. The ledger held the leash. That was the whole of Kessa's loyalty and she had never been ashamed of it; it was the only clean thing she had ever found, the only loyalty that did not curdle, did not lie, did not ask you to love it. A debt was a debt. You squared it because a thing owed and unpaid rotted the ledger, and the ledger was the only thing standing between the Edemre and being merely murderers, and Kessa had built her entire self, every veiled inch of her, on that single uncurdling sentence.

So why was she still on her belly in the sand with her veil down and her hands empty and the light getting worse for it by the minute.

Because the kill was no longer simple. And Kessa of the Veil had spent her whole life despising the women who took simple things and made them complicated, the agonizers, the ones who turned a clean debt into a sermon, and she would be damned three ways before she became one of them, and here she was, becoming one.

She turned it over with the cold thoroughness she'd have turned over a target's habits — the hour he rose, the side he slept on, the woman he visited and lied to his wife about, the door he never locked. The debt, she made herself note, named a *child of a certain line*. It did not name *the woman who can lay a stillness over a field and stop the hearts in it like snuffing a row of lamps*. Until last night those two had been the same girl, perfectly, with no daylight between them — a child of a line, hidden among the Attuin, a name in a ledger waiting to be crossed out. They were not the same girl any longer. Something had walked out of the dark last night that the ledger had no entry for. A debt is a transaction; you collect because the world runs better squared than crooked, because the books have to balance or every name in them means nothing. But to collect *this* debt, here, today, off the body of *that* — she let herself look, properly, down the dune at the small wet shaking thing being held by the cold Ru in the heart-circle — was not squaring anything. It was not bookkeeping. It was walking into an oil-store with a lit lamp and saying you'd come to do the accounts.

There was also — and Kessa noted it the way she noted a tell across a gaming table, flatly, without indulgence, because indulgence was how you got a knife in the kidney while you were busy feeling something — the inconvenient fact of having *watched*. She had lain here all the long night and into the grey and watched the Ru initiate. The cold one. The Salthold velvet, you could see it on her at a hundred paces, the way she held still, the way she moved through carnage in a box-pattern like a girl reading a ledger, the whole expensive interior of Sett wrapped in borrowed road-clothes. Kessa had watched that girl kneel in the blood and take the convergence-child's wrists and say a cruel true thing to her instead of a kind false one.

That was the part that wouldn't leave her. Kessa had a connoisseur's ear for

the false-kind thing. She had ended men who specialized in it — the soft-voiced ones, the *there-there* ones, the ones who told you what you wanted while their other hand did the work — and she had a particular, well-earned contempt for the order that had taken the false-kind thing and *drilled* it, made a discipline of it, taught girls to lay velvet over iron before they'd lost their milk teeth. And she had just watched a daughter of exactly that order, knee-deep in the consequences of exactly that order's design, *refuse the move*. On her knees. In the dead. Choose the cruel truth over the kind lie, with nothing to gain by it, no king to steer, no advantage in the room. The only honest thing in the whole grey field had come out of the mouth of the one creature in it bred to be dishonest, and Kessa had not wanted to find that interesting, and had found it interesting anyway, the way a tooth finds the ache.

"Tidy little defection," she murmured into the sand, a dry curl at the lip. "Don't believe a word of it. Show me again tomorrow."

A debt is paid. But a debt is also *understood* — that was the other sentence, the one the young ones forgot, the one that made the Edemre something other than a gang of women with knives. You did not collect blind. You learned the truth of the kill before you took it, because a debt collected in ignorance shamed the ledger worse than a debt left standing; it put a name in the books that should not be there, and there was no crossing-out of *that*, no balancing it after, the dead did not come back to be uncollected. Kessa had stopped understanding this debt somewhere around the hour the girl's heart-stilling voice had laid one finger against her own throat and then, for reasons the girl would never know and could not have chosen, let her go.

She put her cheek down flat to the cold sand and breathed the long way down into the Stillness, three breaths, the floor of herself coming up to meet her, and made the only decision the ledger actually left her room to make. Not the kill. Not the forgiveness — neither of those was hers to give yet, the kill because she did not have the truth of it and the forgiveness because forgiveness was not an Edemre's to hand out like alms, it had a price and a procedure and she was nowhere near either. Not the kill and not the mercy. The *waiting*.

A debt did not spoil for keeping. That was the mercy of a debt over a meal — it would be just as good owed in a year, in five, the salt-oath did not rot. She would learn what this girl was *for*. That was the thing the night had handed her along with the dread: the certainty that the girl was *for* something, that you did not breed a creature like that by accident, that there was a hand behind it the way there was a hand behind every clean debt, and that she'd be a fool to throw her lamp before she knew whose oil-store she was standing in. She would walk the road behind the caravan into the Deep. Unveiled, now — veil up, she was death walking and every Attuin scout would feel it on their neck a league off; veil down she was nobody, a road-worn traveler, a woman with a story she could make boring in three sentences. She would walk behind them and watch, and learn the truth of the kill, because that was the one thing an Edemre owed before everything else, before the leash and the order and her own dry pride:

the truth of the kill. And she did not have it.

“Slow today,” she told the girl across the impossible distance, the dry note coming up under it, over the bodies of better men than the ones drying in the salt below. “Lucky for both of us. Don’t make a habit of it.”

Then she slid backward off the dune-lip, all of her at once, the trained smooth withdrawal that displaced no sand and threw no shadow, down into the lee where the grey light could not yet reach, and she was gone into the salt-haze the way water goes into sand, and the camp never knew the veil had been down at all, an arrow’s flight away, all night, over the one of them that mattered.

By full morning Tamar had a fire going, because the Attuin made fire even over their dead — *especially* over their dead — and because the living needed their hands occupied or the grief came in through the idle hands and took them, took the hands and then the arms and then the whole person, and there were not enough of them left whole this morning to lose another to that.

It was a proper fire, built right, the way grief-fires were built — not the quick cook-flame but the slow deep one, fed from the center, the kind you could keep three days. Tamar had laid it herself, Sabra saw, in the cleared place that was always kept for it at the heart of a caravan even when there was no death, *because* there was always, eventually, death. The smell of it reached across the heart-circle, resin and dung-cake and the particular green bitterness of the salt-thorn they burned for the dead, a smell Sabra did not know and would now never not know, the smell that would mean *this morning* for the whole rest of her life.

Tamar found her still by Amma Reshi’s tent, sitting now beside Naia rather than in front of her, with the girl’s head fallen sideways onto her shoulder at last — not sleep, something past sleep and below it, the body finally letting go of a tremor it could no longer afford to spend itself on, dropping the girl into a grey place that was not rest but was at least not the shaking. Tamar stood over the two of them with a waterskin in one hand and a face Sabra could not read, and that was its own warning, because Sabra could read almost anyone, and the people she could not read were the ones who had decided something and were holding the decision very still.

Sabra braced for it. She had earned whatever was coming and she would take it standing, or sitting, but she would not flinch from it, she had done enough flinching from true things for one lifetime and was finished. She was the order’s daughter. The order had sent the men in grey. The order would have walked Naia out onto the salt, gently, lovingly. Eight Attuin lay in rime-eyed rows on the cleared salt with their feet pointed at the rising sun the way the Attuin laid them, and Sabra wore, under the borrowed road-clothes, the unmistakable cold interior of Sett, and any one of those facts was reason enough for what she expected to see come down on her now.

“Three of mine died with their faces to the raid,” Tamar said.

Her voice was a flat held thing, the spear-discipline laid over a wound, the breath managed, the words coming out level because she would not let them come out any other way in front of the dead. “The old one with the shoulder. That’s Mira. Nine raids before this one and she fought in this one too — got two of the grey before they opened her. The arrow’s Denn. Fast. We were sending him to the Ochre run this season. The three cuts under the ribs—” her jaw moved “—that’s Kael. Whoever did him knew the work. That’s a Sister’s hand. So they sent at least one real one and not just bought meat. Three of mine. I have a song for them. We sing it at dusk, when the fire’s deep. You’ll learn it. You stayed, so you’ll learn it; you don’t get to stay and not learn the songs.”

Sabra waited. She understood she was meant to wait.

“Five of mine,” Tamar said, “died because the child I’ve called blood opened her mouth.”

She crouched down then, to Sabra’s level, slow, the way you come down to level with something dangerous — and Sabra understood, with the small terrible mercy of seeing clearly even now, that the dangerous thing Tamar was carefully coming down to level with was her own grief, holding it the way you’d hold a spear-point steady an inch from someone’s eye, with enormous control, because the control was the only thing keeping it from going in. It was not Sabra she was leveling with. It had never been Sabra.

“And I have no song for that one,” Tamar said. The level voice frayed at the very edge of it, one thread, and she let it, and pulled it back. “Nobody does. There’s no grief-song for *our own girl killed them with a word she couldn’t take back*. It doesn’t exist. A thousand years over the salt and we never once needed it, because there was never once a girl who could do that, and now there is, and she’s mine. She’s ours. And somebody—” the jaw again, working the words up out of someplace deep “—somebody has to *make* the song. That’s the worst of it, Ru. Not even the dead. That there’s no song yet. That one of us has to sit down by this fire and make the first one, and find words for the thing that has no words, and then sing it out loud, in front of everybody, and be the one who made it for the rest of their life.” She looked at the laid-out five. “It has to be me. It’s mine to make. Because she’s mine. And I don’t want it. I have never wanted a thing less.”

“Tamar—” Sabra started, and had nothing to put after it, and stopped.

“You stayed.” Tamar said it like an accusation and an absolution braided together so tight you could not have said where the one became the other — which was, Sabra was beginning to understand, the whole of how the Attuin carried obligation, *honor by debt and shame*, the thing they wore like water, where the owing and the owning were the same word and the same weight and you did not get to pick them apart. “The smart thing — the Sett thing — was to step back into the dark and let them take her and walk home clean. Tell your Mothers

you did your assessment and the asset went to another party. That's what your order does. That's what you were sent here to *be*. And instead you stood in front of her with a skinning knife you barely know how to hold — I saw you holding it, Ru, you had it like a woman holding a snake — and you screamed at men twice your weight to come through you first. I was three spears down the line and I saw the cold little Salthold girl plant herself in the dirt in front of my blood and scream. So." She held out the waterskin. Her hand was not quite steady, and she did not pretend it was. "Drink. Then get up and help me lay the last two out and weight their feet to the sun, because you've gone and made yourself ours, you did it in the dark with a knife held wrong, and ours don't sit while there's work over the dead. And because—" the level broke again, one more thread, and this time she did not bother to pull it all the way back "—I haven't got the spare anything to hate you with this morning. Even what you've earned just by being what made you. I used it all up in the dark. There's just the work, and the fire, and the song I have to make and don't want to, and you, sitting there being one of mine now whether either of us planned it. Drink, Sabra."

It was the first time Tamar had called her by her name and not by her order.

Sabra took the skin. Her throat had closed somewhere in the middle of all that, the way it had not closed once over any of the bodies, the order's poise holding fast over the dead and failing, finally, completely, over this — over a warm bawdy fierce woman crouched in the salt offering water to the daughter of the people who had done this, because the work didn't care and the fire didn't care and you drank or you didn't and then you got up. Sabra drank to open her throat, and the water was warm from the skin and tasted of leather and salt and the resin smoke that had got into everything, and it was the best thing she had ever drunk in her life, water from a grieving woman's hand on the worst morning of both your lives.

Across the fire, Naia stirred against her shoulder and made a small sound and did not wake. The salt-haze was burning off the pans now in long pale ribbons that lifted and thinned and went to nothing in the climbing light, and the rose-light of full morning came down — that particular flush the desert dawn went after the grey, pink-gold off the white flats, the most beautiful light there was and the one that showed you everything — came down on the rows of the laid-out dead with their feet to the sun, and on the deep slow fire, and on the three women gathered over it: the order's defected daughter, the warrior who had to make a song she didn't want, and the girl who could stop a field of hearts with a word and would carry that for as long as she lived.

She handed the skin back to Tamar, and their cold and warm hands touched around it for a moment and did not pull away.

Then she rose, on legs that had gone stiff with sitting and cold, and she went with Tamar to do the work.

Chapter 17 — The Road Into the Deep

They broke camp before the dead-hour, which is not the Attuin way. You do not march into noon. You shelter, you wait out the white blindness, you move at dusk. But there were bodies behind them the salt had not yet taken, and the order behind those, and so the caravan did the thing that kills the unwary: it walked into the sun.

The breaking of camp was itself a kind of grief, though no one named it so. There was none of the morning's usual noise — no calling between tents, no good-natured cursing over a stubborn camel, no child sent shrieking to fetch the cook-pot. The Attuin struck their poles and rolled their cloth in a silence so total that the small sounds carried: the hiss of a stake pulled free of sand, the dry creak of a yoke, the cough of a beast that did not want to rise. They worked fast and they worked quiet, and the quiet was the loudest thing in it, because the Attuin were a loud people and their silence meant they were counting their dead.

Naia walked at the back, where the dust was worst, because the dust was the only thing she felt she could be near without ruining it.

Her hands would not stop. That was the part she had not expected — not the hollow behind her eyes, not the voices at the edge of hearing like someone reading a list in another room, but her hands, trembling steadily and without any feeling attached, as though they belonged to a woman she had not met. She watched them as she walked. They were her hands; she knew the small white scar across one knuckle from a boning-knife when she was nine, knew the callus the water-rope had laid into both palms. They were hers and they would not obey her, and the disobedience had no fear in it, no chill, no racing pulse — only the steady, betraying shake, as if her body had decided to grieve in the one language it had left her. She kept them wrapped in the loose ends of her head-cloth. When Tamar dropped back and reached for one, Naia pulled away, gently, and Tamar let her.

They did not speak for a long while. The dunes went up in slow combers, dun and rose where the light caught the windward faces, blue-shadowed in the lee. Heat stood off the sand in a shimmer that made the far ridge swim, and the swimming made the ridge seem to breathe, to lift and settle, a great dun animal asleep across the world. The light came down without mercy. It was not yet noon and already the sand gave back the sun doubled, so that the heat came from below as much as above, and the air over the open faces danced and lied. Up the line a child was crying the bored, exhausted cry of a child who has cried already and has nothing new to say about it, and a woman sang under her breath to quiet it — a road-song, the kind that maps the next water into a tune so a child learns the country before she knows she is learning. Naia had known that song her whole life. She could not remember the next line of it.

She reached for it the way you reach for a step in the dark, certain of the floor,

and the floor was not there. The line was gone. Where it should have been was a smooth nothing, a worn place, and then — too suddenly, arriving from the side rather than from inside her — it was there again, *and the well at Saffa's three reeds and the bitter water past*, and she had it whole, the tune and the words and the shape of the country it described, but she did not know whether she had remembered it or been handed it, whether the voice that gave it back to her had been her own child-voice or one of the strangers now keeping house behind her eyes. The not-knowing was worse than the forgetting. She walked on with the song complete and useless in her mouth.

"You keep doing that," Tamar said. "Looking at your own hands like they've insulted you."

"They might have."

"Hm." Tamar walked on. She had a cut along her jaw, scabbed black, and favored her left side where something had caught her in the night, and she carried her spear the way she carried everything — like it weighed nothing and was hers by an old right no one had thought to question. She walked the way the others walked, the rolling, weightless gait that did not fight the sand. "First kill, I was sick for two days. Couldn't keep water down. Amma sat with me. Said — you're not sick from the killing. You're sick from how easy it was. That's the part the body argues with. Not the blood. The ease."

"How old were you?"

"Fourteen." Tamar said it without weight, the way you give a fact across a fire. "Raid on a salt-train. They'd taken three of our girls the season before. I went because I'd sworn I would and because I wanted them to stop treating me like a child, and I got both — which is the cruel thing about wanting. A man came over the cart at me with a club. I put my spear through him before I'd decided to. Before I knew his face. Then I knew his face." She looked off down the line, past the swaying loads, past the children, to the empty ridge ahead. "He was surprised. That's the thing nobody warns you of. They're always surprised. Even the ones who came to kill you. Some part of them never believed it would be them. I was sick in the sand and Amma held my head and told me the truth instead of comforting me. The only thing that ever helped. Never forgiven her for it. Never stopped being grateful. Both at once. That's how you know a thing was true."

Naia said nothing. *Easy* was not the word. There had been no ease. There had been a door she had not known was a door, and the door had opened, and on the other side of it had been *everyone* — the attackers, the temple men, the Spear-Sisters, the old water-carrier who had hidden under a cart and whose name was Dovic and who had three sons and a bad hip and who had stood up at the sound of her, stood up out of his hiding place because she had told the night to *stop*, and walked four steps into the open where a blade was, because she had not been able to tell the night who she meant.

She had not meant Dovic. She had not meant any of the ones she had not meant.

She made herself say it. “Tamar.” Her voice came out level, which frightened her, because she did not feel level. “How many?”

Tamar did not pretend not to understand. She walked three steps before she answered, and Naia understood the three steps were not hesitation but respect — the woman making sure she gave the number whole and right, the way you measure water before you pour it. “Of ours? Four. Dovic. The Marad boy — Sefa. Minded the goats. Could throw a stone truer than a sling. Two I didn’t know — came up from the Ochre caravan to trade, stayed the night because the dark looked like rain that wasn’t coming. Bad luck. Bad night.” A pause. “Of theirs, more. Most of theirs. I stopped counting theirs.”

“I didn’t mean theirs either.”

“I know.” Tamar’s hand found her shoulder, and this time Naia let it stay, the warm weight of it, the only fixed thing in a world of shifting sand. “That’s why I’m telling you the number. So you carry the right weight. Not more. Not less. Four. You carry Dovic. You carry Sefa and the two from the Ochre road. You don’t carry the men who came up the dune in the dark to put a knife in a girl who’d done nothing but be born. Those you set down. Setting them down isn’t mercy you’re stealing. It’s weight you were never owed.”

“I told them to stop their hearts,” Naia said. “Some of them. I felt them do it.” Her hands shook inside the cloth, that steady feelingless tremor, and she gripped the cloth-ends until her knuckles ached, and the ache at least was honest. “There was a man — older than the rest. Grey in his beard. At the back. He was *afraid*, I could feel it, he didn’t want to be there any more than I did, and I felt his chest *agree* with me. I didn’t pick him. I didn’t pick any of them. The order went out and his chest heard it and said yes and stopped. That’s not a thing a person should be able to ask of someone else’s chest. That’s not a thing the world should *allow*.”

“No,” Tamar agreed. “It isn’t.”

She did not say *but they would have killed you*. She did not say *you were afraid*. She did not say *you didn’t know*, or *it wasn’t you*, or any of the soft lies that would have let Naia put the whole night down and walk away light. She walked, and kept her hand on Naia’s shoulder, and let the silence hold the true weight of the thing without trying to lift it off her.

“You’ll want to know if it gets easier,” Tamar said after a while. “It doesn’t. It gets *familiar*. People mistake that for easy. The weight doesn’t go. You only get stronger arms.” She squeezed the shoulder once and let go. “Drink. You’ve forgotten twice since dawn. That’s the kind of thing that kills you out here while you’re busy hating yourself.”

Naia drank. The water was warm and tasted of the skin and of salt, and it was

the most ordinary thing in the world, and she let the ordinariness of it sit in her like ballast.

Behind them, Sabra walked with the dead.

Not the dead themselves — those had been wrapped in what could be spared and laid in the salt at the first hard pan they crossed, because you do not carry the dead into the Deep, you give them to it. Sabra had watched that, too: the Attuin laying their four down on the white floor of a small dead lake, no box, no pyre, only the cloth and the salt and a salt-singer's low unhurried song that did not sound like mourning until you understood that the country itself was the grave and the song was a map telling the dead the way down into it. They had pressed something into Dovic's wrapped hands at the end. Sabra had been too far to see, but she knew it for a desert rose without seeing, knew it the way she knew the time of day, because that was the discipline they had drilled into her and it did not stop reading just because she had broken with the ones who'd drilled it. A rose into a dead hand. Beauty grown out of the hardest ground, given back to the ground.

She walked with the *fact* of them, which is heavier than the bodies, and she walked a little apart.

She had broken with the order. She kept turning the thought over in her hands like a stone, looking for the place where it should hurt, and the place was numb, the way a deep cut is numb before it isn't. She knew the numbness for what it was. She had read it in other people a hundred times — the flat calm of someone who has not yet understood the size of what they have done — and reading it in herself from the inside was a strange doubled thing, the Reckoning turned around and pointed at its own keeper and finding her, for once, opaque.

She had stood between the Salthold's enforcers and a girl the salt-law said was already dead. She made herself walk back through it, because she did not trust a thing she had not examined, and what she found when she examined it was that she had not decided. There had been no moment of choosing, no weighing, no cold clean calculation of the kind her House prized. There had been a woman in grey coming at the girl with the particular economy of motion that meant a trained kill, and Sabra's body had been between them before her mind had been consulted, and she had used everything they had given her — the Reckoning to read the line of the attack a half-breath before it came, the Stillness to hold her own pulse flat while her death stood in front of her, the Voice, once, badly, on a man not trained to hear it.

That was the part she kept returning to. The Voice. She had not even known she would do it. The word had come up out of her — *stop* — pitched into the man's nervous system the way she had been taught and had never once used in earnest, and his hand had opened of its own accord and his blade had dropped into the sand, and he had looked at her. That was the thing. He had looked

at her with such betrayal — not hate, betrayal, the face of a man whose own body had turned traitor on him at someone else's word — that she had wanted to apologize. To a man who had come to help murder a girl. She had wanted to say *I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I know, I know what it feels like to have a thing reach into you and decide.*

She had been raised to be a keeper of memory. She would be remembered now, in the Salthold, the way the prologue of her own childhood was remembered: a name spoken with the particular flat sorrow the order kept for its apostates, the sorrow that was worse than anger because it had already finished with you. *Sabra, who went into the Deep to assess a breach and came back as one.* They would not even hate her, most of them. They would shake their heads. They would use her, gently, to teach the younger initiates what the order cost a woman who forgot what she was for.

If she came back at all.

Tamar fell into step beside her — she had a way of appearing, never arriving, simply being there, the way water shows up in a place you did not expect a spring — and for a while they walked in the kind of silence that is itself a conversation. Sabra was aware of her the whole time. The Reckoning would not stop offering her the woman: the favored left side, the cut along the jaw, the small unconscious competence of every step, the warmth that came off her that had nothing to do with the sun. She catalogued it the way she catalogued everything, the old reflex running its old errand — and found, partway down the list, that she had stopped counting what any of it was good for. She did not know what to do with a reading that pointed at nothing she meant to use. She let it go on reading and did not finish the thought.

"She's wrong about herself," Sabra said finally. "Naia. She thinks she's a monster now. I can see it in how she holds her hands. She's decided what she is, in the dark, alone. The worst way to decide anything."

"Aren't you the one who'd know?" Not unkind. A real question, in the Attuin way, which asked things straight and expected them answered straight, which did not lay a trap inside the question the way the order's questions always did. "Your order would say she is."

"My order would say a lot of things to keep its hands clean." Sabra watched the small figure at the rear of the line, the wrapped hands, the bowed neck, the way the girl had set herself in the worst of the dust as though she had appointed herself to it. "They have a word for her. They have a word for everything; that's how they manage to do what they do and sleep. There's a word in the catalogues for a daughter who shows the capacity to converge. It's clean and it's quiet and it lets you write down what was done to her without ever writing down what it *was*." She paused. The thing rose in her, the way the salt comes up out of the pan, slow and certain, a thing the ground has been holding all along under a smooth white crust. "I watched a girl drowned for *less* than what Naia is. For the *capacity*. Never the act. She'd never Voiced anyone. Never

reached for anything. She'd only been *tested* — and tested high, in all of them at once, which is the thing the salt-law won't suffer. I was twelve. They made me watch so I'd understand the law was kind."

She had not meant to say it. She heard herself saying it and could not stop, and the order had taught her that an unguarded mouth was a wound you gave your enemies, and here she was opening herself with both hands to a stranger in the sand.

"They walked her out onto the White Pan at the lip of Sett, where the brine pools stand deep at the edge. Two of the Salt House held her arms. They were gentle. That's what I remember — how *gentle* they were. How they didn't let her stumble. How one of them, an old one, had tears on her face the whole time and never once stopped walking. The girl didn't fight. She'd been told what she was. She believed it. She walked out into the salt holding the hand of the woman crying over her, and let them put her under, and the brine closed white over the top of it, and the old woman knelt at the edge with her hand still in the water until it was done." Sabra's voice had gone very even, the order's evenness, the trained flatness that was the last wall she had left and was, she could feel, beginning to crack. "And I understood. That was the horror of it. For years I understood. The law is kind. The convergence is fire. Fire doesn't care whose hand holds it. Three hundred years of corpses. Better one girl in the salt than a hall full of the dead. I could say it back to you whole, right now, every word, and every word is *true*, and that's the part I can't —"

She stopped. Tamar waited. The waiting was not the order's waiting, which was a pressure, a held silence designed to draw more out of you than you meant to give. Tamar's waiting was only room. Sabra found she could fill it or not, as she chose, and that choosing was such a strange new freedom that she almost wept at it, there in the killing heat, walking into the Deep.

"She didn't choose it," she said, when she had her voice. "Any of it. They *bred* it into her. The Long Breath aimed the program at the convergence — at the one thing the salt-law forbids above all others — for fifteen hundred years. Generation on generation. A stud-book steered toward a forbidden door. And then they want to drown her for *arriving*. For doing the only thing they built her to do. That's not law. That's a woman building a fire under a man's feet and hanging him for the burning." She heard her own voice shaking and was distantly amazed by it; Adima Ru did not let their voices shake, it was nearly the first thing they unlearned, the body's honesty drilled out and replaced with the instrument's calm. "I don't know what she is. I'll be honest with you the way your people are honest, because I don't think I can stand to be the other way anymore. I don't *know* what she is. She might be every terrible thing the catalogues say. But I know what *they* are. I always have, and I told myself it was wisdom. And I'd rather be wrong with her than right with them. That's the first thing I've decided for myself in my whole life. It's already cost me everything. And I'd decide it again."

Tamar looked at her a long moment. Sabra felt the look land and did not look away from it, though every instinct trained into her said to slide aside, to give nothing, to keep the face still. She let her face be read. It was the most naked thing she had ever done.

And something in the look shifted, settled, decided. Among her people that look had a weight Sabra didn't yet have the words for. It was the look that turned a road-love into a salt-vow, given the years; the look that decided a stranger could be trusted with the country, with the night-roads and the water and the names of the dead; the look that was the beginning of *dasha* and did not announce itself, because the Attuin did not announce the things that mattered, they only lived them and let you notice you'd been let in.

"Then you'd best learn to walk in sand," Tamar said. "You stamp like a woman who's only ever walked on stone. I've watched you fight it all day — you set your heel like the ground owes you something. The ground out here owes you nothing. It'll collect on the debt. You'll wear yourself dead by the second ridge and we won't have time to mourn you. We're a little full up on mourning."

Sabra laughed, and the sound of it surprised her into silence.

"Here." Tamar stopped, and the caravan flowed on past them, and she put her hand briefly to the back of Sabra's neck, rough and warm and entirely without ceremony, the way she might gentle a beast or a child or a thing she had decided was hers to look after. "Watch my feet. No — not with your eyes, you'll trip. Watch them with the rest of you. You roll the foot. Heel to the outside edge to the toe. Let the dune *take* the weight at the top of the step instead of stamping down through it. Don't push the sand away. Let it carry you. It wants to. It's the only thing out here that does. Fighting it is the whole mistake. Yes. Like that. *That's* it."

And she showed her — there, in the killing heat, with the dead behind and the order behind that, with the war coming up out of the east and the white waiting in the north — how to walk so the desert carried her instead of fighting her for every step. Sabra rolled her foot, and let the dune take the weight, and felt, for one stride and then another, the sand stop being an enemy. The old reflex still ran underneath it — *useful, this, knowing the country, knowing her* — and she heard it run, and let it, and found she had stopped minding what it was for, and minded, instead, only that Tamar's hand was still at her neck.

It was the smallest thing. It was the whole of it.

In the Salthold of Sett, on the lip of the White Pan, the Circle did not sleep. The chamber had no windows to the pan — none of the Salthold did, all its eyes turned inward, as if the women who built it had known that what they did should not be done where the salt could watch. Lamps stood in their niches and threw the long shadows of the seated women up the curved white walls, so that each Ru sat doubled, herself and her dark twin thrown huge above her.

The smell of hot oil and old stone and the particular dryness of a room full of women holding still. The salt-table between them was a single slab quarried from the pan and worn smooth by three hundred years of hands laid flat upon it to swear, and it caught the lamplight and scattered it back, the way salt does, holding a little of every flame in the room.

Mother Vael stood, which she rarely did, and that alone told the room how far the night had carried them. Vael conserved everything — words, motion, breath, the warmth of her own face. To see her on her feet was to see a woman spending a coin she did not spend.

“The veil is *torn*,” Vael said. She did not raise her voice. She had never in her life needed to; the lowering of it did the same work and cost less. “Let us not soften it among ourselves, even if we spend a season softening it to everyone else. Every throne from the Red Gorge to Qesh will have the tale by the next moon, and the tale will be *true*, which is the worse thing, because we cannot unmake a true tale. We can only outlive it. A girl who Voiced a field of armed men into stopping their own hearts. Stopping their own hearts, sisters. The Last Word, at scale, in the open, under the sky, with witnesses who lived to carry it home.” She set her hands flat on the salt-table, the old gesture of oath, though she swore nothing; she only let the table feel her certainty. “They will not call it discipline. They never once have, in three hundred years. They will call it the thing we have spent three hundred years promising them does not exist. They will call it the women’s witchery the temple warned of, and they will be right to be afraid, because for the first time the warning is true.”

“And so?” said Ru Ysolde, from across the table. She had not moved.

“And so the law is plain.” Vael turned her head, only her head, to face the younger woman. “It has been plain since before this house had a roof over it. She is returned to the pans. We do it ourselves, quietly, with our own hands, before the temples make her their cause and their proof and their war-banner — or we lose the only thing that has ever kept us alive, which is that no one truly, in the meat of them, believes what we can do. Doubt is our wall and our water both. She has put a crack in it a man can see through. We mend it the only way a crack like that is ever mended.”

“You’d drown the only living vessel of the convergence to keep a secret.” Ysolde did not stand. She sat very straight and very still, and let her stillness do the standing — she had a gift for it, for making her own quiet the loudest thing in a room — and she was beautiful in the lamplight the way a drawn blade is beautiful, which is to say in a manner that made you measure the distance to her hands. “Mother. We both came up under the old Salt Mother. You sat where I’m sitting, younger than I am now, and I watched your face the night they put the Harran girl under, and I have never once in forty years seen you wear that face again, because you decided that night never to wear it. You called the deciding wisdom. I have always thought it the bravest cowardice I ever saw.” She let that rest. “Three hundred years we have hidden because we

believed we were weak. We were *never weak*. And now the world has at last, by accident or design, handed us a woman who can speak to a field and have the field obey — and your answer, the sum of that long brave life, is to put her in the salt and go back to wearing the other face.”

“My answer,” Vael said, “is to keep us alive.”

“Your answer is the old fear in new robes.” Ysolde said it softly, and let it land soft. She did not reach for the word the others reached for; she had no use for it. She wanted them won, not scolded. “I say we have the one thing that can end the hiding. I say we *use* her.” She let her gaze travel the table, slow, and where it stopped she made it stop — on Threya of the Veil, whom no one ever looked at; on old Marem, who had not spoken in the Circle in a year; on the youngest seated woman, whose name half the room had not troubled to learn — and to each she gave the smallest thing, a tilt of the head, a held half-breath, the unmistakable sense of being, for one moment, the only woman in the room who saw clearly. That was her gift, the thing that made the Open Hand follow her into anything: she did not argue you over; she made you feel you had thought of it first, and bravely. “Crown her. Stop hiding. Let the kings hear the Voice and *know* it for once, and kneel knowing exactly what they kneel to, and let the temples scream witchery to a world that has already seen the proof and decided it would rather not be on the wrong side of it.” She smiled, and the smile had love in it, real love, warm and certain and entirely without cruelty, which was precisely the thing that made her the most dangerous creature in that room. “I don’t want her dead, Vael. I don’t want her bound. I want her *risen*. I want, for the first time in three hundred years, to stop being afraid in my own house. Look around this table and tell me you don’t want it too. I think you do. I think every woman here does, and has been told her whole life it was unwomanly to say so. Say it. Just once, among ourselves. Is it so monstrous, to want to stop being afraid?”

“You’d make her a god,” said Hessa of the Long Breath, from the dark at the table’s foot.

Every head turned.

Hessa had not meant to speak. She had come to this room the way the architects of disasters always come to the rooms where their disasters are weighed — to sit at the foot of the table, in the worst of the lamplight, to watch and to say nothing and to carry her knowing home again unspent. She was old. Her House did its work in centuries and it had marked her; she had the look of a woman who had spent her life on something she would not live to see, and had only lately begun to suspect she had spent it wrong. Her hands were folded on the table’s edge. She did not unfold them. But the words had escaped her the way Sabra’s had escaped Sabra a hundred leagues south, the same salt coming up out of the same buried ground, in two women on the same night who could not, finally, keep holding what they had been holding.

“You’d make her a god,” she said again, quieter, and the quiet made it worse,

“and Vael would make her a corpse, and the two of you will sit here until the lamps gutter, certain and afraid, certain and afraid, the hawk and the keeper, and not one of you — not one of you in fifteen hundred years — will say the thing this house has never once said aloud. So I’ll say it. I came here to not say it and I find I cannot carry it the last step. I’m too old to carry it the last step.”

She looked up. The lamplight found her face, and it was the face of a woman who had given her whole life to a heresy and just discovered, on the far side of it, that she did not understand what she had served.

“We *made* her,” Hessa said. “The Long Breath made her. Not found her. Not stumbled into her. *Made* her, on purpose, by design, across fifty generations of women who lay down where they were told and bore the daughters they were aimed to bear. We took the spear-lines and the memory-lines and the debt-lines and we crossed them and crossed them and crossed them again, toward the one thing the salt-law forbids above every other thing, toward the convergence, toward the Unsealing made flesh — and we hid it. From the Circle. From the Salt Mother. From the House of Salt that keeps the very law we were breaking. From the First Mother herself, if she’s listening, if she was ever anything but a story we tell to make the breeding holy.” Her voice caught. She gathered it the way you gather water from a slow seep, patiently, because there is no other way. “And I have sat in the records and I have read the founding hand, the oldest entry, the one that begins the whole long crime, and do you know what it says? It says it *had to be done*. That is all it says. It does not say why. The why is gone. We lost it, or it was never written, or it was burned by some grandmother of ours who decided we should not have it. We have bred toward a forbidden thing for fifteen hundred years on the strength of four words from a dead woman, and now she is here, she is *real*, she is walking into the Deep with a dead man’s weight on her, and we sit in this room arguing whether to crown the thing we built or drown it — and not one of us will ask the only question that has ever mattered, the question the whole crime was an answer to, which is *what was she for*.”

The silence after that was the loudest thing the chamber had held in a generation. Even the lamps seemed to hold their flames still in it. Vael’s hands had not moved from the table; Ysolde’s stillness had a new quality, the stillness of a hunter who has heard something larger than the thing she was hunting move in the dark beyond her fire.

And in the high seat, where she had sat through all of it with her ruined ancient face composed and her hands quiet in her lap and her eyes half-closed as though she dozed and let the young ones spend themselves — the Salt Mother, Yenneth, eldest of the Remembering, who had carried more lines of the dead than any woman breathing, who held inside her skull a crowd no one else could imagine and ruled it the way she ruled this house, by not letting it see her hand — opened her eyes.

“Sit down, Ysolde,” she said. Her voice was a dry thread, barely a voice at all, the rasp of salt over salt, and it filled the room the way water fills a low place, finding every corner. And Ysolde, who had not been standing, understood in her body before her mind caught up that she had been told to stand *down*, and felt the standing-down happen in her shoulders, and obeyed it, and hated, very slightly and very privately, that she had obeyed it. “Vael. Take your hand off the table. You are not swearing anything tonight, and the table grows tired of being lied to. The law is not going anywhere. It has waited three hundred years. It can wait a season.”

Vael lifted her hands. She did it slowly, to make it her own choice and not an order followed, and Yenneth let her have that, because Yenneth let everyone have their small dignities; it was how she kept the large ones.

“And you.” The old woman turned her ruined face down the table, to the foot, to the dark, to Hessa. The gentleness that came into the dry voice then was the only gentleness she spent that night, and she spent it deliberately, the way she spent everything. “Thank you, daughter. You have carried that a very long way, and you have carried it alone, which is the hardest way to carry anything, and you have set it down now in the one room where setting it down might matter. That took more than the breeding ever did. Set it down. Rest your hands. You are not the one who has to lift it next.”

Hessa’s folded hands came apart at last, and she pressed them flat to the cool salt of the table, and she bowed her head, and her shoulders moved once, and no one in that room of trained and frightened women remarked on it, which was its own kind of mercy.

The Salt Mother rose. It took her a long time, and no one moved to help, because to help the Salt Mother rise was to say aloud that she could not, and even now, even bent and dry as a thing the pan had finished with, no one in that house was fool enough to say that to her. She got her feet under her. She got her hands to the table’s edge. She straightened, by degrees, the way the dawn straightens, and stood at the head of the salt-table, small and bent and white as the pan itself, and looked down the length of her deadlocked Circle — the hawks and the keepers, the would-be gods and the would-be executioners, all so certain, all so afraid, all so young to her eyes though some of them had grandchildren — and felt, where she kept her oldest memories, in the deepest and most crowded room of the crowded house inside her, a stirring of something she had been keeping still for sixty years.

She did not tell them what it was. That was the discipline of a lifetime, the truest discipline she had, older and harder than the Voice or the Stillness or the Remembering: you did not show the hand. The whole order was the velvet and the iron was always somewhere else, always in the next room, always a thing the other woman could not be sure of. She had hidden this thing longer than any woman in this room had been alive. She had hidden it from the records Hessa read and from the lovers she had taken and lost and from her own death,

which she could feel now, close, patient, a guest who had let himself in and was content to wait by the door. She would not begin showing it now, in a room full of the certain.

“The girl goes into the Deep,” Yenneth said. “Past your reach, Vael — your enforcers will not pry her out of the dune-sea. They will only walk into it and not walk out, and you’ll have spent good women to teach the Attuin that we are foolish, which they suspect but have the manners not to say. And past your throne-building too, Ysolde — you will not crown a girl you cannot find, and you cannot find a girl the Attuin do not wish found. The dune-sea is theirs the way no throne owns anything. So.” She let the word sit. “We do nothing. We do the hardest thing this house knows how to do, which is nothing, on purpose, with our hands open. We let the world chase her. The temples will chase her, and the thrones will chase her, and the Edemre will chase her if their ledger turns that way, and we will sit in our white house and *watch where the chase drives her*. A thing chased is a thing herded. A thing herded goes where the country lets it go, not where it chooses.”

“And where does the country let her go?” said Vael, who did not trust agreement and was right not to.

“North,” said the Salt Mother. “They will run her north, all of them, every faction certain it is the one doing the herding, and not one of them will understand that the country itself is the herdsman and they are only the dogs. North to the pan. North to the white.” She paused, and the pause was the only honesty she permitted herself in that room — a single drawn breath in which a very old woman looked, behind her composed and ruined face, at a thing she had set walking sixty years ago and a great deal longer than that, a thing she had nudged and steered and prayed over and was no longer entirely certain she could stop if she wished to, which she did not, which was the part she could never tell them. “North to the white. Where else would she go. Where else has she ever been going, since before she was born.”

“There’s nothing north but the White Pan,” Vael said. “Nothing but salt and the old stories and a fool’s death from the heat.”

“Yes,” said the Salt Mother.

And she let her eyes close again, and she let the young ones make of it what they would, and she did not say the word aloud. She had not said it aloud to another living soul in sixty years; she had buried it under everything, under the whole architecture of her long life, and she would not begin now, in this room, before the deadlock and the lamps and the doubled shadows. But she said it behind her teeth, in the dark and the crowd of her own ruined and patient mind, to the only audience she had ever fully trusted, which was the dead she carried, who could not betray her because they were already gone where betrayal does not reach:

The Cradle.

She is going home, and she does not know she has one, and neither do you, and that is exactly, exactly as it must be.

Far to the east, in the Red Gorge, Davec stood on the high gallery above his own throne and watched the temple's torches come up the canyon road in a line, like a fuse laid along the dark, and knew the war he had spent two years refusing had stopped being a thing he could refuse.

The torches came on at the unhurried pace of men who are certain. That was what struck him, watching them — not their number, which was not large, but their pace. Frightened men hurry. Doubtful men hurry. These came up his canyon at the steady, processional walk of men who had already won the argument in their own minds and had only come to inform him of the verdict. He had seen that walk before, in his father's time, in the year the Ochre Gorge fell to its own priests. It was the walk of the iron fist that has stopped bothering with the glove.

Selka came and stood beside him. She did not touch him; the gallery was open to the guard, and a king does not let his men see the witch they sent him steer his hand in plain sight. But she stood close enough that he could feel the warmth of her down his left side, and that was its own language, one the order had never taught her and she had learned anyway, here, from him, against all her training and to the ruin of it — the language of standing near a man because you wished to and not because the move was a move.

"Korik will ask you to declare the orders heretic by the new moon," she said. She did not look at the torches; she looked at him, reading his face the way her House had drilled into her, except that the reading had stopped being for use a long while ago and she had not told her House so. "Not as a question. He'll bring you a parchment and a pen and a great many witnesses, and he'll bring you a *proof*, and the proof will do the asking. He has a trained man now. He'll show him to you. Stand him in this very hall, have him do some small grounded impossible thing, let you watch your own guards go cold and quiet at the sight of it. Then he'll tell you the women's monopoly is broken at last, and that you, Davec of the Red Gorge, can be the king who broke it. The first in three hundred years to hold the witches' own power in a man's hand the temple controls."

"And he'll be lying."

"No." She said it flatly. "That's the part that should frighten you. He'll be telling the truth about the trained man. Oren is real. I've heard what they did to make him — heard it the way my House hears things, in pieces, from women who place daughters in the temple kitchens — and it's worse than anything we've ever done. And we drown children in the salt, Davec. We drown gifted children and call it kindness, and what they did to that boy is worse than that. The proof of how much worse is that it worked."

“And the boy himself? This Oren?”

Selka was quiet a moment, and when she spoke the word surprised her; he saw it surprise her, saw her hear herself say a thing she had not planned to say. “Gentle,” she said. “Terrified. He doesn’t want to be what they’ve made him. The women who saw him say he flinches from his own hands. He prays. Constantly. To be made something else.” She looked down at the climbing fuse of torches. “Which is why Korik will win the whole temple to it, and the thrones after. There’s nothing the devout love so well as a frightened weapon that hates itself. A proud weapon they’d distrust. An eager one they’d fear. But a gentle, frightened boy who weeps over what he can do and does it anyway because they’ve left him nothing else to be — that one proves them right about everything. That one is *holy* to them. They’ll build their war on his bowed neck and call it mercy that they saved him.”

Davec watched the fuse climb his canyon, and he thought of the legitimacy doctrine, the Rite of the Stone Bed, the parchment Korik had set before him three nights ago in this same hall by this same lamp. The law that, signed, would make every Ru-bred king in the desert a bastard at a single stroke — his own grandfather’s line first among them, his own crown reduced to a pretty thing a priest could lift off his head with a sentence. *They cage me too*, he had thought, reading it, and had not said aloud, because a king does not say aloud the moment he understands he is owned. *They’d unmake my own blood to win this, and call it old tradition, and not one of them in that hall remembers it’s barely older than my own father.*

“There are still people alive,” he said slowly, “who remember when the Stone Bed wasn’t the law. My nurse — old Hara, she’s gone now — she used to sing me a song to sleep, about a queen with two husbands and a left-hand love besides, and the song was *happy*, Selka. A child’s song. She sang it to put a child to sleep. The queen was clever and the two husbands were fond of each other and the left-hand love brought them all luck, and nobody in the song thought it a sin. Nobody in the song even thought it strange. It was just a thing that was, the way water is wet.”

“I know the song,” Selka said softly. “We have it too. With a different last verse.”

“When did it become a thing to burn the world over? A queen and her loves. A song to put a child to sleep. When did *that* become heresy worth a war?”

Selka was quiet a while. She was thinking of her own grandmother, who had drunk at two wells in her time and had never once been made to feel it, and who had died the year before the Theft, so that Selka had grown up hearing the old woman spoken of, in the order, with a faint embarrassment no one ever explained. “When someone needed it to,” she said at last, and the plainness of it seemed to disappoint her, as though she’d hoped for a larger answer and found only the small true one. “That’s all. Not when it became wrong. Things don’t become wrong. Somebody stood where Korik stands and found it *useful*

to call wrong, because if you make one bed the only true bed you can unmake every line that crosses you and never lift a sword. And the worst of it —” She stopped, and started again, lower. “My grandmother lived under the old way and didn’t think it a marvel. She’d have laughed at us, fighting a war over whose love counts. I can’t make that laugh come out as a lesson, Davec. It’s just a thing I miss.” Her trained calm slipped, just at the edge, just for him. “The instant a thing is useful to someone afraid, it turns holy. And once it’s holy you can’t ask who it serves. That’s the only lesson my order ever truly taught me, under all the others.”

He took her hand then.

He did it in the open, on the gallery, with the gallery guard ten paces off and certain to see and certain to talk — the iron fist of the Red Gorge taking the bare hand of the Adima Ru witch they had sent to steer him, in front of his own men, and not caring who carried the tale or where. Let them carry it. Let it reach Korik on his torch-lit road. Let the whole devout climbing fuse of them see the king of the Red Gorge hold his witch-wife’s hand on the high gallery and dare them to make a sin of it.

“I won’t sign it,” he said. “Whatever comes up that road tonight. Whatever proof he stands in my hall. I won’t be the king who broke the world to win a smaller one inside it.”

It was the first decision he had ever made entirely as himself — no order steering his hand from the shadows, no temple pushing it from the light, no dead father’s expectation bending it, only Davec, looking at a thing and deciding it was wrong and that he would not do it. It felt like the first full breath he had drawn in two years. It felt like standing up after a long kneeling. And it would cost him, he understood even in the feeling of it, more than he could yet imagine — and he found, with her hand in his and the torches climbing, that he did not much care what it cost.

The torches climbed. And far down beneath them, in the deep stone of the great temple at Stonereach, in a cell that was not called a cell, a gentle, frightened young man who had been taught to stop a heart with his voice lay awake on a hard bed and prayed to the Stone to make him something other than what they were making him — prayed with the whole bowed weight of himself, the way Selka’s women had described, his hands pressed flat together and flinching from their own touch — and the Stone, being stone, said nothing, and went on saying nothing, the way it always had, the way it always would.

They camped at last in the lee of a great barchan as the sun finally gave up the sky, and the Deep turned from white agony to violet to the deep cold blue the Attuin loved best, the hour they had a hundred songs for — the hour when the dune-sea showed you it had never been empty at all, that it had only been hiding in the glare, that it was full of stars and silence and the small fierce lives

of the people who knew how to live in it and the smaller fiercer lives of the things that came out to hunt in the cool. The fires went up. Someone laughed, low, the first laugh Naia had heard since the night before, and the sound of it was almost unbearable, the way the first ordinary thing always is after the worst thing.

Amma Reshi sat apart, a little above the camp, on the shoulder of the dune, and Naia climbed up to her because she could not bear the warmth of the fire and the eyes that kept sliding to her and away, the looks that were not unkind and were not welcome either, the looks of people deciding what she was.

The climb was hard in the loose sand of the windward face, and Naia made it harder than it needed to be, stamping like a woman raised on stone, and only at the top did she understand she had been watching Tamar teach Sabra the rolling step all afternoon and had learned nothing from it, too far inside her own hands to learn. A small ordinary failure, she told herself, a thing she could fix, a thing the desert would teach her if she let it — and the naming of it steadied her, the way a single true small thing can.

The old salt-singer did not look at her. She looked north. That was where she always looked, Naia realized, sitting down beside her; she had known Amma Reshi her whole life and had never once noticed that the old woman always set herself facing the white, that whatever fire she sat at, whatever camp, her face was always turned a little toward the same far place, the way a plant turns to a sun.

“You’re hearing them,” Reshi said. Not a question. “The voices. The ones that aren’t yours.”

“Yes.” Naia drew her knees up and wrapped her trembling hands around them. “All day. Quieter now. But all day.”

“Some will go quiet for good. Some won’t, ever. You’ll learn which are worth the listening — the ones that have something to teach, a skill, a road, the name of a poison, the way to set a broken arm — and which are just the dead being dead. Repeating their last fear forever, the way a frightened child says a frightening word over and over until it stops meaning anything and is only a sound. Those you learn to walk past. They don’t mean you harm. They don’t mean anything. They’re just the last noise a person made, going on making itself in the dark.” She was quiet a moment. The stars came out hard and close above the Deep, the way they only do where there is no other light to argue with them. “I’m sorry, child. I am.”

She did not say the rest of it — the part about the orders’ word for Naia, the temple’s word, the word her own people were already reaching for around the fire. She had carried that speech a long way up the dune and found, at the top, that she did not want to lay it on the girl tonight, on top of everything else. So she set it down, and what came out instead was smaller and meant more. “They’ll all want to tell you what you are,” she said. “Don’t let them. That’s

all. Don't let them."

Naia wrapped her trembling hands tighter. She looked at the old woman's profile against the rising dark, at the deep lines the sun had cut into it over a long life, at the eyes that had watched that white horizon since before Naia was born.

"Amma." Her voice was very small, and it was, she was almost sure — almost, which was the most she had of anything now — entirely her own. "What am I? Not their word. The true one." The stars burned. The fire muttered below. "Where did this come from? It didn't come from nowhere. Things don't come from nowhere — you taught me that. *There's no spring without a source, child. Water remembers where it fell.* So there's a where. There's a source. Where did I come from? Underneath the Attuin and the spear-line and all of it — where?"

And Amma Reshi, who carried the warm Remembering, the old root, the song that ran back further and truer than all the cold women's careful catalogues, the elder form they had sung over fires while the clinical sisters were still filing the dead in drawers — Amma Reshi looked north, at the country that was herding them all without their knowing, and she did not answer.

She did not answer because she did not fully know — and that was true, and she would not lie to this child, not tonight, not after last night. And she did not answer because the part she did know was not hers to give yet, was a thing the road had to give and not a person, a thing that meant nothing handed over and everything arrived at. And she did not answer because she had learned, in a long life of walking the night-roads and singing the dead down into the salt, that the desert does not give you the answer. It is not in its nature. It gives you the road. And the road, if you are stubborn enough and lucky enough and humble enough to keep walking it past the point where you wanted to lie down and die, gives you the answer at the far end of it.

What she did, instead of answering, was put one dry hand over Naia's two trembling ones, and still them — not with the Stillness, not with any discipline at all, but with the plain old weight of an old woman's hand, the oldest medicine there is, the one that runs back before all the orders and all their gifts. And the trembling, which the Stillness could not have touched because it had no fear in it to still, went quiet under that weight, the way a frightened animal goes quiet under a known hand.

She held the girl's hands a long while in the dark, and looked north, and was silent, and let the silence be the answer it could not be in words. After a time she said only, "It's a good question, child. Hold onto it. Don't let me answer it either. The day you let me is the day I've failed you." She turned, finally, from the north, and looked at Naia full in the face, and her old eyes in the starlight were very bright, and then she looked away again, north, as she always did, and said nothing more.

Below them the fire burned small and bright in the great dark bowl of the Deep,

one orange point of warmth under the whole crowded weight of the stars. Sabra sat at it among the Attuin, a little less apart than she had been, learning to belong, learning the names, Tamar's shoulder set warm against hers in the cold that was already coming down out of the cleared sky. Behind them, leagues of salt and dune, an order tore itself white-knuckled apart over what to do with a girl and resolved, in the end, to do nothing and call it strategy. A king on a high gallery refused to sign a law and felt himself become a man. A boy in a deep stone cell prayed to a stone that had nothing to say. A killer who had not killed sat somewhere out in the dark with a debt down his line he no longer understood and was beginning, perhaps, to dread. And an old woman in a windowless white room on the lip of the pan said a single word behind her teeth to the only audience she trusted, and that audience was the dead.

And north of all of it — north of the camp and the fire and the question held against a girl's chest, north of the chasing factions each so certain they were the hunter, north of the whole turning machine of the world — under the White Pan, under the floor of a sea that had died before any of them were born, in the dark and the cold and the salt that forgets nothing, the thing that had been waiting since before the wall was first built went on waiting, the way it had waited for three thousand years. Patient as the first mother. Patient as the grave. Patient as the salt itself, which keeps everything given to it, exactly as it was given, against the day someone comes who can read it back.

Naia did not sleep that night. She sat on the shoulder of the dune with her hands quiet at last under an old woman's hand, and her question held against her chest like water she was afraid to spill, and she looked north into the dark where there was nothing to see, and she did not know what was out there.

But she had begun, without meaning to, without choosing it, the way the road decides things long before the people on it think they've decided anything at all — she had begun to walk toward it.