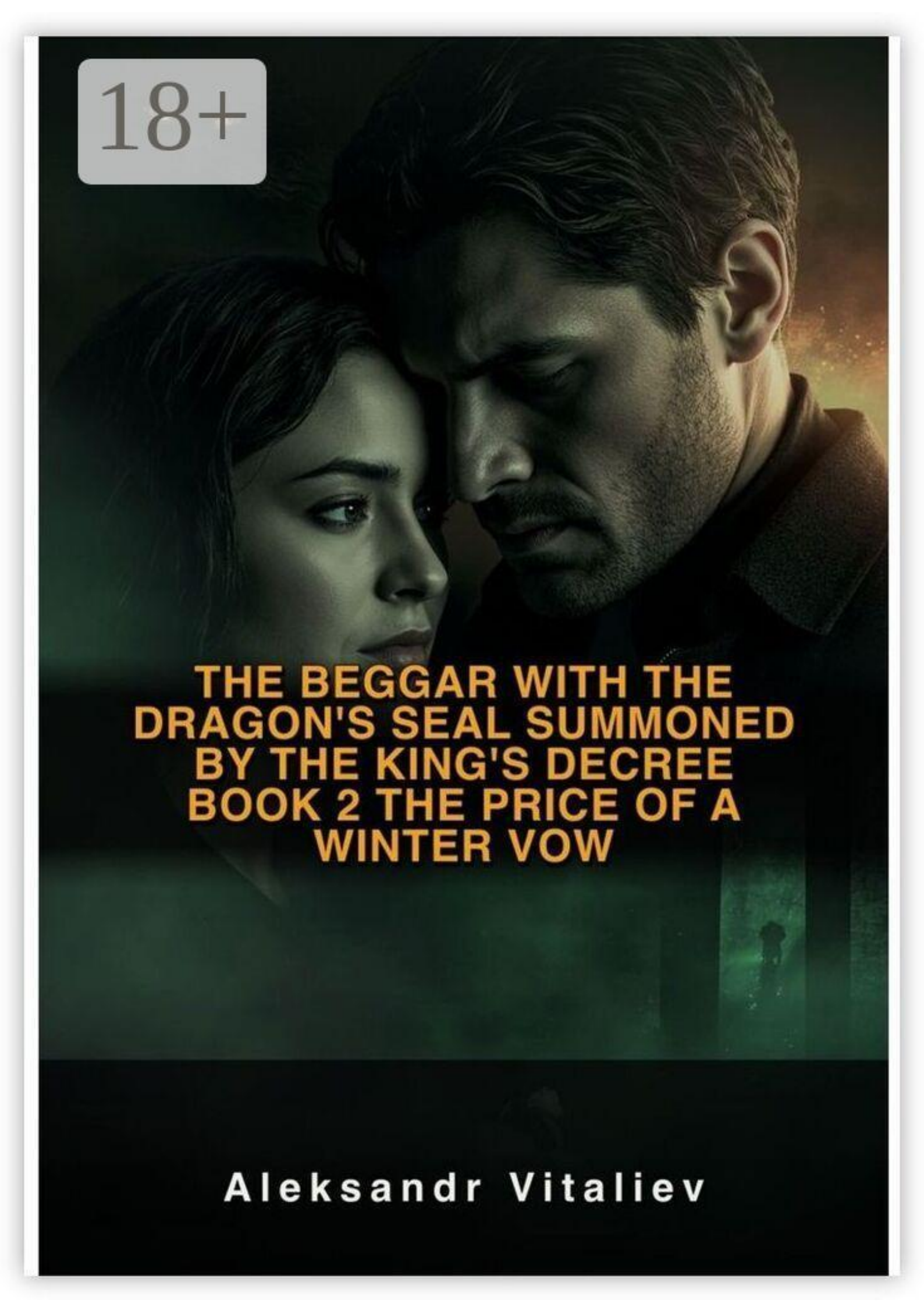




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**THE BEGGAR WITH THE
DRAGON'S SEAL SUMMONED
BY THE KING'S DECREE
BOOK 2 THE PRICE OF A
WINTER VOW**

Aleksandr Vitaliev

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**The Beggar with the Dragon's Seal.
Summoned by the King's Decree.
Book 2: The Price of a Winter Vow**

«Издательские решения»

Vitaliev A.

The Beggar with the Dragon's Seal. Summoned by the King's Decree.
Book 2: The Price of a Winter Vow / A. Vitaliev — «Издательские
решения»,

Last winter gave her a castle, a seal, and the right to demand an accounting from the steward — but not a single gentle word from her husband. Now the royal court extends the winter cycle for another year, and Astrid walks back into the castle not as a beggar, but as the keeper of the household ledger, the savior of the lower city, and the only woman whose name the dragon lord speaks without being ordered to. Darven is learning, for the first time, to ask instead of command. Inara returns from.

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a Winter Vow

by Aleksandr Vitaliev

Chapter 1. The Extended Term

The stone beneath my bare feet was still warm, and I made a point of remembering that, so that later I could hate myself for remembering.

The gates stood open, and that was no good sign. Three years ago, when they threw me out, they had been bolted shut behind me, and I had heard the iron clanging for a long time afterward. Today the two leaves were simply thrown back, like an open mouth, and through them drifted the smell of hot bread, of woodsmoke, of something sweet that made my jaw ache.

I stopped. The hem of the stranger's black dress, pulled off a stranger's dead back, was too short and too tight for me, and I could feel the guards' eyes on me, but those were not the eyes I feared. Those would come later.

"Astrid."

Erwin, the royal scribe, sat on an overturned bucket just inside the gate. On his knees lay a fresh parchment, and the wax sealing it was unfamiliar — blue, stamped with the royal lily, not the dragon's maw. He saw me looking and, for some reason, looked away.

"You're ahead of the term," I said.

He stood. His legs had gone numb, and he shifted his weight, flexing his fingers in the practiced way of men who must not let their hands be seen to tremble.

"There has been no snow yet," I said — echoing what I had repeated to myself all night on the road. "The judge set the term for the first snowfall. I remember."

"The term has been changed," he said, and his voice was level, which was worse than shouting. "The royal court has extended the winter cycle by another year. Until the first thaw, not the first snowfall."

I did not move. Somewhere behind me, down in the lower town, a shutter slammed, and I heard a woman calling her daughter, and the daughter not answering, and it was so ordinary, so unbearably ordinary, that I made a fist and my nails bit into my palm.

"Show me."

He unfolded the parchment. I did not take it in my hands. I had no right to take a document from a scribe's hands until he offered it himself, and we both knew it. I read it sideways, over his shoulder, the letters jumping.

"...in light of new circumstances in the matter of the restoration of the seal of the House of Northern Fire... the term of confinement of the bearer is hereby extended until the full completion of the winter cycle... signed: Judge Lissa of the House of Grey Water..."

Lissa. His Lissa. The one who slept in his bed while I slept under a bridge.

"Where is he?" I asked.

Erwin did not answer, and that was answer enough.

I stepped through. The guards parted, and one of them looked at my bare feet, and I gathered the hem out of habit, and the fabric cracked, and I thought that I needed a dress, and that I would ask Marta for one, and that I would ask Marta for only the dress, nothing more.

The yard was empty. The firewood was stacked neatly, and a new steward I did not know stood on the porch, hands folded over his belly, watching me as I walked, and I walked slowly, so that he could see I was not hurrying, and that I was not afraid.

"My lady," he said, and the word *my lady* cost him an obvious effort.

I stopped in front of him. He was two heads taller than me, and his hands were red, and I thought that he probably did the laundry, and that he did not recognize me, and that I did not recognize him either, and that perhaps that was for the best.

"Lord Darven is in the great hall," he forced out. "A guest from the Winter Branch is there as well."

The guest. Inara. The one who lay in my bed while I lay under a bridge.

I nodded. Thought that I ought to wash, and decided I would not. Thought that I ought to put on stockings, and decided I would not. Walked up to the door, and the steward did not step aside, and I squeezed past sideways, and the fabric at my shoulder tore, and I felt the cold air lick my skin, and I thought that this must be the shame they had spoken of, only I had not recognized it until now.

The corridor smelled of tallow and smoked fish, and I knew that smell, and it hit the bridge of my nose, and I forced myself to breathe evenly. Around the corner I could hear voices — a man's, unfamiliar, and a woman's, soft, with a rasp to it. Inara. And between them, in the silence, his breathing, which I would have known from a thousand.

I stopped. Pressed my palm to the wall, and the stone was warm, and I thought that behind that wall there was probably a flue, and that someone had probably just lit it, and that it was probably he who had ordered it lit.

Erwin caught up with me. He stood quietly at my back, and I heard the rustle of his quill on paper, and I knew he was recording everything, and I knew I was grateful to him for it, and I knew I would never thank him for it.

"Do they know?" I asked, without turning.

"The guest — yes," he answered, after a pause. "The lord — no."

I nodded. Took my hand from the wall, and a warm print was left on my palm, and I closed my fingers around it, and the warmth stayed inside, and I went on, toward the door of the great hall, and the door was not locked, and I thought that perhaps it was an invitation, or perhaps it was a trap, and that in this castle there had long been no difference between the two.

I pushed the door and went in, without waiting to be invited.

The great hall was overheated, and it brought on an ache at my temples at once, the way it does when you have stared into snow too long. To the right, against the far wall, stood a long table laid for two — plates, goblets, a carafe of something dark — and I felt my jaw tighten. To the left, by the hearth, three people sat in a half-circle: an old man with eyes blood-red from a cold, a woman with a neck so thin it seemed her head was held on by a thread, and another, younger, with a wart on his cheek that bounced when he chewed. I did not know them by face, but I knew them by voice — the very elders who three years ago had voted to strike me from the line's book.

Inara stood at the window. She was paler than I remembered, and shadows lay under her eyes, and her belly under the grey dress had begun to round, and my gaze lingered there before I could stop it, and she caught it, and her fingers settled over the fabric, as if to cover it.

Darven sat at the head of the table. He did not rise. That mattered — he could have stood, and did not, and I read in it everything he wanted to say to me, and everything he could not say. He wore the same grey shirt he had worn that morning, when I had seen him through the window across the road, and I thought that he had not had time to change, or had not wished to, and that either way it was equally bad.

"Lady Astrid," said the old man with the red eyes, and the word **lady** came out of his mouth as if he were tasting rotten fish. "We did not expect you so early."

"I am no lady," I answered, and my voice sounded steadier than I had expected. "I am a guest with a seal. Let us leave it at that."

The elder exchanged a glance with the woman. The wart on the younger man's cheek twitched.

"A guest," the woman repeated, and there was so much venom in her voice that I wondered how she was still upright. "With another woman's seal on another woman's wrist. In another woman's dress."

I looked at my wrist. The sleeve had ridden up when I pushed the door, and the thin white line of a scar was visible, and along it, as if alive, crept a fine red thread, and I understood that the seal had woken, and that they could see it, and that I could no longer hide it, even if I wanted to.

"The seal was returned by the court," I said. "By law."

"The law," Darven cut in, and his voice was that very one, low, with the rasp at the consonants that had once made my knees go weak. "The law has been extended. Until the thaw, Astrid. Not the first snowfall."

I turned to him slowly. He was not looking at me — he was looking at his hands, at the carafe, at the table, at everything except me, and I knew his way: when he was ashamed, he hid his eyes, and once I had mistaken that for indifference, and it had made me a fool.

"You knew," I said. Did not ask.

At last he raised his gaze. Grey, almost white eyes, and in them there was neither anger nor remorse — only weariness — and I thought that three years was a long time even for him.

"I learned yesterday," he answered. "Lissa sent a rider. There was no time."

"No time for what?"

He did not answer. The old man grunted, and I heard the wart on the younger man's cheek click against his teeth.

"No time to warn me," I finished for him. "Of course. As always."

Inara coughed. Softly, into her fist, and I saw her shoulders shudder, and she pressed her palm to her belly, and I thought that she was probably cold too, and that she too had probably not been warned, and that, it turned out, the two of us had more in common than I would have liked.

"My lord," she said, and her voice was steady, but the last word broke. "May I sit down? I am unwell."

Darven stood. At last. In a single motion, the way men stand who are used to obeying the crown, not their wives, and I felt something inside me pull, old, familiar, and I crushed it down as I always did.

He pulled out a chair for her. Not for me — for her. And it was that same chair, oak, with the high back, in which I had sat three years ago when I received visitors, and I understood that he had not done it on purpose, and that only made it worse.

"Sit," he threw at me across the table. "And listen."

I did not sit. I went to the carafe, poured myself a drink into his goblet, because there were plates only for two, and drank it down without asking. The wine was sour, and it stung my nose, and I thought that it was probably cheap, and that for me he grudged even the cheap.

"I am listening," I said, wiping my lips with the back of my hand. "Speak."

The elder with the red eyes cleared his throat.

"The Council of Houses will convene at midwinter," he began. "Until then you will remain in the castle. In the capacity of... guests."

"A guest," I corrected. "Not guests."

The woman with the thin neck sniffed.

"A guest," the old man agreed. "With a seal. That grants you the right to enter the court hall, to demand an accounting from the steward, and to summon witnesses. It does not grant you the right to interfere in the affairs of the line."

"I know what the seal grants me," I answered. "I spent three years reading the laws under a bridge while you drank sour wine in here."

The silence struck like a blow. The wart on the younger man's cheek froze, and he stopped chewing.

Darven watched me, and for the first time that morning I caught his eye, and there was something in it I had not seen before — not fear, not anger, but a heavy, grey exhaustion — and I thought that perhaps he too had not slept, and that perhaps beyond that wall, in his rooms, the stove had been lit as well, and that perhaps there was a reason.

"Erwin," I called, without turning.

The scribe stepped forward from behind the door, where, as it turned out, he had been standing the whole time, and I heard the rustle of his quill.

“Record this,” I said. “Astrid of the House of Northern Fire, guest and bearer of the seal, demands of the elders an accounting of the expenditures of the castle kitchens for the past three years. The right to demand this is granted under the law of the winter cycle, article four, paragraph concerning the maintenance of the bearer.”

The old man choked. The woman sprang up, and her thin neck stretched taut as a string.

“You dare not,” she hissed.

“I dare,” I answered. “I was silent for three years. Now I want to know where my money went.”

Darven slowly lowered himself back into the chair. I saw the knuckles of his fingers go white on the armrest, and I thought that he was about to say *go*, or *enough*, or *Astrid*, and I knew in advance which of those words would wound me most, and I was ready for it, and from being ready I grew so sick I nearly swayed.

He said nothing. He only looked at Inara, and Inara lowered her eyes, and her fingers settled over her belly again, and I thought that she too was probably counting the price of silence in this castle, and that her price, probably, was different.

I finished the wine. Set the goblet down on the table — not on a tray, but straight onto the wood — and it gave a dull thud, and the echo ran through the hall, and I turned, and walked to the door, and the door was still unlocked, and behind it stood Erwin with his quill in hand, and I passed him, and he recorded this too, and I knew he would.

I had not taken five steps down the corridor when, behind me, a chair scraped.

“Astrid.”

The voice was low, that very one, with the rasp on the consonants, and I felt the scar under my sleeve twitch, as if someone had run a cold fingernail across it. I stopped. Did not turn. Because if I turned, he would see that my eyelid had fluttered, and I did not want that, and did not want him to know what I did not want.

“What?” I threw over my shoulder.

Footsteps. Heavy, uneven, and I heard him veering slightly to one side, as if going around the table, as if going around Inara, as if going around something else, and I counted the steps, because counting steps was easier than thinking.

He stopped two paces behind my back. I felt the distance on my skin — between my shoulder blades it grew warmer — and I knew his habit of standing too close for a stranger and too far for a former husband.

“The seal,” he said quietly. “It has woken.”

“I know,” I answered. “I am wearing it.”

“It burns. On me.”

I turned slowly. He stood with his right hand hanging at his side, fingers open, and on the back of it, at the base of the thumb, I saw a thin red line that had not been there the day before, and it pulsed in the same rhythm as my scar, and I understood what it meant, and from understanding my mouth went dry.

“The law of blood,” I said. “If the bearer suffers, so does the holder. I spent three years forgetting it. You, it seems, did not.”

He closed his hand into a fist. The red line sank under his skin, and he winced, and I caught myself taking a step toward him, and I stopped myself, and that step I had not taken was louder than any word.

“You have not eaten today,” he said. It sounded like an accusation.

“And you?” I asked, and immediately regretted it, because it sounded like concern, and concern was not something I could allow him.

He did not answer. He only looked at my wrist, at the sleeve that had slipped, at the thin red thread creeping along the scar, and I realized suddenly that he had never before seen it wake, because three years ago I had hidden it, and three years under a bridge there had been no one to see.

"You need food," he repeated. "And a room of your own."

"The room by the kitchen," I said. "I have already been told."

"It is not suitable."

"It is. For me. Not for you."

He raised his eyes. Grey eyes, tired, with red threads in them, and there was something in them I did not want to see, and I looked away, and that was a mistake, because he took it for weakness and stepped closer, and I caught the smell of his cloak — smoke, cold, his skin — and my throat went tight.

"Astrid," he said, and his voice broke, and it was the first time he had spoken my name in three years, and I knew that he had heard it too, and that it did not make it easier for him.

"Lord Darven," I corrected. "If you are finished, I will go."

He did not step back. His shadow fell over my shoes, and I stared at that shadow and thought that three years ago I would have lifted my hand and touched his cheek myself, and now I could not lift my hand, because it would have touched him, and I did not want that, and did not want him to know what I did not want.

"Shall I bring you soup?" he asked, and it sounded so wretched that I almost pitied him, and from pity I nearly agreed, and he could not read the agreement, and I could see him trying.

"Send Marta," I said. "And have the stove lit. The room is cold."

I turned and walked on. Halfway down the corridor I stopped, because my legs would not hold me, and I leaned my shoulder against the wall, and the wall was warm, and I remembered that somewhere behind it lay his rooms, and I pulled my shoulder away, and went on, and my back burned, and I knew he was watching me go, and I did not turn.

The corridor behind me stayed quiet for a long time, and that quiet was worse than his footsteps had been. I made it to my door, pushed it open with my shoulder and went in, and the room met me with cold and the smell of someone else's furniture, and I realized I had forgotten what the castle smelled like from inside when you were its guest and not its mistress. The stove was unlit. The candle on the table had burned down to the very base, the wick drowning in its own wax, and I did not bother to fix it, because in the dark it was easier not to see the wall behind which, I knew, he was standing now.

I sat down on the bed still in the borrowed dress, without taking off my shoes, and brought my left wrist up to my eyes. The scar burned steadily, in the same rhythm as the red line on his hand, and I pressed my palm to my chest and felt beneath it a second heartbeat — his, muffled, stubborn — and from that my nose stung, and I clenched my teeth in anger, and the teeth ground in the silence, and I heard someone pass behind the wall, and the footsteps were uneven, and I thought that he was probably counting his steps too, and losing count, and from that thought I grew so sick I stood up and went to the door, and the door was locked only on my side, and that was right, and it was not enough.

A knock came a few minutes later. Soft, twice, and I recognized the manner — Marta had knocked just that way three years ago, when she came to say that supper was served, and I had asked *who*, although I knew, and she had answered *the keeper of the keys, Marta, my lady*, and I had opened, and in her hands had been a bowl, and the smell from the bowl had been so strong that my stomach clenched, because I had not eaten since morning, and morning had been two days ago.

Behind Marta stood a servant with an armful of firewood. Marta looked at me, then at the unlit stove, then at me again, and said nothing, and that silence spoke more eloquently for me than any question.

"The lord ordered it?" I asked, and my voice came out steadier than I had expected.

"The lord ordered it," Marta nodded. "And he sent this as well."

She drew from behind her back a folded cloak. That very one, his, grey, with a black trim, and I recognized it by the seam at the shoulder, which I had mended myself, back there, in the other life,

when I had believed we had a shared future, and from that I took the cloak carefully, the way one takes another person's evidence.

"He said — have the stove lit," Marta added quietly. "And he said that if my lady was cold, this would be the last thing he would send, not the first."

I set the cloak down on the bed. Put the bowl on the stool. The servant was already lighting the stove, and at the first flame a crackling ran through the room, and I stood and watched the wood catch, and thought that it was his fire, in my stove, and that I had not asked for it, and that it was too late to refuse, and that too late was, in general, the story of us.

"Marta," I called, when the servant had gone.

"Yes, my lady."

"Where is the guest from the Winter Branch now?"

Marta lowered her eyes. I saw her dry fingers work at the edge of her apron, and that was her only sign that she did not wish to answer, and I waited anyway, and she knew I would.

"In the western bedchamber," she said at last. "On the second floor. The lord ordered her not to leave until morning."

"He locked her in?"

"No. He asked. She agreed."

I nodded. Went to the table and took the bowl. The soup was hot, fatty, with carrots, and I knew the recipe, because three years ago I had cooked it myself, and from knowing it my hand trembled, and the spoon clinked against the rim, and Marta pretended not to notice.

"Thank you," I said. "You may go."

Marta did not go. She stood in the doorway, and I raised my head, and she was looking at my wrist, at the scar, and for the first time all evening I saw something on her face besides her habitual caution, and it was recognition, and I understood that she had known about the scar before, and that she had been the first to see it, there, at the gate, and that it had been she who had called Erwin, and that she might be the only person in this castle who was glad I had come back, and from that thought my nose stung, and I lowered my head back to the bowl, and Marta went out, and the door closed behind her, and I was alone, and the scar on my wrist pulsed in time to his steps beyond the wall, and I counted those steps, and lost count, and counted again.

Chapter 2. The Scar That Remembers

The gates stood wide open, and that was worse than if they had been locked. A locked gate could be read as a refusal. An open gate is an invitation, and I have never liked being invited back to the place I was thrown out of.

Erwin was waiting by the gate. Not Darven, not Martha, not the steward — a clerk with a quill tucked behind his ear and a scroll in his hand, the royal seal still bright on the ribbon. I stopped three paces from him and did not greet him. He did not greet me either. We looked at each other the way people look who have met before and both wish they had not.

"The cycle has been extended," he said at last. "One year. By order of the court. Signed — Lissa of the House of Grey Water, Overseer of Compliance."

I took the scroll. The wax was still warm, as if it had just been lifted from the flame, and when my fingers settled on the seal, the scar beneath my sleeve twitched. Not pain, not sharply — just the way an old nerve twitches, the kind that remembers more than its owner wishes it did.

"One year," I repeated.

"One year," Erwin confirmed. "The count now runs to the first thaw, not the first snow. There are three ways to break it. A voluntary surrender by the bearer, a public hearing before the Council of Houses, or an admission by the line that the seal was stolen. The third path," he said, watching me very carefully, "unmakes Lord Darven as a lord. That is why he is home today."

I nodded and walked toward the door. The black dress they had lent me in the lower town fit as though it had been made for someone else and I had squeezed into it on a dare. The hem dragged

on the stone, the bodice pulled across my chest, the fabric sagged between my shoulder blades, and I knew that anyone who looked would see exactly how little I belonged here. I did not care.

The steward met me in the lower corridor. He stood in the very spot where, three years ago, he had not deigned to meet me at all, and he looked at me the way one looks at an uninvited relative who has returned for a funeral.

"Guest with the seal," he said. "A room by the kitchen. Two sets of bedding. The shutters close at night. The kitchen — by the back door only."

"Keys," I said.

He blinked.

"The key to the room. To the shutters. And to the kitchen archive."

"The kitchen archive," he repeated, and I watched the muscle in his jaw work. "Guests are not given a key to the archive."

"Guests aren't," I agreed. "But the keeper of the seal for the winter cycle is. I can summon Erwin and ask him to read you the relevant passage."

He stared at me for a long moment. Then he reached into his pocket, drew out a ring of keys, slid two from it, and set them on the tray. The keys were copper, old, stamped with the sigil of House Northern Fire — the dragon curled into a ring that I had once worn at my belt and that Judge Lissa had removed from me when she pronounced the divorce.

I took the keys. They were warm. I could have sworn they were warm from more than his hand.

Behind me, footsteps — heavy, uneven, the kind that come from a man who is counting his steps and losing count. I did not turn. I knew whose they were. I knew it not by the sound but by the way the keys in my palm grew hotter, and by the way the scar beneath my sleeve drew tight, and by the way Erwin at my back suddenly stopped breathing.

"Astrid," he said.

I turned. He stood at the far end of the corridor, in his dark coat, no cloak, face heavy with sleeplessness, and his hands were empty, and that was the worst of it, because his hands had always been occupied — a glove, a lead, a scroll, a blade — and now they hung at his sides like a man who had forgotten what he came for.

"Lord Darven," I said.

He flinched. Barely, but I saw it. I saw him swallow, the working of his throat, the muscle that leapt along his jaw, the way his gaze dropped from my face to my hands, to the keys I held, and how something shifted beneath his cuff on the same wrist as mine.

"The keys," he said.

"The keys," I agreed. "Mine."

I turned and walked down the corridor. Past him. By half a pace. I felt his warmth through that half a pace, his breath, the smell of his clothes — the one I had not been able to forget in three years and hated myself for every morning beneath the bridge. He did not step forward. He did not step across my path. He simply stood, and I walked, and at one point our sleeves — mine black and borrowed, his dark and of his house — almost brushed.

I reached the turn and stopped. I did not look back. I laid my palm against the wall, where the stone was warm, and I felt something beneath my hand, beneath the skin, beneath the scar, beneath the dragon's mark, slowly waking that I had counted as dead for three years.

Behind me, silence. No footsteps, no breath, no voice. Only the warm stone under my palm and the keys in my fist, and somewhere at the end of the corridor, a man standing, watching me go, and I knew it, and he knew I knew, and that was the first thing between us in three years that had been said aloud.

The corridor past the turn stood empty, and that too was worse than if someone had been in it. News traveled through the castle faster than any messenger, and by the time I reached the kitchen, every servant knew, every stable hand, every laundress at the well, and each of them knew precisely

enough to look at me as though I had come back from the dead and had not yet decided whether to stay.

The kitchen smelled of cabbage and smoke. The cauldrons stood where they always had, and the table at which I had once cut bread for twenty stood where it always had, only now Tobin sat at it, a bowl in front of him, eating as though he had not eaten in three days, and I understood that he probably had not eaten in three days.

"Guest with the seal," he said without looking up. "Already heard. Got the key to the archive. Heard that too."

I stopped in the doorway and looked at him. He was thinner than he had been under the bridge, and dirtier, and his eyes were red — whether from the wind or from three nights of cheap beer and waiting to be paid for the seal, I could not tell. He did not raise his head. He knew I was watching, and he did not want me to see his face, and that was perhaps the only honest thing he had done in a day.

"I have it," I said. "And the key to the shutters. And the room."

"Mm."

"And the right to sit in council. And the right to call witnesses. And the right to block any of the lord's dealings without my signature."

He stopped chewing. He raised his head. He looked at me the way one looks at a person who has just said aloud what both of them were thinking, and at which both of them were suddenly afraid.

"So that means," he said slowly, "you're with the castle now."

"I'm with the seal," I said. "The seal is with the castle. The castle is with the lord. The lord is with me, until I decide otherwise."

Tobin set down the spoon. He looked at the bowl, at me, at the door behind which a floorboard had just creaked, and I knew he was counting who might have been listening, and I knew he was counting correctly.

"Pay me," he said quietly. "For the return. We had a deal."

"We had a deal that you would return the seal through the court," I said. "You returned it. The court sat. The cycle was extended. The payment is not mine to give. The payment is the Crown's. If you want a place in the kitchen, go to the lord and ask. Only think first about what you will say to him when he asks why you sold me my own seal for the silver you drank last night."

He went white. Not red — white, so that even his lips turned gray, and for the first time in two days I thought that Tobin might not be as simple as he was pretending, and that his fear of me was not the fear of a beggar before a former mistress but the fear of a man who knew he had been caught at two ends, not one.

I went to the table, set the key to the archive on the edge of his bowl, and made for the back door. At the door a voice caught me — not Tobin's, another, quiet, cracked.

"Astrid."

I turned. A woman stood in the kitchen doorway. A stranger. No — not a stranger. Pregnant, her hands folded over her belly, in an expensive but rumpled dress, with a face that wore everything at once: weariness, fear, anger, and something else I had no name for, because I had never seen that expression on the face of a woman who had walked into my house.

"Inara," I said.

"Of the Winter Branch," she corrected, and her voice faltered. "A guest. Lord Darven promised —"

"Lord Darven," I said, "can promise whatever he likes. The room by the kitchen is mine. The key is mine. The right of entry is mine. The child is not mine. As for the rest," I looked her in the eye, and she looked away first, "welcome to a house that is expecting you less than you think."

I went out. Behind me Inara began to weep — quietly, the way women weep who have long since unlearned weeping aloud. I did not turn. I walked to my room, unlocked the door, went in, closed it, and turned the key. Through the wall I heard footsteps — those same uneven ones — and

I sat on the bed, and laid my palm against the warm stone, and the seal beneath my sleeve answered, and for the first time I thought that perhaps I had come back for a reason.

The footsteps beyond the wall did not stop. Heavy, uneven, with pauses — as though a man were counting to ten and losing the count. I knew that rhythm. I had known it once, when we shared a bed and I woke to him rising in the night to pace along the window, unable to sleep, unwilling to say why. Now there was a wall between us, and a door with my lock, and a key in my fist, and that was supposed to mean it was over. The footsteps were not over.

I rose from the bed, went to the wall, and laid my palm against the stone. It was warm. Not from the stove — the stove in my room had not been lit. Warm from the other side, from his. Beneath my palm the scar on my wrist twitched, alive, and I felt something hot roll slowly under the skin, as though someone had drawn the tip of a blade along an old burn, not to wound but to remind. The seal of House Northern Fire. Mine. His. Ours — like a scar that cannot be cut in two, only acknowledged.

Beyond the wall a floorboard creaked closer to the door. Then silence. Then his voice, low, not to me, to someone in the corridor — perhaps Martha, perhaps the errand boy.

“The stove in her room — has it been lit?”

“No, my lord.”

“Why not.”

“The steward said there was little firewood, and the guest did not ask.”

Silence. I heard him exhale — not through his nose, through his mouth, the way a man breathes when he is teaching himself not to raise his voice. Then his voice again, level, with that small crack on the last word he had never noticed and I had always noticed.

“Bring wood. And light it. Now.”

The footsteps on the other side moved toward the door. I lifted my palm from the stone and sat back on the bed, and the cloak — his, dark, bearing the crest he had stripped from his shoulders in front of me at the threshold — lay beside me, on my shoulder, and smelled of smoke and cold, and I hated myself for how precisely I recognized it. Behind the door other footsteps came, hurried, and a minute later someone knocked with careful restraint.

“Guest,” said Martha’s voice. “I’ve brought wood. May I?”

“You may.”

She came in, an armful of logs — old birch, smelling the way a house smells where children live. I stepped back without meaning to. Martha was small, silver-haired, a ring of keys at her belt, and she did not look at me but at my wrist, at the place beneath the black, borrowed sleeve where something had moved, and I saw that she had seen it, and that she would say nothing, and that she would remember everything.

She lit the stove in four strokes — deftly, the way someone does it who has done it a thousand times. The fire caught at once. The stone under my palm grew warmer. Martha stood, brushed her hands, and looked at me.

“The lord commanded it.”

“I heard.”

“He did not go to bed,” she said, and her voice held something I had not expected. Not sympathy. Weariness. The weariness of a woman who has served in this house for thirty years and knows that her master does not sleep when his conscience does not sleep.

“Neither did I,” I said.

She nodded and left. I closed the door, turned the key, and went to the stove. I crouched and held out my hands. The warmth came from below, from the fire, and from the wall, and from the stone under my hand, and for the first time in three days I felt that I had a place I could sit in, and that the place was mine. That he had not given it to me. That the court had. That the difference between those two things was the price he would now pay, whether he wished to or not.

The footsteps on the other side of the wall returned. This time they did not stop. They moved evenly, as though the man had at last stopped counting and was simply walking, simply being in the same night as I, and between us there was only stone, and a lock, and the seal that lay warm as a coin beneath my sleeve and waited. I pulled off one boot, set the other beside it, and lay down without undressing, on top of the blanket. I put the cloak under my head. The smell of his smoke was the last thing I breathed in, and I thought that in the morning I would return it, and that he knew I would return it, and that we would both pretend it meant nothing, and that it meant everything.

Morning came early, with that gray light that in the castle settles on stone before it settles on snow. I woke because it had gone quiet on the other side of the wall. The footsteps had stopped. No steps, no breath, no creak of a board — nothing, and that silence was worse than the footsteps, because it meant he had either gone or was standing at the wall and not moving, and I did not know which was worse.

I rose, washed with the cold water from the pitcher, pulled on the borrowed black dress — the one I had come in, from someone else's shoulders, tight under the arms — and went to the door. The cloak lay on the bed where I had folded it the night before. I picked it up, shook it out, and slung it over my shoulders. The cloth smelled of smoke and cold and something else I refused to name. The lock on the door clicked, the key went into my pocket, and I stepped into the corridor.

He was standing at his own door. Not mine — his, three paces of stone away, in the very shirt he had worn through the night, no cloak, his hair fallen over his forehead, and the face of a man who had not slept. In his hand was a cup, and it smelled not of wine but of hot water with a drop of something bitter — I knew the smell, it was what the quarry workers used to blunt sleeplessness, and Darven had never drunk that muck in his life, and now he did, and I thought that three years was long enough to learn to drink what once you would have poured into the fire.

He saw me. I saw him. Between us lay three paces of stone and three years of silence. The cloak on my shoulders was his. The shirt on his shoulders was his. The seal beneath my sleeve was ours, and it twitched, alive, the moment he drew breath, and I felt the hot ring beneath the skin tighten, and I knew he had felt it too, because the fingers around his cup went white.

"The cloak," I said, and I did not move.

He looked at me. Not at the cloak — at me, at my face, at my hands, at the place where his seal lived beneath the black, borrowed sleeve, and I saw his gaze linger there, saw him swallow, saw his throat move, and for the first time I thought that he did not know what to do with his hands, and that was new, because once he had always known.

"Keep it," he said.

I did not move.

"I'll return it," I said.

"I said — keep it."

It was his voice, the commanding one, the one he had used to give orders, and I waited for him to hear it himself, to hear the voice give way, to hear the last word fall into a plea, and he heard it, I saw it in the way he looked away and raised the cup to his mouth, and his hand was shaking. I stood and watched him drink, and the cloak warmed my shoulders, and I did not give it back, and he did not ask again, and between us in the corridor hung that silence which belongs to people who were once one thing and now do not know how to be two.

"Inara arrived," he said, not looking at me. "Last evening. From the Winter Branch. She is pregnant, and she is in your old room, and I did not have time to move her elsewhere, and I —"

He stopped. I saw him search for a word, and not find it, and not invent one, and that was worse than anything he could have said.

"I know," I said. "I saw her. In the kitchen."

I finished the porridge, wiped the bowl with my finger, and set it on the edge of the table. Brinn snatched it up at once, and I saw his fingers tremble — not from the weight, from my gaze. He was

staring at my sleeve, at the place where the seal lay warm as a coin beneath the black fabric, and I knew that by midday he would have carried it through the lower kitchen, that the seal was alive, that it answered to the lord, and that this was perhaps the most important piece of news of the winter.

The steward appeared as I was rising from the table. I knew his walk by the creak in his knee — he had always favored the right leg after that business on the hunt that no one in the castle spoke of aloud but everyone remembered. He came into the kitchen not as a master — as a man who had been given an order and did not know how to carry it out, and for the first time I thought that perhaps he was not cruel, only tired, and that those were different things.

“My lady,” he said, and caught himself, because the word **my lady** no longer fit me, and **guest** he could not say, because a guest does not demand an accounting, and I now could. I saw him run through every option in his head and find none.

“Lord Darven asked me to tell you,” he corrected himself, and his voice steadied, “that a room by the kitchen will be made ready for you. There is no spare bedchamber in the castle. The room is next to his quarters, through the wall. Separate,” he added, and looked me in the eye, and I understood that he had added that word not for me but for himself, so that I would see that he remembered what **separate** meant, and that once, in this house, it had meant something else.

“Show me,” I said.

He led me down a corridor I had once known by heart, every flagstone beneath my feet, every window, every torch bracket, and I followed him and did not recognize the castle, and it was the same, and I was different. He opened the door, and I saw a bed, and a stove, and a basin of water, and a chair, and a wardrobe, and a window set deep in the wall, through which a slice of courtyard and a slice of sky were visible, and I understood that this was the very room I had once refused to live in, because it had been too small for a lady of the house, and was now large enough for a beggar with a seal.

“A lock on the door,” I said, and it was not a request, and the steward heard it, because he looked at me the way one looks at a man who has just discovered he has a knife, and who has just turned his back.

“It is not customary,” he said carefully.

“It is now,” I said. “The seal gives me the right to come and go alone. The lock will be on my side of the door. Not on both. I will have it today, or tomorrow I will go to Clerk Erwin and ask him to enter in the register that the Lord of Northern Fire refused the bearer of the seal her right to a private entry. It will cost him a vote in the Council of Houses, and you know that better than I.”

He was silent. I saw him count — not coins, not days, losses: whose voice in the Council, whose supper, whose sleep, whose lock, whose door. Then he nodded and left, and within the hour a key was brought to me — small, copper, stamped with the sigil I had once worn at my belt and then lost, and which had come back to me after three years, through a court, through a stranger's ruling. I took it in my hand, and the metal was warm, and I thought that perhaps dozens of hands had held it before mine, and that this, perhaps, was the price he would now pay — not in gold, not in blood, but in the warmth of strangers' hands on my skin.

The key slipped into the cloak's pocket. The cloak was his. The key was mine. I went to the wall, laid my palm against it, and felt — not warmth, but the absence of cold, and those were different things, and for the first time in three days I understood that I was in a house that was bound to maintain me, and that it was neither a kindness, nor a command, nor forgiveness, but the law, and that the law, unlike the man on the other side of the wall, did not know how to break off mid-sentence, and that this, perhaps, was the only thing I could rely on today.

“She will get nothing,” he said, and it was no longer about the bedchamber, and we both knew it.

I turned and went toward the stairs. Halfway down the corridor I stopped, because my legs would no longer hold me, and I leaned my shoulder against the wall, and the cloak slipped, and I pulled it back into place, and behind me it was quiet, and I knew he was standing and watching, and

that he would not approach, and that I would not turn, and that this was the first time in three years that we were both silent about what needed to be said aloud.

I went on. The kitchen smelled of cabbage and smoke, and Brinn, the errand boy, flushed and set a bowl before me without meeting my eyes, and I knew the news had already reached the lower town, and that by midday it would reach the market, and that by evening the whole city would know that the former wife had come back, and that the lord had given her his cloak, and that the guest from the Winter Branch stood in the corridor with her hands on her belly, and that the seal beneath my sleeve had woken, and that the lord had not slept all night, and that this, perhaps, was a beginning, and perhaps — an end.

Chapter 3. Pregnant at the Threshold

The footsteps in the corridor were not his. Not heavy, the way Tobin's were, not even, the way Martha's were — cautious, with pauses on every other floorboard, as though the person had grown used to silence and no longer knew whether they were allowed to break it. I stood at the door of my room, the one on the other side of the wall from his chambers, and listened as the sound drew closer, and thought: if it's Martha with the keys, I'll ask about the lock; if it's Brynn with a note, I'll throw it away unread; if it's Darven, I won't open it.

It wasn't Martha. Inara came around the corner.

She was paler than I remembered. Her hair pulled back carelessly, a cloak thrown over her shoulders, beneath it a traveling dress of thin wool, and beneath that dress, if you looked, you could already see the belly. Not large. Only a hint that something was there, that it would be here soon, and that the whole castle already knew about it, everyone but me, because I wasn't supposed to be the first to know.

She stopped three paces away. She didn't greet me. She didn't look at the door behind me, though that was where she'd been heading; I could tell from the way her gaze slid over the handle and pulled back.

"I thought you were still in the city," she said. Her voice was quiet, level, but at the very end of *city* something wavered. Not the word — the air around it.

I didn't answer right away. I needed the time to count her face and convince myself I wasn't inventing what I saw. There were shadows under her eyes that hadn't been there in winter, when we stood on opposite sides of the fireplace in his study. Then she'd smiled at me, and I smiled back, and we both knew it wasn't a smile. Now there was no smile. There was exhaustion, and something like fear — but the fear wasn't for her. It was for the one under her heart.

"You weren't expected back this early," I said. It was true. They'd told me in the kitchen she wouldn't return until evening, which meant she'd come sooner, and someone had brought her, and someone had met her, and someone had walked her past the guards without stopping.

She lowered her eyes. Her fingers tightened on the lapel of the cloak, and I noticed that on her ring finger there was no ring. *That* ring. The one they'd promised her. The one they'd promised me, back when I still believed promises meant something.

"I had to come back," she said. "This is my home."

My home. The corridor was narrow, stone, smelling of damp and old wood, and this house had once been mine, and his bedroom had been mine, and his bed had been mine, and his child was supposed to have been mine, and none of it had happened. She said *my home* the way you test a word aloud, and the way it sounded made me believe it: she didn't believe it either.

"In there," I said, and nodded toward the door behind me. "Your room. The same one as in winter. No one's taken it."

She flinched. Not at the words — at the fact that I'd said them calmly. She'd expected something else. She'd expected me to grab the handle, or block the door, or remind her who had been there first, and she'd been ready for it; I could see it in the way her shoulders were braced for a blow, and in the way she didn't step back, though she wanted to.

I stepped away from the door. Not for her — because I needed to get to the kitchen, and because I had no intention of standing in the corridor waiting for her to decide whether to thank me or hate me for stepping aside.

“Astrid,” she said after me. I stopped, but didn’t turn. “I didn’t know they’d return the seal so soon. I thought I had time.”

I stood and listened to her breathing. It was catching, and not from climbing the stairs. It was from the fact that she’d said *I didn’t know*, and now she was waiting to see if I’d accept it, and I hadn’t accepted it, and I hadn’t refused it, and that made it worse for her.

“Time,” I said. “You had three years.”

And I walked down the corridor, not looking back. Behind me I heard the door open, heard her go in, heard it close, and after that there was silence, and in that silence I thought for the first time that she was afraid too. Not of me. Of what would happen when the child was born, and when the seal stayed with me, and when the castle remained mine by right and hers only by a promise no one had written down.

The kitchen met me with steam and voices. Three cooks stood at the table and, with me there, fell silent — not at once, but with that half-word delay that is worse than any silence. I went to my place at the far wall, to the stool they’d set out for me yesterday, and sat. The stool was low, with a leg that wasn’t its own, and a wood chip had been wedged under it so it wouldn’t wobble. Someone had wedged it, and I didn’t know who, and that got to me more than I’d expected.

The head cook — the one who had come as a girl in Darven’s time — set a bowl in front of me. Not the kind they carried out to servants — an earthenware one, with a rim, the kind they served at table in the hall. I looked at the bowl, then at her. She looked away. Not from shame — from the fact that shame wasn’t part of her job, and she didn’t want to show it in front of the others.

“Shchi,” she said shortly. “Eat, my lady.”

My lady. The word fell into the bowl like a stone. I didn’t correct her. I knew that if I did, it would get worse, because the correction would mean I’d taken it seriously, and I couldn’t take it seriously: I was in a stranger’s dress, with a stranger’s name on my arm, sitting on a stool with a chip wedged under it.

I ate. The shchi was hot, and it smelled of cabbage and bay leaf, and it was the same smell as in my own kitchen three years ago, when I was the one who decided how much bay to put in, or whether to put any in at all. I finished. I left the bowl at the edge of the table, and the head cook took it without a word, and I noticed she took it with the rim, the way you handle the masters’ crockery.

“Inara’s back,” said the second cook, the young one, the one who always said too much in my presence. “With the babe.”

She said *with the babe* as if the babe were already in a cradle, and not under a heart. I stood. The stool creaked beneath me, and the sound was louder than I’d wanted.

“Where is she now?” I asked.

“In her room,” the head cook answered. “The lord doesn’t know yet. Or he knows, but he hasn’t come down.”

I nodded and left. The corridor was colder than the kitchen, damp soaked into the stone, and I walked thinking that *the lord doesn’t know yet* wasn’t true, because in this castle the lord always knew first; he simply kept quiet longer than the rest. I walked toward the stairs, and at the turn I saw Brynn.

He stood against the wall, shoulder pressed to it, his hands in his pockets, looking as if someone had just struck him — not hard, just enough to make him understand they could. He saw me and flushed. His ears went red first, then his neck, then the place where a boy’s chest begins.

“My lady,” he said.

“What?” I said.

He pulled a folded note from his pocket. Held it out, not looking. I took it. The paper was thin, the kind used for travel, with a strange seal — not the palace's, not the castle's, but the kind they burn at waystations when they're economizing on good wax. I unfolded it.

"Lady Astrid. The seal is confirmed. The cycle has been extended by royal decree until the first spring. Your status is guest with seal, neither wife nor servant. You are permitted to enter the council and the archive. You are permitted to go down to the lower city without an escort. Scribe Ervin."

I read it twice. My mouth went dry. The cycle extended. Until the first spring. That meant the whole winter, and a stretch of spring besides, and in that time a child could be born, and raised, and announced, and everything they meant to do with my name could be done in time.

"Who gave it to you?" I asked.

"It came with the morning supply train," Brynn answered. "They said — into your own hands."

I folded the note. Held it. The paper was faintly warm from his pocket, and that warmth was someone else's, and I tucked it against my chest, under my clothes, to where the scar throbbed beneath my sleeve.

"Brynn," I said. "Did you know she was coming back?"

He nodded. Then shook his head. Then nodded again, and I understood that he had known, and that he'd been told to keep quiet, and that he hadn't been able to bear it and had told me, because saying it was easier than not saying it, and because nothing would happen to him if he did, and something would if he didn't, and he already understood that.

"Go," I said. "And if anyone asks — don't say you gave it to me."

He left. I stayed in the corridor alone, the note in my hand, the scar aching at my wrist, and somewhere beyond the wall, in the room that had been mine, sat a woman with my ring on a half-promise and my child on a half-term, and I knew that by evening I would have to go to Darven, and that I wouldn't go, and that he wouldn't come, and that we would both pretend I didn't know, and he didn't know, and that it didn't count either.

I stopped at the turn and pressed my palm to the wall. The stone was icy, and under my skin the scar answered, as if someone had drawn a fingernail along it from the inside. The note lay against my chest, and its warmth — someone else's, a boy's — was burning the skin beneath my ribs.

The door to the former bedroom was ajar. Not wide — a hand's width, just enough that I could see a strip of light and hear someone breathing inside. Evenly, with a whistle on the exhale, the way women breathe in the last months, when the child has already pushed up against the lungs. I knew that whistle. I'd heard it in women in labor in the lower city, and in Gareth's wife, and in three women I'd delivered in a ditch under a bridge, when one's waters had broken too early and there was no one there but me.

I pushed the door. Inara was sitting on the bed — **my** bed, the one where I'd spent my wedding night, and from which I'd been carried out in a single shift three years ago. Her dress was traveling gray, taken in at someone else's shoulders — not mine; she was broader in the bone, and the cloth hung on her like a sack, and that made her look not pregnant but simply gone soft. Her hair was tucked under a kerchief. Her hands on her belly, over the fabric, fingers laced so tight the knuckles had gone white.

She raised her head. Her eyes were dry and red, and it wasn't the redness of crying for show; it was the redness of having nothing left to weep, of sitting and staring at a wall, and the wall not answering.

"You came," she said. Her voice was steady, without a tremor, and that was worse than if she'd been shaking. "I thought you wouldn't."

I didn't answer. I was looking at her hands, at the white knuckles, at the way she held her belly — carefully and afraid — and I understood that she wasn't holding Darven's child. She was holding a child she had nowhere to put, because the castle wasn't her home, and his kin weren't her kin, and

no one had given her any vows, and there was only this — a stone room, a stranger's bed, and my scar at her door.

"You need a maid," I said. "And water. And clean linens."

She blinked. Then she closed her eyes and laughed, very quietly, and the laugh was the kind that made me look away.

"You came to ask whose it is," she said. "They all come to ask."

"No," I said. "I came to tell you there's hot water in the kitchen, and that if you give birth in this room alone, I'll be the one who delivers you. And I won't send for the lord. I'll send for Hella."

She opened her eyes. She looked at me, and for the first time I saw in her gaze not fear and not triumph, but a weariness so old and so deep that my own throat closed.

"You hate me," she said.

"Yes," I said. "And you hate me. And right now that doesn't matter. What matters is that you're sitting in my bedroom with my ring in the chest of drawers, and your water will break in a month, maybe two, and you have no one. And I won't be that no one. But I'll send for the one who will."

I went to the table, took the pitcher, sniffed. The water had gone stale, with a taste of stone. I poured it out the window, set the pitcher back. Inara watched my hands, and I could see her counting every movement, and that it hurt her, the way I did it — calmly, from habit, the way I had done it in this room a thousand times, when I still had the right.

"The ring," I said. "Where."

She nodded silently toward the chest. I went over, opened the top drawer. The ring was there — mine, thin, silver, with a carved serpent I'd chosen myself. I took it, turned it in my fingers. It was cold.

I put it back.

"Keep it," I said. "It's yours, for as long as you're here. We'll sort it out later."

I went to the door. I stopped on the threshold.

"Inara," I said, without turning. "If you tell me now that you love him, I'll leave. And there won't be any hot water."

The silence was long. Then she said:

"I'm afraid."

And I left. And I walked down the corridor, and under my arm the scar throbbed, and the note against my chest was warm, and I thought that there were now three women in the castle who were afraid, and one of them was me, and one of them was her, and the third was the one who wasn't born yet, who was only meant to be born, and that for her too I had nothing, only my hand, and a vow I had given no one, but which, for some reason, I was already keeping.

At the turn I stopped. Behind me, at the end of the corridor, I heard footsteps. Heavy, uneven, stumbling every third step. I didn't turn. I knew who it was, and I knew he knew I knew, and that we would both pretend we didn't hear each other, and that wouldn't count either.

But the scar under my sleeve burned as if someone had called me by name.

The footsteps drew closer. I could hear the way he set his feet down — heavily, as if the soles weren't stone but iron, and every flagstone of the corridor answered his weight as though he were dragging something I couldn't see but that he had been carrying for three years and couldn't put down. Then the footsteps stopped.

"You were with her," he said.

His voice sounded like that of people who have been silent a long time, and then open their mouths and forget why. I didn't turn. I was looking at the wall, and on the wall there was a slanting seam between the stones, and in that seam a dried spiderweb, and I was thinking that no one had cleared the web since the day they'd carried me out of there in a single shift, and that the maids should have cleared it, and that the maids hadn't, and that that meant the order not to clean this room had come from someone with the authority to give an order, and that I now knew exactly who.

"I was with her," I said. "And I brought her water."

“She didn’t ask for it.”

“She won’t ask. She’s sitting on my bed waiting for someone to come in and give her permission to breathe.”

The silence behind me was such that I could hear the wick crackling in the wall sconce, and somewhere below, in the kitchen, a door thud. Then he said:

“She came back from the Branch early. She was brought in during the night. I wasn’t told right away.”

I turned. Slowly, the whole of me, because my neck had gone stiff from holding it so straight, and because I needed to see his face, not his voice at my back. He stood three paces from me, in the half-dark of the corridor, and there were shadows under his eyes, and his cloak was thrown over one shoulder, and his right boot was buckled with the wrong clasp, and it was such a small thing, such a human thing, that my jaw clenched.

“You weren’t told,” I repeated. “Or you didn’t ask.”

He didn’t answer. That was the answer. I saw the muscle jump in his cheek, and saw him lower his hand, and saw his fingers curl into a fist and then uncurl at once, and saw him look past me, toward the half-open door of her room, and I understood — he was afraid to go in. Not because Inara was in there. Because the bed was in there, the one where he’d spent his first night with me, and now another woman sat on it, and under her heart there was a child, and he didn’t know whether he had the right to ask whose.

“She didn’t call for you,” I said. “And she didn’t call for me. She’s sitting and waiting, and the water in her pitcher tastes of stone, and no one has changed her linens in three days, and if you go in to her now she’ll think you’ve come for an answer, and she doesn’t have one. So don’t go in.”

He looked at me. For the first time that whole winter he looked at me as if I were not a guest with a seal, not a former wife, not a beggar in a borrowed dress, but a person who knew something he didn’t, and was ready to say it — but only if he asked the right way.

“What did you say to her,” he asked, and his voice caught on the last word, and I heard him choke on that caught voice, and heard him cough to hide it.

“That there’s hot water in the kitchen,” I answered. “And that I won’t send for you when she gives birth. I’ll send for Hella. And I also said that the ring in the chest of drawers is hers, for as long as she’s here. We’ll sort it out later.”

He nodded. Slowly, heavily, the way people nod when they’ve been handed a sentence, and they already knew it, but heard it for the first time all the same. Then he said:

“I didn’t know she was coming.”

“And I didn’t know you didn’t know,” I said. “And now we both know more than we wanted to.”

I went to my room. Past him, close to the wall, so my cloak wouldn’t brush his, and he didn’t move, and we passed each other the way people pass who were once one thing, and who now each have their own corridor, and their own door, and their own castle, and their own woman behind a wall, whom he is afraid to question, and I am afraid to pity.

At the turn I stopped and pressed my palm to the wall. The stone was icy, and under my skin the scar answered, as if someone had drawn a fingernail along it from the inside. The note lay against my chest, and its warmth — someone else’s, a boy’s — was burning the skin beneath my ribs. Somewhere behind me, at the end of the corridor, footsteps sounded again. This time even, slow, and I knew he was walking toward her door.

Below, in the kitchen, it smelled of cabbage and smoke, and one of the kitchen boys had left a bowl of porridge on the table, and the porridge was still warm, and I realized I hadn’t eaten since yesterday morning. I sat on the bench, drew the bowl toward me, and ate slowly, with a spoon, watching the porridge cool, and I couldn’t taste it. The hand under my sleeve pulsed in a steady rhythm, and the pulse wasn’t mine — too heavy, too low, as if a second heart were beating under my skin, a man’s, and I knew whose, and the knowledge made the spoon slide in my fingers.

Martha passed by, not looking. She set another pot on the stove, took off her apron, hung it on a peg. She stopped at the door.

"More?" she asked, and her voice was even, and her eyes were cleverer than her words, and I understood that she already knew who was in the room upstairs, and that the child had been brought in during the night, and that I had been there, and that I had come out, and that I hadn't cried, and that that told her something too.

"No," I said. "Martha."

She turned. I set down the spoon. The porridge in the bowl had set, with a furrow across it, and I thought I should have finished it, because I'd need the strength, and that the strength I had now wasn't meat or bread but someone else's scar under my skin, and someone else's pulse, and someone else's child behind a wall.

"When they brought her in," I said, "did you see?"

Martha nodded. Once, short, the way people nod who stopped counting other people's secrets long ago.

"In a carriage with no arms on it," she said. "The driver wore a gray cloak, someone else's. Two men brought her in. She wasn't leaning on them, but she walked slowly, and they led her as if she were made of glass."

"She isn't made of glass," I said. "She's simply afraid."

Martha looked at me for a long moment, and in her gaze there was something I couldn't read, and then she turned back to the stove, and I knew she wouldn't say any more, and that it was enough.

Up above the kitchen, a door creaked. I didn't look up. From the sound I knew it was her door, and that she had stepped out, and that she was standing on the threshold, and that there was a mug of milk in her hand, and that she was looking down into the well of the stair, and that I was sitting below, my back to her, and that she could see my neck, and the scar beneath my collar, and the bowl of porridge, and the spoon I had set down.

I didn't turn. I finished the porridge. I laid the spoon in the bowl, and pushed the bowl away, and wiped my hands on a cloth, and the cloth was cold, and my hands were cold, and I thought I ought to get up and leave, and that if I got up, she'd see me get up, and that if I didn't, she'd see me sit, and either way it would count.

"Astrid," she said from above.

Her voice was quiet, and the crack in it ran not down the middle but along the edge, and I knew she wasn't acting, and that she really hurt, and that the mug in her hand was shaking, and that the milk was spilling over onto her fingers, and that she was cold, and that she didn't know who to call.

I stood. The bench creaked. I turned. She was on the top step, and her dress was dark, and beneath the dress there was her belly, and the belly was visible, and she wasn't hiding it, and I understood that she wasn't hiding it on purpose, and that that counted too.

"The milk will go cold," I said.

She nodded. I climbed three steps, stopped one below her, so that our eyes were level. Something sour came off her, and I understood that she was sick in the mornings, and that she hadn't told anyone, and that the smell wasn't illness but fear, and that her fear was under her heart too.

"No one sent for me," she said.

"No one sent for me either," I answered. "I came on my own. I carried the water on my own. I asked for the linens on my own. The milk Martha brought. I didn't go to her."

"I know," she said. "I heard."

"Then you know the rest of it," I said. "That I won't tell anyone, and that you won't tell anyone, and that we both know, and that it isn't friendship, and isn't peace, and isn't a treaty. It's just a pause."

She drank from the mug. The milk ran down her chin, and she didn't wipe it, and I didn't offer my kerchief, and I had a kerchief, and I knew she knew, and we both pretended there was no kerchief.

"Astrid," she said again, and this time her voice broke all the way, and I saw her lips tremble, and saw her press her palm to her belly, and saw her belly jerk, and I understood that the child in there, inside, was already answering her voice, and that this was the most terrible thing I had seen in three years, and that I wasn't allowed to feel sorry for her, and that I did.

"Not now," I said. "Finish the milk. Lie down. I'll send Hella to you. Not me. Hella. Because I don't know how to deliver a child, and because you don't want me beside you when it hurts, and because I don't want to be there either."

She looked at me, and her eyes were wet, and in them I could see the reflection of the stair, and my own reflection in hers, and I thought it was like mirrors in mirrors, and that somewhere at the very end of that endless stair there stood a woman deciding which of us would stay, and that the woman was not her, and not me, and not him, but the seal under my sleeve, and that the seal was silent, and that its silence was the price.

I turned and went down. Halfway down the flight I stopped, didn't turn.

"The ring in the chest of drawers is yours, for as long as you're here," I repeated. "We'll sort it out later."

And I left. And the kitchen door swung shut behind me, and in the kitchen it smelled of cabbage, and Martha was washing the pot, and she didn't look at me, and I was grateful to her for it, and the note against my chest burned against my ribs, and I thought the pause was over, and that in the morning it would all start again, and that I was ready for it, and that it was a lie, and that I was ready all the same.

I stood and listened as he approached, and as he stopped, and as he stood, and as he didn't knock, and as he turned back, and as his footsteps faded around the corner, and as the corridor went quiet again, and as in that quiet I heard, in her room, behind the half-open door, someone crying softly.

I didn't go back. I stood a moment longer, and then went down to the kitchen, and asked Martha for hot water and clean linens, and a towel, and a mug of milk with honey, and Martha gave me all of it without asking for whom, and I carried it up, and set it at the threshold, and knocked once, quietly, and left, without waiting for her to open.

The scar under my sleeve burned steadily, and for the first time I thought that the seal was not only the law, and not only the price, and not only a leash. It was also the thing that hurt me when the one behind the door felt her belly hurt. And that was, I supposed, the most terrible part of the contract, and what I was supposed to do with it, I didn't know.

Chapter 4. The Council in a Borrowed Dress

The dress bit under my arms. I felt it the moment Brynn fastened the last hook — the fabric was borrowed, cut for someone else's shoulders, and it sat on me as if it had been tailored for a woman a full head shorter. The sleeves barely reached my elbows, which made it look as if my arms were too long, or I was too thin after three years beneath the bridge, or both at once. Brynn went still behind my back and exhaled, as if he wanted to say something, but I shook my head, and he pressed his lips tight and stepped away.

The great hall smelled of tallow, soot, and tanned leather. The elders were already seated — Torven Stone at the head of the table, two of his kinsmen flanking him, the scribe Ervin with quill poised, and Lissa of the House of Grey Water, whom I had only ever seen at the gates, now settled to the right of the empty chair. The empty one. The lord's chair.

I stepped inside, and the doors shut behind me. Someone coughed down the line of seats. Someone set down a cup. I did not look at faces. I looked straight ahead, at the long table, at the wax of the royal seal, at the quill in Ervin's hand, and at the sleeves — at my sleeves, from beneath which a bandage showed, wound from wrist almost to the bone. Inara had tried. She had sent a dress cut precisely to measure — just not mine — and I knew she had done it on purpose, because the note about the council had reached her before it reached me.

Torven rose, without waiting for Darven.

“Child,” he began, and I stopped mid-aisle. “The Crown Court has extended the winter cycle. You know this.”

I knew. I nodded, and the scar beneath the bandage twitched, a hot, pulling ache.

“I know.”

“Then you also know the kindred has the right to ask on what grounds you enter this hall.”

I did not answer at once. I waited until Ervin finished his word, and said:

“On the grounds of the seal.”

Lissa smiled, the soft smile one gives a child who has set the block down in the wrong place.

“The seal,” she repeated. “And where might it be?”

I did not argue. I unwound the bandage from my right arm with my teeth — slowly, because the cloth had stuck to the scar, and beneath it the skin was red, swollen, and the seal lay on my wrist like a stranger's mark, alive, pulsing. The hall gasped. Someone stood. Torven raised a hand, and silence fell.

“The seal,” I said. “As you can see.”

Ervin wrote on, eyes down, but I saw how quickly he dipped his quill, racing to keep up with my voice.

“Sit,” Torven said, and I sat on the first chair against the wall — the place for witnesses, not guests. I noticed it. Lissa noticed too.

The door at the far end of the hall opened, and Darven came in. He walked quickly, his cloak bunched on one shoulder, the sleeve of his shirt dark and damp, as if he had just torn it away from something hot. He did not look at me. He went to the chair, sat, and only then raised his eyes.

He saw the dress. I saw him see it — by the way his fingers closed on the armrest, and by the way his gaze stopped on my wrist. The seal under the sleeve burned, and I knew he felt it, because the hand resting on the armrest suddenly trembled and curled into a fist.

“Enough,” he said to Torven. “The council will hear her.”

Torven opened his mouth and closed it. Lissa lowered her eyes. I straightened my back, and the fabric under my arms cut in deeper, and I did not lift a brow. Beyond the wall, in the corridor, footsteps sounded — light, quick, a woman's — and I understood that Inara was standing on the other side of the door, listening, and that Darven understood it too, because his fist uncurled, and he laid his hand back down, and the motion was so slow, as if every bone in him ached.

Torven cleared his throat into his fist, unfolded the sheet before him, and began to speak as though he were reading a list of the dead and not addressing a living woman sitting three paces from him.

“Astrid of the House of Northern Fire, maiden name Keeper, now guest by decree of the court. The kindred has three questions for you. First. How came you by the seal, if by decree of that same court it was taken from your hand three years ago?”

I felt the scar on my wrist twitch again, and knew I had to answer now, before Lissa could slip in her soft word.

“The seal was returned by the witness Tobin, a brickburner from the lower city, through the royal scribe Ervin. I accepted it at the gates. If the elders doubt its authenticity, I ask that Tobin and Ervin be summoned.”

Ervin raised his head from the parchment, nodded, and lowered it again. Torven shot him a look, but said nothing.

“The second question,” he went on in the same flat voice. “By what means do you intend to live in the castle until the end of the cycle, if the kindred's register, drawn up after the divorce, lists neither dowry nor allowance in your name?”

I straightened my back. The fabric under my arms cut in so hard I lost feeling in my left side, and I grabbed hold of that pain as if it were a door handle.

"The register," I said. "I have not seen that register. I have seen a different one, from the kitchen, with a debt owed to the castle in my name. I ask the council to order a cross-check."

A murmur moved through the hall. Lissa raised her hand, and the murmur died as if snuffed out.

"The kitchen register," she repeated, with her gentle smile. "Honored Astrid, the kitchen register is a record of grains and tallow dips, not of dowries. You are, no doubt, weary from the road and are mixing up your documents."

I held her gaze and did not look away, and she was the first to drop hers.

"I am not mixing them up," I said. "I ask for a cross-check."

Torven rapped his knuckles on the table, and I understood that he was angry, but not at me — at Lissa, for speaking out of turn in council.

"The third question," he said at last. "Are you prepared, as a guest who bears the seal, to submit to the order of the house that has taken you in?"

Darven shifted in his chair. I did not look at him. I looked at Torven. But I heard the leather of the armrest creak under his fingers.

"I am prepared to submit to the order," I said, "that does not contradict the royal decree. The rest we will discuss separately."

Torven leaned back in his chair. One of his kinsmen, a dry old man with yellow eyes, spoke for the first time the entire council.

"Separately," he repeated, and the word cracked like bone breaking. "We have no 'separately,' child. We have a winter cycle, a debt to the Crown, and two hundred hectares of northern land we will lose the moment the Council of Houses doubts the purity of your seal. You sit here not as a guest, you sit here as an accusation we are obliged to disprove. Help us, and we will help you."

I was silent. I counted the beats of my heart, and they were too loud, and I knew Ervin was recording that silence, that pause, and that by evening he would bring me the sheet, and I would sign it, and it would go into the common file, and one day that sheet would save my life or take it.

Darven rose. The chair creaked, and the sound was like a knife drawn across glass.

"The council has heard," he said, and his voice was quiet, but the hall sat straighter at once. "The seal is genuine, accepted at the gates in the presence of witnesses. The kitchen register the elder Stone is bound to lay before the council within three days. The question of livelihood is settled by the lord's order, not by vote. This session is ended."

He did not say "thank you." He did not say "you are dismissed." He said "ended," and the word settled over the hall like a coffin lid, and everyone understood that no one was to move until he left first.

Torven stood, bowed — shortly, as if it cost him — and went toward the side door. Lissa stayed seated, and I saw her slowly fold the sheet before her, and how her fingers trembled slightly, and how she looked at neither me nor Darven, but at the wax of the royal seal, as if gauging how long it would remain on that table.

Darven came to me. Not to the table, not to Ervin, not to the door — to me, and stopped one step away, and I smelled smoke from his shirt, and beneath it the smell of cold sweat, and beneath it something else, something I had not smelled in three years and had no wish to recognize.

"Stand," he said softly, so that only I and Ervin could hear.

I stood. The dress split under my arms with a quiet tear, and I felt the cold air of the hall lick the skin beneath the fabric, and felt the scar on my wrist pulse harder in answer, as if the seal had decided that its bearer had finally been seen as she deserved.

Darven took off his cloak. Not the one he had arrived in — a different one, heavy, lined with fur, bearing the crest of Northern Fire on the shoulder, and he laid it over my shoulders without a word. The cloak was heavy, smelled of him, and I had no time to refuse or thank him, because he had already turned and gone to the door, and the hall was silent, and Lissa was silent, and Inara beyond the door was silent too, and I knew that by evening the whole lower city would know of that cloak,

and that Inara would weep, and that Torven would note down the gesture in his little book, and that its price would be named later.

I stayed standing in the middle of the hall, in a borrowed torn dress and in his cloak, and Ervin was writing out the last line, and his quill moved slowly, as if he were afraid to finish it.

The cloak lay on my shoulders like a sentence. The fur was soft, too soft for a man I had refused for three years running, and that softness made me want to tear it off myself right there in the hall, while the elders were still filing out and while Lissa was still sitting, pretending to fold her sheet.

I did not. I gathered the fabric at my throat and walked toward the door, and every step echoed in the scar beneath my sleeve, and I knew it was not pain, it was the seal recognizing the scent of its master, and that it did not care that I did not want it to recognize him.

At the door I nearly collided with Inara. She stood behind the jamb, palm pressed to her round belly, and her eyes were wet, and she was not trying to hide it, and that was worse than if she had tried. I stopped. She looked at the cloak, at the crest on my shoulder, and I saw her chin tremble, and saw her bite her lower lip, and saw her release it, as if she had decided not to cry in front of me.

She said not a word. I said none either. Between us there was only her scent — floral, foreign, brought from the Winter Branch — and the scent of his cloak, and I understood that I had lost her that second, because he had gone to the door and she stood at the jamb, and we both knew whom he had gone to.

I passed her, without touching her, but close, and felt the scar beneath my sleeve twitch in her direction, as if it wanted to say something to her on my behalf, and I tightened my grip on the cloak at my throat.

The corridor was colder than the hall. Two servants, unknown to me, new, brought in, plainly, with Inara, stepped back to the wall, and I caught their eyes — quick, identical, sharp. They were looking at the cloak. They were counting the crests. They would tell.

I stopped. I turned to them, and the cloak slipped off one shoulder, and I did not fix it.

“What are you looking at?” I asked.

One of them dropped his eyes. The other did not.

“My lady,” he said carefully, and the word sounded like an apology he was not offering me. “Lord Darven ordered us to escort you to your chamber and bring something hot.”

I did not move. I looked at him, and he looked away first, and I understood that he feared not me, but what stood behind me in the shape of a cloak, and that I could not outrun that fear, because the cloak was not me.

“Not now,” I said. “And not from him.”

I let the servants go with a look. They left, and their steps were too quick, and I knew that by evening half the castle would know I had refused his hot food, and the other half would decide I simply had not had time to be hungry.

I made my way to the black stair. Halfway down the landing I stopped and looked down into the dark well, and from below a draft breathed cold, from the kitchen, and smelled of cabbage, and somewhere down there, in the kitchen archive, lay my register, my true document, and I thought that I had to go down before the elders came to their senses and locked the doors.

I took the cloak off only at my own door. I took it off and hung it on the hook, and the hook creaked, and the sound was as if someone in the corridor had stopped to listen. I checked with my hand — nobody. I went inside and turned the lock.

The room was cold. The stove had not been lit since the day before. I looked at the cloak on the hook, at the crest, at the fur, and understood that it hung exactly as a man's cloak should hang, and that I had no strength to rehang it differently, and that if I left it so, by morning someone would decide I was keeping it, and if I moved it, that I was rejecting it, and both readings would cost me something I did not yet know.

I went to the window. The castle lay below, grey with hoarfrost, and in one window on the second floor a light burned, and I knew it was his window, because only in his study did they light three candles instead of one, and that he was sitting at his desk now, and that in his hand there might be a quill, or might be a cup, and that I could not make it out, and that not knowing made my wrist twitch again, and I pressed it to the stone sill with my palm.

The cold of the sill was good, even, indifferent. The scar beneath answered quietly, without pain, and I understood that it was not angry, it was only listening, and that I had to decide whether I wanted it to hear what I was about to do.

I lifted my hand from the sill, looked at the cloak once more, and went to the door. I had to go down, into the kitchen archive, before Torven sent someone for the register faster than I.

The stair smelled of cold lime and someone else's smoke, and on every step I counted not steps but the rumor that had already run ahead of me.

On the landing between floors stood Brynn. He was twisting his cap in his hands and staring at the floor, and when I came round the turn he jerked his head up, and I saw his fingers tremble, and how he hid them behind his back at once, as if I could possibly not have noticed.

"My lady," he said, and his voice was hoarse, "Lord Darven ordered —"

"I know," I cut him off. "Something hot. Later."

He did not move. I stopped one step above him, and we were nearly level, and I saw a fresh bruise beneath his eye, and that he was not looking at my cloak, though he should have been, because the cloak had been on me all the way to the door, and now it was not, and that meant Brynn already knew I had taken it off.

"My lady," he said, quieter, "down there... Tobin."

The name fell onto the landing like a coin onto stone. I did not move, and he understood, and began to speak at once, tangling his words, the tips of his ears going red:

"He came to the kitchen right after the council. Sat at the housekeeper's table. Says they won't hand over the register without him. Says he returned the seal, and now it's his turn."

I looked at him and thought that the boy was lying, and that he knew it himself, and that the bruise under his eye was not the price of lying, but the price of lying badly, and that someone had already hit him for it, and that that someone was sitting below at my table.

"Who let him in?" I asked.

Brynn's shoulder twitched.

"Marta," he said, and the name sounded in his mouth like his own guilt. "Marta said a guest of the kitchen has the right."

I nodded. Guest of the kitchen. Tobin. I knew that rule, I had lived beneath it for three years, when I myself was a guest beneath someone else's bridge, and now it had come for me from the other side, and it was funny, and I did not let the laugh out, I swallowed it, and it lodged in my throat like a knot.

"Go to Marta," I said. "Tell her I am coming. Tell her the kindred's register is not to be released to a guest of the kitchen without the keeper of the archive. Tell her the keeper of the archive is me."

He nodded and darted down, and his steps were light, hurried, and I thought he would run not to Marta, but back to Darven, and that Darven would know everything before I did, and that it might be for the best, because Torven would not have time.

I went after him, but slowly. Halfway down the flight I stopped, pressed my palm to the wall, and the stone was cold, but beneath the cold I felt a faint, barely noticeable pulse, and understood that the seal was listening, as I had thought, and that it was counting the steps below, and that it did not care whose they were.

The stair let me out straight into the kitchen corridor, and there it smelled of cabbage and fresh bread, and at the stove stood Marta with a towel over her shoulder, and she did not turn when I came in, and that was her answer, and I accepted it.

Tobin sat at the table that three years ago had been mine. He was thin, his hands red from the wind, dressed in a borrowed coat, and on the table before him lay the register, opened to the page with my dowry, and he was running his finger down the lines, as if he could read, and I knew he could not, and that he did not need to.

He raised his head. He saw me, and something quick and hungry flashed in his eyes, and I understood that he had already sold me today, and that the buyer was sitting in the council hall, and that the register was not paper, it was a price, and that I was half an hour late.

"A guest of the kitchen," I said, "has no right to touch the house's books."

He smirked, and the smirk was black, toothless.

"And who is the house?" he asked.

I did not answer. I went over, took the register from under his hand, and his fingers trembled, but he did not hold on, and I closed the book, and laid my palm on top, and felt the seal under my sleeve answer to its warmth, and the scar grow warm, almost hot, and I thought that if Tobin made a move now, I would have time to press my palm harder, and that the seal would decide for itself what to do with him.

Tobin did not move. He leaned back in the chair and folded his arms across his chest.

"Without me the seal is stolen property," he said calmly. "Everyone in the hall knows it. I am the witness. I am a guest. I have the right."

"The right," I repeated, "to sit at the house's table uninvited by the house. The right to touch another's register. The right to sell another's seal to whoever pays the most."

He did not look away.

"Tobin," I said quietly, "I will not bargain with you. I will give you a place at the kitchen when the seal is confirmed in council. Until the council, you are a guest. A guest waits. If you do not wish to wait, you will leave the castle by morning, and I will not try to hold you."

He smirked again, and the smirk grew thinner, and I saw that he was weighing my words, and that they did not please him, and that something lay in his pocket, and that the something was not a coin.

"Until morning," he repeated, "I will wait."

At the door into the corridor I stopped. Not because I wanted to turn back, but because the stone under my foot grew warm, and I understood what it meant, and I pressed the register to my chest and walked on, counting my steps so I would not have to count my heartbeats.

The corridor was empty. The candles in the wall sconces had burned down to the middle, and the wax had set on the stone in white trails, and it smelled not of cabbage but of someone else's perfume, sweet, heavy, and I recognized it before I saw her.

Inara stood at the turn toward her chamber. No candle. No attendants. In a dark dress beneath which a belly was visible, and she held her hands on that belly, and I thought that she could already feel it, and that she already knew that I knew, and that between us there was left one seal and one unspoken name.

"Astrid," she said quietly. Her voice was even, without tears, and that was worse than tears. "I heard about the council. I heard about the dress."

I stopped three paces from her. I did not let go of the register. The scar under my sleeve lay on my wrist like a warm coin, and I knew she could see the edge of that coin, because the sleeve of the tight dress had slipped, and I did not fix it.

"The dress," I said, "will be returned to me."

"I don't mean the dress," she said, and her voice broke, and I understood she was about to ask, and that I did not want to hear. "I mean the elders. They will not let you go. They will make him. You know how it works."

"I know," I said. "I was there. In a borrowed dress."

She looked away, and I saw her knuckles go white on her belly, and saw her swallow, and saw her look at me again, and in her eyes was what I had seen in everyone's today — hunger and fear, half and half.

"I have nothing," she said. "I have only him. And the child. If they close him in — "

"If they close him in," I cut in, and my voice was hoarse, "they will give you a room in the Winter Branch. They will give you a name. They will give you everything they promised."

She blinked. I saw her head sway, and thought she would fall, and that I would not catch her, and that it would cost me something I could never get back.

"That is not why I came," she said softly. "I came because he called me."

"He did not call you," I said. "He wrote to your father. Those are different things."

She did not answer. I saw her lips tremble, and saw her bite them, and saw her look at the register in my hands, and saw her understand that it was not her document, and that for that document she would have to pay more than she had.

I went past her. Halfway round the turn I stopped, and I do not know why, and I turned back, and she was still standing by the wall, her hands on her belly, and I thought she was beautiful, and that I hated her, and that these were two different things, and that both of them were worth more now than the whole register.

"Inara," I said, and she flinched at her own name. "If the child is his, you have nothing to fear from the council. If not, you have nothing to fear from me. Decide for yourself."

I left. My footsteps rang through the empty corridor, and I counted them to her door, and to my door, and to the stair, and to the place where the stone under my foot grew cold, and where the seal under my sleeve stopped burning, and where I stopped and pressed the register to my chest and understood what I had just done, and that I would not take it back.

Beyond the wall, in his study, a chair creaked. I stood another minute, and went to my room.

He stood up, pushed the chair back, and the chair scraped across the stone, and the sound was long, and Marta at the stove finally turned, and I saw in her eyes what she had not said aloud, and what I understood without words: someone had already looked at the register. Not me. Someone before me.

I pressed the book to my chest. The seal under my sleeve burned steady, and I knew that Darven beyond the wall, in his study, felt the same thing, and that he would stand now, and that he would come here, and that I had to decide whether to open the door to him or meet him in the corridor, and that both decisions would cost me something I did not yet know.

I went toward the door, the register in both hands, the scar under my sleeve pulsing in time with my steps, and I counted the stairs, and thought that the price Tobin had named was no longer his, and that the price I would name had not yet been spoken, and that between those two prices stood one door, one seal, and one man beyond the wall, listening to me walk.

Chapter 5. The Register in the Kitchen

The kitchen smelled of yesterday's bread and someone else's sweat. I ducked through the low door, and this time the frame seemed lower than it had three years ago, though no one had rebuilt the jamb. I had simply forgotten how it felt to belong here. Marta glanced up from the worktable, wiped her hands on her apron, nodded — exactly as she would nod to any guest, no more — and I understood what I was now. A guest who bore a seal. Not the mistress.

Tobin the cook, my age, now a guest of the kitchen himself, sat on an overturned bucket by the hearth, peeling turnips. His hands were black with soil, grime caked beneath his nails, and he did not rise when I entered. He only lifted his eyes and said, "Lady Astrid." Without irony, but without deference either, and I felt the muscle in my cheek twitch. He did not ask why I had come. He waited for me to speak, and I did.

"I need the register. The one kept by the cooks. Old, in a leather cover, with the house seal pressed into the corner."

Tobin stopped peeling. Looked at Marta. Marta looked at me. I held my arms stiff against my sides so they would not see them tremble, and it was not working well, because my left hand — the one with the scar beneath the sleeve — always shakes harder when I am nervous, and Tobin knew that. He also knew the register existed. I saw his nostrils flare slightly when I mentioned the leather cover. So the register was here. So it had not been burned.

“Lady,” he said, “those are kitchen books. A guest with a seal has no business in them.”

“A bearer of the seal has business in any book of the house where her name is recorded,” I answered, and surprised myself with how steady it sounded. “I have the right to see it. The steward will confirm.”

Tobin set down the knife. Stood. He stood a full two heads above me, broad across the shoulders, and he smelled of turnips and pitch and that particular scent of poverty that no new apron can ever scrub from a pauper's things. He spoke quietly, so only Marta and I could hear.

“Lady, you have not been in this house for three years. You have not been in any house for three years. The register sat where no one thought to look. I found it first. I preserved it. I have a matter to discuss with you, and the matter concerns a debt the house owes me, not one I owe the house.”

I did not look away.

“Where is the register?”

“In the chest under the stairs,” Marta said suddenly, without lifting her eyes from the dough. “Second from the bottom. I have the key.”

Tobin turned sharply toward her. She kept kneading. I held out my hand without a word. Marta wiped her palm on her apron, drew a ring of keys from beneath her belt, slipped off a small copper key, and laid it in my palm. The key was warm. Marta watched me close my fist around it, and her face wore that expression I remembered from my old life: she had done what she believed was right, and she did not intend to apologize for it.

The chest stood where she had said, in the dark corner beneath the stairs to the storeroom. The small seal of House Northfire was indeed pressed into the lid, and I traced it with my fingers, and the scar beneath my sleeve answered as though I had touched something hot. The lid groaned. On top lay sacks of grain, beneath them a stack of oiled rags, and beneath the rags — a leather-bound register, thick and dark, tied with cord. I drew it out, set it on my knees, untied the strings. The pages had yellowed, but the ink held. I turned them slowly. Expenses for salt. For firewood. For candles. For the cook's wages. The entries ran on by year, and I searched for the year three years ago, when my name had been struck from the house records and my signature burned in the judgment hall.

I found it. “Expense of dissolution: silver — to the royal scribe; silver — to Judge Lisse; silver — for the temporary upkeep of the seal-bearer during proceedings.” The lines ran in an even hand, beside them the treasurer's signature and the steward's signature and a small wax seal, and — in the margin, in a different hand, hurried — a note: “The seal-bearer's dowry transferred to the house treasury by decision of the council.”

I read the note twice. My throat closed. I had known they had taken the dowry — the whole castle knew — but I had not known it had been entered in the register as an expense, and that the entry bore a seal, and that it could be shown to the council, and that the council would be obliged to explain where twenty-six pounds of silver had gone — silver my father had gathered coin by coin from the neighbors when I was wed. I closed the register. Returned it to the chest. Locked it. The key stayed with me.

“Lady,” Tobin said behind me. I did not turn. “Lady, you have taken the key. You have taken the book. I have a matter to discuss with you, and the price is not silver.”

“The price we will discuss before witnesses,” I answered, still without turning, and my voice did not falter, and that was perhaps the most costly thing I had managed all day. “Now I must go to the steward. The seal-bearer has a legal question for him.”

I left the kitchen. The register I left in the chest, and the key sat in the pocket of a borrowed dress, and the pocket was tight, and the key dug into my hip, and I felt it with every step, and the scar beneath my sleeve throbbed — not sharply, but the way a tooth aches before rain — and I knew I had to return to my room, take out scribe Ervin's ledger from beneath the mattress, and ask him to make a copy. I walked the corridor, and beneath my feet was stone, and the stone was warm, and for the first time in three years I knew that what sat in my pocket was not alms but a key, and that behind that key lay a document, and behind that document my name, and that my name, perhaps for the first time in all these years, was worth something.

At the door to my room I stopped. Listened. Beyond the wall, silence. The particular silence of a house where someone lies awake counting the beats of his own heart so as not to think. I turned the key in the lock — my lock, on my side — and stepped inside, and shut the door behind me, and leaned my back against it, and drew the copper key from my pocket, and set it on the table, and it gave a small clink against the wood, and the sound was so small that only someone standing beyond the wall, too afraid to knock, could have heard it.

The copper key lay on the table, and I stared at it as though it might vanish if I looked away. Small, warm from my pocket, with a groove on the bit worn to a shine by someone else's fingers. I ran the pad of my thumb across it and felt the scar beneath my sleeve answer again — dull, low, like a note struck on the wrong instrument.

Beyond the wall, a cough. Just once. Dry, into a fist. I went still. The cough was his — I would have known it among a hundred, even through stone, even through three winters. He was not sleeping. He had heard me come in. He had heard the key strike the wood. And now he had let me know he was there, and I did not know why he had done it — whether to stop me leaning against the door with my back, or to let me understand that he was counting my steps.

I straightened. Slowly peeled my shoulder blades from the door. Crossed to the table. The key lay where I had left it. I sat on the edge of the bed, boots still on, because in a borrowed, too-tight dress pulling off boots was torture, and because I did not intend to settle in here as though it were home. Then I stood, went to the small stove in the corner, felt the air above it. The stove was barely warm. Ervin had told me that a laundress had lived in this room before, that she had been turned out for thievery, and that since then no one had been put up here, because the steward considered the room unlucky. Unlucky. I smiled without mirth. For a pauper with a dragon's seal, it suited.

I sat again. Drew out from beneath the mattress scribe Ervin's thin ledger — he had left it with me yesterday, along with a stub of a candle, and had said, without meeting my eyes, "If something needs to be written, my lady, I will copy it from the archivist. Only let me know before midday." Ervin was the only person in this house who addressed me as "my lady" as though the word still meant something. I suspected he did it not from courtesy but from professional habit: a scribe may not address a bearer of the seal otherwise, or his copies would not be accepted by the capital archive.

I opened the ledger to a clean page. The pen lay beside it, and the inkwell. I dipped the pen and began to write slowly, forming each letter the way my mother had taught me — with pressure, without flourishes, without blots.

"To the Steward of Castle Northfire, Torstein called the Reckoner. The bearer of the seal of the house, Lady Astrid of House Northfire, widow of Lord Darven, demands an accounting of the silver paid into the house treasury as dowry in the year of the marriage. The sum — twenty-six pounds of silver, city-minted coinage, itemized in the register of kitchen expenses for the year of the wedding, on the page sealed with wax. I require your answer in writing within three days, according to the paragraph concerning the seal-bearer's right to an accounting of expenditures in the house wherein she is maintained through the winter cycle."

I read it through. The lines came out even, without blotches. I signed at the bottom — small, sharp, the way I had once signed in the house ledger. Back then the signature had been elegant, with a curl. Now it was short, almost angry. My hand did not tremble. My left hand — the one with the

scar — lay on the table, and beneath the sleeve of the borrowed dress there was warmth, and I knew that he felt it through the wall, and that he was probably sitting on his bed now, looking at his own hands, and did not know why he had coughed.

Beyond the wall, footsteps. Slow at first, then quicker. I heard his door open — onto the corridor, not into my room. Footsteps on stone. Receding. Silence.

I set down the pen. Sat for a while, looking at my own signature. Then I folded the sheet, sealed it with wax from the candle, held it to the stove, melted the tip of the knife and pressed it down. The seal came out crooked — not the house seal, merely a drop — but Ervin would understand. I would hide the letter beneath the floorboard tomorrow, when I went to him. Today was too soon. Today let Tobin think I had only taken the key.

I stood. Crossed to the door. Pressed my ear to it. No footsteps, no breathing. He was gone. Gone somewhere into his own house, in which I now lived by right of the seal, and from this knowledge something ached beneath my ribs and pulled at my chest at once. I laid my palm against the door. His door — on the other side, in the corridor, without my lock. My door — here, with my key, with my right to refuse entry.

I took my hand away and returned to the table. Put the copper key back in the pocket of the dress. The pocket was tight, and the key dug into my hip again, and I thought that by spring there would likely be a bruise there, and that it would be my first bruise in this house, and that it would not be from a blow but from my own document, and that this was perhaps the most honest price I had ever been asked to pay.

Beyond the wall, silence again. The silence of a house where someone lies awake counting the beats of his own heart so as not to think. I sat on the bed, rested my hands on my knees, and looked at the dark square of the window, behind which there was as yet neither snow nor dawn, and waited for him to come back, and was angry at myself for waiting.

The cloak still hung over the back of the chair. I had hung it there as soon as I came in — not in the wardrobe, not on the hook by the door, but over the chair, because the hook was his, and the wardrobe was too deep, and if I had put the cloak away inside it, I would never have been able to explain whose it was. So it hung there, like someone else's promise dropped across my furniture, and I tried not to look at it, and looked at it more often than at the ledger.

Beyond the wall, the bed creaked. Not a cough, not footsteps — a creak, heavy and uneven, as though someone had sat down too suddenly and the springs had not yet settled. Then silence. Then a voice, low and hoarse, as though it came not from the throat but from beneath the ribs.

“You're not sleeping.”

It was not a question. It was a statement, spoken into the wall, into the stone, into that seam where the plaster had already cracked from the winter damp. I went still. My left hand — the one with the scar — I held on the table, and beneath the sleeve of the borrowed dress the seal answered at once, like a dog to a whistle. Heat climbed up my forearm, into my shoulder, into my neck, and I knew — did not think, knew — that he felt it too, because that first night after the council, when I had come back wearing the cloak, the scar had ached on his arm as well, and Brinn had told me so in the morning, in the kitchen, while he poured water.

“I am not sleeping,” I answered, and my own voice sounded too even, too ready, as though I had rehearsed the line while writing the letter to the steward.

“The porridge is going cold.”

I looked at the bowl Brinn had brought. The porridge was cold, greasy, with a scorched rim. The plate was clay, cracked straight down the middle and glued with something brown. I had not touched it since Brinn set it on the table, and he had seen that, and Darven had most likely heard as well — Brinn knocking at the door, me saying, “Leave it at the threshold,” Brinn saying, “My lady, the lord commanded,” and me saying, “The lord may take his own supper.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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