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THE CHRONICLES OF HEITAR

THE SHADOW OF TIME

MYRON BREITMAN

Myron Breitman

**The Chronicles Of Heitar —
The Shadow Of Time**

«Издательские решения»

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At the edge of the kingdom of eleinor, lies heitar — a city built on old stones And older secrets. When disappearances begin to spread through its streets and the boundary between worlds grows dangerously weak, two siblings discover a darkness that has waited longer than memory. Kaen, a scholar bound to forgotten knowledge. Merissa, a seeker with gifts she barely understands. Together, they will discover that time itself is not as constant as they believed...

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The Chronicles Of Heitar — The Shadow Of Time

Myron Breitman

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**To my son, Daniel, and my daughter,
Lian.
Every word I write, and every world I
build, is ultimately for you. You are the
best story I will ever be a part of.
With all my love.
Dad**

Chapter One — Shadows in the City

Dusk fell upon the city of Heitar the way a dying man exhales his last breath — slow, inevitable, and heavy with the accumulated weight of everything left unsaid.

It came from the east, creeping along the cobblestones first, pooling in the sunken gaps, filling the cracks with something darker than absence. Then it rose, climbing the weathered walls the way water rises in a flooded cellar — patient, purposeful, unstoppable. By the time it reached the rooftops, the sky had surrendered. Not to night — not quite yet — but to that threshold hour between what is and what might be, that liminal gray belonging to neither world and therefore belonging to both.

Heitar was a border city, the last inhabited outpost before the kingdom of Eleinor dissolved into contested borderlands and, beyond those, into the ancient wilderness no cartographer had ever dared map in full. Its cobblestones were uneven underfoot, lifted by centuries of frost and neglect. Its buildings leaned against one another like very old men sharing a bench. Markets sold practical things — rough cloth, root vegetables, tallow candles. Its people had the particular look of those who had given up expecting anything astonishing and learned to be grateful for anything warm.

But dusk changed it. In dusk, Heitar stopped being a city and became something else — a stage, perhaps, or a memory of one. The merchant stalls folded away. The children disappeared inside. And the city stood revealed as it truly was beneath all that daily commerce: old. Desperately, profoundly, impossibly old. Older than the kingdom it served as border to.

The lantern at the corner of Throughway Alley was the first sign that the evening was something other than ordinary. It hung from its iron bracket like a question mark, swinging in a wind no one felt on their skin, the flame inside pulsing — rhythmically, deliberately, as if signaling to someone standing at the far end of the alley who never came.

The smell hung over everything like weather. Wet wood softened to its cellular core by a week of autumn rain. Old smoke from a hundred kitchen fires. The mineral sharpness of cobblestone after rain. And beneath all of it, barely perceptible — something else. Something cold, and faintly metallic, and very old.

Here, at the edge of the magical kingdom of Eleinor, reality wore thin. The people who had lived in Heitar for generations knew it as a physical fact, something felt in the molars on certain nights. The membrane between what was and what lurked was thinner here. Things could come through that had no business being among the living.

Most nights, they didn't.

But this was not most nights.

Their house stood on the northern hill.

It was the sort of house that had once been important and had since become merely significant — three stories of dark stone, windows that rattled when the wind changed, a roof repaired so many times in different materials it had achieved a kind of patchwork dignity. It sat at the place where the cobblestones ended and the uneasy plain began, that stretch of flat wind-brushed land that ran to the horizon without apology, without tree or landmark.

At the northern edge of the plain, barely visible on the best of days and invisible on all others, the Forgotten Forest began.

Not that anyone called it that in daylight conversation. In daylight it was referred to obliquely, if at all — a direction, a horizon, a vague darkness noted in peripheral vision and then consciously unregistered, the way you might notice a stranger watching you from across a crowded market and choose, very deliberately, not to look back.

The house had been in their family for generations. Once it was inhabited by scholars, keepers of old knowledge, mages who chose solitude over the company of courts. Those people were long

gone. What remained was their furniture, their books, their accumulated strangeness, and two young people who had inherited all of it without a great deal of warning.

Kaen and Merissa. Brother and sister. The last of a line almost no one remembered.

He was twenty-two that autumn, lean and dark-haired, with the posture of someone who had spent too much time leaning over books — a slight forward cant to the shoulders, a tendency to hold his head at an angle as if perpetually listening for something. He had their father's jaw and their mother's eyes — gray, with that unsettling quality of seeming to hold more light than the conditions of any given room should allow.

She was nineteen, and looked nothing like him except in the eyes. Where he was angular and still, she was motion and curve — expressive hands, a face that kept almost no secrets, a way of sitting that involved some part of her always in slight motion. Her dark hair fell loose around her face.

That evening she sat on the windowsill with a wool blanket around her shoulders, watching the city below. He sat at the reading table by the fire, surrounded by books in the particular organized chaos of someone for whom disorder had become a system. The book in his lap was old — genuinely old — the typeface the kind that seemed to move slightly if you looked at it long enough.

He read. She watched. The fire crackled. The lantern outside pulsed.

Then Merissa said, very quietly:

"They didn't come back again."

Kaen looked up from his book. He set it carefully aside.

"Who?" he asked. Not because he didn't understand, but because putting a fear into language makes it slightly less capable of moving through walls.

"Airis and her mother. They weren't at the market. The neighbors say the door to their house is open, but inside there's nothing. Everything is in its place. Except them."

He was quiet.

"Everything in its place," he said eventually. "Except them."

"Except them."

He crossed the room, joined her at the window. Outside, the street was empty in a way that streets are not usually empty — not the emptiness of people having gone inside, but the emptiness of a place from which something essential has withdrawn.

"This is the fifth," he said, counting the way you count something you don't want to be counting. "In the past two weeks. Always at night. Always without any trace. No one heard anything. No one saw anything."

"As if they were erased," Merissa said.

"Yes." He put his hand on the cold glass. "Erased. That's the word."

They stood together, watching the lantern pulse.

"Do you hear that?" Merissa asked.

"Hear what?"

"The silence."

He listened — and understood immediately, because it was the kind of silence not merely absent of sound but actively maintained. A silence that had been imposed. No dogs. No wind in the eaves. No distant cart on distant cobblestones. The world had gone still.

As if holding its breath. As if waiting.

They ate supper in the kitchen, at the old table with the ring stains and the one leg replaced with a slightly different wood — endearing honesty in a piece of furniture. She had made stew, and there was bread from the day before, slightly stale, which was fine because slightly stale bread held up better in stew.

They ate without speaking much. They had a long-developed language of comfortable silence — the fluency in not-speaking that develops in people who have been each other's primary company long enough to distinguish silences that mean something from silences that mean nothing. This silence

was neither comfortable nor fraught: the silence of two people processing the same information and not having anything useful to add to each other's processing.

After supper, Merissa washed and Kaen dried — a division of labor established through silent negotiation and never renegotiated since. There was something almost ceremonial about it on evenings like this. The warm water, the rough ceramic, the familiar movements. These things were in their place.

The clock struck midnight.

He heard it from the back porch, where he had gone to stand in the dark and look at nothing in particular. The kitchen light was warm through the window behind him. Somewhere inside, Merissa was settling into sleep — he had heard her on the stairs, the familiar pattern of her footsteps, then the soft click of her door.

He should have been asleep too.

He stood on the porch instead, in the dark, in the cold, in the silence.

The wind from the plain brought things. Usually it brought the expected: grass, soil, the mineral cold of autumn approaching winter. Tonight it brought something else — a metallic edge, like copper or like blood, cold and slightly sweet.

His hand found the amulet at his throat.

It was old, a simple disc of dark metal on a chain with a symbol etched into it — something between a stylized eye and a knot. His father had worn it. His father's father before him. It had been passed to Kaen when he was too young to understand what was being passed, only that the passing was serious and that the weight of the metal against his skin was warm in a way that metal should not have been.

It was warm now. Not hot. Just present. Alert. The way a watchdog's ears lift before it growls.

He did not turn around immediately.

He should have.

He heard the sound from inside the house before he could react — not a footstep, not a crash, but a displacement. As if the air inside had shifted because something had shifted within it, and the air had rearranged itself around the new thing the way water rearranges around a stone dropped into it.

"Merissa," he said, barely more than an exhale.

He turned.

On the threshold between the kitchen and the hallway, there was something.

It was difficult to describe because it resisted description. Not a form so much as a formedness — a density, a gathering, a mist that had achieved sufficient internal agreement to approximate the shape of a standing figure without actually being one. Taller than a person by half again. No face, no features in the place where a face would be. And yet presence — the quality of taking up more space than its physical dimensions should account for. The air around it shivered, very slightly, as if reality was consulting rules it hadn't anticipated.

It moved without touching the floor. Not floating — more like flowing, water finding paths of least resistance. It flowed toward him.

He had no time for fear, which was perhaps fortunate. What he had was instinct — a deep, bone-level, pre-verbal recognition that what stood before him was not of the ordinary inventory of the world, and the only appropriate response was to act immediately.

He was a mage of time. He had been one since childhood — the first manifestations strange and frightening, small impossible things, moments stretching, objects moving back to where they had been moments before. His mother had recognized it and taught him, carefully and partially, what she knew. The rest he had taught himself from books and from patient and occasionally painful experimentation.

What he did now was reflex: he reached into the flow of time around the thing and grabbed it, the way you grab a rope.

The world changed. He felt it rather than saw it — a sudden new density to the air, time thickening around the entity like amber forming around an insect. Its flowing movement slowed. Became labored. Each increment of progress costing something.

It was not enough.

He could feel, even as he did it, that it was not enough. The entity slowed but did not stop. It continued toward him, fighting the temporal drag with patience rather than strength — as if slowing it was merely a delay, and the delay meant nothing to something that thought in centuries.

And then — from the hallway above, from the direction of the staircase — came the sound of a door opening.

The second entity appeared at the base of the staircase. He had not heard it arrive. It was simply suddenly there, the way something is there in a dream, present without the inconvenience of arrival.

A third appeared in the doorway to the back porch, cutting off his exit.

Three of them.

The thought in his head was very clear and very simple: they came for her. Not for him. He didn't know how he knew this, but he knew it with the certainty of something understood below the level of argument.

"Wake up!" he shouted, throwing all pretense at quiet away. "Merissa, wake up!"

He released the coiled temporal energy abruptly, rerouted it as a pulse radiating outward through the room — not elegant, the magical equivalent of throwing something large and blunt at a problem. But it bought him four seconds, maybe five, in which the three entities recoiled, momentarily disrupted.

He was already moving. Up the stairs, two at a time, hand on the banister, and then the door at the end of the hall was opening and Merissa came through it with her eyes not quite fully awake but her body already knowing, already recognizing the wrongness the way a sleeping animal recognizes the wrongness in its environment and wakes with its muscles already tense.

Her eyes, when they focused on him, became immediately clear.

"How many?" she said.

"Three. Downstairs."

She was already pulling at the air around her with both hands, gathering the substance her magic worked with — illusion, misdirection, the manipulation of perceived reality. The air in the hallway became subtly different, dense with possibility.

"They don't see," she said. "Not yet. Give me thirty seconds."

He turned to the top of the stairs.

He could hear them coming — that terrible non-walking, that flowing movement translated to the creaking of the staircase beneath weight that was not quite the right kind of weight. The house was protesting their presence.

Merissa's illusion took hold. Where there had been one hallway there were now many, stretching off in directions the architecture didn't support, each ending in a different kind of darkness. The entities paused — whatever their mode of perception was, it could be confused.

The first entity paused at the second step.

The second, behind it, paused on the landing.

The third walked through the illusion as if it wasn't there.

Merissa made a sound — surprise, and something under surprise, something that landed with the force of a recognized fear. The third entity had moved through her working as if the illusion were not matter but not-matter, as if her magic had failed to register as something worth responding to.

She had not known they could do that.

"Go," she said, and her voice was extraordinary in that moment — steady, flat, entirely controlled, saying exactly what it needed to say and nothing else. The kind of voice that appears only when a person has no room left for anything except what is necessary.

He went. Down the stairs, past the first two entities — the temporal pulse he threw ahead wasn't enough to scatter them but enough to slow them by the second or two he needed to be through the hallway and into the street. He felt the house shaking behind him — not from wind, not from structure, but from the particular resonance of two incompatible magical forces attempting to occupy the same space, reality groaning at the strain.

The rain hit him immediately. The kind that doesn't build but starts at full force — cold, dense, deliberately unhelpful. The cobblestones were black with it. The lantern at the corner had gone out.

He turned back toward the door.

Merissa came through it running.

They ran.

There is a quality to running in genuine fear different from any other kind of running — no relationship with form or efficiency, the body doing what the body does, something at a lower level than thought deciding direction and obstacle avoidance, managing the extraordinary cooperation of dozens of muscles without any input from the conscious mind.

They ran through the rain, through the empty streets of Heitar, through the silence that still held the city in its inexplicable grip. Not a dog barked. Not a window opened. The city was absent — not sleeping but absent, the way a crowd is absent when something has told it, through some collective wordless communication, to be elsewhere.

The shadows ran with them. He registered this in peripheral vision first and then had it confirmed by the feel of his amulet — the warmth had intensified to something approaching uncomfortable. The things behind them were not keeping distance. They were not rushing either. They were maintaining a precise and terrible proximity, close enough to be felt, far enough to permit the illusion of escape.

His sister was beside him. Her hand found his wrist in the dark and held it.

He thought of the Temple of Hours. The thought arrived fully formed, as if it had been waiting for this particular moment. The Temple of Hours, which stood on the far side of the city, which was old — older than the city, certainly, older than anything currently standing in it — built by time-mages who had preceded everything, which was still consecrated to its original purpose even if no one worshipped there now, even if the current caretaker was an old man who did not speak.

"The Temple," he said, between breaths.

She understood immediately.

He adjusted their direction, angling through a back alley that would save them half the distance at the cost of some light, and she followed without question, and behind them the shadows followed too, maintaining that precise and patient distance.

Just before they turned the final corner, Merissa looked back.

Once. Only once.

Their house — visible from here still, on its northern hill — was disappearing. Not burning, not collapsing. Dissolving at the edges, the stone walls softening into the surrounding darkness, becoming indistinguishable from it the way a photograph left in sunlight becomes indistinguishable from the paper it's printed on. Gradually, without drama, without sound.

Being absorbed.

She turned away and ran.

The Temple of Hours was ancient beyond reckoning — older than the city, older than the name of the kingdom. Its stones were enormous, fitted without mortar in the manner of things built by people who understood that permanence is not achieved through adhesion but through proportion. The iron gate stood open, as if the temple had decided long ago that whatever was worth keeping out would not be stopped by a gate.

Inside: old wax and cold stone and something beneath both — a faint mineral warmth, the residue of very old magic embedded in the walls, patient and quiet and entirely unlike what had been pursuing them through the rain.

They pushed through the inner door and into the main hall and the shadows did not follow.

The threshold held them. He could feel it — the precise moment at which the pursuit stopped, that particular quality of pressure lifting, the silence inside the temple its own kind of silence: old and deliberate rather than imposed. He leaned against the wall and listened to his own breathing.

Merissa closed the door.

For a long moment neither of them spoke.

Then, from somewhere in the interior, a light appeared — small, carried, moving with the unhurried pace of someone for whom urgency had ceased to be relevant some decades prior. An old man. One eye, a covered lantern, a robe mended so many times it was difficult to determine what it had originally been. He looked at them both without surprise, as if their arrival had been expected.

He set the lantern on the floor. Went to a side door, opened it, and waited.

There was food inside. A fire already built. Blankets. A room beneath the dome, with the crack in the stone that let in a thread of sky, dark now but present.

He left them there without a word, because he did not speak. Words would have been unnecessary. What he had provided was enough: shelter, warmth, and the profound reassurance of walls older than what had followed them here.

Outside, invisible in the rain, the Forgotten Forest breathed.

And in the morning, everything would begin.

Chapter Two — The Forbidden Book

Dawn in Heitar never arrived the way dawn was supposed to arrive.

In other cities — cities that hadn't spent centuries positioned at the seam between the known world and what lay beyond it — dawn came with something like generosity. A gradual warming at the horizon. A softening of dark to gray to something approaching gold. A sense of the world choosing, slowly, to be visible again.

Heitar's dawn was not like that. It came the way a judge enters a courtroom — without ceremony, without warmth, without any interest in whether those assembled were glad to see it. It pressed through the clouds rather than parting them, colorless and precise, illuminating without improving, revealing without consoling. The kind of light that showed things as they were rather than as they might be wished.

That particular morning came with additional weight — a quality of aftermath, like the smell that lingers in a room where something irreversible has happened. The lantern at the corner of Throughway Alley hung dark and still, its iron bracket empty as a sentence ending in the middle.

The creatures were gone.

They had departed — receded, whatever the appropriate word was — sometime in the deep of night, before the first suggestion of dawn. Kaen had known they were gone the moment it happened, though he couldn't have explained how. The particular quality of pressure their proximity had created simply lifted, the way a migraine lifts: all at once, without transition, leaving an absence that was almost worse than the presence had been, because absence has no edges to brace against.

In the room beneath the dome of the Temple of Hours, Merissa had finally surrendered to exhaustion and slipped into sleep. He had watched it happen — the way her breathing changed, the way the small persistent tension in her jaw released, her hands uncurling from whatever they had been holding in the waking dark.

He had not slept.

He sat by the dying fire and held the dark green book in his lap. Understanding was not the problem. The problem was accepting — allowing the information to be simultaneously true: that he and his sister were described in a prophecy in a temple neither of them had entered before last night, described with specificity that could not be coincidence, that the things which had come to their house were connected to this prophecy, that the Forest on the northern horizon had been waiting for them specifically and personally and with patience that made the concept of waiting seem almost quaint.

He looked at the sleeping face of his sister.

He thought: our parents knew.

Not revelation — more like recognizing a face you have known for a long time in a context where you don't expect to see it. Of course. They had always known. The house on the northern hill. The books in the study, accumulating their silent influence. The amulet. The particular way his mother had looked at the Forest on clear days — not with the incurious avoidance most of Heitar's inhabitants had perfected, but with something more complicated. More informed. A look that contained history and decision and something very close to grief.

They had known what their children were. And they had chosen not to say.

He sat with this until Merissa opened her eyes.

She woke absolutely. No gradual emergence, no confusion about where she was. She opened her eyes and the gray light of the domed room was in them and she looked at him across the embers and said nothing for a long moment.

Then: "How long did I sleep?"

"A few hours."

She sat up, reached for a piece of wood from the small supply left beside the hearth, and fed it in with the competence of someone who has done this enough times to do it without thinking.

“The things are gone,” she said. “They’ll come back.”

“Yes. Both.”

The wood caught. The embers began to breathe again.

“You read all night,” she said. “And?”

He handed her the book.

She took it with both hands, with the sensitivity in her fingertips that was part of how illusion-images related to objects. She opened it and looked at the text that should have been illegible to both of them and was not.

She read for several minutes. He watched the fire.

“This is about us,” she said. “Specifically. I can feel it — writing doesn’t usually carry magical resonance, but this does. It’s addressed. Like a letter written before we were born.”

“Written before there was a way to know we would be born.”

She closed the book and held it in her lap. “I dreamed about the Forest. I understood that the things that came last night weren’t sent to harm us — they were sent to find us. To verify we exist and are what the prophecy says we are.”

“And now that they’ve confirmed it, the actual summons will come.”

“Unless we go first.”

She was quiet. The fire had achieved something sustainable — not large, but steady.

“We need to understand more. The book describes something, but doesn’t explain it.” She looked up. “Where did it come from? Who put it here?”

“Someone who wanted it found at the right time.”

“Our parents?”

The question hung in the air above the fire. Needing to be addressed.

“I don’t know,” he said. “The book predates them. But they may have known it was here. May have arranged for it to be accessible when it needed to be.”

“They prepared for us,” she said finally. “They knew we would need this. They made sure that when we reached this point, we would have what we needed.”

“We’re going to go into the Forest,” she said.

She had said it before she decided to say it. That was how she knew it was true — not the kind of thing you arrive at through argument, but the kind that is simply already there when you open your mouth, waiting to be spoken.

She looked at the fire. Twelve years she had looked at the horizon instead of the Forest. Twelve years of peripheral vision, deliberate and practiced. And last night something had come out of it and walked through her walls and looked for her specifically.

There was no version of this in which they didn’t go.

It was not a brave thought. It was just a true one.

“Yes. But not today. We need to prepare.” He paused. “We start today. But first — we eat something. We find out what happened to the city last night. Then we plan.”

Outside, very distantly, he could hear the first sounds of the city waking. A cart on wet cobblestones. The sound of a door.

The world was choosing, with reluctant pragmatism, to continue.

The city, they discovered, was largely unaware.

The market was operating by mid-morning. The stalls were open, the people selling their things with ordinary focused attention. Children had emerged, the dogs had reclaimed their corners, the smell of bread from the communal ovens had reasserted itself. No one spoke about the night. Not at the market, not at the well, not among the clusters of neighbors exchanging the ordinary social currency of a small community.

As if it had not happened.

“They didn’t experience it,” Merissa said to Kaen, when they found a quiet corner behind the herb seller’s stall. “Only us.”

“Only us,” he confirmed. “That’s intentional. Whatever came last night was precise — it targeted us. The silence, the stillness, was a stage. A demonstration of capabilities.”

They watched the ordinary morning of the market. Everything as if last night had simply not occurred.

“After,” she said, when he mentioned the house. “First I want to know what Marten knows. About the temple. About why that book was there.”

“He doesn’t speak.”

“I know. But he communicates. He left us food and a fire and a room and said nothing about it, which suggests he was expecting us. A man who expects people doesn’t expect them without reason.”

Marten was in the lower part of the temple when they returned, mending cloth, working with the concentration of hands that know a task well and are permitted to let the mind go elsewhere.

He looked up when they entered. His one eye — the left — was extraordinary in the way eyes are sometimes extraordinary in very old people, as if years of seeing have deposited something in the iris. Dark gray, very clear. The other socket was covered by a patch of worn leather so old it had become part of his face.

He set down his mending with the movement of someone who understands that some conversations take precedence, and he waited.

“We found the dark green book in the library,” Kaen said carefully. “Last night.”

Marten’s hands rested perfectly still on his knees — the stillness of someone for whom this information is not new. He produced his notebook and pencil, wrote, held the paper out.

I have been its keeper for forty years. It arrived before I did. I was told what it was, and that the right people would find it when the time came.

“Who told you?”

A woman. She came once, thirty years ago, and said: you will know the moment when the book chooses to be read. Keep it safe until then. She did not give her name.

Merissa looked at Kaen. Thirty years ago — the timeline was close to right for their mother. Or someone who knew their mother.

“The creatures that came last night,” Merissa said. “What are they?”

Marten wrote carefully. *I have heard them called the Breathless. They are not alive the way animals are alive — they are what remains of something that chose to un-live, that gave up the things which bind a creature to the world in order to become unbound. They are instruments.*

The Forest sent them.

The three words sat on the paper with the directness of a fact long understood.

“Yes,” Kaen said. “We believe so.”

Marten stood and went to a small chest in the corner, opened it, and held something out to Merissa.

A key. Old brass, darkened almost to black, with a handle in the shape of a knotwork Kaen recognized from the book — cousin symbols, drawn from the same original vocabulary.

Merissa took it without asking why. When a very old man who has spent forty years keeping a thing for the right people finally recognizes them, you do not ask for credentials.

He wrote one final note and returned to his mending in the manner of someone who has completed work that has been waiting long enough.

The lower library. Third door on the right from the bottom of the stairs. What is inside has been waiting for your family.

The lower library existed at a depth that had not seen daylight in longer than anyone living could know, the stairs cut into bedrock rather than built of it. They descended by lantern light, the flame making the walls look wet, the grain of the cut stone look like something living.

Three doors on the right. The first two were unlocked, opening onto rooms that smelled of deep storage. The third was different — not in the visible age of the wood but in some quality of the space around it, a pressure suggesting it had opinions about who it would open for.

Merissa put the key in the lock. It turned with the ease of something that has been waiting to be turned.

Inside: a room smaller than the others, the walls lined with shelves from floor to ceiling, the shelves occupied not by many books but by few — each one isolated from its neighbors, each one resting in a purpose-built bracket. The care of the arrangement was striking. Not the careless accumulation of the library above, but something curated. Selected. Each item chosen and placed with intention.

Seven books.

And between two of them, on the middle shelf, at eye level — a box.

Small, made of the same dark metal as Kaen's amulet, with a quality of seeming to absorb rather than reflect the light. On the lid, symbols — the same language as the book, immediately comprehensible to both of them without their being able to say why.

For those who carry the Hours and the Mist.

Merissa reached past the books and took the box down. She held it with both hands for a moment. Then she looked at Kaen.

"I think here is where we're meant to open it," he said.

She pressed the latch. It released without resistance.

Inside, resting on what had once been velvet — the ghost of a texture, the memory of a color — were two objects.

The first resembled a watch in its dimensions and disposition toward circularity, but revealed itself on examination to be something other. The face had no numbers. The case was dark metal, warm to the touch the way the amulet was warm, and when Kaen picked it up he felt time moving through it — some channel opening between his gift and whatever this object was. The hands moved not in correspondence to duration but in response to something else he could not yet name.

It was their mother's. He knew this the moment his skin touched the metal. Not from a label, but from the imprint of years of a specific person's handling.

She had left this here. For him.

The second was a pendant — small, oval, made of something suggesting both glass and stone, clear enough to see through but with depth. Inside it, something moved slowly, continuously, without any visible mechanism. Something that looked like mist but was more deliberate — put inside this pendant and told to stay.

Merissa picked it up. The thing inside moved toward her touch without hesitation.

"Hers," she said.

"Yes."

On the back of the watchcase, an inscription. He read it and the reading took a moment, because what it said was not simple. Then he looked up.

"The time you carry is not a weapon. It is a river. Walk with it, not against it. And when the river floods — breathe, and remember that water returns to water."

She was quiet.

"And mine?" she said. She turned the pendant herself and read it, and he watched her face.

"The mist you make is not a lie. It is the truth seen from an angle. The mist that hides is a mist that has forgotten its purpose. Make it so it shows instead."

A long silence in that small stone room. The lantern between them. Seven books on their shelves.

“They knew this day would come,” he said.

“They prepared for it. They couldn’t tell us — if we’d grown up knowing what we were, knowing this was coming, we would have prepared ourselves according to our own understanding, and our own understanding would have been insufficient. They needed us to arrive at this moment as we are, not as we would have tried to be.”

“That is either wisdom or a very convenient explanation for secrecy,” he said.

“Both,” she said. “Things can be both.”

The house, or what had been the house.

He had tried to prepare himself and found that preparation of this kind was not possible. There is a category of experience that can be understood in advance without being felt in advance.

The foundation remained. The oldest part, intact — though the stones were disturbed in a way that suggested not demolition but removal from within, as if the structure above had been lifted away. No rubble. No scattered timber, no shattered glass. Everything that had stood above the foundation was simply absent.

Taken.

The garden was untouched. The low shrubs in their self-determined shapes. The stones of the path leading to where the door had been, now leading to nothing. The iron gate, lacking its latch, standing open to emptiness where a house had been.

Merissa stood at the edge of the foundation and did not speak for a long time. He stood beside her and also did not speak, and the wind moved between them, and the clear blue sky above was very blue, and somewhere in the distance the Forgotten Forest was a dark line that was too dark to be merely shadow, too present to be merely weather.

“Everything that was ours,” she said finally.

“Yes.”

“The books in the study. Father’s notes. The pressed flowers Mother kept in that box by the window. The mechanical bird I was building, with the moving wings. Since last spring.”

“I know.”

“Everything.”

The wind between them. The open gate. The foundation stones that had once held a life.

“We still have what we carried out,” he said. “And what the temple gave us.”

She looked down. The pendant was around her neck — she had put it on in the room below the library, instinctively, as if it had always belonged there. The watchcase was warm against his ribs in his coat pocket.

“And each other,” she said.

“Yes. And each other.”

She crouched and picked up a piece of stone from the foundation — small, loose, displaced in whatever had happened here. She held it for a moment. Then she put it in her pocket.

He understood without asking. A piece of the place where they had been children, where they had learned to be themselves. Not enough to rebuild anything. Enough to carry.

She stood.

She looked north.

“We have one day,” she said. “One more day in the city. We read what’s left in the library, we find what we can purchase with what money we have, we prepare for the journey.” She turned from the north and looked at him. “Tomorrow morning we go to Sylva. And after Sylva — we go to the Forest. And we finish what our parents started.”

He looked at his sister. She had their mother’s jaw, he realized suddenly — that particular set of it, the quality of determination made physical. He saw it now because he had rarely seen it at full expression.

“Yes,” he said. “We finish what they started.”

She nodded.

The day continued around them — blue sky and the bare foundation of a life and a horizon with a dark line on it that was the most important place in the world and the most dangerous and the only possible destination.

That evening, they sat at the window of the domed room — the narrow window that looked north, not designed for looking out of but permitting it. The sky had deepened from blue to the particular shade that precedes dark, the blue of a world that has used up its light for the day and is weighing the decision to begin again tomorrow.

On the northern horizon: the dark line.

More visible in this light than in the full brightness of day. In full brightness, the Forest was simply a darkness at the edge of the visible world, a shadow that could almost be rationalized as weather. At dusk, it was undeniable. It sat on the horizon with a settled certainty that no trick of failing light could account for. It was there in the way that only real things are there — thoroughly, without equivocation, without any interest in whether you believed in it.

“I’ve been looking at it my whole life,” Merissa said.

“Yes.”

“I never looked at it directly. I always looked at the edge of it. At the line between ordinary and that.”

“I did the same.”

“It knew we were doing that. It was patient about it.”

He considered this. “I think it needed circumstances more than it needed us to be ready. The prophecy is not about us being ready. It’s about us being present at the right time.”

“Which is now.”

“Which appears to be now.”

She was quiet for a while. Then: “Do you think they’re aware? Our parents. Inside it. Do you think they can experience being inside it?”

“I don’t know,” he said honestly. “But I think they’re not gone. I think there’s enough of them still themselves that when we reach them, they’ll know us.”

She absorbed this. “That’s the most important thing. Everything else — the Forest, the darkness, whatever needs to be done with the prophecy — all of it matters less than that.”

“Yes. I know.”

“I need you to know that. In the Forest, things might suggest otherwise. Things might suggest that everything else comes first and our parents are secondary. And I need you to know that for me they are not secondary.”

He turned to look at her directly. She was looking at the horizon, at the dark line, at the thing she had been looking at obliquely her whole life and was now, for the first time, choosing to look at straight.

“They’re not secondary for me either,” he said. “Whatever the prophecy needs from us — the prophecy can have. But I am also going in there to bring them home.”

She exhaled. Very slightly. The release of something held.

“Good. Then we’re agreed.”

Outside, the dark deepened. The line of the Forest became invisible — merged with the approaching night, present but unseen the way it was most of the time. The city of Heitar made its small evening sounds. The clock below marked the hour.

Tomorrow: the Boundary Hills. Sylva. The beginning of becoming what they needed to become.

And after: the Forest itself.

But tonight: the fire, and food, and the particular warmth of two people who have decided on a dangerous thing together and found, in the deciding-together, something that fear alone could not provide.

The night came in, as nights do.

And in the lower library below them, the seven books sat on their shelves in the dark, patient as only very old things can be patient, waiting for the morning that would begin the next part of everything they had been prepared to explain.

Chapter Three — The First Steps

Morning did not announce itself in the Temple of Hours. It arrived the way old truths arrive — not with drama, not with the warm ceremony of sunrise over open country, but quietly, through the single crack in the domed ceiling that let in a thread of sky. The thread turned from black to gray to something approaching silver, and that was all. That was morning here.

Kaen had not slept.

He had kept watch the way you keep watch over something you cannot protect by watching it but cannot stop watching anyway — sitting by the dying fire with the dark green book in his lap, not reading, only holding it, letting the warmth of its strange living pages move through his palms like a second pulse. Outside the temple walls, the city of Heitar had been very still. Not the imposed stillness of the night before, the silence that had felt placed, deliberate, the silence of something listening — but a different kind of quiet. The exhausted quiet of a place that has recently been frightened and is now, carefully, beginning to be ordinary again.

He was not ordinary. He understood that now in a way he hadn't when the sun had last been up.

The book had told him things he could not unknow. The prophecy was precise in the way of things written by someone who had seen what they were describing, not imagined it — precise in the wrong places, in the details that mattered and should not have been guessable, while vague in the places where vagueness served as a kind of mercy. It named them without naming them. It described what they were. What they carried. What they were expected to walk into.

He set the book aside and looked at Merissa sleeping.

Her face in sleep had the quality it always had — motion arrested, all the expressiveness of it held still for the moment, and what remained was the structure beneath: the particular architecture of her that was their mother's jaw and their father's brow and something else entirely that was simply and specifically her. He had looked at that sleeping face his entire life. In the first years of it he had been afraid of the dark and would sometimes leave his room and sit beside her bed until the fear passed, and she had never woken but her breathing had always seemed to him to change slightly, as if some part of her acknowledged him even in sleep. Steadied him.

He was going to put her in danger.

The thought was not new. It had arrived the moment he read the prophecy and had been sitting in him since, solid and quietly terrible. He was going to put her in danger because there was no version of this that did not. Because the prophecy did not leave space for one of them to be safe while the other proceeded. Because the lock and the key did not work separately.

He thought about the words. The Clock and the Illusion. Through them — the Last Path. Through them — the Return of the Primordial Dark or its Final Ash.

Both options led through them. Not around. Not instead. Through.

He fed the last of the wood into the fire and watched it catch.

She woke absolutely, as she always did — no gradual emergence, no confusion about where she was or what had happened. Her eyes opened and the gray morning was in them and she looked at him for a moment without speaking. Then she sat up and reached for the piece of bread from the night before that the old caretaker had left and ate it with the focused attention of someone who understands that the body's requirements are not suspended by extraordinary circumstances.

"You read all night," she said.

"Yes."

"And you've already decided something."

It was not a question. He had forgotten, over the comfortable years of their shared life in the northern house, how well she read him. Or perhaps he had not forgotten — perhaps he had

simply grown accustomed to living in the presence of someone who read him well, the way you grow accustomed to a good light.

“We need to go to Sylva,” he said.

She was quiet for a moment, processing this. Sylva — the name was known in Heitar the way that names of certain places and people become known in border towns, through accumulation rather than any particular event. Not famous, not notorious. Simply known, in the way a reef is known to sailors: consistently present, consistently relevant, consistently something you didn’t approach without purpose.

Sylva lived in the Boundary Hills, three hours north and east of the city, in a house that was allegedly not quite a house. She had lived there as long as anyone could remember and rather longer than that, judging by the age of the stories. Most people in Heitar did not discuss her directly. She existed in their conversations as a peripheral reference, mentioned sideways, as a last resort — you could go to Sylva, someone might say, meaning: if everything else has failed and you are desperate and you are not afraid of what you might find.

“The book mentions her?” Merissa asked.

“Not by name. But the lineage of the Guardians — the people who understood what the Forest was and what it required — her description is there. What she is. What she knows.” He paused. “She was one of them. One of the ones who chose to remain outside rather than go in.”

“She chose not to enter.”

“She chose to be the preparation for those who would.” He looked at the book. “There’s a difference.”

Merissa absorbed this. She finished the bread. She looked at the crack in the dome, where the morning’s thread of light had widened slightly, the silver of it warming toward something that was almost white.

“How long will it take?” she asked.

“A day to reach her. However long she needs after that.” He paused. “However long we need.” She looked at him.

“You mean to learn something from her. Not just receive information. Actually learn.”

“Our magic,” he said carefully, “as it is now, is not enough. Not for what the book describes. Not for what came through our door two nights ago.” He met her eyes. “We have had our gifts since childhood. We have used them carefully, occasionally, with the instincts of people who were never taught what they were carrying. We have managed with them.” He paused. “Managing is not the same as being ready.”

She was quiet for a long moment.

Then she said: “All right. We go to Sylva.”

They left the Temple of Hours as the city was beginning its careful return to ordinary. The market stalls reopening, not with their usual energy but with a kind of deliberate normalcy, as if the act of reopening was itself a statement. The water-carriers moving their routes. A woman hanging washing from a high window with the focused attention of someone concentrating on what she can control. Heitar had been frightened in the night, and now Heitar was making the decision, collectively, silently, to continue — the way that border cities always make this decision, because the alternative is to stop, and stopping is not survivable.

No one looked at them for long. This was both ordinary — they were not remarkable-looking people, in their walking clothes with their packs — and slightly strange, because the previous night had not been ordinary and the city knew it. But border people had a talent for looking past what they were not ready to address. They had spent centuries perfecting it, living at the edge of the thing that lived behind the Forest’s darkness. You did not stare at evidence of the extraordinary. You looked at your washing, your water, your bread.

They walked north through the city and out the northern gate and onto the plain.

The plain, in morning light, was a different thing from the plain at dusk. It did not have the quality of a stage or a threshold — it was simply flat land, grass brown and pressed down by autumn, stretching to the horizon with the undemonstrative honesty of land that has no pretensions. The sky above it was wide and pale and the wind that moved across it was cold but not hostile. Just winter approaching, doing what winter does.

And at the horizon — always, reliably, inescapably at the horizon — the line of the Forest. Darker than it should have been, more present than mere distance could account for, but in morning light at least clearly a thing rather than a feeling. Trees. A great deal of them, very close together, very old.

He looked at it and looked away.

“You do that,” Merissa said.

“Do what.”

“Look at it and then look away. Like you’re checking that it’s still there and then deciding you’d rather not confirm it.”

He was quiet for a moment. “You do it too.”

“I know.” She turned her face forward, toward the Boundary Hills. “I did it this morning, actually. Got up and on the way back I looked north through the window and — looked away. Even after everything.” She paused. “I think we’ve been practicing that our whole lives. Not quite looking. As if there were an agreement with ourselves about how much we were prepared to see.”

“That agreement is probably over,” he said.

“Yes,” she said. “I think it is.”

The path to Sylva’s dwelling was not a path in any maintained sense. It was an understanding — a direction that people who had made this journey before had worn slightly into the hillside by the fact of having walked it, the grass a little lower, the stones a little more deliberately arranged. You had to know to look for it.

Kaen had found the reference in the book. Not directions, exactly. More a description of approach: the hill that faces the plain like an open question, the stones at its base arranged as numbers without a clock. He had recognized this at once — a low ridge with a particular profile against the sky, its base scattered with stones that were, when you looked at them with the attention the description demanded, positioned in a pattern that was not geological.

The hills themselves were different from the plain. The land folded here in ways that changed the quality of the air — warmer in the folds, colder at the ridgelines, with the kind of micro-climate that develops in terrain that has been left alone for long enough. The scrub was denser. Old trees, not forest-old but considerably beyond young, their roots finding the angles of the hillsides with the confidence of long occupation.

They did not speak much on the walk. Not because there was nothing to say but because the quality of the land discouraged it — invited instead the kind of attention that silence makes possible, the close reading of what surrounds you. He found himself noticing things he would not ordinarily have noticed: the specific angle at which a certain stone sat in the hillside, too precise for randomness. The way two trees on a ridge had grown together at the crowns without quite touching. Small things that carried the quality of arrangement, of intention, as if the landscape here had been worked on by hands that were not quite hands and not quite time.

Merissa walked beside him with her dark hair pulled back against the wind and her pack settled on her shoulders with the ease of someone who had always known how to carry a weight. He watched her peripherally and thought about what the book had said about the Illusion — that it was not merely the ability to deceive, but the ability to perceive what others could not, to see through surfaces to the structures beneath them. The Mist that hides has forgotten its purpose. Make it so it shows instead. He had read that passage three times.

Her magic had always been the kind that concealed. Mist, distortion, the layering of false over real. He had always thought of it, vaguely, as a defensive quality — useful for escape, for confusion, for buying the seconds needed for something else. He had not thought of it as a way of seeing. He wondered if she had.

The sun was at its highest point — which in the late autumn of the borderland was not very high, a wan and oblique illumination that cast long shadows even at noon — when they found the house.

It was not a house.

Or rather: it was a house in the way that a human face is a face — it had the necessary structural elements, the things that defined the category, but it had them in proportions and arrangements that made the category feel approximate. The walls were stone and wood, but the stone was the hillside's own stone and the wood was the hillside's own trees, and they had been brought together with such patience and skill that the building seemed to have grown rather than been built, to have arrived at its current form through a process more like evolution than construction. Moss covered the north face. The roof was a complex of angles that shed water in seventeen directions simultaneously and housed, in its various protected corners, a population of birds that moved in and out with the easy propriety of tenants who have been there long enough to stop noticing the landlord.

There was smoke from a chimney that was more of a suggestion of a chimney.

Before they could knock, the door opened.

The woman who appeared in it was — he found himself reaching for the right category and not quite finding it. Old, certainly, in the way of things that had been subject to time for a long time, but the oldness was not diminishment. She was compact, deliberate, her face holding an expression that was not quite assessment and not quite welcome but something between them — the expression of someone who has been expecting something and is now verifying that it matches expectations.

Her eyes moved to each of them in turn with a specific, focused attention that was different from ordinary looking. He felt it — a quality of being looked at that registered not just on the surface but behind it, as if she were checking not his face but the structure behind his face.

“Children of the Clock,” she said. Her voice was low and entirely unhurried, the voice of someone for whom urgency had long since become someone else's problem. “Time-Breath and Illusion-Mist. I felt the Path crack.” She looked at them for a moment longer. “Come in. You'll be hungry.”

She turned and went back inside without waiting for a response, which was its own kind of welcome.

The inside of the house was an organized argument with the concept of a house.

There were things here that served the functions of furniture without being furniture in any recognizable form. Places to sit that were stone ledges covered in layered cloth and did this so effectively that the distinction between ledge and chair became philosophical. A table that was a flat-topped root, polished by years of use to a warm smoothness. Shelves that were the natural horizontal interruptions of the stone walls, extended slightly by carefully fitted wood, holding an inventory that ranged from the ordinary to the genuinely impossible to categorize.

And everywhere, woven into the structure of the space in a way that was not decorative but functional, were marks. Not the dark green book's symbols — different, older, more worn, the kind of marks that accumulate over long periods of consistent use rather than being placed with intention. The house itself was, he understood after a few minutes in it, a working space. Not a home in the sense of a place designed for comfort, but a place designed for something else, and comfort was what remained when that something else was temporarily set aside.

Sylva fed them — a stew that was clearly from whatever the hills provided and was better than it had any right to be, with bread that had been made that morning and was still warm enough to be honest about it. They ate. She sat across from them and did not eat but watched them with the quality of a person doing something useful.

When they had finished she looked at each of them in turn.

“You found the book,” she said.

“In the temple library,” Kaen said. “In the lower room. The caretaker — ”

“Marten. Yes. He has kept that room for forty years. He was told to.” She folded her hands on the table, hands that were considerably stronger-looking than the rest of her suggested. “You read the prophecy.”

“Yes.”

“Then you know why you’re here. Not in my house specifically. Here, on this side of the line, making this choice.” She looked at Merissa. “You have not said anything since you sat down.”

“I’ve been listening,” Merissa said.

Sylva’s expression shifted — very slightly, but he caught it. The thing that moved across her face was not quite approval, but was recognition of a quality.

“Good,” she said. “That will help.” She looked between them. “You are not what you think you are. What you carry — the Time and the Mist — you have both treated it as a capacity. Something you have. A quality of yourselves, like height or the color of your eyes.” She paused. “It is not that. It is more like a language. You know the vocabulary. You do not know the grammar. You cannot write a sentence. You are functional illiterates in your own mother tongue.”

He absorbed this. It stung, which meant it was accurate.

“Then teach us the grammar,” he said.

She looked at him.

“That,” she said, “is why you’re here.”

The teaching began that afternoon and lasted seven days.

Later, he would find it difficult to describe those seven days in any linear way, because time within Sylva’s hill-house did not proceed with the regularity that the word day implies. There were long stretches of light and long stretches of dark, meals at irregular intervals, sleep that came when it came and was not negotiated. The house had its own rhythm and it was not particularly interested in accommodating theirs.

On the first day, Sylva took him outside to the slope below the house, where a shelf of exposed rock ran horizontally through the hillside, and she sat him on the rock and said nothing for an hour. He did not ask questions. He had the sense that questions would not be answered, not because she was withholding but because questions were not the instrument required here.

At the end of the hour she said: “What did you feel?”

He described what he had felt, which was: the particular way time moved through the rock’s exposed surface, which had a different quality from time moving through soil or through air. Slower, more compressed, carrying the specific density of stone that had been in the same position for centuries. He had not noticed this before. He noticed it now because he was not doing anything else, because the hour of silence had reduced his attention to its simplest form, which was simply: being there.

“Good,” she said. “Again.”

On the second day, she made him run. Not metaphorically. She made him run up the hillside at a pace that was uncomfortable and maintain that pace for much longer than he wanted to, and while he ran she called instructions: slow it — not your body, the time in your body. Keep your legs moving at the same speed. Now slow just the breath. Not the run. The breath. It was, he realized partway through, not an exercise in physical conditioning but in the decoupling of the various streams of time that moved through a living body simultaneously. He had always experienced his magic as a single thing — time, which he could affect. She was showing him that time was not a single thing. That a body was a collection of clocks, each running at its own rate, and that the ability to affect them separately was not a more advanced version of what he could already do, but a fundamentally different skill.

He collapsed on the hillside at the end of the second day and understood, in the complete and humbling way that you understand something when your body has been used to demonstrate it, that he had been doing something much simpler than he thought.

“You could have told me this,” he said, lying on his back looking at the autumn sky.

“I could have told you,” Sylva agreed, standing above him with no visible sympathy. “In six months you would have half-believed it. Now you know.” She paused. “Rest. Tomorrow is worse.”

It was.

Merissa’s lessons were different.

Sylva worked with her in the mornings, inside the house, in the back room that smelled most strongly of the old working marks on the walls. She sat Merissa at the table and put objects in front of her — ordinary objects, a stone, a candle, a small mirror — and said: “Make me believe this is something else.”

Merissa could do this. She had always been able to do this. The mist came easily, the suggestion of other shapes, the distortion of the eye’s reading of the object’s surface. She performed this competently on the stone on the first morning and waited for approval.

Sylva looked at the illusioned stone for a long time.

“What is it now?” she asked.

“It looks like an apple,” Merissa said.

“It looks like an apple,” Sylva agreed. “Now — what does it feel like?”

Merissa blinked. The apple-stone still sat on the table.

“It’s a stone,” she said. “Under the illusion.”

“Yes. And that is the problem.” Sylva touched the apple-stone with one finger. “You have given it a surface. You have not given it a truth.” She looked up. “An illusion that is only surface is a wall. It can be walked through by anything that knows walls are not real. An illusion that carries its own truth — that has been thought through fully enough that when you say apple, the apple is, in the way that matters to the world — that cannot be walked through, because there is no through. There is only it.”

Merissa stared at her.

“You’re asking me to believe my own illusions,” she said.

“I’m asking you to make them real enough that the world believes them,” Sylva said. “Which requires that you do first.” She leaned back. “This is why illusion magic is the hardest of all the visible arts. Not because the technique is complex. Because the practitioner must be completely honest about what they are doing, in order to lie completely. A halfhearted truth makes a halfhearted lie. A full truth, fully inhabited, makes a full lie. One that stands.” She paused. “What do you fear?”

The question arrived without context. Merissa did not answer immediately.

“Your fears are where your illusions fail,” Sylva said. “The thing you cannot make yourself believe, you cannot make anyone else believe. Show me what you cannot make.”

This was the second day. The third and fourth were spent on what she could not make. The list was longer than she had expected and the exposure of it was not comfortable. She could not make her parents’ faces. Could not make the house on the northern hill stand on the table as a credible object rather than a ghost of one. Could not make a fire that did not look like the memory of a fire.

“These are places where your grief is louder than your will,” Sylva said. “They will be your weakest points in the Forest. The Forest will find them.”

“How do I close them?” Merissa asked.

“You don’t close grief,” Sylva said. “You use it. Grief is not weakness in illusion magic. It is material. The most potent kind, because it is fully believed. Learn to craft with it rather than around it.” She looked at the table. “Show me your mother’s face. Don’t try to hide what you feel about it. Use what you feel about it.”

Merissa looked at the table. She thought of her mother. Not tried to think — she let the thought come with everything it brought, the weight of the loss and the particular quality of her mother's presence, which had been a kind of warmth, a specific density of attention.

The face appeared on the table and it was her mother's face, completely and without equivocation, and it lasted for four seconds before Merissa's control broke.

But those four seconds were, Sylva told her, the most real magic she had made in three days.

On the seventh day, Sylva took them both outside. The afternoon was clear, which in the Boundary Hills meant a specific kind of clear — cold and exact, the light at that low autumn angle that illuminates the surface of things rather than their depth, making the world look like a very careful illustration of itself.

She stood them at the top of the ridge and looked at the horizon.

The Forest was visible from here. More than visible — legible, in a way it was not from the city below. From the city you could see its edge, the line where it began. From the ridge you could see into the first hundred yards of it, the way the trees were arranged, the specific quality of the shadow between them, the sense not just of depth but of oldness. Of a thing that had been there for a very long time and had no intention of being anywhere else.

Merissa and Kaen stood at the ridge and looked at it, and this time neither of them looked away.

Sylva stood behind them and said nothing for a long time.

Then she said: "Magic does not make you powerful. It makes you visible. To the things in there — to what waits in the dark between those trees — your gifts are not weapons you carry. They are light you emit. You shine. And what lives in places like that is drawn to light." She paused. "You cannot dim yourselves. You cannot pretend to be ordinary. You have gone past that point." Another pause. "What you can do is learn to be bright enough that the thing that comes toward your light is blinded by it rather than fed."

Kaen turned to look at her.

"Is that what happened to our parents?" he asked. "They shone, and the Forest —"

"Your parents made a choice," Sylva said. Not unkindly. With the specific kind of care that comes from long practice at delivering difficult truths without cruelty. "They went in knowing what they were, knowing what would happen. They went for reasons I am not able to tell you because they did not tell me. Only that it was necessary and that they would not be back." She looked at the Forest. "They are not lost in there. Lost implies unintentional. They are in there. Whether in the form you remember — that I cannot tell you."

A silence.

"But they're there," Merissa said.

"Yes."

"We're going to bring them home," she said. It was not a question. It was a declaration, stated with the specific evenness of a person who has made a decision they are not prepared to revisit.

Sylva looked at her.

"Then go," she said. "The path to the Gate is north. You know which path. You have both always known. You learned to look away from it. You can stop doing that now."

She turned and walked back toward the house without ceremony, which was its own kind of farewell — the farewell of someone who does not have use for performances of emotion, who offers instead the practical gift of a direction clearly stated.

They stood at the ridge a moment longer.

Below them, Heitar was a collected set of rooftops and lanterns in the failing afternoon, very small, very human, very much a place that had been home and had now become something a little past home — the place you carry with you rather than the place you inhabit. He looked at it. He looked at the Forest. He thought about his mother's watch, warm in his coat pocket, its hands moving

in response to something other than time as he had understood it. He thought about the inscription. The time you carry is not a weapon. It is a river.

He thought: then I will learn to swim in it rather than try to dam it.

“Tomorrow,” he said.

“Tomorrow,” she said.

They came down from the ridge as the sun sank behind the hills, and the long shadow of the Forgotten Forest stretched across the plain toward the city of Heitar, patient as it had always been, reaching exactly as far as the light permitted and no further, for now.

Chapter Four — A New Threat

The world beyond the city was another country.

They understood this within the first hour of walking it — understood it in the body rather than the mind, the way you understand weather or cold water, as an immediate and physical fact. The road that left Heitar's northern gate was a road in name and memory only. The stones that had once made it were still there, but they had been reclaimed incrementally by the land, lifted and tilted by the long patient work of frost and root until they had achieved a kind of dissolution back into the landscape — not rubble, not ruin, but something closer to return. The road was reverting to hillside. The hillside was accepting it back without ceremony.

They walked in the morning light. It was good walking weather — cold enough to keep you moving, not cold enough to make movement costly. The sky was the pale silver-blue of late autumn, high and uninterrupted, with the occasional transit of birds in their deliberate formations. Far off to the east, thin smoke from a farmstead or a shepherd's camp, the only sign of human occupation on the plain's wide canvas.

Behind them, Heitar. Ahead — the Forest's dark line on the horizon.

And in between: the road, and what it might hold.

They had left with what Sylva had prepared for them — not supplies, exactly, not provisions in the practical sense, though there was food enough for the journey and the pack on each of their backs was sensibly organized. What she had prepared for them was more like orientation. A frame for understanding what they were walking into, built from seven days of a specific kind of education, the kind that works on the person rather than informing them. He carried a different relationship to the time moving through his body now. She carried a different understanding of what her mist was and was not.

Neither of them spoke about Sylva directly. She was already becoming one of those presences that is most accurately held in silence, the kind of influence you integrate by not examining it too closely.

"The Gate is northeast," Kaen said. "Past the crossroads at the old marker stone."

"I know," Merissa said. "I've always known. I just never named it."

He understood this. The knowledge of how to reach the Forest's entry had always been in him the way certain knowledge is — not learned, not told, simply present, occupying a space in his understanding of the local geography that he had kept carefully unexamined. Now he examined it. It was very clear.

They walked.

The crossroads announced itself by feel before it was visible.

There was a quality to certain places in the world near the Forest's territory — places that existed at intersections of old paths, old intentions, old uses of land — that was different from the quality of the land around them. Not magical, exactly. Or not magical in the way that Sylva's workings were magical, the direct and deliberate application of a structured understanding to the world's materials. This was something older than that, something that had to do with the accumulated weight of decision made in a place over time. People had stood at this crossroads and chosen directions for as long as there had been people in this country. The choosing had left something. A quality of significance that was not the same as the quality of the ordinary land.

The marker stone was a block of granite that had been set upright by hands that were not available to date, wearing the specific patina of something too old for rain to do much more to it. There were marks on its surface that might have been letters in a writing system no one currently alive could read, or might have been something else entirely. They were deep and precise in a way that

suggested tools or intention, and they had the quality, like the Library's prophecy, of being almost comprehensible — of carrying meaning just below the threshold of his ability to receive it.

He touched the stone with one hand. The time moving through it was extraordinary — compressed, layered, dense with the specific weight of great age. He could feel centuries in it the way Sylva had taught him to feel the different streams in his own body. Not a single flow but many. The stone had been here through the Boundary Wars. Through the long period of abandonment when the hills were empty. Through the settling of Heitar, its slow accumulation of itself into city-hood. Through all of it, holding this crossroads, marking this point where direction becomes choice.

He lowered his hand.

"Which way?" Merissa asked.

He pointed northeast. The path that went northeast was the least visible of the four — barely a path at all, just a slightly lower angle in the grass, a direction that the eye slid over rather than settling on. The kind of path made by people who did not want their destination to be obvious.

"Northeast," she said. Not a question. She had looked where he pointed and she knew.

They took the northeast path.

The tower appeared in the middle of the afternoon, and it was wrong.

Not wrong in the obvious way of a thing out of place — it was not grotesque, not dramatic, did not announce its wrongness. It was wrong the way a word can be wrong in a sentence that is otherwise grammatical: precisely wrong, specifically wrong, wrong in a way that only becomes clear when you already know the language. The tower stood at a point where three lesser paths converged in a shallow depression of the land, a point that had its own gravitational quality, the way crossroads do, but of a different character from the marker stone. Where the marker stone carried weight, this point carried a quality closer to attention. It felt observed from multiple angles simultaneously.

The tower itself was built from the hillside's own stone, or appeared to be — it had the look of something that had always been there, that the hillside had produced naturally in the way it produced outcroppings and ridges. But outcroppings did not have doors. And this one did.

He stopped.

Beside him, Merissa had also stopped, and the air around her feet had shifted very slightly — a barely perceptible thickening, a beginning of mist that she was producing without quite deciding to, the instinctive response of her magic to a situation that her conscious mind was still assessing.

"Someone is in there," she said quietly. "More than one someone."

He felt it too. Not through his magic directly — time in the tower was strange, bent in a way that was not natural accumulation but deliberate arrangement — but through the anomaly perception that Sylva had spent a day teaching him to trust. The feeling that a situation has been prepared. That you are arriving at something that was set up before you got there.

"We don't have to go in," he said.

She looked at him.

"We don't have to go in," she agreed. "But we're going to."

This was accurate. The path northeast ran directly through the tower's shadow, and the sense of prepared attention he was feeling was not the attention of something that would let them pass without engagement. Whatever was inside the tower was aware of them. Had possibly been aware of them for some time.

The door opened as they approached. Not theatrically — not swung wide with a sound effect. It simply became open, the way a door becomes open when someone inside has decided it should be. The darkness beyond it was not the darkness of an unlit interior but a different quality of dark, the dark of a space that had been arranged to receive people.

He put his hand in his coat pocket. The watch was warm — warmer than it had been all morning. Paying attention.

"Stay close," he said.

They went in.

The interior was a single round room.

It was larger than the tower's exterior suggested it should be, which was itself information. The ceiling was high and dark. The walls were stone, unmarked, carrying none of the quality of the ancient marker stone's accumulated meaning — these were walls with nothing to say, the walls of a space designed to contain rather than to hold. In the center of the room was a table, circular, cut from a single piece of stone, low enough to see across at standing height.

Around the table: four people.

They did not rise. They did not greet. They simply looked — four sets of eyes settling on him and Merissa with the focused efficiency of people who have been waiting and are now done with waiting.

He looked at each of them.

The first was an old man, perhaps seventy, with eyes the specific pale gray-blue of old ice — eyes that had been that color for so long they had lost the warmth that most eyes retain, eyes that had become their function, which was to assess. He wore plain clothing that had been expensive once. His hands on the table were very still, with the stillness of a person who has learned to be still as a discipline.

The second was a woman — younger than the old man but not young, perhaps fifty, with black gloves on both hands despite the room's warmth, and the posture of someone accustomed to rooms in which information and power were the primary currencies. Her face was composed in the way of someone who has composed it deliberately. Whatever she felt, she had decided you would not see it without her permission.

The third was a young man, Kaen's own age perhaps, wrapped in a long coat of blue that had the look of something chosen carefully rather than practically. He had a quality of studied ease — the ease of someone who has worked at appearing comfortable in high-stakes rooms. He was the least still of the four. His eyes had something in them that was almost entertainment.

The fourth was the difficult one.

In the corner farthest from the door, where the tower's curved wall made a hollow that the room's light did not reach, there was a presence rather than a person — something that occupied the space of a figure without being fully resolvable into one. He could look at it directly without quite seeing it clearly, the way you cannot look directly at a dim star, only at the space around it. It was there. It was listening. More than the other three, it was listening.

He turned his attention back to the ice-eyed old man, who seemed to be the one that had decided he would speak first.

"The prophecy found its way to you," the old man said. His voice was flat and careful, the voice of someone who had learned long ago that inflection is a vulnerability. "As it found its way to us."

"We know what you are," said the woman in black gloves. Her voice was lower than he'd expected, with an evenness that had been cultivated. "Children of the Clock. Illusion and Time. The last who remain capable of change."

He said nothing. Beside him, Merissa was very still — the particular stillness she achieved when she was doing something deliberate with her magic, something small and careful, something like listening.

The young man in blue leaned back from the table with the comfortable ease of someone settling into a position he had been in before, in other rooms, for other negotiations. He smiled. The smile had no warmth in it, but it was technically a smile.

"We have a proposition," he said.

"We want what belongs to you by right," said the old man. "Your power."

The statement arrived in the room and took up its space. Not a request. Not a threat. Something stated as a fact — the way facts are stated by people who have decided that the reality of things is aligned with their preferences, and who find disagreement bewildering rather than challenging.

“Not your lives,” the woman in black gloves said, as if this were a significant concession. “Not any violence. Simply your gifts — transferred, not taken. It can be done nearly without pain.” A pause. “Nearly.”

Merissa’s hand found his wrist in the dark.

He was not afraid. He was something more specific than afraid, something that had a cleaner edge — the feeling of a situation that has been correctly identified. These were not random actors. They were not the creatures from two nights ago, the Breathless, the instruments of the Forest’s reaching. These were people, with faces and voices and the specific human quality of having decided what they wanted and constructed reasoning to support it. That made them dangerous in a different way. And more readable.

“The prophecy is not only about salvation,” said the woman in black gloves. “It contains also the warning. What it calls through those who carry the gifts — the gifts do not belong to those who carry them. They are vessels. Vessels can be repoured.”

Vessel. The word sat in the air with a quality he recognized from the book’s language — a word chosen to do specific work, to reframe the person it was applied to as a container rather than an agent. A thing rather than a someone.

“You don’t believe in the prophecy,” Merissa said.

She said it quietly, without challenge, almost with curiosity — the tone of someone checking a conclusion they had already reached. He felt the truth of it as she said it. These four did not believe in the prophecy. Or they believed in parts of it — believed enough to have acted on it, to have placed themselves in this tower at this crossroads to intercept two people they knew would pass here. But the full weight of what the prophecy described, the stakes of it, the Forest and what lay in its depth — that they had set aside, or converted, or decided to be unafraid of.

“We believe in power,” the old man said, with the flat certainty of a statement he considered definitional. “And in the fact that power is better held by those capable of holding it without sentimentality.”

“Children,” the young man in blue said pleasantly. “However gifted, are children. The world is not going to be saved by children. The world is going to be managed by people who understand it.”

“Managed,” Merissa said. The word was flat in her mouth.

“Managed,” said the woman in black gloves. “Which is what heroism looks like in practice rather than in prophecy. The poets prefer the other word. We prefer the accurate one.”

In the corner, the fourth presence had not moved. But it had changed — very slightly, in a way that was almost undetectable, only perceptible through the specific attention that Sylva had spent seven days building in him. The presence in the corner was no longer only listening. It was drawing. The slow, careful, almost patient work of gathering something, accumulating energy in the way that a thunderstorm accumulates, not in a rush but through the steady accrual of small increments.

Three more heartbeats.

He felt time the way Sylva had taught him to feel it — not as a single stream but as the multiple simultaneous flows of a complex system, each moving at its own rate, each capable of being addressed separately. The woman’s hand — beginning to move beneath the table. The blue-coated young man — shifting his weight, subtle, preparatory. The fourth presence in the corner — rising, the gathering almost complete.

The old man’s eyes had changed. There had been something almost of apology in them a moment ago. It was gone now, replaced by the older thing that had always been underneath.

Two heartbeats.

He did not throw time like a wave — that was what he had done before Sylva, the blunt instrument of a talent not yet graduated to skill. He targeted. The woman's moving hand: slowed, the specific muscles of it encountering a resistance they could not identify. The young man's shifting weight: suspended for three seconds in the precise moment of transfer. The presence in the corner: he turned his attention to what it was doing and found the gathering energy and — not disrupted it, not fought it, but introduced a delay, a hesitation, one beat's worth of time inserted into the sequence of what it was building.

One beat was enough.

"Merissa," he said. Calm, even, the word doing exactly what it needed to do and nothing else.

She had already begun.

Her mist had been building since they entered the room, low and barely perceptible, the thing she could do now that she couldn't before — not a mist that concealed but a mist that prepared, a mist that had been reading the room and forming its response. Now it rose. Not in the wall of fog she would have made before Sylva — this was more precise, more particular. It entered the room's geometry and reformed it. The circular table became the center of a space that was not the room they had entered — a space in which direction was unreliable, in which the eye's reading of distance was systematically incorrect, in which each of the four around the table would find that their sense of where the door was, where the walls were, where the two young people were, had been gently and completely replaced with a version that was wrong.

Not panicking wrong. Just enough wrong to cost them the moment.

They ran.

The tower shook.

He felt it through the soles of his feet — not a structural shudder, not the shake of a building in wind, but a different quality of movement, the resonance of a space in which two systems of power had come into contact and were not compatible. Something behind them cracked the air, a sound without quite a source, and the stone wall of the tower's interior went briefly luminous — not lit but active, carrying energy it had not been built to contain.

They were through the door.

Outside, the afternoon light hit him like cold water — the specific shock of ordinary daylight after interior dark, the sudden return of a sky and a horizon and distance. He ran without thinking about running, his body doing what it had learned to do, letting his legs find the path while his attention stayed back, monitoring the pursuit, reading the time-signatures of the four inside the tower.

Merissa was beside him, her mist trailing behind them like a wake, still working, still maintaining the geometric confusion inside the tower's walls.

The path ran northeast. He ran northeast.

Behind them, the tower's shaking intensified and then stopped.

He slowed. Stopped. Turned.

The tower was gone.

Not destroyed — not collapsed, not burned. Simply absent, the way Sylva's specific kind of workings sometimes worked: the thing ceasing to have been there, as if its presence had been conditional and the conditions had expired. The three paths that converged at the shallow depression still ran to their convergence point, the depression was still there, the grass still pressed lower where the structure had stood. But the structure was not there anymore.

He stood and breathed.

His body was doing the physiological things that bodies do after fear and running — the elevated heartbeat, the specific quality of the breath, the hands that would not quite be still. He let it. There was information in it, and ignoring it would be wasteful. He noted that he was afraid, and he noted that he had acted correctly despite being afraid, and these two things were both relevant and non-contradictory.

Merissa had stopped three yards ahead of him. She was standing with her back to him, looking north, and the mist that had been trailing from her had dissipated, pulled apart by the natural air. She was breathing deliberately, the specific pattern he recognized as the one she used when she was bringing herself back from the edge of something.

He walked to her.

“Are you hurt?” he asked.

“No.” She turned. Her face was pale in the way of someone who has very recently been more frightened than they planned to be and is managing the aftermath with precision. “You?”

“No.” He paused. “I used it differently. The way she showed us. Not — not a wave. Targeted.”

“I know. I felt it.” She looked back at the place where the tower had been. “It worked.”

“It worked,” he agreed.

They walked without speaking for a time, processing — not each other’s silence but their own, the particular interior work of integrating an experience that has not been fully categorized yet. The afternoon continued its pale, unhurried progress across the sky. The path was still there, running northeast, carrying them toward the Forest’s edge.

After a while he said: “They knew the prophecy.”

“They knew of it,” she said. “They knew enough to know we existed and where we’d be. But they didn’t understand it. They read the part about the vessel and took it literally.” She paused. “Or chose to.”

“The vessel,” he said. “The word they used.”

“It’s in the book,” she said. “But Sylva talked about it. The prophecy uses vessel in the older sense — not container, not passive object. The older meaning is closer to conduit. Something the force moves through. There’s a difference.” She looked ahead at the path. “A vessel in their sense is something you can empty and fill with something else. A conduit in the real sense is something whose structure is what matters — you can’t use a different pipe and get the same flow.”

He thought about this.

“They were afraid,” he said. “Underneath the certainty.”

She looked at him.

“The woman especially,” he said. “The specific quality of her certainty — I’ve felt that before. It’s the certainty of people who have committed to a belief and cannot afford to be wrong, because if they’re wrong the cost is too high to contemplate.” He paused. “She’s afraid of the Forest. Afraid of what the prophecy means. They’ve decided that the way to be safe is to hold the power that the prophecy says will determine the outcome, and then control what the outcome is. Rather than trust it.”

“Rather than trust us,” she said.

“Rather than trust anything,” he said. “That’s the older fear. Not distrust of us specifically. The fundamental distrust of outcomes that are not in your own hands.”

Merissa was quiet for a while.

“I think they’ll come back,” she said. “Not those four specifically — or maybe those four. But that kind of opposition. People who have decided that the safest thing is to hold what we carry.”

“Yes,” he said. “I think so too.” He looked at the Forest on the horizon, closer now, the detail of it beginning to resolve — individual trees distinguishable, the variation in the dark of it, not a single darkness but many overlapping ones. “The prophecy doesn’t make us heroes. It makes us — it makes us legible to the things that want what we have.”

“Sylva said that,” Merissa said. “In her way.”

“She said we shine. That things are drawn to the light.”

“Yes.”

The sun was declining.

It was not setting yet — there was another hour, perhaps, of usable light — but it was on its way, beginning the long pull toward the western edge of the sky, and the quality of the afternoon was

changing, the shadows extending, the air gaining the specific chill that arrives when the light begins to lose its warmth without yet losing its presence. The in-between hour. The threshold light.

He thought about the pendant around Merissa's neck — the object from the box in the temple's lower library, the mist held inside glass and stone, their mother's second object. He thought about the inscription on its back. The mist you make is not a lie. It is the truth seen from an angle. The mist that hides has forgotten its purpose. Make it so it shows instead.

Merissa had read it that morning in the temple library and had not spoken for a long time afterward. He had not asked what she was thinking. He knew, or knew enough — that it was the most direct communication they had received from their parents, more direct than any entry in any family record. Their mother had put a specific instruction into a small oval of glass and stone and had left it in a temple lower library with a caretaker she had trusted to hold it for the right moment. The instruction was not sentimental. It was practical. It was about her daughter's magic and what her daughter should do with it.

It was the most parental thing Kaen could imagine. Not comfort. Use.

He thought about his father's watch in his own coat pocket. The time that moved through it, responsive to him, no longer the mystery it had been in the early morning before this day. He had a better sense of it now. It was not a clock. It was an antenna. It received. It was sensitive to the temporal structures of the places he carried it into, the way a compass is sensitive to the field that runs through everything without the everything knowing it. His father had used it to navigate. Not geographically. Through time's architecture.

He understood what it was for, now, without fully understanding how to use it.

That was the shape of this, he thought. Incremental knowledge. Learning enough to take the next step, then learning enough to take the step after that. Not arriving at complete understanding but at the specific understanding required by the present moment, over and over, the understanding growing as the requirements grew.

Sylva had said: the river. Don't fight the current. Move with it. Read it. Trust that where it runs is where it's going.

He thought: then this is the current.

The Forest's dark line on the horizon had become, as they walked, something more than a line. It had acquired dimension, depth, the specific character of a thing you are approaching rather than observing from safety. He could see the individual trees now, or the tallest of them above the rest, ancient in the specific way of things that have been growing for much longer than the current era's memory of them. He could see the texture of the darkness between the trunks — not a flat darkness but a layered one, full of differentiation, of internal complexity.

It was not nothing, what was in there. It was very much something.

And in something's depth, somewhere in the layered darkness between trees that had grown for centuries without human hands near them — something that had been his parents was waiting. Not lost. Not gone. Waiting, in whatever form the Forest permitted people to wait in. Waiting in the way that only people who went somewhere with intention wait — not the waiting of the stranded but the waiting of the arrived.

Merissa had said: I'm going to bring them home.

He thought about what home meant now — the house on the northern hill, which was gone, which had been absorbed by what it had been standing over the edge of all along. Home as the stones in Merissa's pocket. Home as the watch in his. Home as the two of them, walking northeast in the threshold light toward the thing they had been born to walk toward.

The threshold light faded. The ordinary dark began.

And the Forest waited, as it had always waited, as it would wait until they came through its gate — which they would, tomorrow, in the morning, with what they carried and what they had learned and the specific quality of attention that seven days with Sylva had built in them.

He did not look away from it. Neither did she.

They stopped for the night in the shelter of a hillside fold that was protected from the wind and dry, made what fire they could from what the land offered, and ate by it in the companionable silence of two people who have decided the same thing together and do not need to discuss it again.

Tomorrow.

Above them, the stars appeared in the clear cold sky — the same stars that had been above the northern house their whole lives, the same stars that were above the Forest now, that were above whatever their parents were doing in whatever form they were doing it, impartial and ancient and entirely unconcerned with the extraordinary smallness of everything happening beneath them.

He looked at them for a while.

He thought: we are very small. The Forest is very old. The stars do not care.

He thought: and yet here we are. And yet we go.

The fire burned. The night held. His sister slept beside him, one hand in her coat pocket where the stone from the house's foundation was. The watch was warm against his ribs, its fine mechanisms reading the temporal structure of this hillside in the old language of his father's craft.

Tomorrow, the gate.

Tonight, the rest that made tomorrow possible.

He slept.

Chapter Five — The Gates of the Forest

The world changed before they crossed its boundary.

The Forest did not begin with a path. It did not end at a fence, did not post a warning, did not mark itself with any of the civil arrangements that human territory uses to announce itself. It simply was. And had always been. One step, and the ground beneath them became something else — quieter, denser, as though it had been here so much longer than the ground they had just left that the two could not quite be said to be the same substance. As though the world, upon entering this place, had forgotten how to be ordinary.

They stopped at the edge without agreeing to stop.

He had expected a feeling. Something dramatic — a wall of pressure, a change in temperature, the specific sensory announcement of a threshold being crossed. There was none of that. There was only the quality of the air, which was different in a way that was not measurable by any single attribute. Not colder, not darker, not heavier. Simply: other. The way a room is other from the corridor that leads to it, in a way that has nothing to do with its dimensions.

Merissa pressed her palm to the bark of the nearest tree.

The tree was enormous — not the largest thing in sight, which was a strange quality for an enormous tree to have, but enormous in the way of things that have been growing for a very long time without anyone to tell them to stop. Its bark was the dark silver-gray of old iron, furrowed deep, the furrows filled with moss of a green so saturated it read almost as a color you had never seen before despite having seen green your entire life.

“It’s not just trees,” she said. Her voice was careful, low, shaped by some instinct about this place that was operating ahead of her conscious judgment. “It’s like — someone is looking.”

He looked up. The canopy was dense and interlocked — the branches of adjacent trees had, over the decades or centuries of their proximity, grown together in a way that seemed less like coincidence and more like decision, like a long conversation conducted in the language of wood and light. Through the interlocking of them, almost no direct sky was visible. What came down instead was a filtered luminosity, green-tinted, sourceless, as if the trees themselves were producing light rather than receiving it.

He crouched and put his hand flat on the earth.

The time here was coiled.

That was the only word for it — coiled, the way a spring is coiled, a potential rather than a flow. In every other place he had ever used his magic, time had been a current, something moving with or against him, something he could accelerate or retard, could step into and redirect. Here it was wound tight, held in tension, a river that had been frozen not by cold but by some quality of this place that refused the ordinary forward motion of things.

“I can’t move it,” he said. “The time here. It resists.”

He was not frightened by this, exactly. He was something more precise than frightened: attentive. Sylva had said the Forest’s magic was not the same as theirs. She had said it without explaining the difference, in the way she said most important things — giving you the conclusion and leaving the comprehension as something you would have to earn by experiencing it.

He was experiencing it now.

“My magic — » Merissa began.

And then she stopped, because something had happened at her hands.

A figure had appeared. Not one she had made — not one she had thought into existence or reached for. It came from her the way breath comes, from some involuntary depth, and it was their father. Standing at the threshold of a door — the door of the northern house, the house that no longer

existed — and he was alive, and he was looking at her, and the expression on his face was the specific expression she had spent the years of his absence trying to reconstruct from memory.

She stepped back. The figure dissolved. But the smell remained: rain on stone, and woodsmoke, and the particular combination of those two things that meant, to both of them, the word home.

“That wasn’t me,” she said. Her voice had the quality of a statement that needs to be said aloud to be believed. “I didn’t make that.”

“No,” he said. He stood and looked at the space where the figure had been. “The Forest made it. Or the Forest woke something that was already in you. The raw material is yours. The making was not.”

She looked at her hands. They were faintly luminous — not visibly, not in a way that someone else might have noticed in ordinary light, but here, in the Forest’s green sourceless illumination, there was a quality to them that was hers amplified, her magic responding to the environment the way a stringed instrument responds to a room’s particular resonance.

“I can’t trust what I feel here,” she said. “That’s the danger, isn’t it. I can make anything. And here, anything can make itself through me.”

“Yes,” he said.

A path appeared.

This was not a metaphor. The path — which had not been there thirty seconds ago, which was not there when they had crossed from the open hillside into the Forest’s first tree-shadow — had come into being between one breath and the next. Not cleared, not constructed: simply present, as if it had always been there and had only just decided to be visible. The stones along its edges had arranged themselves with a rhythmic regularity that was organic and deliberate simultaneously, the way ribs are organic and deliberate. The branches above it had separated slightly, letting more of the deep green light fall in a corridor along its length.

An invitation. He felt this with a certainty that was below the level of reasoning.

“We’re near the Gate,” he said.

He could feel it — not geographically, not as a point in space ahead of him, but as a quality of the present moment, a pressure of significance, the specific feeling of a threshold that was not made of stone or wood but of something more fundamental. A boundary that existed not in the landscape but in the nature of what was possible on either side of it.

“The inner boundary,” she said. Understanding it the way she understood many things — not from the information he had given her but from the same source he was reading.

“Yes. The outer edge is where the land changes. The Gate is where we change.”

She looked at him. Her eyes in the Forest’s light had a quality he had not seen in them before — or had seen only in glimpses, in the moments of most intense concentration, when she was doing something at the very edge of her ability. The quality of a person who is fully present, not in the ordinary social sense of attentiveness, but in the deeper sense of being completely here, all resources available, nothing held in reserve for comfort.

He had never seen her look afraid and unafraid simultaneously before. He suspected she was seeing the same thing in him.

“Then we go to it,” she said.

They walked the path.

The path was not long. Or it was not long in any measurement that translated to the distances of the world outside the Forest. He had been walking for what felt like twenty minutes and had covered what felt like a considerable stretch of ground, and yet he had the sense that if he could look back to where they had started — which he could not, because the path behind them had ceased to look like a path the moment they moved forward along it — the distance would be much smaller than the time suggested.

The Forest was doing something with scale. With the relationship between duration and distance. He felt this as a craftsman's awareness rather than a theoretical understanding — the same way he had felt the coiled time in the earth, as a quality of how the environment interacted with his specific sensitivity. Time was not moving faster here or slower. It was moving sideways, perpendicular to its ordinary direction, and the result was a landscape in which the categories of near and far, brief and long, were not precisely wrong but were approximate in a way they were not supposed to be.

The trees on either side of the path were becoming older.

Not progressively — not the way trees get older as you walk further into an old forest, a gradual statistical increase. These were getting older in a way that was deliberate, as if the path were a timeline and they were moving along it through the Forest's own history. The trunks they passed now were the diameter of small houses, their bark not furrowed but plated, the plates the size of flagstones, with a surface texture that suggested not wood but something with more mineral content, something that had spent centuries becoming more stone-like in its patience.

And the light between them was different again — not just green now, but layered, as if it were coming from multiple sources at different depths, each one a slightly different shade of the same impossible color.

Merissa was receiving things.

He knew this without asking — knew it from the quality of her attention, which kept catching on invisible things, kept pausing on nothing visible, kept registering the impact of input he could not perceive. Her magic was responding to the Forest's production in real time, amplifying whatever the Forest was generating, and the Forest was apparently generating a great deal.

"What do you feel?" he asked.

She was quiet for a moment.

"Not hear. Receive. It's not words. It's not images. It's — sensation compressed into an instant. I get an entire memory in the space between one step and the next. A feeling so complete it has the weight of years." She looked ahead at the path. "People's memories. Not mine. Someone who was here before us. Many someones. A long time ago."

"The Forest remembers," he said.

"The Forest is made of memory," she said. "I think that's what it is. Not just a place with a long history. The history is the structure. The trees grew in it the way coral grows around a reef — the memory was here first, and the physical is what accumulated around it."

He thought about the inscription on the Gate they had not yet reached. Only those who are ready to lose themselves can find the way. He had understood it as a warning about transformation — about the change that the Forest would work on anyone who passed through. He was beginning to understand it more specifically. The Forest would not take anything from them. It would add. It would add the weight of everything it remembered, and the question was whether the structure of who they were could bear that weight without losing its shape.

The path ended.

Or rather: the path arrived.

The Gate was not made by hands.

He had imagined — without quite admitting to himself that he was imagining — some structure of carved stone, some deliberate arrangement of material into a form that announced itself as an entrance. Something built. Something that said, in the language of constructed objects: this is where you cross.

What stood before them was two trees.

Two trees that had grown, over a span of time he could not calculate and did not try to, into an arch. Not grown toward each other and been trained into an arch by human intervention — grown into an arch the way that two separate things, placed in the right proximity for long enough, discover that they have been moving toward each other all along. Their canopies interlocked thirty feet above

the path. Their roots, visible above the ground for several yards on either side, had intertwined in the earth beneath, each supporting the other's reach in a reciprocity that made them, structurally, a single system despite being two distinct organisms.

And the bark of both trees was covered in runes.

Not carved. Grown. The runes were part of the bark's texture, raised from the surface the way the grain of wood raises in old timber, part of the tree's own material. They moved — not oscillating, not sliding, but breathing, contracting and expanding with the rhythm of something that was alive in the way these trees were alive, which was different from alive in the way he was alive, but was unquestionably alive.

He stepped closer.

On the inner curve of the left-hand arch, at eye level, a passage of the runes had resolved into something he could read. Not in his own language — in no language he had studied, in no script he had encountered in any book in the temple library or in Sylva's hill-house — and yet it was legible to him in the way that dreams are sometimes legible despite being in no language that exists: fully comprehensible, the meaning arriving directly without the intermediate step of translation.

Only those who are ready to lose themselves can find the way.

He did not read it aloud. She was standing beside him and he felt, from the quality of her stillness, that she was reading it too.

He looked up from the runes to the arch above them.

"We will not come out of this the way we went in," he said.

It was not a statement made in fear. It was a statement made in the same spirit as a craftsman saying: this tool will change the material it works on. A recognition of what was true about what they were doing. He had spent seven days with Sylva becoming something more capable than he had been. He understood now that capability was not a fixed state but a direction — that each engagement with something that required more of him than he currently had, if survived, extended what he currently was. The Gate was going to require more of him than he currently was. He was prepared for that. Or as prepared as it was possible to be.

Merissa stepped forward.

Her eyes were alight with the mist-quality of her magic, but differently than usual — not the controlled production of a practitioner managing a tool, but something more like illumination, as if the magic were responding to this specific place by expressing itself in its most fundamental form. Around her, in the air, things that were not quite butterflies moved through slow circles, made of the Forest's light and her own unconscious production, impossible and entirely present.

"I think this is what they want," she said. "Not to test us. Not to stop us. To see if we can become what we need to be."

"And what do we need to be?" he asked.

She looked at him with those lit eyes.

"More than we are," she said. "And still ourselves."

He considered this. He thought about what Sylva had said about the river — that you did not fight the current but moved with it, that the river knew where it was going. He thought about the coiled time in the Forest's earth, not flowing but held, not a river but a spring: potential energy, waiting to be released in the right direction.

He thought: what is released through the Gate is what was always there, held tighter than it could be held outside.

"I'm not afraid of the Forest," he said. "I'm afraid of what it might do to us."

"I'm only afraid of what happens if we don't go through," she said.

And they stepped through.

The world did not break. They did not disappear. The Gate did not consume them or transform them in any visible, immediate way.

And yet.

The inside of the Forest — beyond the Gate, in the deeper territory — was different from the outside in the way that a held breath is different from an ordinary breath. The same substance, but a different state. Here the silence was not the silence of an absence of sound. It was the silence of a space that had decided, some time ago, to become a vessel for quiet, and had been practicing the decision long enough that quiet had become its primary quality, the thing that defined it more than any of its other features.

No birds. No wind in the canopy. No water audible anywhere nearby.

The magic here was dense — not coiled but settled, the way sediment settles at the bottom of still water, each layer pressing on the one below, the whole accumulation so thoroughly at rest that disturbing it would be not a physical act but something more like an argument with the history of a place.

And it was watching them.

He felt this on every surface of his awareness simultaneously. Not threatening — not the aggressive attention of the four in the tower, not the predatory attention of the Breathless. Something more like the attention of a mind so large and so old that its observation of you was not evaluation but simple registration: noting their presence the way a mountain notes the weather.

“Don’t use yours yet,” Merissa said. She had felt something he had not yet articulated. “Wait.” He waited.

She was right to say it. He had been about to reach into the time here, to try again what had failed at the outer edge — to put his hand to the flow of things and see what was possible. But the quality of the magic here was such that reaching into it without understanding it first would be not dangerous, exactly. More like rude. Like speaking loudly in a language you did not know in front of a large number of people who were fluent in it, and who would hear every mistake.

He was not too proud to be educated by a place.

He waited. He let his perception rest on the surface of things without pushing. He let the Forest’s magic approach him rather than reaching for it, and what approached him was multiple.

He saw himself in multiple futures simultaneously. This was not the gentle probabilistic sense of futures that his training had begun to give him — the slight forward lean of attention that Sylva had described as time’s own preference for certain outcomes. This was concrete, specific, and plural. He saw himself wounded, sitting against the base of a tree with his head bowed and both hands pressed to his side, and the light around him was the light of a different time of day, and he was very much alone. He saw himself standing at the edge of something — a cliff, a drop, a precipice whose depth he could not determine — and looking down. He saw himself absent — not dead, not in any place he could identify, simply no longer present in any of the futures the Forest was showing him.

Futures. Not predictions. Not certainties. The Forest’s time was coiled because it held all possible futures equally, without the ordinary world’s bias toward the one that was actually going to happen.

“Merissa.”

She was already stopped. Whatever the Forest was showing her had stopped her in place, and she was standing with her weight wrong, with the posture of someone who has been struck by something that did not make contact with her body.

He moved to her and saw the mist around her feet and knew what was happening before she spoke.

The mist had made a figure.

This had happened before, on the outer side of the Gate — the figure of their father, involuntary, drawn from her by the Forest’s amplifying quality. This was different. This figure was Merissa herself.

Her own face looked back at her from a distance of eight feet, and the expression on it was one he had never seen on her actual face — an expression of absolute desolation, the expression of someone who has lost every point of reference and is no longer able to reconstruct any version of themselves that is coherent.

The figure spoke.

“Everything you believe will turn to a lie,” it said. Its voice was hers but drained of her — the same frequency and timbre, the same cadences, with something essential absent, the way a recording is present and not present. “You will deceive yourself. You will lose him.”

She was shaking. Not visibly, not in the gross physical sense — but he could feel it in the shoulder under his hand when he put it there, the fine tremor of something being held still by a will that was beginning to cost more than she had.

“That is not you,” he said.

“I know,” she said. And then: “I don’t know.”

He moved between her and the figure.

The figure did not react to this — it was not aggressive, was not trying to get past him. It did not need to. It was having its effect from where it stood, and that effect was not attack but mirror: showing her a version of herself that the Forest had constructed from the deepest material of her fears, built with the precision of something that had access to more of her interior life than she had consciously allowed it.

The Forest was not cruel. He was beginning to understand this. It was not trying to break them. It was showing them what was in them — what was in them that would resist the journey, what was in them that would fail at the crucial point, what was in them that they had not yet looked at directly enough to know.

In showing them, it was giving them the opportunity to look.

He held his hand out toward the figure. He did not reach for the Forest’s coiled time — Merissa had been right, that would be wrong. He reached for his own, the time that was in him, the stream of it that Sylva had spent seven days teaching him to separate into its components, and from that stream he drew what was cleanest — not the future-sight, not the retardation or acceleration, but the most fundamental quality of time, which is truth.

Time, Sylva had said, does not lie. It does not have the capacity. It is the only substance in the world that is entirely incapable of being other than what it is. When you carry time-magic, you carry the ability to touch something with that quality — to hold a thing in the light of what is actually true about it.

He held the figure in that light.

For two seconds the figure was both things: the Forest’s construction, the fear-mirror, and also — visible through it, behind it, the same way you see the structure behind a transparent surface — the actual Merissa it was made from. Strong. Frightened. Fully capable. Carrying loss the way all people carry loss, not cleanly, not without it affecting how she stood, but carrying it rather than being carried by it.

The figure dissolved.

The Forest went quiet in a different way — not the tense quiet of a space holding its breath, but the settled quiet of a space that has said what it needed to say and is now waiting to see if it was understood.

She fell to her knees. Not in collapse — in the specific way that people kneel when the body needs to be closer to the ground because the ground is the most real thing currently available.

He crouched beside her.

“I don’t know who I am,” she said. Her voice was very quiet.

“You’re the person who saw that,” he said. “And stayed.”

She looked at him.

He put his hand against her temple, not to do anything with his magic — just contact. The warmth of it. The undeniable factual presence of another person.

“Your illusions tried to be the truth,” he said. “But they had no love in them. And you do.”

She was quiet for a long moment.

Then the Forest went entirely still around them, and the stillness was different again — not holding, not waiting, not watching. It was the stillness of acknowledgment. Of something large and old recognizing something it had been looking for.

She breathed out, very slowly.

“Thank you,” she said.

“I didn’t give you anything,” he said. “I only reminded you of what you have.”

They sat in the Forest’s deep silence for a time that was not measurable by the Forest’s own sideways-moving measure. Long enough for the specific aftermath of intensity to pass — not the intensity itself, which had changed them rather than passing, but the physiological weight of it, the shaking at the periphery of things, the heightened alertness that did not yet know the immediate demand had been met.

He looked at the trees around them. The enormous ones, the house-diameter trunks, the plated bark.

“The Forest tested us,” he said. “And it did not succeed.”

“It wasn’t trying to succeed,” she said. “You said that. It was trying to show us.”

“Yes.” He paused. “And what it showed us — the visions of me wounded, alone. You losing yourself. These are not inevitabilities. They are the possibilities that the Forest considered worth showing us. Which means they are real enough to warrant being seen.”

She looked at him. “The wound. The aloneness.”

“Yes.”

“Then we have to make sure those futures don’t close us off from each other,” she said. “Whatever happens in there — however deep it gets — we stay within reach.”

“Yes,” he said. “Always within reach.”

He stood and helped her up and they looked together at the path ahead — the deeper path, the one that led into the Forest’s interior with the specific quality of a path that knows where it is going and would appreciate being taken seriously.

“It’s only started,” he said.

“I know,” she said. But in her eyes, which had been afraid and then unafraid and were now something he did not quite have a word for — something in the range of determined, or the specific word for determined-and-clear-eyed-about-the-cost — there was no retreat.

He did not say: we should rest first. He did not say: perhaps we should find shelter before going deeper. He did not say any of the things that were true and practical and beside the point.

He said: “Then we go deeper.”

She nodded once.

And the Forest, old beyond the reach of anyone currently alive to remember how it came to be, received them as they moved into its interior — not with welcome, not with threat, but with the particular quality of attention it had been maintaining since before the city of Heitar existed. The quality of a thing that has been waiting for something specific and has, at last, recognized it.

A quality that was, he thought, as close as this place could come to yes.

Chapter Six — Merissa's Illusions

The Forest breathed.

Not rustled, not creaked, not produced the ordinary sounds of a place inhabited by wind and leaf and the minor lives of small creatures. Breathed — in some deep, foundational rhythm that she felt not in her ears but in her sternum, a pulse that operated at a frequency below hearing, arriving as a quality of the air against her skin rather than as sound. As if the entire structure of this place were the chest cavity of something vast and patient, its inhalation and exhalation a cycle so slow that you could only perceive individual moments of it, never the whole.

Day and night here were the same thing, made continuous.

That was the word she kept returning to: continuous. The light outside — the ordinary world's light, which divided itself so clearly into illuminated and dark, into the identifiable positions of a sun moving across a sky — had no equivalent here. What the Forest offered instead was a twilight that was not the twilight of transitional hours but a permanent condition, a specific quality of luminosity that existed for its own reasons and not in relationship to any external source. In this light, shadows had the same weight as the things that cast them. Everything was equally present, equally available to the eye, equally refusing to be background.

She was losing herself.

Not dramatically. Not in the way of the figure the Forest had made from her fear — that had been acute, a crisis with a recognizable shape, something she and Kaen had been able to address directly. This was different: incremental, sideways, the kind of losing that does not announce itself but is only perceptible by comparison, when you look at where you are and cannot quite remember the path from where you were.

It had begun with small things.

A stone she stepped on that felt, for the half-second of contact, like the wooden toy horse she had owned at age six — smooth-worn, warm in a specific way, carrying in its surface the ghost of a particular afternoon in the kitchen of the northern house, her mother's voice from the next room. The sensation was gone before she could reach it. But it left something behind: a faint overlay, the memory and the present moment briefly superimposed, and when she looked at the stone after stepping off it, it looked like a stone, but it also looked like the toy, the way that if you have seen two slides projected on the same screen you cannot entirely separate them even after one has been removed.

A branch that she passed with her hand — just brushed, barely contact — that was, for an instant, her mother's hand.

The sound of water somewhere in the Forest's distances, which she could not locate and which arrived, each time she caught it, as her father's voice speaking her name from another room.

She was not creating these. She understood this — had understood it since the outer edge, had been making herself understand it carefully because the alternative, which was to believe that her magic was failing, that the distinction between what she made and what the Forest made through her was collapsing, was worse than the truth.

The truth was that the Forest was using her. Not against her will, not against her interests — using the natural mechanism of her magic as an instrument for its own expression, the way water uses the shape of the riverbed to define its course. She was the material through which the Forest chose to communicate certain things, because her particular magic was the right substrate for what the Forest needed to say.

This was not reassuring.

"Kaen," she said.

He was three steps ahead of her on the path and turned immediately. The quality of his attention when he turned — fully present, no delay, no moment of orienting himself away from whatever he

had been thinking about — was something she noted and was grateful for. He was managing his own version of whatever the Forest was doing to them, but he was managing it without closing any part of himself off from her.

“I’m here,” he said.

“I know.” She looked at her hands. They were producing a low, continuous mist now — barely visible, something that was more a quality of the air around her than a substance, a slight softening of everything in her immediate vicinity. She had not told her hands to do this. They were doing it the way lungs breathe, automatically, because the environment required it. “The Forest is making things through me. I can’t — I don’t know where I end and it begins.”

He came back to her. He looked at the mist around her hands with the focused attention of someone reading a situation with the specific skills they have.

“You’re still here,” he said. “You’re telling me about it. That’s you.”

“Yes.”

“Your illusions are starting to talk to you,” he said. “Not the Forest’s constructions. Your own. They’re starting to live.”

She looked at him.

“Sylva said this would happen,” she said. It was not quite a question.

“Sylva said the Forest shows you what’s in you,” he said. “Your magic is inside you. So the Forest is showing you your magic, from the inside.”

She stood with this for a moment.

“I don’t know where I end,” she said again, “and where it begins.”

“Tell me,” he said quietly, “when you feel yourself.”

She thought about this.

“When I’m talking to you,” she said.

“Then keep talking to me,” he said. “About whatever you see. Whatever you feel. Don’t hold it.”

She looked at the trees around them. The enormous ones, their bark plated and mineral, each one carrying in its surface the Forest’s memory like a library carries books — densely, without apparent order, accessible only to the right kind of attention.

“I see a woman in that tree,” she said. “Not in the bark. Not on the surface. Inside it. She’s been there a long time. I think — I think she went in deliberately. I think the tree was her choice.”

He looked at the tree. She could tell from his expression that he did not see the woman.

“What does she look like?” he asked.

“Old. Patient. She’s not — she’s not unhappy. She’s very far from unhappy. She’s just — she’s become part of the structure. Part of the memory that holds the Forest together.” She paused. “There are others. In other trees. People who came here and became part of it.” She looked at him. “Is that what happened to our parents?”

The question arrived without her planning it, and she felt, in the asking of it, the specific quality of a fear she had been carrying since the beginning without quite naming: not that their parents were lost, not that their parents were dead, but that their parents had become something other than what they had been — that in the Forest’s deep territory, the category of person was flexible, and flexibility in that category was not reversible.

He was quiet for a moment.

“I don’t know,” he said. He said it with the honesty that was one of the things she had always most valued in him — not the false comfort of an easier answer, but the respect of the true one. “I don’t know what form they’re in. I don’t know if the form they’re in looks like the form we remember.” He paused. “But Sylva said they went in knowing what they were doing. Whatever form they’re in — it was chosen.”

“That’s not the same as all right,” she said.

“No,” he said. “It’s not the same as all right. But it’s not the same as wrong, either.” He looked at the tree with the woman inside it. “It might be something there’s no word for yet.”

They walked.

The path through the deep Forest was not the path that had led them to the Gate — not marked, not invited, not arranged for them with the Forest’s version of hospitality. It was simply the direction that was most coherent to move in, the direction that offered the least resistance from the space’s own logic. He could feel this through the time-sense, now that the Forest had given him enough time to calibrate to its specific quality: the way that certain directions through this space were more permissive than others, not because they were easier physically but because the Forest’s accumulated memory was arranged in a structure with its own internal logic, and moving with that logic was like moving with a current rather than against one.

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