THE SHATTERED STAR OF VAELTHORNE

The First Shard

Book One



Written by Marcus Draper

A story from the world of Vaelthorne

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THE SHATTERED STAR OF VAELTHORNE

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Book One of the Vaelthorne Trilogy

Written by Marcus Draper

For everyone who has ever wished on a falling star - and for the friends who help carry the wish home.

The Shattered Star of Vaelthorne was created as an original campaign world.
This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual dragons is entirely hopeful.

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The Four Lands of Vaelthorne

Emberwood Vale

A valley of great oaks and lantern-lit villages, where the Festival of Falling Stars is held each year. Somewhere in its deep wood sleeps the Shard of Roots.

The Drowned Archive of Thaldris

The greatest library in the world, sunk long ago beneath a still, dark lake. Its books remember everything - including where the Shard of Tides fell.

The Skybound Isles of Zephyra

Islands that drift among the clouds, tied to the world below by long chains and longer stairways. The Shard of Winds fell somewhere up there, among the griffons.

The Cindervault Forge

A forge-city inside a sleeping volcano, where the finest star-metal in Vaelthorne is worked. The Shard of Embers fell into its fire.

And above them all…

…the Hollow Between, where Vaelgorath, the Hollow Star Dragon, waits in the dark where the Star used to be. But that is a story for the end of the trilogy.

The Lands of Vaelthorne



Emberwood Vale in the east; the lake of Thaldris in the west; the Skybound Isles chained among the clouds; the Cindervault Forge in the south.

Every road in this book begins at Millbrook, in the Emberwood Vale - and every road out of it leads, sooner or later, to a shard. West lies the great lake, and beneath it the Drowned Archive. North, the Isles drift in their chains. South, the Forge sleeps in its mountain of fire. Above them all, where the Star used to burn, the charts leave a blank.

CHAPTER ONE

Three Days Before the Stars Fall



Kael Thorn reads the night's news at the wood's edge, three days before the Festival.

Three days before the stars fell, Kael Thorn woke before the sun, the way he always did when something exciting was close enough to smell.

The Festival of Falling Stars was on Friday. All over Millbrook, the Vale was getting ready, and getting ready, in Millbrook, was a job for everybody. Ladders leaned against the great oaks of the clearing. Strings of lanterns waited in baskets like sleeping fireflies. Somewhere below Kael's window, somebody was already arguing, cheerfully and at length, about whose turn it was to make the cider.

Kael pulled on his boots, took his bow down from its peg - the bow he had made himself, from ash wood, over one whole winter - and slipped out of the cottage while his father was still snoring in the big chair by the hearth, where he had fallen asleep mending a net.

A hunter does not begin the day in the village. A hunter begins the day at the wood's edge, reading the night's news.

The news that morning was written in the wet grass at the top of the hill. Deer, early, a doe and two fawns, down to drink and back again. A badger, busy and bad-tempered, judging by the depth of the prints. And - Kael frowned, and knelt, and put one finger in the mud beside a print - something he did not know. A broad, soft pad. No claw marks. Bigger than a dog. It had come out of the deep wood in the night, walked a slow circle at the very edge of the trees, as if it were looking at the village, and then it had gone back in.

Kael sat back on his heels. In six years of mornings, nothing unknown had ever come out of the deep Emberwood to look at Millbrook.

He did not tell anybody. That was his first mistake, though he would not know it for three days. He told himself a hunter checks a thing twice before he talks

about it once, which is true, and also a very good excuse for keeping an interesting secret a little while longer.

Below him, the village was waking up properly. His father, Tomas Thorn, had the smokehouse going and the day's list chalked on the board by the door, in handwriting like a fence: HARES TO THE MILLER. NET TO MEND. LANTERNS - CLEARING, EAST SIDE. ASK ME ABOUT NOTHING BEFORE TEA.

Kael was on the third line of the list. East-side lanterns were the highest in the Vale, strung between the two oldest oaks, and hanging them was a climbing job, which meant it was the best job of the festival, and his father knew it, and had given it to him on purpose.

"You'll fall," said Tam Reed, arriving with a basket and the air of a boy who has been sent on an errand he fully intends to enjoy. Tam was eleven, round-faced, and in charge of the festival pies in the same way that the captain is in charge of a ship, which is to say completely, and with strong opinions. "And when you fall, I am not catching you. I am catching the basket. The basket has pies in it."

"I won't fall," said Kael, and climbed. From the top of the east oak, with the rope between his teeth and the lanterns swinging below him on their string, he could

see the whole of the Vale at once: Millbrook in its bowl of green, the mill and its wheel on the brook, the roof of the little church with its clock tower, Hazel's beehives in a white row at the wood's edge, and beyond and around everything, the Emberwood, dark and deep and older than the village, older than the festival, older - the old people said - than the Star itself.

Kael hung the last lantern and looked up, though there was nothing to see yet but morning. In three days the Star would shine down on all of it, and the little falling stars would come, and he would wish his wish for the sixth year running.

He had wished it first when he was six years old and small enough to sit on his father's shoulders. He had wished it every year since, in silence, the way the rule demanded, and he had never told a living soul what it was. Some years he thought the Star must surely have heard him by now. Some years he thought perhaps wishing was like knocking on a door in a very big house, and you simply had to keep knocking.

The hares went to the miller at noon, as the list commanded, and Kael spent the long middle of the day the way the whole Vale spent it: up a ladder, down a ladder, holding a nail bag, holding an opinion, holding

the short end of a garland while somebody taller did the honourable part. He iced the cider barrels in the brook. He carried benches. He sharpened, with his father's whetstone and his father's exact instructions, the knife that would cut the festival loaf, a knife older than the church and treated with more ceremony. And all day, wherever he went in the Vale, his eye kept snagging on the deep wood's edge - on the boundary stones, grey among the green - and on the memory of a broad, soft footprint, bigger than a dog's, that had walked out of the dark trees in the night to look at the village, and walked back in.

"You're miles away," said his mother, catching him at the pump with a full bucket and an entirely absent expression. His mother, Wren Thorn, mended the village's sails, nets, tempers and - in her own estimation - its hunters. "It's the wish," she said. She did not ask which wish. In Millbrook, you did not ask. "Six years you've carried that one, Kael Thorn. Whatever it is, it's heavy. Set it down somewhere this year, love. Even wishes need a rest."

"I can't set it down," said Kael, surprised into honesty. "It isn't finished."

"No," said his mother, and kissed the top of his head as she passed with the bucket, though he was twelve and officially too tall, "they never are. That's how you can tell they're the real ones."

"Kael!" Tam shouted from below. "The clock's stopped!"

"What clock?" Kael shouted back.

"The church clock! It stopped at half past six and it will not go! Your person's mother has been sent for!" By which Tam meant Mira's mother, though Kael did not know Mira yet, and did not know that the stopped clock was the first small gear of the whole enormous adventure beginning to turn.

He only knew that he had lanterns to finish, hares to deliver, and three days to get through.

Three days, as it turned out, was exactly long enough.

CHAPTER TWO

The Bell That Forgot the Time



Mira Solen and the search for the clock's lost brass cog.

The church clock of Millbrook told one time, badly, and now it was not telling it at all.

It had stopped at half past six, which the whole village agreed was a very inconsiderate time to stop, because half the Vale set their mornings by it. Nobody could remember it stopping before. The clock had been built by a Solen, in the days of Mira's great-grandfather, and Solens had wound it, oiled it and argued with it ever since - which is why, when it stopped, the village sent for Maera Solen, who fixed clocks, and who mostly, these days, fixed this one.

Maera Solen took one look up the tower, rolled her sleeves, and came back down with the face of a woman delivering sad news about a relative.

"The bell-cog is gone," she said.

"Gone?" said the priest.

"Gone," said Maera. "The little brass cog that lets the bell strike. It was worn - I have been saying so since spring, in writing - and it has sheared clean off its spindle and fallen. It is not in the tower. I have looked. It is not in the church. It has gone out into the world, and until it is found, or a new one is cast, the bell cannot strike, and the festival cannot properly begin, because the festival begins, as it has always begun, at the first strike of that bell."

There was a silence, in which several people looked at the woods, the brook, the mill race, and the general size of the world a small brass cog might hide in.

"I'll find it," said a voice.

The voice belonged to a girl about Kael's age, with a braid over one shoulder, a blue cloak sprinkled with tiny stitched stars, and a look of total certainty. This was Mira Solen, the clock-fixer's daughter, who had been raised among gears and pendulums and had strong

feelings about things being findable. Around her neck, on a plain cord, hung a pendant in the shape of a small five-pointed star. It was not glowing. Not then. Kael noticed it only because it caught the sun.

"You'll need a tracker," said Tomas Thorn, who had appeared with the hares for the miller over one shoulder. "Cogs do not walk away by themselves. Something carried it, or the water took it. Either way there will be a trail, and trails are this one's whole education." He jerked his chin at Kael, in the manner of a man presenting a tool he is quietly proud of. "Kael. Take the girl. Find the cog. Mind the brook - it's fast after the rain."

So Kael Thorn went on his first quest of the week with a girl he had met four minutes earlier, and she walked faster than he did, which he had not expected and had not decided how he felt about.

"A cog falls out of a tower," Mira said, thinking aloud in the way of people who fix things, "it falls down. Down is the churchyard, and the churchyard slopes, and a brass cog is round, so down is also roll. Roll is the lane. The lane is rutted. The ruts run with rain. Rain runs to the brook." She stopped at the brook's edge, where the water went brown and quick over the stones below the

mill. "The brook took it. And the brook gives things back, if you know where it slows down. Everything the water carries ends up somewhere the water rests."

"That's very neat," said Kael. "How do you know the brook took it?"

"I don't," said Mira cheerfully. "It's a theory. Sera Vayne says a theory is a guess with its boots on. Now we test it."

They searched the brook the way hunters and clock-keepers both search: slowly, and looking at what did not belong. Kael read the bank. Mira read the water. Twice Kael found treasure that was not the treasure - a spoon of great age and no use, and a button with ambitions - and once, in the deepest of the slow pools below the mill wheel, Mira stood very still and said, "There."

It was not the cog. It was a stone.

It lay in the clear centre of the pool, round and smooth and dark, no bigger than a hen's egg, and it was warm. Kael knew it was warm before he touched it, because the water above it shimmered the way air shimmers above a summer road. When he lifted it out, dripping, it sat in his palm like something that had only just stopped falling. And Mira's pendant, on its cord, gave

one small pulse of light - no more than a coal breathes when you blow on it - like an eye opening and closing again.

"Did you see that?" said Kael.

"I see everything," said Mira, a little shakily. "I just don't always get believed about it. Put the stone down, Kael. Gently. Whatever it is, it isn't ours, and it isn't the cog."

He put it back in the pool, exactly where it had been, the way you put back a bird that has flown into a room. The shimmer settled. The pendant went dark.

The cog, in the end, was not in the water at all. It was Kael who thought of the magpies - every village has magpies, and every magpie is a small flying pawnbroker with no respect for ownership - and it was Kael who climbed the ash behind the church to the untidiest nest in the Vale, and came down with his fist closed around a little brass cog, bright as a new coin, along with one spoon of great age and no use, which he decided not to mention.

The bell struck seven that evening, only twelve hours late, which in Millbrook counted as a complete success. Maera Solen paid them two silver acorns each - acorns being what the Vale used for small money, silver ones

for proper payment - and the priest added a blessing and a gooseberry tart, and divided neither.

"First quest of the festival," said Mira, pocketing her acorns, "and we are already rich."

"We found a cog," said Kael. "And a spoon. And a stone we didn't keep."

"And a stone we didn't keep," Mira agreed. She looked back at the brook, once, as they went up the lane in the dusk. Her pendant was dark and ordinary and said nothing at all. "I wonder what it was doing there."

Neither of them wondered for long. There were only two days left, and Tam Reed had a problem about honey.

CHAPTER THREE

Ember-Honey



Hazel's bees, the ember-flowers, and a stone that fell early.

The problem about honey was this: festival pies require ember-honey, and there was none.

Ember-honey is not ordinary honey, though it comes from ordinary bees, in the way that a song is not ordinary breath. The white hives at the wood's edge belonged to Hazel Wren, the beekeeper, and her bees fed all summer on the ember-flowers that grew only where the Emberwood let the sun in - deep red blooms that opened at dusk and smelled of woodsmoke and spice. Honey from ember-flowers kept pies warm for a day and a night after baking, which is a small magic,

and the only magic Millbrook claimed to possess, and the village was very firm that the festival pies could not be made without it.

"And Hazel says the hives are empty," said Tam, in the hollow voice of a boy reading his own death sentence. "Empty. Two days before the festival. She says the bees have not come home, and bees always come home, and she is worried, and when Hazel is worried I am worried, because Hazel is not a worrier. She once set a broken arm during an argument about soup. She is the calmest person in the Vale."

"Where do the bees go?" asked Sera Vayne, who had appointed herself to the expedition on the grounds that somebody should be writing this down. Sera had a new notebook for the festival, with a star ruled on the first page in her best ink, and a column for stars counted, and she was at that moment inventing a second column, headed EVENTS, in case events occurred.

"To the ember-flowers," said Tam. "Past the boundary stones. Into the edge of the wood."

Into the wood, even the edge of it, was not a place children of Millbrook went alone. The Emberwood was not wicked. Every child in the Vale learned that early. But it was old, and it was deep, and it had its own

opinions, and you asked before you entered any part of it that the sun did not reach - and the ember-flower clearings were exactly as far as you could go without asking.

"We're not going alone," said Kael reasonably. "We're going with Hazel. Hazel goes every day. And we're not going past the clearings."

"We are going," said Mira, "because Tam's face is doing that."

So the four of them - for this is the first time there were four of them together, though nobody noticed, which is how the best groups usually start - went up the path to the white hives, where Hazel Wren stood in her veil with her hands on her hips, looking at an empty sky.

"They went out at dawn," Hazel said, "and a bee out at dawn is home by noon, drunk and delighted and telling the whole hive about it. Something has called them off. Bees are not called off by weather. Bees are called off by news." She looked at the four of them for a long moment, and then she did a thing that surprised everybody. She opened her store shed, and took out four veils, and a smoker, and a jar. "Well. You are the questing sort, I can smell it on you. Two silver acorns apiece if you find my bees, and the first jar of ember-

honey for the boy's pies if we bring them home. The flowers are through the stones and left at the old charcoal hearth. Follow the humming. There is always humming, even when you cannot see a single bee."

The boundary stones of the Emberwood stood where the path gave up and the trees began: seven grey stones, waist-high, worn smooth, older than the village and carved - though the carving was nearly gone - with roots and stars. Kael had passed them a hundred times and never once without his father saying the same words, and he said them now, quietly, because somebody should: "We go in as guests. We take only what we're given. We thank the wood when we leave."

Beyond the stones, the wood changed its mind about light. It came down green and gold and in spears. The ember-flower clearing, when they found it, was the reddest place any of them had ever seen - a whole bank of blooms open in the middle of the day, which ember-flowers never do, and above the flowers, the bees.



The wheel of bees, turning over the fallen stone.

Thousands of them. Circling. Not feeding, not fighting - circling, all together, in one slow turning wheel in the air, the way starlings turn, the way sparks rise, around something the children could not see.

"Bees do not do that," whispered Hazel, from the treeline, and her voice had gone strange. "In sixty years, bees do not do that."

In the centre of the clearing, in the centre of the wheel of bees, the grass was flattened and blackened in a ring no wider than a cartwheel, and in the middle of the ring, half-buried in warm ash, was a pebble.

It was smooth, and dark, and no bigger than a hen's egg, and it shimmered. The air above it shimmered too, the way air shimmers above a summer road - exactly,

precisely, in every detail, like the stone in Mira's brook pool, which had not been a stone at all.

"There's another one," said Mira softly. Her pendant gave one small pulse of light, like an eye opening. "Kael. There's another one, and this one fell here."

Sera wrote it down with a hand that only shook a little. EVENTS: one. Or possibly two. Investigation ongoing.

It was Kael who understood the bees. "They're not called off," he said slowly. "They're keeping it warm. Or keeping watch over it. Hazel - ember-bees keep the hive warm all winter by circling. Whatever this is, they think it belongs to the hive. They think it's theirs to guard."

Then the stone, very gently, cooled - they all felt it, the way you feel a cloud cross the sun - and the great wheel of bees loosened, and broke, and came pouring home to the clearing like a river finding its course, and filled the flowers, and Hazel Wren laughed out loud like a girl. By evening the hives were heavy. By evening after, Tam had his jar of ember-honey, dark red as bottled dusk, warm through the glass.

And the four of them had a stone from the sky in a handkerchief in Sera's satchel, and eight silver acorns from Hazel, and one shared, unspoken thought that

Kael finally spoke on the path home, as the first lanterns came on below them in the Vale.

"Things are falling," he said. "Early. Before the festival. Small ones."

"Then the festival," said Mira, looking up at the darkening sky, where the great Star burned steady and whole and enormous above the Heart Tree, "may be bigger than we think."

The next day was market day in Millbrook, and they had something to sell.

CHAPTER FOUR

Market Day in Millbrook



A star-pebble sold, a chart unrolled, and an expedition quietly funded.

Market day in Millbrook was held the day before the festival, so that everybody could sell what they had made, buy what they had forgotten, and argue about the difference, in good time to enjoy the falling stars.

The clearing filled before breakfast. There were stalls for cheese and stalls for ribbons, a stall for second-hand boots with first-class stories, and Tomas Thorn's stall, where the smoked hares hung in a row and Kael was trusted - this year, for the first time - with the money box.

The four friends had gone into business.

This was Sera's idea, and it was written down, because by then everything important was written down. THE FESTIVAL FUND, Sera wrote, INCOMES: cog-finding, two acorns each, eight. Bee-finding, eight. OUTGOINGS: to be decided by vote. PURPOSE: festival, and emergencies, and pies. Tam had added the pies. Tam was selling festival pies at the Reed stall in two sizes, today-pies and tomorrow-pies, and doing the sort of trade that made the cheese stall look at him with respect.

Mira had a corner of her mother's workbench by the mill stall, with a sign in her best lettering: CLOCKS MENDED, BELLS ADVISED, PENDULUMS REASONED WITH. She mended two clocks and advised one bell, and was reasoning with a pendulum when the stranger came up the north road.

He was not a frightening stranger. Millbrook, being on no road to anywhere important, got very few strangers, and judged them the way it judged weather: hopefully, and out loud. This one was old, and tall, and bent like a question mark, with a long grey beard tucked into his belt, a coat with more pockets than any reasonable garment should have, and a cart - the cart was the thing - a cart hung with brass telescopes and star-charts and little glass bottles of coloured sand, with a painted

moon on the side and three discreet bells that rang when nobody had touched them.

"Master Wen," he said, bowing to the whole clearing at once, which saved time. "Traveller. Stargazer. Buyer of curious stones, seller of curious knowledge, mender of nothing whatsoever. I have come, as I come every seven years, for your festival - and I am told -" here his eyes, which were very bright and very old, found the four friends the way a needle finds north - "that this year, the curious stones have started before I have."

Sera, who had prepared for many things, had not prepared for this. She did the only sensible thing. She opened the handkerchief.

The star-pebble lay in the market sunlight, smooth and dark and ordinary as a plum - until Master Wen breathed on it, once, the way you breathe on a coal, and the whole stone lit from inside like a struck match and the coloured sands in his bottles rattled in their glass, all by themselves, and the three discreet bells rang.

"Ah," said Master Wen, very quietly. "Yes. It is as I feared and hoped, in that order. Children, do you know what you have found?"

"A stone that fell before the festival," said Kael. "Small. Early. Warm. The bees thought it was theirs."

"The bees," said Master Wen, "are excellent judges." He took the pebble in both hands, gently, like a bird. "This is star-stone. Sky-metal and sky-fire, fallen from the great Star's own country. In the old days they fell only on festival night, and only small, and the Vale wished on them and thought no more of it. But this one fell three days early, and alone, and hot - and that, my young merchants, is not a curiosity. That is a knock on the door, three days before the guest arrives."

He paid for it like a prince. Nineteen silver acorns - more than the cog and the bees together - and, when Sera (who drove the bargain, and was magnificent) said that knowledge was also currency, he paid a second price, in the coin of his own trade: he spread his oldest chart on the cart's top, weighted its corners with bottles, and showed them the whole of Vaelthorne as the stargazers keep it.

"Four lands hold the Star's light," said Master Wen, "and the Star holds over all. Here, your Emberwood Vale, and the Shard of Roots that sleeps in its deep heart - oh yes, children, the old charts name them. West, across the hills, the great lake, and beneath it the Drowned

Archive of Thaldris, where the books remember everything, and the Shard of Tides. North, the Skybound Isles of Zephyra, chained to the world so they do not wander off among the clouds, and the Shard of Winds. South, in the red mountains, the Cindervault Forge, where they work star-metal in a sleeping volcano's fire, and the Shard of Embers." His long finger stopped at the chart's edge, where the parchment was dark, and empty, and drawn with nothing at all. "And above them all, the Hollow Between, where the Star's light does not reach. The charts leave it blank. It is the only honest part of the map."

"What is in it?" asked Mira.

"On that," said Master Wen, rolling the chart with great care, "the stargazers are pleasantly silent, because the one who went to look has not come back to tell us; and she was my friend, and a singer, and you may hear her lute in this Vale again before you are much older, if the sky does what I think the sky is about to do." He looked up at the blue afternoon, where no stars could be seen, though all of them were there. "Sell your pies, children. Buy your rope. Keep your fund. And tomorrow night - wish carefully."

They bought the rope first. That was Kael's doing: fifty feet of the rope-maker's best, tested by hanging Tam off the church stile, briefly and with his permission. Lantern oil, from the chandler, in a stoppered flask. Ink for Sera, in a bottle small as a thimble. A ribbon for Tam's hair, red, festival colour, because he had lost his to a balloon the year before and had spoken of it since with real sorrow. And one thing more, which was not on any list: at the very last stall, where a smith from the south road sold his father's overstock, Kael bought - with his own acorns, not the fund's - a single arrowhead of dark, star-flecked metal, heavier than it should be, that sang very faintly when he held it to the light.

"Star-metal," said the smith's boy, bored. "Falls out of the sky some years. Father says it's luck to carry and a nuisance to work."

"I'll carry it, then," said Kael, and put it in his pocket, where it sat warm as a coal all the way home, though he did not say so.

That night the four of them divided the Festival Fund on the mill steps in the dusk: four silver acorns to each of them, and the rest - eleven acorns, one thimble of ink, fifty feet of rope and a flask of oil - into Sera's satchel,

under Sera's hand, in Sera's writing: HELD IN COMMON, FOR EMERGENCIES.

None of them could have said what emergency they were expecting.

Tomorrow was the Festival of Falling Stars.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Festival of Falling Stars



The Festival of Falling Stars, in the great clearing of Emberwood Vale.

Once a year, on the last night of summer, the stars fall over Emberwood Vale.

Nobody in the village of Millbrook could tell you when it started. The oldest grandmother said her grandmother had watched the stars fall, and hers before her, all the way back to the first lantern hung in the first oak. All anyone knew was the rule, and the rule was simple: when a star falls, you wish. Not out loud. Never out loud. A wish spoken aloud is a wish let go, and the people of Millbrook held on to theirs.

Kael Thorn had held on to the same wish for six years.

Kael was twelve years old, a hunter's son, with a bow he had made himself and a shot that almost never missed - a fact he mentioned more often than anyone strictly needed to hear. He could track a rabbit through wet leaves and sit stiller than the stones. What he could not do, no matter how he practised, was say what his wish was. That was the rule. But every year, standing in the great clearing with lantern-light on his face, Kael wished it so hard his chest hurt.

The clearing that night was everything a festival should be. Lanterns hung in long strings between the oaks, gold and red and green. There were stalls selling cider hot enough to fog your glasses and pies with steam curling out of them like little ghosts. There was a fiddler, and then two fiddlers, and then an argument about whose tune it was, which the whole village agreed was also part of the festival.

Earlier, while the light lasted, there had been the archery - because there was always archery, and because Kael Thorn intended, this year, to win it. The butts were set at the clearing's edge, straw targets with painted stars, and the older boys went first, to general encouragement and one outstanding miss that ended in the cider barrel and was talked about for the rest of the evening as if it had been done on purpose. Kael shot

last-but-one, with his own bow, the ash bow, the winter's work. Three arrows. Three stars, pierced clean through the middle, one, two, three, while the clearing made the noise it makes when it is proud of somebody and trying not to show it too much.



The archery butts: three arrows, three stars.

The prize was a ribbon, green as the deep wood, and a copper token stamped with a star, and Kael took both with a face he hoped was modest. He gave the ribbon to a small girl at the front of the crowd whose own wish-ribbon had blown up into the oak at noon and stuck there, out of reach, to her great and public sorrow. He climbed for hers instead - festival ribbons are personal, like wishes, and not to be replaced - and came down with it to applause, and put the copper star token in his pocket, where it clicked, once, against something

already there: a dark arrowhead of star-metal, bought at market, that he had carried all day for luck.

He did not know why he kept touching them together, token and arrowhead, coin and point. He only knew the night felt like a held breath, and that everything in his pockets seemed to be listening.

Kael's father clapped him on the shoulder. "Mind you wish well this year," he said, the way he said it every year.

"I always wish well," said Kael.

"You wish big," said his father. "There's a difference. Big wishes have a way of coming true sideways." Then the first star fell - a bright scratch of light across the dark - and the whole clearing sighed the way crowds do, and a hundred heads bowed over a hundred secret wishes.

Kael closed his eyes. He wished his wish. And because he was twelve, and the cider was hot, and the night was the best night of the year, he added a second wish on the end of the first, very small and very quiet, just for luck:

And let something happen this year. Anything. Let this be the year something actually happens.

The stars, as it turned out, were listening to that one.

CHAPTER SIX

The Girl with the Star Pendant



Mira's star pendant, glowing at the pie stall.

Kael met Mira Solen at the pie stall, reaching for the same last slice.

"Go on," said the girl, pulling her hand back. She was about his age, with a braid over one shoulder and a blue cloak sprinkled with tiny stitched stars. "You look like a person having a very serious pie emergency."

"I was here first," said Kael, with dignity.

"You were here louder," said the girl. She split the slice neatly in two with her thumbs and handed him the bigger half. "Mira Solen. We moved to the mill house in

the spring. My mother fixes clocks, which in this village mostly means fixing the church bell, which is a clock that only tells one time, badly."

Around her neck, on a plain cord, hung a pendant in the shape of a small five-pointed star.

It was glowing.

Not much - no more than a coal breathes when you blow on it - but Kael had hunted by moonlight since he was six and he knew light when he saw it. "Your necklace," he said. "It's shining."

Mira closed her hand around it, quick as a secret. "It does that," she said. "It has always done that, a little, on festival night. This year it's doing it a lot." She opened her fingers. The little star pulsed, gentle and steady, like something with a heartbeat. "Nobody believes me. Gran says it's a trick of the lantern-light."

"That's not lantern-light," said Kael.

"I know," said Mira, and grinned, and the grin made her whole face look like somebody had lit it too. "That's why I came to the top of the hill. Whatever it's answering, it's up there."

They were joined, in the way of festivals, by accident and gravy. Tam Reed arrived chasing his escaped festival ribbon, which had wrapped itself around a balloon, which had wrapped itself around Tam. Tam was eleven, round-faced, and the best cook of any of them, which in Tam's opinion was the only heroic skill that fed anybody. And Sera Vayne came down the hill the other way, carrying a notebook, having climbed up to record exactly how many stars fell - forty-one so far, which she announced was "statistically rude, because last year it was forty, and now my chart is wrong."

They were not strangers, exactly - not any more. The four of them had spent three days becoming a four, in the way of people who have searched a brook, faced a wheel of bees and haggled with a stargazer together. Tam Reed arrived at the hilltop with gravy on his sleeve, a stolen festival ribbon in his hair (red, market-bought, replacing the one the balloon had taken the year before) and the news that his ember-honey pies had sold out entirely by lantern-lighting, which he announced as a triumph and a tragedy in one breath, since he had saved none for himself. Sera Vayne arrived with six years of star-counts in one notebook and a fresh page ready, having climbed, as she did every year, to count them properly, without what she called crowd

error. And Mira told them, in the comfortable dark, about the mill house and the clocks, and how the pendant had come to her - how Gran Solen had found it, the story went, in the mill race on the morning Mira was born, caught in the wheel like something the water was delivering. "Gran says the brook gives things back," Mira said. "Cogs. Stones. Babies' necklaces. She says you just have to be at the right pool when the water rests."

"And does it glow at home?" asked Sera, pen ready.

"Only on festival night," said Mira. "Only ever on festival night. A little more each year." She held it up, and it pulsed, gentle and steady. "This year it's doing it a lot."

Sera was twelve and believed, firmly, that the world made sense and could be written down. She wrote down Mira's pendant, too. *Glows. Pulses. Not lantern-light (checked).*

So there were four of them on the hill when the sky changed: a hunter, a miller's daughter with a shining star at her throat, a cook, and a girl with a notebook.

"It's getting brighter," Mira said quietly. She was not looking at her pendant. She was looking up.

They all looked up.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Night the Star Fell



The night the Star fell.

There was one star over Emberwood Vale that never fell.

It hung above the Heart Tree at the centre of the wood - the biggest star in the sky, big as a harvest moon's little sister, gold as a candle flame. The old people called it the Star, the way you might say the Sea, as if there were only the one that mattered. Sailors steered by it. Lovers pointed at it. Every wish made at the festival was, in the end, made in its light.

On the last night of summer, in front of the whole of Millbrook, the Star cracked.

It began as a sound too low to hear - a feeling in the teeth, like the moment before thunder. A line of darkness split the Star from top to bottom, the way ice splits on a pond. The fiddlers stopped. Somebody's cup fell. Then, slowly, terribly, beautifully, the Star came apart into great shining pieces, and the pieces fell.

"Down," said Kael's father, somewhere below, in the voice he used for storms and falling trees. "Everybody down, and look away from the light!"

But the four on the hill did not look away. They could not have. They watched the great pieces of the Star tumble in four long arcs of fire - one toward the far lake in the west, one climbing impossibly upward into the clouds, one toward the red glow of the southern mountains - and one, the closest, the greenest-gold, falling straight and slow and certain into the deep Emberwood, close enough that they felt its landing in the soles of their feet. *Whump.* A breath of warm wind. A ring of fireflies rising out of the trees all at once, like sparks off a kicked log.

Then it was over, and the night was darker than any night Kael had ever stood in.

That was the worst of it, somehow. Not the cracking, not the falling. The dark afterwards. Where the Star had

burned for every year of every life in the village, there was now a hole in the sky - a patch of empty black, shaped almost like a star, that no other light seemed willing to enter.

Below them, the village was doing its best, in the way villages do. Somebody's grandmother had fainted, picturesquely, into the arms of three neighbours and a wheelbarrow, and was recovering with cider and an audience. The priest was saying, loudly and comfortingly, several things that were mostly for himself. Children cried, not because they understood, but because the sky had done a loud, bright, grown-up thing, and were being held, and told - in the oldest voice there is, the voice that says it while hoping it - that it would be all right.

Tomas Thorn had the lantern crews organised inside a minute, strings of light swung up into the oaks so that the clearing should not sit in the new dark; and it worked, after a fashion, except that all of them kept seeing it: above the lantern-light, above the tree-tops, above everything, the hole. Other stars stood around it in their hundreds, ordinary and small and suddenly not enough. Sera, methodical even then, counted the ones nearest the gap and wrote down their names from her charts, as if taking a register of survivors.

"Forty-one falling stars," she said. "And the Star. The count is: the Star is missing from its place. That is the whole count. That is the only entry that matters."

Nobody argued. Master Wen's cart stood dark at the clearing's edge, its three bells silent now, and the old stargazer stood beside it looking up with the expression of a man whose worst chart has just come true. "A knock on the door," he said to nobody in particular, "three days early. And now - the guest."

"My chart," Sera said faintly, "is extremely wrong."

Mira's pendant blazed like a struck match. She gasped and held it away from her chest on its cord, and its light fell across all four of their faces - and pulled, very gently, the way a compass needle pulls.

It was pointing into the wood.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Four Shards, Four Lands



Gran Solen tells them where the four shards fell.

The village did what villages do with the end of the world: it put the kettle on.

By midnight the clearing was a parliament of lanterns. The miller said the pieces of the Star had to be gathered, or the dark would spread. The priest said the Star had been a lamp, and lamps can be mended. Old Gran Solen - Mira's grandmother, ninety if she was a day - said the thing nobody wanted to say, in the voice of somebody reading out the weather:

"Four shards. I saw them plain. One to the Archive under the lake, for the Shard of Tides. One up to the

Isles in the sky, for the Shard of Winds. One to the Forge in the mountain, for the Shard of Embers." She squinted toward the dark trees. "And one came down in our own wood, children. The Shard of Roots. Close. Closer than the rest together."

"Then someone must go and fetch it," said the miller.

Every adult in the clearing immediately found something fascinating to look at that was not the deep, dark, ancient wood.

It was Sera who said it, writing as she spoke, because writing helped her be brave: "The pendant points at it. Mira's pendant has pointed at the Star all her life - Gran, you said so yourself, it's in my notes from spring. So the pendant points at the shard now. Which means -" she swallowed - "whichever way you dress it up, the wood is expecting *us*."

"You're eleven," said the miller to Tam.

"Twelve," said Tam, "in the ways that matter," and produced, from the festival supplies, a satchel of pies, a coil of good rope, a tinderbox, and his grandmother's second-best lantern. "If we're going into a dark wood after a piece of a star, we are not going hungry. That's my whole speech."

They packed like people who had been preparing all week without knowing it - because, the four of them realised, they had. Onto the clearing's edge, out of the lantern-parliament's way, Sera spread her satchel and read the inventory aloud, the way quartermasters and older sisters have always read inventories, in a voice that allowed no argument.

"One rope," she said, "fifty feet, Tam-tested. One flask lantern oil, full. One lantern - thank you, Tam's grandmother. One notebook, one thimble of ink, one pencil. One copper star token - Kael's. One arrowhead, star-metal, Kael's, purchased and peculiar. Pies, six, ember-honey, held against emergency. Wishes -" she looked up over the notebook - "four. Unspoken. Carried carefully." She closed the satchel. "And the Festival Fund: eleven silver acorns, held in common."

"When did we become an expedition?" Tam asked, wonderingly.

"On Tuesday," said Mira, "when a clock stopped. We just didn't have the paperwork."

The adults were arriving, by then, at the edge of the children's firelight, one by one and then in a knot: the miller, Maera Solen, the priest, Hazel Wren with her veil pushed back and a jar of something golden under her

arm, which she pressed on Tam without a word - more ember-honey, for the road - and at the back of them all, Gran Solen, who had been watching the four of them the way you watch weather coming over a hill you know well.

Kael's father looked at Kael for a long moment. Hunters' children grow up early in the Vale; Kael had been bringing home dinner since he was nine. His father took Kael's bow down from his own shoulder - the good bow, the grown-up bow, that Kael had never been allowed to touch - and put it in his son's hands.

"Mind you wish well," he said.

"Dad," said Kael, hoarse. "I think I wished big."

"I know you did, son." His father almost smiled. "Sideways, remember. Wishes come true sideways. So walk straight, and be kind to whatever you meet in there - the wood keeps accounts of kindness longer than anything else. Now go, before the grown-ups organise a committee."

Four children, one lantern, one notebook, one satchel of pies, one glowing star on a cord, and one very good bow went down the hill and into the Emberwood, while

behind them the whole village stood in a sky with a hole in it, watching the dark.

CHAPTER NINE

Into the Emberwood



The Hollow Wisp, warmed by the pendant's light.

The Emberwood at night was a different country from the Emberwood by day.

By day, Kael knew every path in it the way you know the rooms of your own house. By night - this night, with the Star gone - the trees stood closer and taller than trees had any business standing, and the dark between them was not empty dark. It was *listening* dark.

Mira walked first, holding her pendant out like a lantern of her own. Its light was small but certain, and it leaned, always, a little to the left of the path, toward the deep heart of the wood where the shard had fallen.

"Left again," she said. "Whatever it is, it does not care for paths."

"Nothing good ever does," said Tam, and fed each of them a cold pie, on the sound principle that fear is worse on an empty stomach.

They had passed the boundary stones an hour out - the seven grey stones, waist-high, worn smooth, carved with roots and stars - and Kael had said his father's words at them, quietly, the way you knock at a door: we go in as guests; we take only what we are given; we thank the wood when we leave. After the stones, the hunter in him walked with his eyes down as much as forward, and what he read on the ground kept his voice low.

"Everything went out at a run, when it fell," he said. "See here - deer, all one way, away from the heart. And here." He stopped, and crouched, and the others crowded round the lantern. In the soft earth of the path was a print: broad, soft-padded, without claw marks, bigger than a dog's, with the mud at its edge still crumbled fresh. "I saw this on the hill. Three mornings ago. Something has been walking out of the deep wood to look at the village - and walking back in."

"Something what?" asked Tam.

"Something careful," said Kael. "Something that didn't want to be seen by anyone who'd worry. It knew we were there tonight, too. These are hours old, not days." He stood up, and looked ahead into the listening dark, and his voice, when he spoke again, had respect in it. "Whatever it is, it's ahead of us, not behind. The shard fell at the heart. Everything old in this wood will be around it. We are expected, I think. We were expected before the Star even fell."

Mira's pendant leaned a little to the left of the path, pulling gently, always gently, toward the deep heart. "Left again," she said.

They had been walking an hour when the cold came.

It arrived without wind. The lantern flame bent blue. Frost flowered across Sera's notebook cover in curling white fern-shapes, in the middle of the last night of summer - and between the trees ahead, something pale was drifting. It was shaped almost like a person. It whispered in a voice that sounded almost like Kael's own:

"...turn back... lay it down... be empty... be free..."

Kael had the good bow up and drawn before he had decided anything. The pale shape drifted closer. His

fingers were steady. His shot, as mentioned, almost never missed.

It was Sera - practical, chart-keeping Sera - who caught his elbow. "Wait. Listen to it properly. It's not threatening us. It's... repeating. Like an echo that lost the original sound." She raised her voice, and it only shook a little. "Hello? Can you hear me? What are you?"

The shape stopped drifting.

"...hollow..." it whispered. *"...was a wish... somebody wished... and the star broke... and now I am the part that fell out..."*

Nobody shot anything. Mira stepped forward instead, slow as approaching a shy animal, and held out the light of her pendant. The pale shape leaned toward it the way a plant leans toward a window. Some of the cold went out of the air. Some colour - the faintest gold, like the memory of gold - came into the shape's edges.

"Keep the light near," Mira said softly. "It's not a monster. I think it's a piece of the night that's *missing* the Star. I think there will be more of them, wherever the Star used to shine." She looked back at the others, and her face in the pendant-light was frightened and

certain at once. "Write it down, Sera. In Vaelthorne, kindness first. Arrows after. Arrows *much* after."

Sera wrote it down. *Hollow Wisps: do not shoot. They are cold because they are empty. Warmth helps. Pies untested.*

CHAPTER TEN

Things Found in the Dark



A lost Wayfarer's pack, a silver key, and a ring of mooncaps.

The Wisp did not follow them. It stayed where the pendant-light had warmed it, hovering at the edge of the path like a small gold moon, and if it watched them go, none of them liked to think about its watching for long. The wood had gone quiet in the way it does after something important - not empty quiet, but listening quiet, the quiet of a house where someone is awake upstairs.

They had been walking perhaps twenty minutes, Mira first with her light held out, Kael last with an arrow resting on the string and not drawn, when Tam - who

was watching the ground because the ground was where pies and footing both lived - stopped so suddenly that Sera walked into him.

"There's a boot," said Tam.

There was. An old boot, of good leather gone grey with years, lying beside the path as if its owner had sat down to rest and then been politely forgotten by time. And beyond the boot, where the roots of a fallen oak made a hollow like a cupped hand, half-buried in leaf-mould and moss, was the rest of what the wood had been keeping: a traveller's pack.

It had been a fine pack once. The leather was cracked now, and green at the seams, and a rowan sapling had grown straight up through one of its straps, which made opening it feel less like looting and more like being handed something by the tree itself. Whoever had carried it had been no ordinary traveller. A Wayfarer's pack, Sera breathed - she knew the marks from her grandfather's stories: the brass ring at the flap, the little stitched compass-rose, the oilcloth inner pocket that keeps one thing dry when everything else in the world is wet.

They did not simply take it. That matters, and they knew it mattered, even before Bramble ever explained

about the wood keeping accounts. Kael stood with his bow grounded and said the boundary-stone words over it, out loud - we take only what we are given - and Mira held the pendant-light steady, and it was Tam, in the end, who said the practical thing that was also the kind thing: "If he's coming back for it, he's had a long time. And if he's not - then he'd want it used. Travellers would. But we leave a marker, and we leave payment, and Sera writes exactly what we took, so it isn't stealing. It's borrowing from the road."

So they opened the pack like archaeologists, like priests, like children - which is to say, with total reverence and both hands.

The oilcloth pocket had kept its one thing dry. A key. Not an iron key: a silver key, heavy and bright and untarnished after all its years in the wet dark, with its bow - the part you hold - made in the shape of a perfect five-pointed star. Nobody spoke for a moment. Mira's pendant, on its cord, was glowing steadily now, and in its light the key shone back, star answering star.

Under the pocket, folded small: a scrap of map, drawn in brown ink on linen that had survived better than it should, showing a shoreline, and hills, and a tower drawn beneath wavy lines, in the middle of what could

only be a lake. WEST, the map said, in a stranger's careful hand, in the corner. THE WATER KEEPS THE DOOR. Nothing else. No name.

In the main pocket: a coil of silver wire, fine as thread and strong as rumour. A tinderbox, dead. A water flask, empty and smelling faintly of apples. A spoon - of great age, and enormous use, Tam ruled, and claimed it on the spot as expedition property.

And at the pack's side, where the fallen oak's roots made their cupped hand, growing in a ring as neat as stitching: mushrooms. Pale as peeled eggs, tall as thimbles, and glowing - softly, steadily, with a cool green-silver light that did not flicker.

"Mooncaps," said Sera, reverently, already writing. "Hazel sells them dried to the healer for fever-tea. A basket of mooncaps is worth - " she did the face of somebody doing arithmetic with respect - "rather a lot of acorns, actually. They only grow where starlight has touched the ground. Hazel says so. She says that's why they're rare: the Star only shines in one place."

The Star, Kael thought, had been shining on this hollow. On this pack. On whatever road had ended here, in the dark, years before any of them were born.

"Expedition inventory," said Sera, and wrote, in her best hand, by pendant-light: FOUND, NOT STOLEN. ONE SILVER KEY, STAR-BOWED, PURPOSE UNKNOWN. ONE MAP SCRAP, LAKE, WEST. ONE COIL SILVER WIRE. ONE SPOON (TAM'S). MOONCAPS, ONE RING, LEFT GROWING - WE TAKE ONLY THREE, FOR EVIDENCE. She paused. "And payment," she added, and Tam, without a word of argument, which for Tam was a form of ceremony, took one whole ember-honey pie from the satchel and set it on the flat stone beside the pack, where the wood could see it.

"For the road," said Tam. "Whoever's it was."

They were turning to go - pack respectfully re-closed, rowan strap left exactly as found, treasures distributed about their persons like a smuggler's choir - when Kael's boot struck something at the hollow's edge that was not a stone. He dug with his fingers, two inches down in the scorch-smelling earth, along the blackened line they had been half-following all night without naming it: the scorch trail, where the shard's fall had seared the wood floor in a long green-black scar pointing at the heart.

It was an arrowhead. Dark metal, flecked with tiny stars, the twin of the one in his pocket - and when he

lifted it, the two of them sang together for a moment, his pocket and his palm, a little two-note chord, like a bell and its echo.

"Everything made of the Star points at the Star," Sera whispered. "And bits of it fell all along the road. All along the road in. Which means -" she looked up the dark path ahead, and her voice went very small and very certain - "we can follow it home again, if we have to. The pieces mark the way."

It was at that moment that a voice from the bushes beside them announced that it had seen where the star-piece went, and that it had been VERY loud, and that it had been VERY brave about it.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Bramble



Bramble, who saw the whole thing.

"I saw where it went," said a voice from the bushes, "and it was VERY loud and I was VERY brave about it."

The bushes stood up.

It was a treant - or would be, one day, when it grew. At present it was about the height of Tam, made of smooth young bark, with a crown of bright green leaves for hair, root-feet, twig-fingers, and a red festival ribbon tied around one arm that it clearly considered extremely fine. Two round amber eyes blinked at them from the foliage.

"I am Bramble," said the sapling, with enormous dignity. "I live here. Well. I live wherever I stop, which is a sort of everywhere, but tonight I live here, because here is where the star-piece fell and somebody has to be in charge of it, and the oaks are all too busy being wise to do anything useful."

"In charge of it?" said Kael.

"I watched it land," said Bramble. "I have appointed myself." The sapling leaned closer, and its voice dropped to a rustling whisper. "It fell by the Heart Tree. Right at the roots. And HE is there." A twig pointed dramatically into the dark. "Antor. The Guardian. He has been standing over it since it landed, not sleeping, not eating, just... standing guard. As if it were an egg. As if something might hatch."

"Will you take us to him?" Mira asked.

Bramble's leaves shivered all over, which the four would learn meant thinking. "He is very old and very large and his antlers have their own weather," said Bramble. "But you warmed the cold thing instead of shooting it. I saw that too. I see everything; it's a gift and a burden." The sapling stepped grandly onto the path and immediately tripped over its own roots, recovered, and pretended it had meant to do that. "I will take you.

Keep close. The deep wood is full of old paths tonight, and some of them remember being walked by things that weren't people."

But first, because Bramble was Bramble, there was an inspection.

The sapling circled their gear the way a customs officer circles a suspicious cart, twig-fingers tapping, leaf-hair rustling with professional suspicion. It examined the rope. It sniffed the lantern oil and pronounced it "adequate." It held Sera's notebook up to the moonlight as if important documents might be concealed in it, which, in a sense, they were. It came, at last, to Kael's pocket, and stopped, and every leaf on its head stood slowly on end.

"What," said Bramble, in a small voice, "is THAT?"

Kael took out the arrowhead. Dark metal, star-flecked, heavier than it should be - and here, in the deep wood, on the scorch-smelling path, it was not faintly singing any more. It was humming, low and sweet and clear, like a plucked string, and in Kael's palm it turned - actually turned, slowly, the way a compass needle turns - until its point aimed left of the path, exactly where Mira's pendant leaned.

"Star-metal," said Sera, writing fast. "It answers the shard the way the pendant does. Everything made of the Star points at the Star. Oh, that's good, that's a rule. Write that down. I am writing that down."

"That came out of the sky," said Bramble, with enormous respect, "a long time before you did, small hunter. Things are arriving in this wood that have not been seen since the oaks were acorns." The sapling drew itself up, both ribbons stirring though there was no wind. "I revise my opinion. You are not four children with a lantern. You are an expedition, with equipment, and the wood knows it. The wood always knows. Well!" It clapped its twig hands. "Then we had better be a good one. This way - and step where I step, because the path is feeling rememberful tonight."

"How far?" asked Sera, notebook ready.

"By morning," said Bramble, "if the wood lets us. The wood decides, you know. It always has. We are only ever walking where it has already agreed to let us arrive."

And with a small treant in a red ribbon leading the way, the four friends went on into the deep Emberwood, toward the Heart Tree, and the Guardian, and the fallen piece of the sky.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Bramble's Hollow



Ribbons, riddles, an owl's bargain, and a silver acorn.

"We cannot go straight," said Bramble, twenty minutes into the deep wood, stopping so suddenly that all four of them very nearly walked through it. "The straight way is flooded where the stream changed its mind, and the long way takes till morning, and the short way -" the sapling's leaves rustled, which they were learning could mean several things, and this time meant embarrassment - "the short way goes past my house, and my house is not TIDY, and I have a REPUTATION."

"You live in a wood," said Tam. "Everybody lives in the wood the untidy way. That's the whole point of outdoors."

Bramble's house, when they reached it, was a hollow oak so old and so wide that its heart had become a room - a real room, round and dry and smelling of resin and leaf-mould, lit by fireflies drifting in and out of glass jars (human jars, collected over years, Bramble explained proudly, traded from the village rubbish heap at the full moon, which was apparently an entire economy) and furnished with acorn cups, a flat stone table, and - along one curved wall, pinned with thorns in rows of heartbreaking neatness - ribbons. Dozens of ribbons. Festival ribbons, lost ribbons, ribbons of every year and colour, each one labelled, in wobbly charcoal on a sliver of bark, with a year.

"You collect them," said Mira softly.

"I RESCUE them," said Bramble. "People wish on them and lose them and the wood finds them and somebody has to keep the wishes safe while the people are away forgetting. It is a solemn duty. Also they are pretty. Both things can be true; write that down, writer."

Sera wrote it down.

The short way, it turned out, was a root-road: a path the old trees kept between their roots, below the ordinary floor of the wood, where the water never flooded and the dark was a friendly dark. But a root-road must be asked for, and the asking, Bramble explained, was traditionally a riddle - the wood's old manners, older than the village, older than the festival.

"I am not the one who asks," said Bramble, stepping aside with enormous ceremony, and creaking a wooden bow. "The road asks. Listen."

And from the hollow dark of the root-way, from the wood itself, in a voice like leaves settling after wind, the question came - not in words, exactly, but in a shape in all their minds at once, the way the fear would come later, the way the wood did everything: WHAT IS GIVEN AND GIVEN AND NEVER GROWS LESS?

Tam said "Pie," immediately, and with total conviction, and was gently shushed by three people and one treant.

Sera thought of her notebook, which grew heavier with everything she gave away from it. Mira thought of light, which her pendant spent all night and never dimmed. Kael thought of his father at the smokehouse door, and of wishes carried six years like a coal that does not burn

the hand - and he heard his own voice answer, almost before he had decided to speak:

"Kindness," said Kael. "A wish you give away. Love. Stories. Things that multiply when you spend them."

The root-road opened. It is the only word for it: the great roots ahead of them, which had been a wall, were suddenly an arch, and a stair, and a way down into warm earth-smelling dark, lit - just slightly, just kindly - by mooncaps growing along its edges like lamps.

But first - because the hollow had one more resident - there was Hush.

Hush was the owl who lived in the chimney-hole of Bramble's oak, and Hush was old the way the tree was old, which is a different old than people get. She opened one amber eye at the commotion, and then the other, and looked at the five of them the way headmistresses and grandmothers and certain owls look: as if she had already read the report.

"The Guardian is awake," said Hush, to nobody in particular, in a voice like a page turning. "The lake is dreaming loud. And somebody's granddaughter is wearing a piece of the sky." Her eye settled on Mira. Then, businesslike: "I trade sightings. It is the owl

economy. You have a question you cannot reach. I have a hollow at the top of this tree that sees to the Heart Tree itself. The price of a look is a treasure, small and bright and no use to me, which is how you will know it is a true trade and not a purchase."

They offered, in turn: a silver acorn of the fund (Hush closed her eyes at it, bored); the copper star token (a flicker of interest, no more); and then Mira, rummaging, brought out the coil of silver wire from the Wayfarer's pack - and the owl's whole head came forward out of the dark like the moon coming over a hill.

"Wayfarer wire," said Hush softly. "For mending what cannot be nailed." She took it with enormous delicacy, foot over foot, and it vanished into the chimney dark. "A true trade. Climb, then. One at a time. Look long. Remember all of it. The wood charges extra for forgetting."

From the top of the great oak, through Hush's hollow - which was a knot-hole aligned by centuries of growth like a telescope of bark - Kael looked out over a midnight sea of leaves, and saw the Heart Tree. It did not look like a tree. It looked like a green mountain with a fire at its heart: fireflies in their thousands, rising in a slow spiral, and beneath them, at the roots, the green-

gold pulse of the fallen shard, beating - he counted it against his own pulse, standing in the wind with his hand flat to his chest - beating exactly in time with the hearts of the people who had come to find it. And nearer, on the black water of the swollen stream that lay between: pale shapes, drifting, dozens of them, patient as snow.

"You see the road as it is," said Hush, from the dark below him. "Cold water, and the cold things in it, and the fear after - the wood shows everyone the fear; it is not personal, it is thorough. And the Guardian standing over the piece of the sky, not sleeping. He has not slept since it fell. He is waiting for somebody in particular, and tonight he seems to think -" the owl's voice went dry as paper - "that it might, against all precedent, be you."

Coming down, they found the last gift of the hollow lying on its threshold, where no gift had been when they went in. An acorn. Silver - not painted, not gilded: silver, through and through, big as a robin's egg, warm as a held hand, with the root-marks of the Heart Tree etched on its cap by nobody's knife.

"That is not mine," said Bramble, in a hushed and reverent voice. "That is HERS. The Tree's own. She gives

those - oh, rarely. Rarely at all. Plant it somewhere true, carrier." The sapling's leaves were trembling. "The Tree has just joined your expedition. We are six, now, if you count a tree, and I DO."

Mira wrapped the silver acorn in the map scrap's spare corner and put it over her heart, next to the pendant, where the important things were kept. Then the five of them went down together into the root-road, where the mooncaps lit the way like lamps, toward the cold water, and the fear, and the Guardian who was waiting.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Deep Wood



Bramble holds on - and the Heart Tree appears.

The wood let them walk - but it made them earn it.

First came the stream. By day it was the little brook where Millbrook children sailed leaf boats. Tonight it ran black and swollen and fast, shoulder-deep in the middle, humming with cold - and full of pale shapes, drifting slowly downstream like drowned lanterns. Hollow Wisps, dozens of them, caught in the current of the wood's grief.

"We can't cross through them," said Kael. "We'd freeze before the middle."

"Then we don't cross *through*," said Mira. She took off her pendant - the first time she had ever taken it off, Bramble would later tell them, though she had never told Bramble that - and held it high, and walked straight into the black water, holding the light out ahead of her like a boat's prow.



Holding the light high: the crossing of the black stream.

The Wisps parted. Not fled - parted, the way grass parts for a friend. They crowded close to the light, warming, goldening at the edges, and where Mira passed, the water behind her stayed clear and only ordinarily cold. "Now," she said, teeth chattering. "Quickly. And somebody hold my cloak dry, it has very important stars on it."

They crossed in a line, hands on shoulders, Tam holding the satchel over his head and announcing to the night at large that the pies were fine, the pies were his first concern, everyone please remain calm about the pies.

On the far bank they did what expeditions do, which mostly amounts to wringing things out and taking stock. The rope - fifty feet of the rope-maker's best, bought at market, Tam-tested - had gone across first on Bramble's root-bridge of an arm and come back tied, hand over hand, as a safety line for the smallest: Tam, who crossed it white-knuckled and joking, which the others had learned was the same thing with him. Now Kael coiled it, wet and heavy, and Sera sat on a root with the notebook wrapped in oilcloth and wrote the crossing down anyway, in writing she would later describe as "underwater, but committed."

"Dry socks," said Tam, in a voice of religious awe, producing from the bottom of the satchel, beneath the pies, a pair of his own spare socks in a waxed paper twist. "I packed dry socks. My mother made me. I mocked her, in my heart, and I was wrong, and she will know. Mothers always know. That's their magic; the rest of us just have star-metal."

Mira put her pendant back on, over her heart, where it glowed the steadiest it had all night - and at that exact moment the four of them felt, rather than heard, the temperature of the wood change. Not colder. Emptier. As if something ahead of them had been holding its breath for a very long time, and had just - carefully, deliberately - let it go.

After the stream, the fear came - and it was worse than the cold.

There was no monster. That was the terrible cleverness of it. The deep wood simply showed each of them, quietly, in the dark between the trees, the thing they most did not want to see. Kael saw the clearing at home, empty, the lanterns out, everyone gone home because he had failed. Sera saw her notebook blank, every page, forever. Tam saw an empty table. Mira saw her pendant dark in her hand, and her hand alone in the dark, and nobody's shoulder under it.

Bramble saw the four of them stop walking, one by one. And Bramble, who was small, and young, and not especially brave, did the only thing a treant can do.

It grew.

Not much - treants do not hurry - but in the space of a held breath the sapling stretched a full foot taller, put out new leaves in a rustling green rush, and wrapped one long twiggy arm around each of their shoulders, all four at once, and held on.

"You are not alone in this wood," Bramble said fiercely, to all of them and to the dark. "Nobody is alone in this wood. That is the entire point of a wood."

The dark between the trees thinned, and thinned, and went back to being only night. Ahead of them, through the last of the great trunks, fireflies were rising in a slow green-gold spiral around something vast.

"The Heart Tree," whispered Bramble. "We're here."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Heart Tree



The oldest living thing in Vaelthorne, and a small errand of kindness.

The root-road brought them up, at last, through an arch of living wood, into the grove of the Heart Tree - and every one of them, even Tam, even Bramble, stopped talking at the same moment, the way you stop at the door of a church or a sickroom or a library: because the place itself had asked.

The Heart Tree was not the biggest tree in the wood the way a house is bigger than a hut. It was the biggest the way the sky is bigger than a roof. Its trunk rose out of the grove like a tower built by a patient god, too wide to see around, its bark plated and folded like a landscape,

its roots coming out of the earth in arches high enough to walk under and going down again like the ribs of the world. Above them - far above, farther than the festival oaks, farther than seemed fair for a tree - its crown spread over the whole grove and blotted out what was left of the sky, and in and out of its branches, unhurried, marvellous, ten thousand fireflies were rising in a slow green-gold spiral, turning, always turning, around some warmth at the Tree's heart that the children could feel on their faces like a hearth through a wall.

Between two roots, half-buried in moss, the Shard of Roots was glowing. They could all see it now. Green-gold, big as a loaf of bread, pulsing - yes, in time with their hearts, exactly as Hush had shown Kael from the oak-top. And Mira's pendant answered it, and the two arrowheads hummed in their pockets and wrappings, and for one long moment the whole grove was a chord of small lights answering one great one.

"Don't touch it," said Bramble, quietly. "Not yet. Not before HIM. He is between us and it - he has been between everything and it, all night."

"Where?" whispered Tam.

"Eyes," said Bramble. "Look up. No - " a twig lifted, slowly, into the firefly dark between the roots. "There."

Two eyes. That was all, at first. Two calm, dark, enormous eyes, at the height of a horse's shoulder and a half again, watching them out of the shadow of the roots with the patience of geology. Not hostile. Not welcoming. Weighing.

But before anything else could happen - before the Guardian could step out of the firefly light the way mountains step - the grove presented its own small emergency, in the way of places that test you with the errand at hand rather than the one you have rehearsed.

At the foot of the root-arch, half in the mud of the root-road's mouth, lay a fallen nest: a starling's nest, blown or shaken down in the night of the falling, and in it, unhurt and furious about it, three nestlings, wide-mouthed, screaming soundlessly up at a mother who circled the grove above them calling and calling and not daring the ground, because the ground had eyes on it tonight, and she knew.

The branch it had fallen from was twelve feet up. The mud was cold. The nestlings were the size of plums.

Nobody discussed it. That is the truest thing that can be said about the whole expedition, and it happened again here, under the eyes of the oldest power in the wood: nobody discussed it, because it did not need discussing.

Tam took the nest in both hands like a bowl of something precious and spillable. Sera counted nestlings (three, all present, all shouting) with the relief of an auditor who has found the accounts to balance. Mira held her pendant high so they could see. Bramble, who could not climb - "I am a tree, we do not climb, it would be undignified and also impossible" - did the next best thing and grew, a foot and a half, all at once, in a rustling rush of new leaf, and Kael went up Bramble's shoulder and the tallest root together with the nest cupped in one elbow, a hunter's child doing a bird's errand at the top of the world, and set it - carefully, woven-firm, exactly in the fork it had fallen from.

The mother starling came down like a thrown glove. Her noise, landing, was the loudest ordinary sound any of them had heard all night, and it was worth more to Kael at that moment than the shard itself: because it was the wood, going on. Birds feeding chicks. Rivers running. The ordinary world, still turning on its hinges, in the middle of the most extraordinary night in the history of the Vale.

Only then - only then - did the eyes between the roots blink, once, slowly, the way a forest decides something. And the shadow that held them stood up.

While they had worked, the grove had done one more quiet thing. Rest is a kind of test, and the grove had watched them take it properly: they had sat on the roots and shared the last cold pie but one between five, and Sera had written the grove into the notebook (THE HEART TREE: no measurements are adequate; the word is "vast," crossed out twice, replaced both times with "vast"), and Mira had sung, under her breath, without noticing she was doing it, the tune the village children sing when the lanterns are lit. The shard pulsed. The fireflies turned. The whole grove breathed with them, slow and green and gold.

Then the fireflies stilled.

And Antor, Guardian of Roots, stepped out of the light.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Antor, Guardian of Roots



Antor, Guardian of Roots, at the Heart Tree.

The Heart Tree was the oldest living thing in Vaelthorne, and Antor was its keeper.



Antor steps out of the firefly light.

He stepped out of the firefly light the way mountains must step, if mountains ever bothered: slowly, and all at once. A stag as tall at the shoulder as a horse is tall altogether, with a coat the colour of deep water at dusk, and antlers that were not antlers - they were branches, true branches, budded and leafed, with their own small weather of fireflies and falling seeds. Between the roots of the Heart Tree behind him, half-buried in moss and warm as a hearthstone, glowed the Shard of Roots: a crystal of green-gold starlight, big as a loaf of bread, pulsing in time with Mira's pendant.

In time, Kael realised, with all five of their hearts.

"LITTLE BRIGHT THINGS," said Antor. His voice was the sound of a forest deciding something. "YOU HAVE COME

FOR THE PIECE OF THE SKY."

Kael did the thing he had been raised to do when meeting anyone older than the hills: he knelt. The others knelt too, even Bramble, whose ribbon trailed in the moss.

"Guardian," said Kael, "we have. The Star broke. The village sent - well. We came. To fetch it back, and mend the sky."

"MANY WILL COME FOR THE SHARDS," said Antor, "BEFORE THE END. SOME WITH ARMIES. SOME WITH GOLD. SOME WITH VERY GOOD REASONS." The great head lowered until one enormous dark eye was level with Kael's. "I DO NOT ASK WHAT YOU BRING, HUNTER. I ASK WHAT THE SKY ASKS. EVERY SHARD WILL ASK IT. ANSWER ALL OF THEM TRULY, AND THE STAR MAY YET BE WHOLE. ANSWER EVEN ONE FALSELY, AND IT NEVER WILL."

"AND WHAT DO YOU CARRY, LITTLE BRIGHT THINGS?" Antor asked, and it was not the question any of them had expected, so of course it was the right one. "THE SKY IS WATCHING WHAT YOU BRING TO IT. SHOW THE WOOD WHAT YOU HAVE BROUGHT."

So they showed him, one by one, on the moss, like an offering and like a shopkeeper's stall at the same time, and Sera - who understood that this was the inventory's true purpose, and always had been - read it as they laid it down. The rope, still damp from the stream. The lantern, low now, and the flask of oil beside it. The notebook, with the count of the falling stars and the register of the survivors. The copper star token from the archery, worn already at its edges. The star-metal arrowhead, humming softly, pointing at Mira. The warm Wisp-light of the pendant itself. Six ember-honey pies, much travelled. Eleven silver acorns, held in common. A silver key with a star for its bow, that opened nothing they had yet found. A map scrap, drawn by a stranger's hand, showing a lake shore none of them had seen. A coil of mushrooms that glowed like drowned moons. And a silver acorn of the Heart Tree itself, given, not taken, in a hollow full of ribbons.

Antor looked at it all for a long time.

"YOU HAVE COME POOR AND COME HONEST," he said at last, "WHICH IS THE ONLY RICHES THE OLD PLACES RECOGNISE. YOU TOOK LITTLE. YOU WERE GIVEN MUCH. YOU CARRIED IT CAREFULLY. THAT, TOO, IS AN ANSWER, THOUGH IT IS NOT THE ONE I MUST ASK FOR."

"Ask," said Mira. Her pendant and the shard were blazing now, answering each other like two ends of one song. "Please."

The fireflies stilled. The wood held its breath. And Antor, Guardian of Roots, asked the question of the First Shard:

"WHEN THE STAR IS WHOLE AGAIN, AND BURNS AGAIN ABOVE YOUR VALE, AND GRANTS AGAIN THE WISHES OF YOUR PEOPLE - WHAT WILL YOU DO WITH YOURS?"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Say It Out Loud



To answer the Guardian, they must break the oldest rule of the Festival.

It would be nice to say they answered at once. They did not. They looked at one another in the green-gold light - a hunter, a miller's daughter, a cook, and a girl with a notebook - four children who had each carried a secret wish up a hill that very evening, wished in silence, held tight, never spoken aloud.

To answer the question, they would have to break the oldest rule of the Festival.

They would have to say their wishes out loud.

A rule you have kept since you were six years old is not a small thing to break, even for a god of the wood, even at the end of the longest night of your life.

The Festival's rule was the first rule any of them could remember learning. You do not say your wish aloud. A wish spoken is a wish let go. Mothers said it, tying ribbons. Fathers said it, lifting children onto shoulders to see the first falling star. Gran Solen said it with the air of a woman repeating the law of gravity. Six festivals Kael had kept his wish behind his teeth. Six festivals Mira had kept hers. It had never once occurred to any child in Millbrook that the rule could have an exception - that there might come a night when the Star itself, through its Guardian, would ask to hear.

They looked at one another in the green-gold light, and what passed between them was not really fear. It was more like standing at the top of the church tower stair with the bell-ropes in your hands - the knowledge that the sound, once made, could not be unmade.

Tam was thinking - and the others, later, would find they had all been thinking their own versions of the same film, running backwards like smoke into a chimney - Tam was thinking of the first pie he ever sold. He had been nine. It was market day, and raining in the

way that makes everybody sorry for everybody, and an old travelling man with no dry inch on him had counted out his coins twice at the Reed stall and put them away again, and gone to stand under the eaves with his collar up, hungry in the particular proud way of people who will not say so. Tam had taken a pie off the stall - his mother's pie, mind, not his, and the risk was real - and carried it over with both hands and said the first thing that came into his head, which was, "It's a spare shape. It came out wrong. It would only be wasted." It had not been a spare shape. It had come out perfectly. The old man had known, and Tam had known he knew, and they had eaten the lie together very happily, because some lies are just kindness wearing an apron. Tam had wished his wish that festival, for the first time, with the rain still in his sleeves: that nobody at his table should ever go hungry. He had meant the old man. He had meant everybody, ever since.

Sera was thinking of her grandfather, who had given her the first notebook and the first column and the whole idea of the register of the stars; who had sat with her at his last festival, though none of them knew it was his last, and pointed up with a hand like a bundle of kindling and said, "Count them, love. The world is big and mostly unwritten, and somebody has to start." She

had counted forty that year. She had written, underneath, in handwriting she still recognised as a younger person's: NEXT YEAR, UNDERSTAND EVERYTHING. She had been wishing it, in one form or another, at every festival since - the wish to understand the world, all of it, even the parts that would not fit in the notebook. Especially, as it turned out, those parts.

Mira was thinking of the mill race on the morning she was born - a story she did not remember and had been told so often that it had become a kind of memory anyway: the wheel turning, the water running bright, and her grandmother, up to her elbows in the race with the dawn coming up, lifting out a small star on a cord that the brook had carried down out of the hills in the night, from no village, from no maker anyone ever found. "The water was delivering it," Gran always said. "I just happened to be the midwife." Mira had worn it every day of her life. She had wished her wish by its light - to know where it came from, who had left it, what she was for - and tonight it was blazing on her chest beside a piece of the broken Star, and the answer to her wish, whatever it was, was so close that breaking the rule felt less like letting the wish go than like finally handing it to its owner.

And Kael thought of six festivals. Six times up the hill, on shoulders and then on his own feet. Six times the first star falling, and the whole clearing sighing, and the wish going up out of him like a held breath released into the dark: let me be a hero. Not famous. Not sung about. Just - there. Just the person who shows up when it matters, when somebody needs one. He had wished it at six, when he could not yet shoot. He had wished it at nine, the winter his father was ill and the house was quiet. He had wished it tonight, with the copper token and the star-metal in his pocket and the whole sky listening - and the sky, it turned out, had been listening all along, and had answered in the only way the sky knows how.

Sideways, his father always said. Big wishes come true sideways.

"Well," said Tam, into the enormous silence, and his ears had gone red in the firefly light. "Somebody has to go first, and mine's the smallest." He cleared his throat, and looked up - all the way up, a long way up - into the face of the Guardian of Roots. "No it isn't," he said, suddenly, to himself. "It isn't small. That's just what I say so nobody makes a fuss." He took a breath that went all the way down to his boots. "All right. Out loud, then. Here it is."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The First Shard



Antor bows, and the Shard of Roots rises.

Tam went first, because Tam said somebody had to, and his was the smallest.

"I wish," said Tam, red to the ears, "that nobody at my table ever goes hungry. That's it. That's the whole wish. Every year. I know it's not grand."

"IT IS THE GRANDEST KIND THERE IS," said Antor gravely, and Tam stood a little straighter in the moss.

Sera opened her notebook to the last page, where she had written her wish in her smallest writing, upside down, years ago. "I wish to understand the world," she

said. "All of it. Even the parts that don't fit in the notebook. *Especially* those parts, apparently."

Mira held her pendant tight. "I wished to know where this came from," she whispered. "Who left it. Why it shines. I wished to know what I am *for*."

Then everyone looked at Kael.

Six years he had held it. Six festivals. The wish that made his chest hurt. Kael Thorn, who almost never missed, stood up in front of a god of the wood with his father's good bow on his back, and said it out loud for the first time in his life:

"I wished to be a hero," he said. "Not famous. Just... when it mattered. When somebody needed one. I wished to be the person who shows up."

The silence afterwards was the warmest silence any of them had ever stood in.

"AND NOW?" said Antor. "THE QUESTION WAS NOT WHAT YOU WISHED. IT WAS WHAT YOU WILL DO WITH IT - WHEN THE STAR IS WHOLE."

Kael looked at his friends: at Tam, who had carried pies into the dark like they were treasure, because to Tam they were; at Sera, who had talked to a monster made

of cold instead of letting him shoot it; at Mira, walking first into black water with the light held high; at Bramble, holding all four of them at once and telling the dark the entire point of a wood.

"We'll give ours away," Kael said slowly, and then all at once, certain. "That's the answer. When the Star is whole - we'll spend our wishes on other people. Every year. Starting with whoever needs one most. A hero isn't the person who gets a wish, Guardian. It's the person who shows up and *gives*."

Antor closed his great eyes.

And bowed.

The Guardian of Roots bent his branching antlers all the way down to the moss, and the roots of the Heart Tree opened like slow fingers, and the Shard of Roots rose out of the earth on a cushion of fireflies and came to rest, warm and humming, in Mira's outstretched hands - where it fit beside her pendant as if the two of them had been separated a long time ago, and were very glad.

Mira did not keep it in her hands for long, because some things are too important to hold alone. She took the cord of her pendant - the plain cord she had worn all

her life - and threaded the Shard of Roots onto it beside the little star, where it settled as if it had been measured for the place, and the two of them together, star and shard, made a light that turned the whole grove the colour of spring water in sun.

"You should have a name for what you are now," said Bramble, who had been uncharacteristically quiet for nearly a full minute, out of respect, and possibly shock. "Things that carry pieces of the sky should have a name. It is traditional. I checked with the oaks once and they agreed with me, which they almost never do."

"SHARDBEARERS," said Antor, and the word went through the grove like wind through wheat. "IT IS AN OLD WORD. IT HAS BEEN ASLEEP A LONG TIME. CARRY IT BETTER THAN IT WAS CARRIED LAST TIME."

"Last time?" said Sera, pen flying. "Guardian - there were Shardbearers before? Who were they? What happened to -"

"THAT," said Antor, not unkindly, "IS A STORY THE LAKE KEEPS." He turned his great head west, where the shard's thin beam was shining through the trees like a plumb line of light. "AND THE LAKE, LITTLE WRITER, IS WHERE YOUR ROAD GOES. ASK IT YOURSELF. IT

ANSWERS MORE THAN I DO - TO THOSE WHO COME HONEST."

Then the shard did something none of them expected. It shone a beam - thin, straight, unmistakable - away west, across the dark wood, in the direction of the great lake, and the library that slept beneath it.

"Tides," Sera breathed, writing furiously. "It's pointing to Tides. They *call* to each other. The shards call to each other!"

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

What the Wood Gives Back



Farewells, fragments, and a small warm piece of the mended night.

Antor did not say goodbye. Guardians, it turns out, do not; it would take too long, and forests are not in the habit of pretending that anyone has really left. What he did was older and better. He walked with them.

Not far - no farther than the edge of his grove, where the roots of the Heart Tree gave out and the ordinary wood began again - but a stag as tall as a horse is tall altogether does not need to walk far beside you to rearrange your understanding of walking. The fireflies went with him in a slow escort. The Wisps of the grove - for there were Wisps here too, pale shapes among the

roots - kept a respectful distance from the shard-light and the stag, and watched the five of them pass with what might, in a face with more face to it, have been envy, or hope.

At the grove's edge, Antor stopped, and lowered his great head until the branching antlers were level with them, and spoke the last words he would speak to them in that wood on that night.

"YOU HAVE BEEN ASKED ONE QUESTION," he said. "THERE WILL BE THREE MORE, IN WATER AND IN AIR AND IN FIRE, AND THE LAKE AND THE ISLES AND THE FORGE WILL ASK THEM IN THEIR OWN WAYS. DO NOT PREPARE ANSWERS. PREPARE ONLY TO COME HONEST, AS YOU CAME HERE. IT IS THE ONLY PREPARATION THAT HAS EVER WORKED." A pause, in which a single firefly landed on the tip of one antler and rode there, unconcerned, like a lantern on a gatepost. "AND CARRIER OF THE ACORN -" Mira looked up, startled - "PLANT IT WHERE YOUR ROAD BEGINS. A TREE SHOULD START WHERE A JOURNEY DOES."

Then he turned - slowly, and all at once, the way mountains turn - and was gone between the trees, and the grove behind them went on glowing for a long time, until distance and dawn thinned it into ordinary dark.

The way home took one hour instead of four, because the wood had changed its mind about them, or because the root-road's cousin runs downhill toward morning, or because - Sera's theory, written up later in fair copy - a wood, like a dog or a village, hurries you along once it has decided you are family. They followed the scorch trail backwards by the singing of the arrowheads: every few hundred yards along the blackened line, another fragment lay in the earth, dropped by the falling shard on its way in, and each one hummed as they passed, a little descending scale of notes, like the wood humming them home. At the fourth fragment, Kael stopped pretending he wasn't collecting them. By the boundary stones there were nine pieces of star-metal in a handkerchief in his quiver - enough, the smith's boy had said, to be luck to carry and a nuisance to work, and enough, by any market reckoning in the Vale, to be worth a small fortune.

"Evidence," said Sera firmly, when Kael looked at the fortune in his hand with the expression of a boy who has accidentally become an industry. "And travel funds. Star-metal is the most valuable thing in three valleys, Kael. Book Two is going to need boats."

"Book Two?" said Tam.

"Whatever comes next," said Sera, "is going to need boats. And provisions, and notebooks, and - mooncaps!" For here, in a root-hollow by the path where the first grey of the morning was feeling its way between the trees, a whole ring of mooncaps stood glowing in the half-light, twice the ring they had found by the Wayfarer's pack, open to the dimming sky. This time they harvested properly - two thirds of the ring, as Hazel's rules demand, leaving the rest to seed - and Tam's satchel, which had carried pies into the deep wood, carried treasure out of it, wrapped in cloth, faintly luminous through the weave.

And there was one more traveller on the road home, though it took them a while to notice, because it had learned politeness somewhere in the night.

The Wisp came with them.

Not the cold one - not any more. The pale shape they had found whispering between the trees, the piece of the night that was missing the Star, had stayed all night at the edge of the grove in the shard's light, and it had warmed the way a window warms at sunrise: gradually, from the edges in, until what drifted out of the trees behind them at dawn was not white and not frightening, but gold - small, round-shouldered, curious,

bobbing along at the height of a lantern, peering at the birds. Peering, particularly, at Tam's satchel, in a manner that can only be described as hopeful.

"Oh, no," said Tam, in the voice of a boy who can see his whole future arriving. "No. I am not feeding the sky. I am not adopting a piece of the night. I have a ribbon situation already; I cannot have a Wisp situation too."

The Wisp bobbed. It said, in a voice like a kettle deciding, small and warm and not hollow at all any more: "...embers...?"

"Ember," said Mira, delighted. "We'll call it Ember. Ember, this is Tam. Tam gives everybody breakfast. It is his entire religion; you have come to the right satchel."

So the expedition that came down out of the Emberwood at dawn was larger than the one that had gone in: four children, one treant with two ribbons, one small warm piece of the mended night, a fortune in star-metal, a satchel of glowing mushrooms, a silver key to a door under a lake, a map of the way there, and - green-gold and steady on a plain cord at a girl's throat, beside the little star that had waited twelve years for its other half - the Shard of Roots, first of the four, pointing west.

Behind them, very far behind them and closer than it sounded, the wood thanked them for visiting - or the wind did, moving through ten thousand leaves at once. Kael turned at the boundary stones and said the words back, the ones his father had taught him, in the right direction this time.

"Thank you," he said. "We were guests. We'll come again properly."

The stones said nothing. Seven grey stones, carved with roots and stars, are not much for conversation. But the grass at their feet was full of fireflies going out like candles, one by one, as the sun came up over Millbrook - and the village, below, had not slept at all.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

A Song About the Star



Dawn, a new arrival on the path - and a key recognised.

They came out of the Emberwood at dawn, to a village that had not slept.

All of Millbrook was still in the clearing, wrapped in blankets, keeping the lanterns lit against the hole in the sky - and when Mira walked into the lantern-light with the Shard of Roots held high and shining green-gold, the cheer that went up frightened every bird out of every tree in the Vale. Kael's father said nothing at all, which those who knew him understood to be the loudest pride in the world. He just took back his good bow, looked at

it, and put it - deliberately - back into Kael's hands. For good.

Bramble was given a festival ribbon of its very own (it already had one, but now it had two, and wore both), a place of honour by the cider stall, and the official title of Guide of the Vale, which it accepted on the condition that somebody else did the paperwork.

It was while the kettle was on - because in Millbrook the kettle is always, eventually, on - that they heard the singing.

It came down the north road with the morning mist: a clear voice, a lute, and a song none of them had ever heard, about a star that loved the world so much it broke itself into pieces to be nearer to it. The singer came into the clearing unhurried - a tall half-elf in a travelling cloak the colour of deep water, with a bard's lute, a guide's staff, keen eyes, and the particular smile of someone who has been walking toward this exact morning for a very long time.

"Seren," said Gran Solen, in the tone of a woman whose suspicions have all come home at once. "Seren the Bard. Well. It has been some years."

"It has, grandmother-of-the-valley," said Seren, bowing to Gran, to Antor's distant wood, and then - to everyone's surprise - to the four children and the sapling, deepest of all. "I sing the old songs. I walk the old roads. And I have come because the sky has a hole in it, because a shard is calling to its sisters across lake and cloud and fire... and because four children and one extremely decorated treant are going to need a guide."

It was then that Seren saw the key.

The four friends had been telling it all in a heap, the way you do at dawn after the biggest night of your life - the wood, the Wisp, the pack, the stream, the stag - and the things they had found were passing from hand to amazed hand around the fire: the humming arrowhead, the map scrap, the glowing mushrooms under a cloth. The silver key came last. Mira held it up, star-bow bright in the firelight, and the song that Seren had been humming - idly, under the story, the way bards do - stopped.

"Where," said Seren, in a voice quite unlike the storyteller's voice of a moment before, "did you find that?"

"In a pack," said Kael. "A lost pack, in the deep wood. A Wayfarer's, Bramble thinks. Old. Why?"

"Because I have seen its brother," said Seren slowly, "on a ring of nine keys, in a tower under a lake, a very long way from here and a very long time ago. That is an Archive key, children. It opens a door in the Drowned Archive of Thaldris - one particular door, that has been locked since before your village had a name." The bard turned the key over once, gently, and gave it back to Mira as if it were made of glass. "The Wayfarer who carried it was looking for the Shard of Tides. Whatever stopped him, stopped him in your wood, on his way home. Keep it safe. Keep it safer than the shard. A shard can only point at a door."

Mira closed her fingers around the key. "And a key?"

"A key," said Seren, "is a promise that somewhere, there is a door that has been waiting for you personally."

Mira's shard pulsed once, bright as a wink, and its thin green-gold beam swung - steady now, certain - toward the west. Toward the Drowned Archive of Thaldris, where the Shard of Tides lay sleeping under dark water. Toward the next page of the story.

Seren shouldered the lute, and smiled, and sang the first line of a song about the Star -

CHAPTER TWENTY

The Dawn Market



Mooncaps, star-metal, a boatman's token - and a tree planted where the road begins.

Millbrook has a market the day before the festival. Nobody, in the whole history of the Vale, had ever held one the morning after - until the morning the sky had a hole in it, the children came out of the wood with a piece of the Star, and the entire village found itself wide awake at dawn with its sleeves rolled up and nowhere to put its feelings. Feelings, in Millbrook, go into work. By seven o'clock the clearing was a market again, the oddest and happiest market in living memory: stalls thrown up out of festival wreckage, blankets for countertops, the kettle on in three places at once, and

everybody in the Vale trading simply for the pleasure of having something to do with their hands while the world changed.

And the Shardbearers - the name had got out, the way names do when a treant coins them - the Shardbearers had things to sell.

Hazel claimed the mooncaps first, by right of conquest, having taught them the harvesting rule in the first place. She weighed Tam's satchel-load in her palm, sniffed, peered, and named a price that made Tam sit down on a crate. Glow-capped, star-touched, fresh from the deep wood on the night of the falling: the healer, she explained, would pay in gold acorns for fever-tea stock, and the apothecary over the hills would pay more, and Hazel was not going to be the woman who underpaid the children who had mended the sky's first piece. The mooncaps went for more than the cog, the bees and the star-pebble put together. Tam wrote the figure down himself, in Sera's notebook, because his hand needed the practice believing it.

The star-metal went to the smith. Master Odo turned the nine fragments over on his anvil one at a time, listening to each one sing, in a silence that deepened the way water deepens, and then he did a thing smiths are

not famous for: he named a fair price first, and raised it himself. Half in gold acorns - real gold, heavy, stamped with the Vale's oak - and half in work: he would make, from the metal's own heart, arrowheads for Kael that would fly true toward whatever the Star pointed at, and a clasp for Mira's cord, star-metal on star, so the shard could never be lost from her neck; and the work, he said, would take until the roads were ready, which was his way of saying: I know where you are going, and you are not going unarmed with kindness only.

Master Wen bought the map scrap's story - not the scrap itself; Sera would not sell the original of anything, ever, but she copied it in her best hand on market parchment, the shore, the hills, the tower beneath the waves, WEST, THE WATER KEEPS THE DOOR - and Wen paid expedition prices for the copy and sat a long while looking at it, with his three bells silent and his beard out of his belt for once, like a man saying goodbye to a friend he had never met. "The Wayfarer drew that," he said at last. "I knew his hand before you told me whose pack it was. He owed me a song and I owed him a road. It appears -" he folded the copy away with enormous care - "that you children have settled both debts."

What the expedition bought with its fortune took the rest of the morning, and Sera's list for it is famous in the

family now, because half of it is in her handwriting and half in Tam's:

Four packs, weathered, with the brass rings - WAYFARING QUALITY. Provisions for six days for five persons and one treant: dried apples, hard cheese, oatcakes, tea. (Ember's share: one candle, to look at. Ember does not eat. Ember approves of candles.) One coil of new rope, because the first rope is a hero and is RETIRED WITH HONOURS over Tam's bed. Ink, two thimbles. Paper. One boatman's token, purchased from old Ferryman Cobb, who runs the west ferry to the lake shore: a notched oak tally, good for one boat, one crew, and all the questions the crew can carry. Passage west: PAID IN ADVANCE.

"And the key?" said Seren, in the middle of it all, mildly, the way you ask about the weather. The bard had spent the morning being useful in the effortless way of people who have done everything twice: mending a strap here, teaching Bramble a travelling song there, and watching the expedition assemble itself with an expression of deep and private satisfaction. "You have sold the mushrooms, the metal, the map's likeness, and a whole second baking of ember-honey pies that half the village queued for in its blankets - the last one being under negotiation, and its price -"

"Ember's candle money," said Tam, firmly.

"- the key," Seren went on, smiling, "you have been offered a great deal for, by a man whose name I will not repeat, who collects old doors. I watched you refuse him. Tell me why."

"Because it isn't ours to sell," said Mira. "It was left. It's a promise, you said so. Somewhere there's a door that has been waiting."

"Then it is the most valuable thing you own," said Seren, "precisely because it was never bought." The bard stood, and shouldered the lute, and looked around the dawn market at the lantern crews and the pie queues and the whole bright impossible village, and then west, where the road went over the hill toward the lake country. "Keep it safer than the shard. And come and find me when the packs are packed, Shardbearers. The road west is three days, the lake is patient, and the Archive -" a pause, and the smile of somebody who has been walking toward this exact morning for a very long time - "the Archive has been waiting to be asked a question for four hundred years. I should like to be there when it's asked."

Last of all, at the edge of the clearing where the west road begins, in sight of the boundary of the village and

the first of the roadside oaks, Mira knelt down in the new grass and planted the silver acorn.

She dug with Kael's knife and her own fingers, one hand's depth, the way Bramble had instructed - acorn's cap to the sky, root to the road - and covered it with Vale earth, and watered it with the last of the lantern oil flask's water (the water, not the oil: Tam checked twice), and the four of them stood around the small dark patch of ground in the morning sun with their packs on, and nobody said anything foolish or grand, because the moment did not need it.

"A tree should start where a journey does," said Mira. "Antor said."

"When we come back," said Sera, writing it down, as a heading, at the top of a fresh page, in her best ink - THE ROAD WEST - "it will have leaves."

Then the Shard of Roots, on its cord, pulsed once, bright as a wink, and its thin green-gold beam swung - steady now, certain - toward the west. Toward the Drowned Archive of Thaldris, where the Shard of Tides lay sleeping under dark water, and a locked door was waiting for its key. Toward the next page of the story.

And that is where we leave them - four children, one extremely decorated treant, one small warm piece of the mended night, and a bard with the road in his boots - until Book Two.

The End of Book One

The Story Continues

Book Two takes Kael, Mira, Tam, Sera - and Bramble - beyond Emberwood Vale: down into the Drowned Archive of Thaldris, where the books remember everything and the Shard of Tides sleeps under black water, and up into the Skybound Isles of Zephyra, where the Shard of Winds fell among the griffons and the clouds.

And in **Book Three**, the four friends must enter the Cindervault Forge for the Shard of Embers - and then climb into the Hollow Between itself, to face Vaelgorath, the Hollow Star Dragon, and discover the truth about why the Star fell... and what a dragon does with a second chance.

The Shattered Star of Vaelthorne began as a campaign world for deskatur.com - with a printable campaign book, a solo web adventure, and the Vaelthorne Shard Quest card game, in web and print-and-play editions.

In Vaelthorne, kindness is a weapon. Almost everything can be befriended.

Meet the Four Friends

KAEL THORN, twelve, a hunter's son of Millbrook. Bow: his own making (ash, one winter). Shot: almost never misses. Wish: carried six years, never spoken - until the Heart Tree. Carries: the good bow (his father's, now his for good), a copper star token, and nine humming fragments of star-metal, soon to be arrowheads. Strength: he shows up. It has turned out to be the whole job.

MIRA SOLEN, twelve, of the mill house. Daughter of Maera Solen, who fixes clocks; granddaughter of Gran Solen, who knows things before they happen and says so afterward. Wears: a star pendant on a plain cord, found in the mill race on the morning she was born, glowing a little more every festival of her life - and now, beside it, the Shard of Roots itself. Carries: also, a silver key to a door under a lake. Strength: she walks first, holding the light.

TAM REED, eleven ("twelve, in the ways that matter"), the best cook of the expedition and, by his own appointment, its quartermaster of pies. Ember-honey pies: legendary. Spare socks: packed. Ribbon: red, market-bought, replacing the one the balloon took. Wish: that nobody at his table ever goes hungry - the

grandest kind there is, according to the Guardian of Roots. Strength: fear is worse on an empty stomach, and Tam has never once let it happen.

SERA VAYNE, twelve, keeper of the notebook. Six years of star-counts, one register of survivors, and now the Expedition Inventory, the expedition accounts, and a fresh page headed THE ROAD WEST. Belief: the world makes sense and can be written down. Discovery of the expedition: everything made of the Star points at the Star. Strength: when everyone else is frightened, Sera writes - and writing, as the miller can testify, helps her be brave.

BRAMBLE, a treant sapling of the Emberwood, Guide of the Vale (official; somebody else does the paperwork). Height: variable, by about a foot and a half, at moments of great feeling. Ribbons: two, both festival. Collection: every lost wish-ribbon the wood has found in living memory, kept safe until their owners come back for them. Strength: nobody is alone in a wood. That is the entire point of a wood.

AND ALSO: Ember, a small warm piece of the mended night, formerly a Hollow Wisp, now travelling with the expedition for reasons of breakfast; and SEREN THE BARD, singer of old songs, walker of old roads, who has

seen the brother of Mira's key on a ring of nine, in a tower under a lake, a very long time ago.

The Expedition Inventory

(Kept by S. Vayne, quartermaster. Prices in silver acorns unless marked gold. Items marked with a star were found, not bought, and are carried under the wood's rules: we take only what we are given.)

COG, BRASS, ONE. Found: a magpie's nest, church ash. Returned to the church clock, where it now strikes the hours properly. Payment received: 2 acorns each, one blessing, one gooseberry tart (divided).

STAR-PEBBLE, ONE. * Found: the ember-flower clearing, guarded by bees. Sold: Master Wen, stargazer, 19 acorns, plus one chart-reading and several warnings, all valuable.

EMBER-HONEY, ONE JAR. Earned: bee-finding, for the festival pies. Mostly baked. Worth: one festival.

ROPE, FIFTY FEET. Bought: market day, rope-maker's best. Tested: on Tam, from a stile, briefly, with permission. Service: the black stream crossing, the starling rescue (indirect). Status: RETIRED WITH HONOURS.

ARROWHEAD, STAR-METAL, ONE (plus nine fragments). Bought: market day, one; * found: the scorch trail, nine.

Behaviour: hums, points at the Star, sings in the presence of its own kind. Disposition: to be worked by Master Odo into arrowheads for K. Thorn and a clasp for M. Solen. Value: a small fortune. The expedition voted to keep it anyway.

SILVER KEY, STAR-BOWED, ONE. * Found: the Wayfarer's pack, deep Emberwood, oilcloth pocket, dry. Purpose: one particular door, the Drowned Archive of Thaldris, locked four hundred years. Value: not for sale at any price. (See: promises.)

MAP SCRAP, LINEN, ONE. * Found: as above. Shows: a lake shore, hills, a tower beneath waves. Inscription: WEST. THE WATER KEEPS THE DOOR. Original retained; one copy sold to M. Wen at expedition prices.

MOONCAPS, TWO RINGS' HARVEST. * Found: the Wayfarer's hollow; the boundary path. Sold: H. Wren, for the healer, at gold prices. Tea value: considerable. Light value: also considerable.

SILVER ACORN OF THE HEART TREE, ONE. * Given: the Hollow Oak, by the Tree, via nobody's hand. Planted: where the west road begins, Millbrook clearing edge. Expected: leaves, by our return.

THE SHARD OF ROOTS. * Won: the Heart Tree, by answering truly. Carried: M. Solen, on the pendant cord, beside the little star. Behaviour: pulses in time with our hearts; points west; calls to its sisters. Value: the sky, eventually. Not for sale. Not ever. Some things are only ever carried.

Bramble's Field Guide to the Emberwood

A note from Bramble: Everything in this guide is true, which is more than can be said for most guides. I have kept it short, because the wood is long. If you meet anything in the Emberwood that is not in this guide, be polite to it anyway. That is the whole guide, really. The rest is details.

HOLLOW WISPS. Pale, cold, shaped almost like people, and not - whatever the old songs say - monsters. A Wisp is a piece of the night that is missing the Star: a wish, some say, that fell out of the sky when the Star broke, and has been cold ever since. They whisper, and repeat, and drift toward warmth. DO NOT SHOOT. (This instruction is underlined in the original expedition notebook, three times.) Warmth helps. Light helps best. A Wisp properly warmed turns gold, and curious, and follows you home, and is called Ember thereafter. Feeding: they do not eat. They approve of candles.

MOONCAP MUSHROOMS. Pale, tall as thimbles, glowing green-silver after dark. They grow only where starlight has touched the ground - along the scorch trails of fallen star-stone, and in one ring in the Vale that nobody discusses. Hazel's rules, which are the law

in this matter: take two thirds, leave one third to seed, never take the ring's mother-cap. Dried, they make a fever-tea the healer pays gold for. Fresh, they light a root-road better than any lantern, and go on doing it after you have picked them, which the expedition found restful.

TREANTS. The wood, walking. A treant grows at the speed of importance, which is usually very slow and occasionally very fast indeed. Young treants (saplings) are talkative, collect things, and appoint themselves to duties of great solemnity, such as guarding fallen pieces of the sky and rescuing lost wish-ribbons. Old treants say less and mean more of it. All treants hold the view that nobody is alone in a wood, and will grow a foot and a half on the spot to prove it.

HUSH, THE OWL. Resident of the chimney-hole of the Hollow Oak, trader in sightings, keeper of the far-seeing hollow that looks to the Heart Tree. Prices: one treasure, small and bright and of no use to an owl. Wayfarer wire accepted. Change is not given, because what Hush shows you is worth exactly what you paid, every time. Do not waste a look. Remember all of it. The wood charges extra for forgetting.

EMBER-BEES. Ordinary bees with an extraordinary employer: the ember-flowers, which bloom at dusk at the wood's edge and smell of woodsmoke and spice. On the night before the Star fell, the ember-bees of Millbrook circled a fallen star-pebble in one great wheel, the way bees circle to keep a hive warm, because they judged - correctly, according to Master Wen - that it belonged to them to guard. Bees are excellent judges. The honey is dark red, warm through the glass, and keeps a pie warm for a day and a night. Tam Reed has opinions about the honey. The opinions are: it is the best in the world, and there is never enough, and both are correct.

ANTOR, GUARDIAN OF ROOTS. A stag as tall at the shoulder as a horse is tall altogether, with a coat the colour of deep water at dusk and antlers that are true branches, budded and leafed, with their own small weather of fireflies and falling seeds. Keeper of the Heart Tree, oldest living thing in Vaelthorne. He does not ask what you bring. He asks what the sky asks. Answer truly. (The expedition also recommends: kneel, be polite, and do not touch the shard before he says so. This advice is free, unlike Hush's.)

THE BOUNDARY STONES. Seven grey stones, waist-high, worn smooth, carved with roots and stars,

standing where the village paths give up and the deep wood begins. What is said at the stones: We go in as guests. We take only what we are given. We thank the wood when we leave. What the wood says back: nothing, usually. It keeps accounts instead, of kindness, longer than anything else.

From Sera's Notebook: Notes on the Star

(Copied fair, from the expedition notebook of S. Vayne, with the crossings-out left in, because crossings-out are data too.)

ON THE STAR. The Star hung above the Heart Tree at the centre of the wood. It was the biggest star in the sky, big as a harvest moon's little sister, gold as a candle flame. Sailors steered by it. Every wish at the Festival was made, in the end, in its light. It never fell. Until the last night of summer, in front of the whole of Millbrook, when it cracked from top to bottom, like ice on a pond, and came apart into great shining pieces. Where it was, there is now a hole in the sky, shaped almost like a star, that no other light seems willing to enter. I have counted the stars nearest the gap and written down their names. It seemed important that somebody should know they are still there.

ON THE COUNT. Falling stars at the Festival, by year, as counted by me (ages seven to twelve): 36, 38, 38, 40, 40, 41. The increase is steady and is not explained by better counting, whatever Gran says. On the night of the falling: 41 small, and the Star itself. My chart was extremely wrong. I have kept it. A wrong chart,

honestly kept, is worth more than a right one invented afterward. (Grandfather's rule.)

ON THE SHARDS. Four. Named by the lands they fell to. ROOTS: Emberwood Vale, won, carried by M. Solen. TIDES: the Drowned Archive of Thaldris, under the lake, west. WINDS: the Skybound Isles of Zephyra, in the clouds, in chains, north. EMBERS: the Cindervault Forge, in the sleeping volcano, south. Each shard will ask a question (Guardian Antor, in person). The questions are not the same. Answers cannot be prepared. Honesty can.

ON STAR-METAL AND STAR-STONE. Pieces of the Star's country, fallen in all sizes, from pebbles that warm a brook pool to arrowheads that sing. RULES: 1. Everything made of the Star points at the Star. (Pendants, keys, arrowheads; tested.) 2. Star-stone falls early when something large is coming. Three days early, this time. Noted, for next time, if there is a next time. 3. It is worth a fortune and is mostly not the point.

ON WISHES. The Festival rule: a wish is never spoken aloud; a wish spoken is a wish let go. FINDING: the rule is true, and incomplete. A wish can also be given - spent on purpose, on somebody else, in front of witnesses, at the roots of the oldest tree in the world - and a wish

given does not diminish. It multiplies. (Source: the Guardian of Roots, who is the grandest authority I have ever cited, and the only one whose footnotes are trees.) Further research is planned. We are going to need boats.

- S. V.

SNEAK PEEK

Book Two - The Drowned Archive

Chapter One: The Lake That Keeps a Library



The lake that keeps a library.

The road west took three days, and on the third day, just as the light began to go, the land dropped away in front of them and the lake was simply there - the way the sea must be there, the first time you see it: all at once, and bigger than the word for it.

None of them had ever seen so much water in one place. The lake filled the whole bottom of the hills, still and dark and enormous, going silver at its far edge where the evening stood on it. It did not look like the

mill pond. It did not look like the brook. It looked like a held breath.

"Thaldris," said Seren, from the front of the little procession - four children with weathered packs, one treant with two ribbons and a brand-new travelling song, one small warm piece of the mended night bobbing at shoulder height, and a bard who had stopped walking, the way people stop at gravesides and homecomings. "The lake that keeps a library. Mind your voices. It listens beautifully."

Below them, at the water's edge, a stone jetty went out into the stillness, and at the end of the jetty a lantern burned in a little roofed shelter, blue-green, steady - a lamp that, the ferryman's boy told them later, had been lit every night for four hundred years, by an arrangement nobody could any longer explain, and had never once, in all that time, been allowed to go out.

And out in the middle of the lake, where the water was deepest, something showed above the surface: the top of a tower. Just the top - a crown of grey stone, a broken dome, one arched window open to the sky like an eye - and around it, faintly, when the light went the right way across the water, other shapes, down in the dark below

the surface. Roofs. Spires. Streets of towers, going down and down.

"The Drowned Archive," said Sera quietly, writing without looking at the page. "It sank in a night, four hundred years ago, with all its books and all its librarians' questions still inside it. Gran says the books remember everything. Gran says the water keeps the door."

"And the Shard of Tides is down there," said Kael.

"The Shard of Tides is down there," Seren agreed, "and so is a locked door" - the bard's eyes went, briefly, to Mira's hand, which had gone, all by itself, to the silver key on its new star-metal clasp - "that has been waiting four hundred years for somebody in particular."

At the end of the jetty, old Ferryman Cobb was waiting with his boat, though nobody had sent for him, and his notched oak tally was already in his hand, and he looked at the five of them and the Wisp and the bard for a long, flat moment, in the manner of a man who has ferried stranger cargo than this and charged it double.

"Heard you were coming," he said. "The lake heard first. It does that." He jerked his chin at the black water, where the tower's one open window had begun, faintly,

impossibly, to glow - as if, far below, in a drowned room, somebody had just lit a lamp. "It knows you've brought the key. I wouldn't keep it waiting past morning, if I were you. Things that wait four hundred years -" he spat, companionably, into the dark - "get ideas."

They went out on the lake at first light, when the mist was still deciding whether to be weather, in Ferryman Cobb's second-best boat - the best boat, he explained, was being saved against the lake's next idea - with the Shard of Roots glowing green-gold at Mira's throat under two scarves, in case the water was watching, which by all accounts it was.

Tam had opinions about boats, most of them delivered while holding both sides of this one. "It is smaller than the lake," he said. "I feel that is a design decision somebody should answer for."

"The lake is patient," said Seren, trailing one hand in the black water, entirely unbothered. "It has waited four hundred years. It can wait for us to arrive properly." The bard nodded toward the tower-top ahead of them, growing out of the mist. "What I would not do is make it wait past today. The Archive knows the key is on the water now. Librarians are the most patient people in

the world, children, right up until a book they want is overdue."

The boat slid over water so clear and so still that looking down was like looking through the floor of the world. Below them, drowned streets went past in the green gloom: an avenue of towers, a fallen bridge, a courtyard where fish moved in slow processions between the statues - and everywhere, lit windows. Not many. Not bright. A lamp here, a lamp there, far down, in rooms that had been under water since before Millbrook had a name, burning steadily about their business, as if the library down there had never once, in four hundred years, closed for the night.

Sera wrote: WINDOWS LIT: eleven, and counting, and the counter is frightened.

And then, from directly beneath the boat - from the deep water, from the drowned streets, from the heart of the sunken library itself - there came a sound. It was not loud. It was enormous, which is a different thing. A bell. One slow note, bronze and green and vast, rising through fathoms of black water and through the boards of the little boat and through the soles of their feet, up into their teeth, the way the Star's cracking had come, on the last night of summer.

It struck once. It struck twice. Under the water, in the Archive, something with a voice like the turning of the world's largest page was counting the new arrivals in.

The silver key, on its star-metal clasp at Mira's throat, beside the shard, beside the little star that had waited twelve years - the key rang, very faintly, in answer. Like a bell. Like a name being called, in a library, by someone who has been expecting you.

Mira closed her hand around it, and looked down into the green dark, and smiled the smile of a girl whose wish had started, at last, to answer back.

"Good morning," she said to the lake. "We're the Shardbearers. We've come about the door."

Book Two: The Drowned Archive - coming soon.