THE SHATTERED STAR OF VAELTHORNE

The Star, Mended

Book Three - The Final Book



Written by Marcus Draper

A story from the world of Vaelthorne

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THE SHATTERED STAR OF VAELTHORNE

The Star, Mended

Book Three of the Vaelthorne Trilogy

Written by Marcus Draper

For everyone who ever waited in the dark -
and for those who finally came back, carrying the pieces.

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 - Roots

Millbrook, the Festival of Falling Stars, the Heart Tree and Bramble the treant. The Shard of Roots was won here in Book One.

The Drowned Archive of Thaldris - Tides

A library beneath a lake, kept by Pearl the Archive Cat and the Sunken Librarian Prime. The Shard of Tides was won here in Book Two.

The Skybound Isles of Zephyra - Winds

Islands chained among clouds, the Bridge of Bells, and Aurelith, Guardian of Winds. The Shard of Winds was won here in Book Two.

The Cindervault Forge - Embers

A forge inside a volcano in the south, kept by Kharzul, Guardian of Embers, and three hundred and eleven coal sprites. The Shard of Embers waits here - and under it, Vaelgorath, the Hollow Star Dragon.

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 last book runs south and down: through Ashford and the Glass Desert, into the Forge, and below the Forge to the deepest cavern in the world - where the oldest keeper in Vaelthorne has waited a thousand years for somebody to come back and ask after him.

CHAPTER ONE

The Road That Goes Down



The Forge-Gate stands open by exactly the width of five travellers.

The road south from Millbrook was not a road the way other roads were roads. It was an argument the land was having with a mountain. It began in farmland, ran out of farmland, apologised through a valley of black ash trees that had learned to grow leaves again out of sheer stubbornness, and ended - all maps agreed on this, and so did Gran - at the Forge-Gate, where the Forge-folk kept the way down into the Cindervault, and where nobody entered without being owed, owing, or expected.

They were, as it turned out, all three.

They had rested one night in Millbrook, which was not nearly enough and was exactly enough. Gran had fed them as if feeding were a form of armour. She had mended Tam's red scarf where a sky-pirate's hook had nicked it, packed four loaves that would keep, four that would not and should be eaten first in honour, a wheel of cheese wrapped in waxed cloth, dried apples, a small pot of ember-honey from Book One's bees, and - pressed into Sera's hand at the gate, with the air of a woman paying a debt to the future - a brass compass that had belonged to Sera's grandfather, who had been lost and found so often that the family had finally bought him an instrument for it.

"South is easy to find," Gran said. "It is the rest of the directions down there that wander. Mind the compass. Mind each other more."

Bramble had come to the gate to see them off, which in a treant sapling meant arriving the night before and being mistaken for part of the fence until he waved. He had grown. He was now almost as tall as Kael, with a new ring of leaves the bright green of early peas, and in his branches, very carefully, sat Hush the owl, who had traded silver wire for wisdom in the first book and had apparently decided that the friendship was permanent.

"You smell of sky," Bramble said, in the slow voice of wood thinking. "And lake. The wood misses you when you are wet and high up. Come back smelling of yourselves."

"We will," Mira promised, and the three shards in her pack sang a soft three-note chord, Roots deep, Tides slow, Winds high and thin, as if agreeing.

They walked all morning through farmland going thin, then through the ash valley, where the trees stood black-barked and brave with new leaves and the ground crunched softly under their boots like a hearth raked out. The air changed by degrees: first woodsmoke, then plain smoke, then a smell with iron in it, and underneath it all a warmth coming up through the soles of their boots.

Kael heard it first and stopped with his hand up, archer's fashion. "Listen."

It was underneath the shards, underneath the warm stream that ran beside the road, underneath the valley itself - slow, enormous, regular as a sleeper's breathing. Bellows. A hammer. A pause the length of a held breath. Bellows. A hammer.

"The Forge is keeping time," Seren said quietly. He had his lute wrapped against the ash and his hat in his hand, though there was no one yet to take it off to. "And the time it is keeping is ours. The hammer falls once for every hundred of our heartbeats. Forge-folk manners. They match the work to the guest. It is the greatest courtesy they have. It is also how they tell you that you were never, at any point on this road, unobserved."

Tam counted his heartbeats for a while, walking, and reported, with awe, that the mountain was patient.

By noon the road gave out altogether and became a stair cut into black rock, wide enough for a cart, with iron rings set into the wall at hand height and lanterns - unlit, patient, forge-pattern - hanging at every turn. Sera wrote as she walked, because Sera wrote everywhere, and her first entry for the third volume of the Expedition Inventory was already forming itself in her head: one road, used up; one stair, beginning; one mountain, awake, still not for sale.

The Forge-Gate stood at the stair's first landing, between two pillars of slag glass that caught the light and threw it back in slow green and amber folds. The gate itself was black iron, taller than a house, and it was not shut.

It stood open by exactly the width of five travellers, no more, and in the opening stood the Forge-keeper.

She was no taller than Sera. She might have been two hundred years old or forty; forge-work does that to a face, gives it the look of a thing well made and much used. Her apron was black leather, her arms were like rope, and her eyes assessed them the way Kharzul himself would later assess them: weight, temper, and what they were for.

"Seren of the Songs," she said, "who owes us a song, and interest."

"Keeper Vay," said Seren, and bowed so low that his hat nearly brushed the stair. "I have brought the interest in person. Four of them."

Her eyes moved to the children, and to Mira's pack with its three lights, and her expression did the thing that Pearl's and Anselm's and the Librarian Prime's had done before her: the look of a keeper recognising the next entry in a very old catalogue.

"And the shard-bearers," she said. "He has been asking for you."

"Kharzul?" Kael asked.

"And the other one," said Keeper Vay, "under him." Far below, the hammer paused - for the first time, Seren would tell them later, in living memory - and in the pause, up through the gate and the stair and the soles of their boots, something enormous turned over in its sleep beneath the mountain and listened, with its whole enormous loneliness, to the sound of the ringing coming home.

"Debts first," said Keeper Vay, and stood aside. "Songs second. Down you go."

CHAPTER TWO

The Town of Cinders



Ashford: every shop has a forge, and every forge has a cat.

Before the descent, there was Ashford, and Ashford had rules about descending. Nobody went down to the Forge in travelling clothes, in soft boots, or hungry, and the town - which lived in the Forge-Gate's shadow and made its living equipping the people the Forge expected - took the rules personally.

Ashford was built of black stone with copper roofs gone green, and every street sloped, and every shop had a forge, and every forge had a cat, and every cat, Sera noted, had the same assessing look as Keeper Vay. The main street was one long market, and the market dealt

in heat: boots with iron-shod soles, gloves that would hold a hot pan or a hotter promise, smoked-glass goggles, heat salve in clay pots, water skins lined with clay, bread baked twice so it would keep in hot air, and cheese in wax the colour of warning.

They had things to sell, because an expedition that does not sell as it goes ends up carrying its own museum. Sera conducted the trading, notebook open, pencil sharp, in the tone she had perfected in Brinemarket and Bellhaven and which stallholders in three countries now recognised as the end of haggling.

Sold: the spare length of bell-cord from the Isles, which sang under strain, to a bell-hanger who tested it, heard it, and paid six silver acorns without a word of argument. Sold: two cloud-wool cloaks, surplus since the descent would be hot rather than cold, to a widow who ran a laundry in steam and wanted them for her grandchildren Up Top, as Ashford called everywhere that was not Ashford. Sold: a small listening shell, the last of the Archive three, to a mine-foreman who wanted to hear the rock before the rock spoke - nine acorns, and his thanks, which Sera recorded as currency.

Bought: four pairs of forge boots, iron-shod, fitted by a bootmaker who made each child stand on a hot - not too hot - plate to prove the fit, and who refused payment for Tam's pair on the grounds that small feet on a big errand were the town's business. Bought: heat salve, four pots. Bought: clay-lined water skins. Bought: twice-baked bread, lamp oil of the forge kind they already carried a little of and now carried enough of, and a coil of forge-chain lighter than the one from Bellhaven, which they traded in, weight for weight, plus two acorns.

And found - because Ashford, like every town in this story, kept one thing back for the people who looked properly - an ember-map.

It hung in the back of the map-seller's shop, behind the counter, not for sale, which Sera established by asking, and then established the exception to by showing the map-seller the inside of Mira's pack. He looked at the three shards for a long time. Then he took the ember-map down, rolled it into a tube of oiled leather, and put it into Mira's hands.

"It is a map of the Forge as the Forge was," he said, "before the Star fell and the lower ways were shut. If

the shut ways are shut, it is a souvenir. If they are not - " he shrugged the shrug of a man who has sold maps for fifty years and knows what maps are for - "then it is the way home for somebody. Maps are just promises the land made once. Some of them it keeps."

The ember-map showed the Forge in layers, like a cake cut open: the Gate, the Town Stair, the Upper Forge where Kharzul worked, the Bellows Hall, the Chimney Shaft, the Star Anvil Deep - and below the Deep, in ink so old it had gone brown, a spiral going down and down to a chamber marked with a star drawn and then, at some point in the last thousand years, crossed out by a hand that had pressed hard enough to tear the paper and then, unmistakably, had tried to mend the tear.

Sera copied the tear into her notebook, exactly, because some details are messages.

That night they slept in Ashford in a room over a bakery, with the mountain breathing through the floor - bellows, hammer, pause - and the shards, for the first time since the Isles, sang all three notes at once and held them, like a chord deciding something.

"Tomorrow," Seren said from the doorway, with his hat off to the room in general, "we go down properly. Eat.

Sleep. And if you dream of fire, do not be frightened. Down there, fire is just the local weather being honest."

Tam dreamed of a small bright thing in a dark place that was glad, in advance, that he was coming. He did not mention it at breakfast. He wrote it, instead, on the inside of his wrist in pencil, in letters too small for anyone else to read: DO NOT FORGET THE SMALL BRIGHT THING. Then they put on their forge boots, and their goggles up on their foreheads, and their salve, and went down.

CHAPTER THREE

The Glass Desert



A small bright thing, shouting in sparks, in a crack in the glass.

The Forge Door was not at the bottom of the Town Stair. The Town Stair ended, to everyone's surprise, at a plateau of black glass - and beyond the plateau, Keeper Vay informed them, lay the Glass Desert, which the Forge kept the way other places keep a moat.

"It is the Forge's spilled work," she said. "A thousand years of slag and sand and star-heat, melted and cooled and melted again. It is beautiful. It is sharp. It sings at noon. Cross it before noon, shard-bearers, and mind where the glass is thin, because under the thin places the old fire is not out. It is only waiting politely."

She gave them a guide rope with bells on it, a white flag on a pole so the Gate could see them from above, and a warning that Sera wrote down word for word: WHAT YOU FIND IN THE GLASS, THE GLASS FOUND FIRST. BRING BACK WHAT IS LOST. LEAVE WHAT IS ONLY SHINY.

The Glass Desert was the most beautiful dangerous place they had ever been, and they had by then been to a drowned library and a sky that kept sheep. It stretched for two miles under a white morning sun, dune after dune of fused glass in green and amber and smoke-blue, ringing faintly under their iron-shod boots like a floor made of bells. Every step had a note. Walking together, in step without meaning to, they made chords. Tam, inevitably, experimented, and for half a mile the expedition crossed the desert to an accompaniment of Tam.

They found the first thing where the glass was greenest: a sun-glass, a perfect lens the size of a dinner plate, grown - there was no other word - in a hollow of the dune, focusing the morning into one bright coin of light on the sand beneath it. Kael lifted it with his gloves, wrapped it in cloud-wool, and Sera entered it in the Inventory with the respect due to a thing that would

plainly be useful and equally plainly be saleable, two qualities she was learning to hold in one hand without dropping either.

They found the second thing where the glass was thin, and they found it by nearly losing Tam through it.

The crust gave with a sound like a spoon through creme brulee - Sera's simile, recorded later, at leisure, in safety - and Tam went down to his knees in a hollow under the glass where the old fire breathed warm against his shins and something, something small, was shouting.

It was not shouting in words. It was shouting in sparks, in a language of pops and bright spits, from a crack in the hollow's floor, and when Mira lay flat on the glass and put her face - goggles down - to the crack, she saw it: a coal sprite, no bigger than a teacup, made of living ember and soot, with two bright eyes and a crack running right across its little round body like a flaw in a pot, wedged fast in the cooling glass that had caught it, by the smell of it, some time ago, and had been holding it, cooling and tightening, ever since.

"A SMALL BRIGHT THING," Tam said, in capitals, showing her his wrist.

Freeing Pip - the sprite named itself, in spark-language that Seren translated with the air of a man interpreting an opera he had once known by heart; Pip was short for a name that meant, roughly, the first spark off a good flint - took the rest of the morning and all of their cleverness. They could not pull: the glass held like a fist. They could not break: the crack in Pip ran deeper when the glass sang. So Kael did the archer's thing, which is to say the patient thing, and used the sun-glass, and focused that coin of sunlight, small and fierce and exact, on the glass around Pip's waist - not on Pip - until the glass remembered being liquid, and softened, and let go all at once with a sigh like a kettle.

Pip shot out of the crack like a cork, looped the loop around the white flag, set the flag briefly and joyfully alight, apologised in a shower of contrite sparks, and landed on Tam's shoulder, where it sat down, crossed its tiny legs, and announced - through Seren - that it was coming with them, that the Forge had been stealing its family for work for a hundred years without asking, that it knew every shut way and warm crack in the mountain, and that it had, personally and specifically, a Grievance.

Pip's arrival made the expedition six, or seven counting Seren, or eight counting the shards as a choir, and the small bright rescuer became, from that hour, the expedition's smallest and warmest member - and the one who would, when the time came, talk to the mountain's other small bright things and save them all.

They crossed the rest of the desert by eleven, with the glass beginning to sing at the edges as noon came on, and the Forge Door - the real one, iron, star-embossed, set into the mountain's foot with the stair going down behind it - swung inward as they reached it, on hinges that made no sound at all, which was somehow more impressive than any creak.

Warm air breathed out of the dark, smelling of iron and oil and bread.

"Down," said Pip, from Tam's shoulder, in sparks. "Down, down. Home. Grievance. Down."

So down they went.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Forge Door



The river was not water. The landing was the size of a village green.

The stair behind the Forge Door went down the way the Drowning Stair in the Archive had gone down, in a spiral - but where the Archive stair had smelled of cold water and old paper, this one smelled of hot iron and lamp oil, and it was lit, every twenty steps, by forge-lanterns burning with the steady, unhurried flame of oil that does not mind bad air.

Bad air was the stair's test, and Seren set it out for them on the first landing with the plainness of a man reading weather.

"Deep places breathe out as well as in," he said. "What they breathe out is not poison, exactly. It is sleepiness, and headache, and a strong belief that sitting down forever would be reasonable. The lanterns are the tell. Forge oil burns blue at the base when the air goes bad. Blue flame: stop, climb twenty steps, wait, breathe. That is the whole rule. Obey it and the mountain is a house. Ignore it and the mountain is a very polite trap."

It went blue twice on the way down. Both times they obeyed, climbing back to good air and sitting with their backs against the warm wall while Sera made them recite things - the inventory, the kings of somewhere, the words of Seren's unfinished song - because reciting, Seren said, is breathing with a supervisor. Both times the flame burned yellow again after a while, as if the mountain had sighed and changed its mind, and they went on.

They used the expedition's stores the way good expeditions do, without drama: the clay-lined skins, a mouthful at a time; the twice-baked bread at the second landing; the chain, once, where a section of stair had fallen away in some old year and left a gap over a drop that Pip lit for them, sitting on the far edge and glowing helpfully like a small hearth, while Kael anchored the

chain to an iron ring and they crossed hand over hand, packs and all, with Tam going last and lightest and fastest, to show off, which Sera recorded as morale.

At the bottom of the stair there was no bottom. There was a landing the size of a village green, roofed by a vault of black stone ribbed like the inside of a cathedral, floored with flagstones worn into gentle hollows by two hundred years of boots. Doors went off it. Bells hung in it. A river ran through it in a channel of black glass, and the river was not water.

"That," said Pip, in a shower of reverent sparks that Seren translated in a whisper, "is the Slack. It is the Forge's cooling run. It is - it was - it will be again - " the sparks changed, and Seren's voice changed with them, into something old and sad and formal: "It is where the Star's fire was quenched, the night the Star fell. No one fishes there."

The slack-water ran black and still and faintly shining, like ink in the Archive, like the lake over Thaldris at night, and Mira, without thinking, put her hand out over it - and the three shards in her pack sang, all at once, the chord they had held in Ashford, and the slack-water answered.

Not with a note. With a light. A deep, slow, ember-red light, rising from the channel's bed as if something down there had opened one eye.

"Embers," Seren said. "The fourth land keeps its shard in fire, and its fire keeps - " He stopped, because the landing doors had opened, all of them, together, in the forge-folk way that meant a guest had been announced, and out of the central door, with a hammer on his shoulder and the assessing look of every keeper in the world raised to the power of two hundred years, came Kharzul himself.

He was not tall. He was wide - wide in the shoulder, wide in the hand, wide in the beard, which was grey as ash and braided with copper wire - and his arms were like rope the way Keeper Vay's were, only more so, the way a river is a stream only more so. His apron was black leather over black leather. His eyes went over the expedition the way a scale goes over a weight: boots, goggles, salve pots, chain, lens, map tube, shards, sprite, bard.

"The song-debt," he said to Seren, in a voice like a grate settling. "In person. With interest." His eyes finished their weighing at Pip, on Tam's shoulder, and something

in his face - not softness, exactly; a recognition, banked - moved. "And a grievance," he said. "In person too. Well. The Forge has been expecting all of you for a hundred years. It can wait one hour more. You will eat. You will wash the glass off your boots. And then - " the hammer came down off his shoulder and pointed, without haste, at the star-shaped anvil that stood in the centre of the landing, in a circle of swept-clean stone - "then we will see what you are made of. Which is, shard-bearers, the only question this mountain has ever asked anybody."

CHAPTER FIVE

Kharzul at His Forge



Kharzul, Guardian of Embers, at the star-shaped anvil.

Kharzul at his forge was not like a king on a throne or a librarian among books. He was like weather in a place that had agreed to have weather. The Upper Forge was a cavern the size of a town, with a hundred hearths in rings around the great central chimney, and at its heart the star-shaped anvil stood on a stump of petrified wood older than the kingdom, and Kharzul worked at it the way other people breathe: without deciding to.

He fed them first. Forge-folk hospitality was soup the colour of a sunset, bread baked in the edge of a hearth, cheese that had been smoked until it had opinions, and

water that tasted of stone and was cold in a way that felt like a kindness from very far underground. While they ate, Kharzul worked, and talked, and the working and the talking were the same rhythm.

"You want the Shard of Embers," he said. Hammer. "It is not mine to give." Hammer. "It never was. I am its keeper the way a bank is a keeper of a river." Hammer, and a turn of the glowing workpiece, which was a horseshoe, or a hinge, or possibly a note of music being made in iron; with Kharzul it was hard to tell until the quench. "The Guardians before me set the custom, and the custom is the Forge's, and the Forge's custom is this. No one is given fire. Fire is - " quench, in the slack-water trough, with a hiss that sang - "earned in the earning sense. Work. Real work, wanted work, work the Forge actually needs. Then the trial. Then, if the metal rings true - " he lifted the workpiece, which was, definitively now, a small perfect bell, and struck it once with one finger, and it rang the exact note the Shard of Winds had sung on the peak - "then the shard."

"What work?" Kael asked, in the tone of a person who has learned that this is always the right next question.

Kharzul set the bell down among a row of its siblings, each a different note, and Sera understood all at once, and wrote it down before she understood that she understood: he was building, bell by bell, year by year, an instrument for a song he did not yet have all the notes of. Seren's unfinished song. The shards' chord. The mountain was not just a forge. It was an orchestra, waiting.

"The work is threefold," Kharzul said, "because the Forge is threefold broke, and has been since the Star fell, and we have learned to work around the breaks the way you learn to walk around a hurt leg, and we are tired of it. First: the Great Bellows in the Bellows Hall stands still. Its leathers are perished, its drive-chain is off its wheel, and someone - " his eyes went, without accusation and without mercy, to Pip - "or someones have been borrowing its parts for a hundred years. Second: the coal sprites, who are the Forge's hands in every place too small and hot for ours, have stopped work. They have a grievance. It has a name. The name is - "

"Fair asking," Pip said, in sparks, and Seren, startled, translated before he could decide not to. "And fair counting. And names. We have names. We are not 'the

sprites'. We are Pip and Ash and Coal and - " the sparks poured out, name after name, a whole census of small bright things, and Kharzul stood with his hammer still and listened to every single one, and when the list was done he nodded, once, like a man entering figures in a ledger he should have kept all along.

"Third," he said, more quietly, "the chimney shaft is blocked. Something has built itself out of slag and spite halfway up, where the Forge breathes out, and the Forge has been holding its breath, politely, for longer than is good for it. That is why the air goes bad on the stair. That is the work. Bellows. Sprites. Chimney. Do the work, shard-bearers - not for me. For the Forge. Then come to the anvil, and we will talk about trials."

"And if we do the work," Mira said, "and the trial - what is the trial? The other Guardians - there was a book to shelve, a trial of winds - "

"The trial," said Kharzul, "is the anvil's. You will each make a thing. Only you can make it, and you will not know what it is until the iron is hot. Everyone is very frightened of that part, and everyone, so far, in two hundred years, has been wrong to be. Now." He picked up his hammer again, and the hundred hearths seemed

to lean in a fraction, the way a room leans toward a story. "Shoes off the clean stone. Aprons on. The bellows first - and take the sprite. Take the grievance. Around here, boy - " this to Tam, gently, with the whole weight of the mountain behind the gentleness - "a grievance carried properly is just a tool that has not been picked up yet."

CHAPTER SIX

The Lost Bellows



The Great Bellows drew in a breath the size of a weather system.

The Bellows Hall was a cathedral built around a single sleeping machine. The Great Bellows stood twenty feet tall, a house-sized pair of lungs in a frame of black oak and iron, with leathers as wide as sails, a drive-wheel like a mill wheel, and a chain like a ship's anchor chain lying off its wheel in loops on the floor, where it had fallen - or been helped to fall - at some point in the last hundred years.

"Perished leathers," said Forge-keeper Vay, who had come down with a crew of six and a handcart of tools and materials, and who conducted the inspection the

way she conducted everything, as an assessment. She pressed the bellows leather with one thumb, and it crumbled like old cake. "Stolen toggles. Half the rivets gone to sprite barrows. Chain off. Wheel sound. Frame sound. Heart - " she put her whole hand flat on the great oak side, and listened with her face, the way you listen to a sleeper - "heart sound. It wants mending, this one. It has wanted mending for a long time, in a loud voice, and we had stopped hearing it. That happens. Write that down, notebook."

Sera wrote it down.

The mending took two days, and it was the best kind of work there is: work too big for any one pair of hands, broken into jobs that fitted the hands available. The Forge-folk cut new leathers from the hides of the great blind cave-oxen that lived, placid and enormous, in the lower pastures, and cured them with fire-salt, which Pip identified - solemnly, by taste, spitting sparks - as the true salt, the seam his family had mined before the Forge stopped asking their names. Kael, with his archer's eye for tension, took charge of the drive-chain: every link inspected, three cracked links cut out and forge-welded by Vay's second smith, the whole chain reeved over the great wheel hand over hand with the

expedition and the crew hauling together to a song Seren provided for the purpose, a hauling song with a chorus that went up on the pull, which made the work, mysteriously, half the work.

Mira worked the leathers. It was sewing, but sewing the size of a house: waxed thread as thick as twine, needles like small spears, saddle-stitch, two needles passing through the same hole from opposite sides to meet in the dark of the leather - a stitch, Vay told her, that would hold if either thread broke, because it had been made by two hands agreeing. Mira thought about the shards, and roots and tides and winds agreeing, and sewed, and her seams held.

Tam and Pip did the rivets and the toggles, the small-parts work, in and out of the frame's hot crannies where only the small could go - and it was there, in a warm hollow at the bellows' heart, that Tam found what the sprites had been stockpiling for a century: the Bellows Hoard. Buttons. Bells, small ones. A spoon engraved with a stag. Three gold gulls. A key with a tide-mark. A hundred years of small bright lost things, gathered by small bright finders, kept - Pip explained, with dignity, from inside the hoard like a king in a treasury - as Wages Owed, in the sprite economy:

evidence, itemised, that work had been done and not counted.

Sera counted it. All of it, aloud, in the hall, with Vay writing the Forge's side of the ledger and Pip calling the items, and the counting took an hour and was, everyone present understood, not a delay in the work but the work itself, arriving at last at the part it had been waiting for.

On the second evening the chain was on, the leathers were on, the wheel was greased with cave-ox tallow and the whole great machine stood dressed and ready. Kharzul came down in person. He did not inspect. He put his hand flat on the oak the way Vay had, nodded to the crew, nodded to the children, and said: "Blow."

The wheel turned. The chain ran. The Great Bellows drew in a breath the size of a weather system - the lanterns leaned, the dust rose in spirals, Pip surfed the draught shrieking happily in sparks - and let it out, down the great clay throat of the Forge, into the hundred hearths above, and every hearth in the Upper Forge flared up together, gold and joyful, and a sound went through the mountain like a sleeper turning over toward morning.

One break mended. Below them, faint and far, something that had been holding its breath for a century adjusted, irritably, in the chimney shaft - and Kharzul heard it, and the children heard it, and nobody said anything at all, because some sounds are appointments.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Coal Sprites' Strike



Three hundred and eleven small bright things, in banks, like a parliament of embers.

Settling a strike, Sera wrote later in the notebook that was becoming, volume by volume, the true history of the expedition, is ninety per cent listening and ten per cent sandwiches. The sandwiches were forge-bread and smoked cheese. The listening took a whole evening, in the warmest hall of the Upper Forge, with the coal sprites of the Cindervault assembled in full - and full, for sprites, was a sight: three hundred and eleven small bright things, perched on every ledge and tool-handle and beam, glowing in banks like a parliament of embers, with Pip on the anvil as speaker, and Ash -

older, dimmer, steadier, with a crack like Pip's that had healed into a silver seam - beside him as clerk.

Seren translated. It was, he said afterward, the hardest interpreting of his life, not because the language was difficult but because he kept wanting to applaud.

The grievance, set out in order, was this. The sprites were the Forge's first people. They had been in the mountain before the Forge-folk, before the anvil, before the Star - they were, in the oldest sense, the mountain being awake in small places. When the Forge was founded they had agreed to work it: to carry fire where hands could not go, to tend the hot crannies, to keep the deep fires honest. The agreement, the Covenant of Coals, had three terms, and Pip recited them with the care of a lawyer who is also a bonfire.

One: fair asking. The Forge asks; it does not take. A sprite may refuse a task that would crack it, and the refusal stands.

Two: fair counting. Every task is entered, by name, in the Forge Ledger. Work that is not counted is not work; it is weather.

Three: names. The sprites are called by their names. All three hundred and eleven of them. A forge that cannot name its hands has no business using them.

"And when the Star fell," said Ash, through Seren, in sparks so slow and steady they were almost words already, "everything was emergency, for years, and emergency eats agreements the way fire eats paper, meaning no harm, meaning only to be warm. The asking stopped. The counting stopped. The names - " the whole bank of embers dimmed, all together, like a field under a cloud - "the Forge began to say 'the sprites', the way you say 'the rain'. So we stopped. Not in anger. A tool that is not picked up does not cut. We waited to be picked up properly."

There was a long silence, in which the bell Kharzul had made on the first day could be heard, faintly, from the row of bells by the anvil, though nobody had touched it.

Kharzul had stood at the back for the whole hearing, which for a man of his width took some arranging. Now he came forward, through the banks of watching embers, to the anvil, and he did a thing that no one in the hall - forge-folk, children, bard - had ever seen him do. He took his hammer off his shoulder and laid it

down on the floor, out of his own reach, the way you lay down a weapon before a negotiation or a title before a king.

"Read the ledger," he said to Sera. "The new one. From the bellows count."

And Sera read: the hoard, itemised; the bellows work, named, sprite by sprite, from Pip's list - and as she read, Keeper Vay, at the great desk by the hearth with a pen made from a chimney swift's feather, entered every name in the Forge Ledger, in ink made with fire-salt that would not fade for a thousand years, while Kharzul stood with his hammer on the floor and said each name after Sera, aloud, in his grate-settling voice, like a man learning a song he intended to sing for the rest of his life.

Three hundred and eleven names. It took until the deep of the night. The sandwiches were eaten. The bell by the anvil rang, very softly, entirely by itself, at the last name, which was Pip's - entered last, at his own insistence, as clerk's privilege.

"Terms," said Kharzul. "Asking. Counting. Names. Entered. Sealed with - " he looked at his empty hands, and then, with the ghost of what in another face would

have been a grin, he picked up not his hammer but the little bell, and rang the Covenant in: one note, clear as spring water. "Work with us again, small bright kin. The Forge has a chimney to clear, an anvil trial to fire, and -" his eyes went to Mira's pack - "a star to mend. We cannot do it at half breath. We never could. That was the whole lesson, and it took a hundred years and four children and a grievance to teach it to a mountain."

Pip looped the loop around the anvil, once, for joy, and landed on Kharzul's beard, where he sat glowing among the copper braids like a jewel the mountain had made for itself.

Two breaks mended. And in the chimney shaft, high above them, the third break heard the bell, and the breathing, and the names, and understood - in whatever way slag and spite understand things - that its appointment was coming up the shaft toward it, and it began, in the dark, to pull itself together.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Slag Golem



The mountain's cough, stuck - and objecting.

The chimney shaft was the Forge's throat, a mile-high flue of black rock rising from the Upper Forge through the heart of the mountain to a sky none of them would see again for days, and halfway up it, where the shaft narrowed at the place the old plans called the Collar, the slag had built itself a body.

Kharzul briefed them by the ember-map, weighted down on the anvil with tools. "It is not a creature," he said. "That is the first thing. Creatures can be reasoned with, fed, befriended - you four are the proof of that, walking. This is a blockage that has had a hundred

years of hot dark to learn the shape of its surroundings, and what it has learned is falling, and crushing, and holding. Slag, ash, quench-scale, roof-fall, and spite. It does not hate you. It is the mountain's cough, stuck."

"How do we clear it?" Kael asked.

"You go up the maintenance rungs with ropes and bars and the chain, and you break it up small enough to fall safely down the flume to the Slack, the way miners have always done." Kharzul's voice did not change at all, which was how they knew the next part mattered most. "It will object. Objects in the shaft fall. Some of them will be it, coming apart on purpose. Trust the rope. Trust each other. Trust the small bright kin in the crannies - they will light your way and warn you. And shard-bearers - " he looked at Mira's pack - "the Forge's custom says the trial-fire is not lit until the chimney draws. No shard work can be done at half breath. This is not my test. It is physics, wearing a custom's coat."

They went up at the hour the Forge called first bell, roped together in line - Kael first with his bow left below and a pry-bar in his belt instead, which he said felt like leaving a word out of a sentence; Mira second with the shards, whose light steadied as they climbed;

Tam third with the tool roll and Pip ranging ahead; Sera last with the chain on her shoulder and the notebook, by her own flat refusal to leave it, oil-wrapped in her inside pocket.

The sprites lit the way. That is the plain fact and Sera's written record says it in just those words: at every rung, in every cranny, small bright faces looked out, and the shaft glowed ahead of them like a stairway in a story, and names - names they now knew, and called, and were answered by, with sparks of unmistakable pleasure - echoed up and down the flue. Ash went with them as far as the Collar, riding the draught. Coal, smallest of all, took post at the halfway platform with a store of fire-salt twists to eat, as lookout.

They saw the blockage first as a ceiling that should not have been there: a black wedge jammed across the shaft, crusted, steaming faintly at its seams, with the mountain's held breath sighing around its edges in hot, bad-smelling threads. The air tasted of pennies. The lantern flame stood blue at its base.

"Bad air," Sera called, from below, in the brisk tone of a person reading a label. "Twenty steps down after, rule says - "

"It is the blockage holding the bad air against us," Kael called back. "It cannot drain past it. Working fast is the obeying, this time. Bars in. On my count - "



The Slag Golem: the blockage pulls itself together in the chimney shaft.

It objected, exactly as promised, and all at once. The wedge did not fall; it shrugged, and the shrug travelled, and the whole crust broke into a slow, grinding avalanche of slag - and in the middle of the avalanche, pulling itself together the way Pip had warned things in this mountain could, came the golem-shape of it, the blockage's biggest pieces gathering into a rough man-form twice Kael's height, with quench-scale fists and a head that was only a crack of inner fire.

What happened next took, by Coal's later accounting, four minutes, and by Sera's written account an entire chapter of her life. The golem swung, and the shaft rang like a bell, and Kael went sideways off the rungs onto the rope, which held, because Mira had taken the strain against a rung with her whole weight and the Shard of Roots was singing through her hands into the iron like the iron was a root going down. Tam, from his perch, did not throw tools - Tam threw light: the sun-glass, unwrapped in one motion, catching Pip's glow and Ash's glow and the golem's own fire-crack and focusing it, small and fierce and exact, on the wet seam where the golem's arm met its shoulder, the quench-seam, the place where hot slag is weak to sudden change. Sera hauled chain, hand over hand, as she had on the stair, looping the golem's ankle as it stepped for Kael - and the sprites, three hundred and eleven strong, in every cranny of the shaft, did the thing they had not done for a hundred years. They worked. They poured their small heats into the seams Tam's light found, seam after seam, name after name called up the shaft like a song with a chorus, until the golem-shape - not defeated, exactly, but unpicked, unbuilt, understood back into pieces - came apart with a sound like a hillside settling, and fell,

piece by safe piece, down the flume to the Slack, where it hissed itself out in black water and silence.

And the mountain breathed.

The draught hit them like a river going the right way at last: up, clean and hot and strong, flattening their hair, making the lanterns stand tall and yellow, carrying a hundred years of held breath out of the Forge's throat and up into a sky that - Pip reported later, having ridden the draught all the way for the joy of it - stood open and astonished above the peak.

Kael hung on the rope for a while, grinning, with his pry-bar still in his belt and both boots off the rungs. "Physics," he said, "wearing a custom's coat."

Three breaks mended. The Forge drew breath, full and free, for the first time in a century - and in the Upper Forge below them, every hearth stood up tall and gold, and Kharzul took the little bell down from its row and rang it once, for the chimney, and set about lighting the trial-fire with hands that - Keeper Vay would swear to it afterward, on the Ledger - were not entirely steady.

CHAPTER NINE

The Trial of Embers



You will each make a thing. Only you can make it.

The trial-fire burned in the star-shaped anvil's heart, which was a hollow at the anvil's centre that no one had explained and everyone understood: you put the iron in the star, and the star put something in the iron. Kharzul set the terms at dawn, with the whole Forge assembled - forge-folk in their aprons, sprites in their banks, Keeper Vay at the Ledger, Seren with his lute silent for once and his hat in his hands - and the terms were, as promised, simple enough to be terrifying.

"Each of you will make a thing," Kharzul said. "Only you can make it. You do not get to choose it in your heads.

You will take iron - " he laid out four billets of star-metal, grey and faintly shining, the last, Sera understood and wrote down with a hand that shook only a little, of the metal that had fallen with the Star - "and you will work, and the thing will arrive through your hands the way weather arrives, if you do not lie to the iron. Lies ring false. We will all hear it. The whole Forge will hear it. Begin when the fire is in you. There is no clock. There is only the quench, when you are done."

Kael went first, because Kael always went first when there was a hard edge to walk up to. He worked for an hour without speaking, forge-folk quiet around him, and made - not an arrowhead. He had expected an arrowhead; his hands had expected an arrowhead; the iron, apparently, had other information. What came off the anvil at the quench, hissing in the slack-water and rising out of the steam in Vay's tongs, was a key. A small, plain, working key, with a bow shaped - nobody had seen him shape it; the steam had been in the way; he swore afterward he had been making an arrowhead the whole time - exactly like the bow of the star-bowed silver key from the first book, the key that had opened the wood, the Archive, everything.

"A key that has not found its door yet," Kharzul said, and set it on the clean stone. "Archer. You make openings. The Forge notes it."

Mira wept while she worked, once, quietly, without stopping, at about the halfway point, and would not say why until the quench. She made a cup. It was not a fine cup - the rim stood a fraction uneven, the way her rim in the bellows leather had threatened to and hadn't - but when Vay filled it at the slack-trough it held, completely, and the water in it went still and then, in the stillness, shone with a light that was not the hearths: three notes of colour, root-green, tide-blue, wind-silver, turning slowly in the water like fish in a pool.

"For carrying what must not be spilled," Kharzul said, very gently. "Keeper. The Forge notes it."

Tam made a bell. Of course Tam made a bell; the Forge had been building toward Tam's bell, in a row of patient notes by the anvil, for a hundred years, and everyone saw it at once, and Pip - who had ridden the whole trial on the anvil's horn, glowing fit to burst - said something in sparks that Seren refused to translate because, he said, some things should stay between a sprite and a bell. It was not a big bell. Its note, when Kharzul lifted it

and Tam struck it himself with one finger, the way he had been shown, was the fourth note. The missing note. The note the shards' chord had been leaning toward since Ashford, since the Archive, since the Festival meadow in the very first book when a star fell and four children heard a chord with a hole in it and set out, without deciding to, to mend a sky.

The Forge heard it. The hearths heard it. Somewhere under the mountain, in the dark below the lowest stair, a sleeper turned toward the sound the way a plant turns, and the turning shook a little dust off the shut ways, and Sera, waiting her turn with her billet in her hands, felt the shake through the clean stone and understood her own making before her hands did.



The Trial of Embers: Sera's making, drawn out fine and finer in star-metal.

Sera made a pen. It should not have been possible in iron, at a forge, in an hour - forge-folk would be arguing about the technique for a century - but the star-metal went where her certainty pushed it, drawing out fine and finer, a nib, a shaft, a tiny star cut in the grip that she did not remember cutting. It wrote in fire-salt ink, which Vay brought without being asked. It wrote, at Sera's first testing stroke on the Ledger's practice slate, in her own handwriting but steadier: WE WERE HERE. WE DID THE WORK. WE KNOW THE NAMES.

"The record," said Kharzul, into the complete silence of the Upper Forge. "The Forge notes it - " and he stopped, and picked up the four makings, key and cup and bell and pen, and laid them in the four points of the star-hollow in the anvil, and stood back with his hammer down and his head bowed, a keeper at last in the presence of the thing kept.

"Ring true," he said. "All four. Ring - " and the trial-fire, in the heart of the star-shaped anvil, stood straight up like a flag in a sudden wind, and changed colour, through gold, through white, to a clear and singing ember-red that lit every face in the cavern like a sunrise coming up indoors.

"Now," said Kharzul, "we may talk about the shard."

CHAPTER TEN

The Shard of Embers



Four shards. The whole set. The chord, complete at last.

The Shard of Embers was not in a vault, or a book, or a nest, or any of the places a story teaches you to expect a treasure. It was in the fire. It had been in the fire - the central fire, the first fire, under the star-shaped anvil - since the night the Star fell, keeping the Forge alight through a hundred years of half-breath and emergency, and the trial-fire's change of colour had been, Kharzul explained, the shard recognising its company.

"You do not take it out," he said. "A shard that has worked for a century is not a stone to be pocketed. You ask it. As the sprites were asked. As I should have asked

- " and the old smith, in front of his whole Forge, laid his hammer down for the second time in a week, which the oldest forge-folk said later was the moment they understood the age had turned.

So they asked it. All of them: the four children with their makings in their hands, Seren with the song at last unsheathed and his fingers on the strings, Kharzul with the Ledger open at the new pages, Keeper Vay with the crew, Pip with three hundred and eleven sprites banked in silence, glowing like a held breath.

Mira spoke for the expedition, because the pack had been hers to carry all the way from Emberwood, through water and sky and glass and fire, and her voice did not shake, though her hands did, around the uneven honest cup.

"Shard of Embers," she said, "we have come a long way to ask you something, not to take something. The Star is broken. Roots held. Tides kept. Winds remembered. But the mending cannot be done with three, and it cannot be done without your leave, because mending that is taken is just breaking in a better coat. Will you come with us - not as a thing we won, though the Forge will

tell you we did the work - will you come with us as a colleague, and be mended, and mend?"

The fire stood still. The cavern stood still. Seren's fingers found, very softly, the first note - and Tam's bell, unheld, unstuck, on its point of the anvil's star, answered it; and Sera's pen wrote nothing and was content; and Kael's key turned, a fraction, all by itself, toward a door no one could see yet; and Mira's cup, empty on the clean stone, filled slowly with a light the colour of a hearth in winter, tide-blue and root-green and wind-silver and at last, rising through them all like sap, like blood, like dawn - ember-red.

The Shard of Embers rose out of the first fire the way the Shard of Tides had risen out of the Book of Tides: slowly, turning, lit from inside, trailing sparks that did not burn. It was the largest of the four, rough-faceted, warm as a living thing, and it came to Mira's hands and settled beside its siblings with a chord - the chord, complete at last, four notes, Roots, Tides, Winds, Embers, in a harmony so whole that the row of Kharzul's bells by the anvil rang, each in turn, unrolling the scale a century of patience had built, and the sprites lit all together like a field at noon, and the Forge, at full breath, with its chimney singing and its bellows

breathing and its ledger kept and its names known, roared its hearths up in salute.

Four shards. The whole set. The Star, in pieces, in a twelve-year-old's hands.

It was Sera who said it first, because Sera kept the accounts, and this was the largest entry of all: "Inventory. Four shards, complete. Status: singing. Value: - " and her voice broke, and she wrote it anyway, in the firmest hand she had, with the iron pen that wrote it steadily for her: "Value: everything. Not for sale. To be carried home."

Below the Forge, below the shut ways, below the lowest stair where the ember-map's brown ink drew its torn and mended star, the sleeper finished turning toward the sound.

Vaelgorath the Hollow Star Dragon opened his eyes, for the first time in a hundred years, all the way - and the mountain, from its glass desert to its astonished sky, felt him wake, and held its breath, and the four notes in Mira's pack sang on, unafraid, like a doorbell in a house where someone has been waiting a very long time to be visited.

"Ah," said Seren, quietly, into the chord, with his hat off and his lute up and his whole life's unfinished song suddenly standing in front of him with its last verse showing. "There he is. Well, my friends. Debts first. Songs second. Dragons - " the chord rang on, brave as a bell - "dragons, it turns out, third. Eat something. It is a long way down, and for once in this whole expedition, we are expected."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Emberfall Market



A Mending Market: three days, no stall fees, everything for the road down.

They did not go straight down to the dragon. Expeditions that go straight anywhere arrive as anecdotes, Seren said, and besides, there were practical matters, and practical matters in this story had a way of turning out to be the main matters wearing aprons.

Practical matter the first: word had gone up the stair ahead of them, through Ashford, through Millbrook, west to the lake and up to the Isles - the way word does in Vaelthorne, by bell and bird and Ferryman - that the four shards were together and the last road was open. And the friends the expedition had made were coming.

Not to a war council, because nobody in this story was foolish enough to call it war. To a market, because Ashford, practical to its copper roofs, had declared one: a Mending Market, three days, no stall fees, everything for the road down.

Practical matter the second: the expedition had stores to lay in for the deepest descent anyone had attempted in a century, and things gathered on the road that would be more use converted into those stores than carried as treasure.

Sera traded, with the ember-map's spare copy (she had made two; Sera always made two) going to the map-seller for the price of his whole stock of deep-cave candles and his blessing, which in Ashford was a tradeable commodity. Sold: the sun-glass, at last - reluctantly, itemised fondly - to the Glass Desert's warden, a new post the town had founded that week, who intended to mount it at the thin place as a warning beacon and pay for it in instalments of safety, beginning with four pairs of glass-walking overshoes the expedition did not need and redirected, by Sera's arrangement, to the warden's apprentices. Sold: slag-glass flowers, made by Pip's cousins from golem pieces - the Forge's first sprite-made goods in a century, entered

in the Ledger by name - which the Ashford stalls sold out of by noon on the first day at prices that made Keeper Vay raise one eyebrow and enter the proceeds in a new column headed Sprites' Own.

Bought: deep-cave candles that burned without air-hunger. Bought: rope, three hundred feet, forge-spun. Bought: provisions for a week for five, plus sprite twists, plus guest-right gifts in the Forge manner - bread, salt, and a song, in that order - because you do not descend to the oldest living thing in the world, Kharzul said, empty-handed, whatever your errand. Whatever your errand. Guest-right is older than the Star.

And given, which Sera entered in a column of its own: forge boots reshod, free. The compass cleaned and its needle re-trued on the star-anvil, free, and blessed by Kharzul personally, who held it a moment longer than the work required and said, "South is easy. It is the rest of the directions that wander. This one knows the way home now. I put it in myself." Given: a coat for Bramble, sent up by cloud-sheep post via the Isles, woven by Ashford grandmothers who had heard about a treant in the party - "In the party," Bramble would say later, deeply moved, wearing it in a photograph that exists only in this sentence and in Sera's heart - with pockets.

On the third evening, the Mending Market held its closing fair in the square under the Gate, with every stall lit and the mountain breathing slow and golden through the chimney behind them, and the visitors began to arrive in earnest. Pearl came first, in a bottle of lake water carried by Ferryman Corin in person, who set her down in the fountain with the air of a man delivering royalty and stayed to eat three dinners. The Zephyr Hound arrived as weather usually arrives, all at once and from the east, with a lost travelling-clock in its mouth that it laid at Sera's feet like an apology for being early. Skye the griffon came down out of a clean sky with a Cloud Shepherd riding, absurdly, at ease behind her ears, and Anselm's whistle blew itself in his pocket at the sight of his flock arriving as escort - forty cloud-sheep, drifting over Ashford like a second, woollier dusk.

They were not all there yet. Some were still on the road, and one was coming up out of the lake by a way that had not been open for a century, and one - the smallest, the newest-ringed, the bravest - was already marching south through Emberwood at the pace of roots, which is slow, and unstoppable, and exactly on time.

"Muster," Sera wrote, and closed the notebook on the list, and went to stand with her friends at the fountain's edge, where Pearl, in her bottle, in the fountain, in the fair-light, was holding court like a small white queen.

"Tomorrow," Mira said, watching the sky over the Isles fill up with friends, "we go down and introduce ourselves properly."

"Tomorrow," said Seren, "I pay a song-debt with all the interest in the world standing behind me in a fair." And south and below and underneath them all, patient as a held chord, the dragon waited, and listened, and - for the first time in a hundred years, though only the sprites, who feel everything, noticed - hummed, very faintly, along.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Allies Return



They came, in the end, by every road the trilogy had built.

They came, in the end, by every road the trilogy had built.

Bramble came up the Town Stair at dawn on the fourth day, wearing the coat, with Hush the owl on his shoulder and Antor the great stag walking beside him in the stately unhurried way of a king visiting another king's country. The Heart Tree of Emberwood had sent, by Bramble's branches, a living cutting in a pot of vale earth, which he carried the way other people carry infants, and which had put out one new leaf for every land they had healed - three leaves, and a bud.

Nerissa the Tide Serpent came up through the Slack. The channel from the lake to the Forge, shut since the Star fell, had opened in the night - the Forge-folk found the slack-water running clear and cold and smelling of rain, with a current running the wrong way, uphill, the way tides do when something large and courteous is travelling by water. She raised her great blue head out of the channel in the landing, with the Archive's water still beading on her scales and a listening shell, the listening shell, balanced on her forehead like a jewel, and looked around the Forge with the deep, unstartled gaze of a keeper visiting a fellow keeper's stacks. "I have brought the lake's regards," she said, through the shell, which gave her voice back exactly, only larger, "and its army, which is also its regards, in a louder arrangement."

Her army was rain. She had called it, slowly, over three days, out of the lake's whole watershed, and it stood above the mountain in a sky the colour of deep water, waiting for instructions, while the Storm Roc's mother circled it in great patient rings, keeping the cloud-sheep inside the weather like sheepdogs in a sky that had become a field.

Aurelith herself did not come down. A Guardian does not leave her peak. But she sent her voice, in a bell the size of a house that Skye and the Roc between them carried slung in the bell-cord net the expedition had sold and bought back twice over the trilogy, and the bell, hung in the Forge-Gate by Vay's crew, spoke - when the wind from the peak came down the stair at noon - with Aurelith's authority: the Winds' witness, present by proxy, that the mending, when it came, would be seen from the sky and answered.

Pearl took charge of the catalogue of the muster, because Pearl took charge of catalogues the way weather takes charge of a valley. The list, as she dictated it to Sera in the fountain-bottle's temporary successor (a glass tank, forge-made, with reading lamps) ran for four pages and included: persons, keepers, sprites (by name, all three hundred and eleven, at Pip's flat insistence), one stag, one serpent (plus weather), one griffon, one roc (by bell), one hound (plus lost property, miscellaneous), one cat (in charge), one owl, one treant, one shepherd (plus forty sheep, aerial), the Forge entire, the town of Ashford entire, Ferryman Corin (plus boat, beached, ornamental), the Sunken Librarian Prime (by letter, delivered by Nerissa, sealed with tide-wax, to be

read aloud at the threshold), and four children, one bard, and four shards, complete.

"Reinforcements," Kael said, looking at the list, and then corrected himself, because the trilogy had taught him its vocabulary properly: "No. Friends. It's different. Reinforcements come because they're sent. This lot - "

"This lot came because they were asked, or because they heard, or because they owed a song, or because nobody was going to keep them away with a gate," said Mira. "Including - " she looked at the tank - "a cat in a bottle."

"I am the expedition's memory," Pearl said, with dignity, through the glass. "Every army needs one. Yours, children, is also its conscience, its catalogue, and its most experienced traveller. I have been flooded for a hundred years. Nothing in the deep can surprise me. That is what I am for."

Seren, at the end of the muster, did the thing bards are for. He stood on the fountain's rim with the tank at his feet and the Gate behind him and the whole impossible company spread across Ashford's square, and he sang the debt-song - the song he had owed the Forge for a lifetime, with interest. It was not the unfinished song. It

was an old one, a forge-song, about a smith who made a bell for a town that had not been built yet, and it had a chorus that the Forge-folk knew, and then Ashford knew, and then - voice by voice, bell by bell, sheep by improbable sheep - the whole square knew, and sang it back at the mountain, which answered, from its chimney and its bellows and its hundred hearths, in harmony.

Underneath the harmony, far below, the listener in the deep turned his great head, and laid it down again, and sighed out a breath that came up the shut ways warm and smelling, unmistakably, of the sea and of green things.

"Sea," said Nerissa, tasting it, coiled in the Slack. "And leaf-mould. He is dreaming our countries back at us."

"He's ready," Mira said. She had the pack open; the four shards were singing the complete chord, steady as a heartbeat, and for the first time since the first book it did not sound like a question. It sounded like an introduction, being practised. "We're ready. All of us. Tomorrow at first bell - down the shut ways, by the ember-map, with the whole company at our backs. To say hello."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Climb to the Hollow Star



The shut ways opened like a first page being turned.

The shut ways opened the way the ember-map had promised: at the place where the map's ink had been torn and mended, which in the mountain itself was a door at the back of the Slack, below the lowest landing, behind a fall of black water that Nerissa parted by the simple method of being in it. The door had a keyhole. The keyhole had, for a hundred years, had no key.

Kael's key - the trial key, the one he had made by accident while trying to make an arrowhead, the opening he carried in his hands - fitted it the way a word fits the sentence it was always meant for.

He turned it. The mountain considered. Then, with a sound like the first page of a book being turned by a careful reader, the shut ways opened, and a stair went down into warm dark, lit - as they descended - by the welcoming, banked glow of the deep sprites, the ones who had stayed below when the upper Forge closed the ways, and who had kept the lower fires, and the lower names, and one other thing, faithfully, in the dark, for a hundred years.

The climb down was the strangest journey of the trilogy, and the quietest. The company that went down was small by necessity: the four children, Seren, Kharzul himself - who had not been below the Slack since he was an apprentice, and who walked the stair with his hammer down and his hand trailing the wall like a man in his childhood home in the dark - and Pip, and Ash, riding the draught. The rest of the muster held the mountain above: the Forge at full breath, the rain on standby, the bells manned, Pearl in her tank at the threshold with the Librarian Prime's letter open before her like a general with a map. That, too, was a kind of going with them. Sera's record is explicit about it: NO ONE WENT DOWN ALONE. THE WHOLE WORLD HELD THE ROPE.

The lower ways were the Forge's first working, older than the anvil, and they were beautiful the way a root system is beautiful, the way the Archive stacks were beautiful: a working place that had grown into a wonder by being used with love for centuries. Crystal grew in the walls - star-metal's poor bright cousins - and threw the shard-light back in constellations. The deep sprites came out of their crannies in twos and threes to watch the chord go past, and their names, called softly by Kharzul from the old Ledger he carried in his head, came back with sparks that were - Sera wrote it down, and underlined it - unmistakably tears, of the kind fire cries.

Halfway down, the stair passed the Star Anvil Deep, where the Star itself had been received the night it fell: a crater of black glass in the mountain's heart, ringed with the oldest tools in the world, and in its centre the scorch-mark, star-shaped, five-pointed, where the falling light had struck and broken. The four shards in Mira's pack leaned toward the mark like compass needles. The compass in Sera's pocket leaned too, its re-trued needle swinging away from south at last, and pointing, steadily, down.

"He caught it," Kharzul said, in the crater's hush. It was the first time any of them had heard the story from a person who had been told it by a person who was there. "That is what the world has forgotten, up in the light. The Star did not fall on Vaelgorath. Vaelgorath caught the Star, when it fell out of the sky, burning, a thousand years and more ago, and the catching broke it, and the breaking broke - " the old smith stood with his hammer down in the scorch-mark's light - "him. Its keeper. Its guardian. The Hollow is not a wound he gives. It is the wound he got, doing his duty, alone, in the dark, for a world that then shut the ways and forgot to come back and ask after him. Remember it, shard-bearers, when he roars. Roaring is what the pain sounds like at that size. It is not the same as evil. It is barely even the same as anger."

The stair below the crater was warm. Then it was warm the way a held hand is warm. Then the dark ahead of them began, very slowly, to be not only dark, but shaped - a vastness in it, a hill that breathed, a crest of spines against the crystal constellations, one enormous eye, gold and ancient and unspeakably tired, opening at the sound of the chord coming home.

Vaelgorath, the Hollow Star Dragon, the last and greatest keeper of Vaelthorne, raised his head from the floor of the deepest cavern in the world, and looked at four children and a bard and a smith and a chord of mended light, and spoke, in a voice that the mountain amplified and the sprites translated and Sera - whose hand did not shake, whose iron pen wrote steadily, whose whole trilogy of notebooks had been training for this one transcription - wrote down word for word.

"WHO," said Vaelgorath, "HAS COME INTO MY DARK, SINGING MY STAR?"

And Mira stepped forward, ahead of the archer, ahead of the bard, ahead of the smith, with the pack open and the four shards singing and her chin up and her voice clear, and answered him the way the whole trilogy had been teaching her to answer everything.

"Your friends," she said. "A thousand years late. We're sorry. We've brought it home."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Vaelgorath: The Hollow Roar



Phase One. Pain at that size fits in weather.

It would be pleasant to report that the dragon, having been spoken to kindly, immediately wept, apologised, and was mended before tea. Dragons of a thousand years do not work like that, and neither, if we are honest, does pain. What happened in the deepest cavern took three movements, the way Seren would later set it, and the first movement was the Roar.

Pain at Vaelgorath's size does not fit in words. It fits in weather. He rose - the cavern, which was the size of a drowned cathedral, turned out to have been mostly dragon, folded - and the Hollow in his chest showed as

he rose: a star-shaped absence between his ribs, neither wound nor door, a place where light should have been and wasn't, rimed with old frost that no forge-fire had ever touched, because no fire had been allowed close enough for a thousand years. And he roared, and the roar was the Hollow speaking, and it said, in the language under language: I WAS LEFT. I CAUGHT THE SKY AND I WAS LEFT IN THE DARK WITH THE PIECES, AND NO ONE CAME, AND NO ONE CAME, AND NO ONE CAME.



The Hollow Roar: weather for weather, note for note, friend for grievance.

The company held the way the muster had promised: together, and by their trades. Kharzul set his feet the way a smith sets for a long quench and took the roar on his apron and his beard and his two hundred years,

unmoving, a wall the children could stand behind until they found their own feet. Ash and Pip and the deep sprites lit, all of them, at once - three hundred small suns in the cavern's crannies - because darkness was the roar's element and they declined, as a people, to provide it. Seren played. That was his whole part in the first movement and it was not a small part: he played the chord, on the lute, under the roar, finding the four notes again and again the way you find a path in a storm, by feel, and gave the children the beat to breathe to.

Kael shot twice. Not at the dragon - never, in the whole finale, at the dragon. The ash-crows of the Hollow, the old servants, the thought-forms that a thousand years of unwitnessed pain had condensed out of cinder and grievance, came off the cavern's ceiling in a shrieking spiral when the roar shook them loose, and those could be fought, and were: Kael's star-metal arrowhead from the first book, on his last good shaft, took the lead crow through the wing-joint of shadow and it burst like a sack of soot; Mira's cup, raised, caught the roar's edge in its impossible stillness and threw the sound aside; Skye's bell - Aurelith's bell, up at the Gate, three miles of rock above them - spoke down the chimney at the exact

moment it was needed, because the muster was listening, and the note came down the flue like a rope of sound and the crows faltered.

And the rain came. Nerissa's rain, released from its three-day patience, finding the mountain's every crack, running down the chimney the sprites had cleared, arriving in the cavern as a fall of clean lake-water out of the dark above - Tides, present in person by proxy - and where the rain struck the Hollow's frost-rim it hissed, and steamed, and the frost, for the first time in a millennium, retreated by the width of a thumb.

Vaelgorath stopped roaring the way a storm stops: not all at once, and not because it had been defeated. Because it had been answered. Weather for weather, note for note, friend for grievance. He stood in his cavern in the rain of his own mountain, dripping, steaming, enormous, with his Hollow smoking gently where the frost had given ground - and he looked down at the children with an expression that, at that scale, in that face, took Sera a page of notebook to describe and which reduces, in the end, to one word.

Astonishment.

"YOU CAME BACK," he said, and the mountain repeated it softly, all the way up, flue and stair and Forge and Gate, so that Pearl in her tank heard it and closed her eyes like a cat in sun. "THEY - SENT CHILDREN."

"No one sent us," said Mira. The rain was running off her hair. The shards were singing through it like bells in a harbour. "We read the story wrong for a hundred years, all of us, up in the light - we thought you were the end of it. The monster at the bottom. You're not the end of the story, Vaelgorath. You're the beginning of it that got hurt. And we've come about the pieces - " she opened the pack wide, so the chord stood in the wet air between them, four-coloured, whole, patient - "but that part is yours to say. We learned about asking. Ask, or tell, or - take your time. We've brought provisions."

The dragon regarded the provisions. The dragon regarded the children, the smith with his hammer still down, the bard with his lute dripping, the sprites like a constellation that had come indoors. And Vaelgorath, the Hollow Star Dragon, lowered himself, joint by joint, mountain by mountain, until his great head rested on the cavern floor at the children's height, and the Hollow in his chest was level with their eyes, frost-rimed, star-shaped, aching in plain sight at last - and the second

movement, the Starless Night, began the way night always begins in deep places: from inside.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Vaelgorath: The Starless Night



Phase Two. Not to fight the shadows. To stay.

The Starless Night was not an attack. Sera's account is very careful about this, because she knew that readers in the light would want a battle, with winners, and she had been there, and there wasn't one. What Vaelgorath did, with his head on the cavern floor and his Hollow level with their eyes, was show them.

Pain shares itself when it finally can; that is its whole economy. The Hollow opened - not physically; the cavern did not change - but the children found themselves, hand in hand without remembering joining hands, standing in the dragon's memory the way they

had stood in the slack-water's light, and the memory was a night a thousand years old, and it was the last night of the unbroken world.

They saw the Star fall. It did not fall the way the Festival celebrated it, gold and lovely, a show for a meadow. It fell screaming, out of a torn sky, with the dark coming through the tear behind it like water into a boat - the original dark, the starless kind, the Hollow's true name. And they saw Vaelgorath young, and whole, and terrible in the proper sense, rising from this same cavern on wings that filled the tear's whole width, and catching the falling Star against his chest, and holding the sky shut with his own body while the Star broke - saving everything, costing him the place where his own light lived, in one endless minute that the memory made them stand in for exactly as long as it had lasted. It lasted a long time. That was the point of it. Alone lasts a long time.



The Starless Night: they did not fight the shadows. They stayed.

Then the memory did what a thousand years of unwitnessed memory does. It looped. It went starless. The sky stayed torn, the dark kept arriving, and shadow-things with hollow eyes - the ash-crows grown great, the grievances with claws - circled the little ring of shard-light where the children stood holding hands in a dragon's grief, and the test of the second movement presented itself, plainly, in Sera's transcription: not to fight the shadows. To stay. To witness the whole loop without looking away, without fixing, without flinching into usefulness - to be, for the first time in the dragon's thousand years, an audience for the pain instead of another absence.

It was the hardest thing the expedition ever did, and they had sewn a bellows, unpicked a golem, and answered a Librarian. Staying is harder than doing; the trilogy had been building to that sentence the whole way down.

They stayed. Kael kept his empty hands open and visible, archer's hands, weaponless on purpose. Mira let the shards sing quietly and did not raise them like a shield. Tam - who could not bear a silence or a sorrow anywhere near him without trying to mend it with his whole heart - stood on his own impulses like a lid on a pot and simply glowed with unshed helpfulness, which Pip, riding it out on his shoulder with her own small griefs, translated later as the bravest sentence in the book: HE DIDN'T FIX. HE STAYED. IT FIXED MORE. And Sera wrote. She wrote the whole loop down, in the dark, by shard-light, in the dragon's memory, in her steadiest hand - because a record, Pearl had taught her, is a way of staying forever - and when the loop came round for the second time, the shadow-things were smaller. When it came round the third time, the tear in the memory's sky had edges that could be seen. Witnessed pain takes up less room. That is not a metaphor. In the cavern, in the world, it was physics, wearing mourning's coat.

The loop ended the way night ends: not with a triumph, but with a grey lessening. The children came back to themselves on the cavern floor with their hands joined and their cheeks wet, and Vaelgorath's eye, level with theirs, was wet also, at a scale that made each tear a small, hot, shining lake in which the shard-light doubled itself.

"I HAVE SHOWN MORTALS THIS BEFORE," said the dragon, very quietly, for him - the mountain only trembled slightly - "IN THE FIRST YEARS. THEY RAN. THEY SENT SOLDIERS, AFTER. THE SOLDIERS RAN BETTER. THEN THE WAYS WERE SHUT, TO KEEP ME - " the vast voice found the word the way a tongue finds a broken tooth - "SAFE. THE WORLD HAS A KIND FACE, CHILDREN, WHEN IT LOCKS A DOOR."

"No more doors," said Kharzul, from the dark behind them, in his grate voice, with a smith's lifetime of the Forge's share of the guilt standing in it squarely. "Keeper. Brother. The Forge kept half the shutting, and called it custom, and I have come down in person to unkeep it. The Ledger is open. The names are in it. Yours is the first name in the first book, Vaelgorath, Guardian of the Star. It always was. We stopped reading it aloud. That is the whole crime, stated plainly, and we

are here to - " the old smith's voice, for the first and only time in the trilogy, broke - "to read it aloud again. If you will have us."

The dragon's eye closed. The cavern held itself still. The four shards sang, softly, like something in another room, being practised by a friend.

"THE THIRD THING," said Vaelgorath at last, "IS THE HARDEST. ANYONE CAN ROAR. I HAVE NOW BEEN WITNESSED, AND IT IS - " the frost on the Hollow's rim cracked, audibly, in the quiet, a sound like ice on a lake in spring - "WORSE AND BETTER. THE THIRD THING IS THAT MY STAR IS IN PIECES IN A CHILD'S PACK, AND PIECES CAN BE MENDED ONLY BY BEING - GIVEN UP. BY ALL OF US. YOU MUST GIVE UP YOUR TROPHY. I MUST GIVE UP MY GRIEVANCE. AND NEITHER OF US - " the great eye opened, gold, direct, unflinching, a keeper's eye at last looking at fellow keepers - "NEITHER OF US KNOWS WHETHER THE MENDING WILL HOLD. THAT IS THE TRIAL THEY NEVER SET YOU, SHARD-BEARERS. NOT FIRE. NOT WIND. TRUST, WITHOUT A GUARANTEE."

"Yes," said Mira, simply, into the enormous quiet. "We know. We brought the pieces anyway. That's what trust

is. Shall we?"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Truth of the Hollow Star



Bread, salt, and a song, in that order - at the bottom of the world.

Before the mending, at the dragon's request - and it was a request, phrased as one, with the stiff courtesy of a being relearning the forms after a thousand years of having no one to be courteous to - there was tea.

There was not, strictly, tea. There were the guest-right gifts, laid out on the cleanest flagstone in the deepest cavern in the world: bread, salt, and a song, in that order, as the Forge's custom required. The bread was Ashford twice-baked, warmed on a sprite-heated stone until it smelled like every hearth in the trilogy at once. The salt was fire-salt, Pip's family's seam, presented by

Pip in person with a small formal bow that scattered sparks across the stone like a signature. And the song - Seren understood, Kharzul understood, the children understood as it began - was not the debt-song. The debt was paid. This was the unfinished song, the one with the hole in its chord, and Seren stood up in the dragon's cavern with his lute and his hat off and sang it from the beginning, for the first time in his life, in the place it had always been about.

It was the Star's song. Of course it was; bards know things before they know them, that is the entire profession. It told the catching, and the breaking, and the locking, and the long dark, without villains - the song was very clear about the absence of villains, which made it, the children realised, the first true history of their world any of them had ever heard - and it came at last to the final verse, the one Seren had never been able to write, the one that had stopped every attempt for twenty years.

He stopped there too. In the cavern, in front of everyone. The chord hung, unfinished, exactly as it had hung over three books.

Tam's bell rang. Once, by itself, on its point of rest among the makings the children had laid by the gifts - the key, the cup, the pen, and the bell, the four trial-makings, which had come down with the expedition the way all true tools do, because no one could imagine leaving them. And the bell's note, the fourth note, the missing note, was the verse. Seren laughed - startled, delighted, twenty years of not-knowing ending in his face like weather clearing - and sang the last verse to the tune of Tam's bell, and the words of it, as Sera transcribed them with her iron pen in fire-salt ink that would not fade for a thousand years, were these: that what is caught must be held, that what is broken must be witnessed, that what is mended is not what was, and does not need to be, and is whole anyway.

Vaelgorath listened with his whole mountain. When the song ended, the cavern was silent for a long time, and the dragon spoke at last in a voice with something new in it - not softness; at his scale softness would still flatten a house - but humour, dry as ash, ancient as the tools in the crater above.

"THE BARD OWED THE FORGE A SONG," he said. "NO ONE TOLD ME THE INTEREST WOULD BE COMPOUND." His eye moved, keeper to keeper, to Kharzul. "AND THE

FORGE OWES ME A THOUSAND YEARS OF NAMES, SMITH."

"Entered," said Kharzul, "and being read aloud. Beginning tonight, at first bell, and every night the Forge burns. Your name first. Then the sprites'. The Ledger has a new keeper's rule. Nothing is kept in this mountain again that is not named."

"AND THE WORLD ABOVE OWES ME - " the dragon paused, and the pause was different from the old pauses, the held breaths; this one was a being choosing, carefully, in a new direction - "NOTHING. LET THE RECORD SHOW IT. NOTHING IS OWED BY CHILDREN. THEY CAME. THE OWING IS DONE." The great head turned, and the Hollow, frost-rimmed, star-shaped, faced the four shards where they sang in Mira's open pack like a choir that has finally been joined by its hall. "WHAT I OWE - IS TO LET GO OF THE PIECES BEING MINE. A GUARDIAN WHO CANNOT LET THE THING HE GUARDS BE HEALED IS ONLY A LOCK WITH SCALES. I HAVE BEEN A LOCK FOR A THOUSAND YEARS. CHILDREN. SMITH. BARD. SPRITES, SMALL BRIGHT KIN OF MY FIRST DARK - I AM TIRED OF BEING A LOCK. MAKE ME A DOOR AGAIN."

Mira put her hand into the pack, and took out the shards one by one, and laid them on the gift-stone - Roots, green as Emberwood in spring; Tides, blue as the Archive at noon; Winds, silver as a bell in clean air; Embers, red as a hearth in winter - and the four trial-makings with them, key and cup and bell and pen, and stepped back, empty-handed, with her friends, into the lamplight.

"Yours," she said, "to give up. Ours, to give up. Everybody's hands empty. That's the arrangement."

"THEN ATTEND," said Vaelgorath, the Hollow Star Dragon, Guardian of the Star, first name in the first book, "AND I WILL SHOW YOU THE THIRD MOVEMENT."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Vaelgorath: The Mending



Phase Three. Everybody's hands empty. That was the arrangement.

The Mending was not quiet. Later, up in the light, people would ask the children whether it had been beautiful, and they would say yes, and whether it had been frightening, and they would say yes to that too, with more emphasis, because beauty at full scale is a kind of weather, and the Mending was the biggest weather Vaelthorne had made in a thousand years.

It began with the giving up, which had to be done properly, aloud, each in turn, the way the Covenant had been read, the way the names had been read: out loud, in company, so it counted.

The children gave up the shards first. Not the carrying - the having. "Ours to win, ours to keep, ours to be the heroes of," Sera said, for the record, steadily, "given up. They were never a trophy. It just took three books to prove we knew it." Kael gave up the key - "the door it opens isn't mine" - and set it with the makings. Tam gave up the bell, after one moment of visible internal negotiation that Pip witnessed and would never betray, and the bell, given up, rang clearer than it ever had held on to. Mira gave up the cup, and the pack, and the carrying itself, and stood with her shoulders light for the first time since the Emberwood, and found - she told Sera later, on the road home, as the single strangest fact of the whole expedition - that she did not fall over.

Kharzul gave up the Forge's claim: a century of keeping, entered and closed in the Ledger, in Vay's hand, by lamplight relayed up the stair, as the entry was made in the world above at the same hour. Seren gave up the song - "it isn't mine, it never was, I was only its postman" - and the sprites, at Pip's signal, gave up the grievance, formally, in a shower of sparks that Ash entered in the deep ledger they had kept, down there in the dark, in their own script of scorches, for a hundred

years. Their ledger, too, balanced. Their ledger, too, closed.



The Mending: four lights, four notes, and nobody holding on.

And Vaelgorath gave up the Hollow.

That was the action. That was the fight scene, though no weapon was in any hand: a dragon the size of a cathedral opening the star-shaped absence in his own chest - letting the frost go, letting the dark be only dark and not a treasury, letting the wound be a wound and therefore, at last, a place that could close. The cavern's shadows came off the walls for it like crows off a roof. The ash-servants, the grievance-forms, the thousand years of condensed unwitnessed weather, made one last spiralling attempt to keep their keeper locked - and the

muster, three miles up and fully present by bell and breath and rain, answered: Aurelith's bell down the flue, Nerissa's rain in the Slack running uphill in defiance of every law but friendship, Bramble's roots - felt, unbelievably, through three miles of rock, the Heart Tree's cutting opening its fourth leaf, and then its fifth - and Pearl, in her tank at the threshold, reading the Librarian Prime's letter aloud at last, every word, which turned out to be a single sentence, written a century ago by a Guardian of Tides who had understood everything and been unable to reach: TELL HIM THE LIBRARY KEPT HIS CHAIR.

The shards rose.

No hand lifted them. They rose the way the tide rises, the way wind rises, the way roots rise in spring - by their nature, released. Four lights, four notes, and the makings with them: the key turning in an invisible lock, the cup pouring out a light that did not spill, the bell tolling the scale Kharzul had built for a century, the pen writing, on the air itself, in fire-salt gold, WE WERE HERE, WE DID THE WORK, WE KNOW THE NAMES - and the four shards met, above the gift-stone, above the empty hands, and became, in a sound that the mountain would repeat in its chimney for a week like a

tune it was learning, one Star: whole, five-pointed, burning with the clear white-gold light of a thing that is not what it was, and does not need to be, and is whole anyway.

The Star descended. The Hollow received it the way a door receives a key, the way a cup receives water, the way a page receives the last word. Vaelgorath's chest closed around the light as a hand closes around a coal it has decided, on evidence, to trust.

The light went through him. That is Sera's sentence, and the Forge's, and the mountain's: the light went through him, root and tide and wind and ember, healing in the order the expedition had earned it, and came out of him changed, and the change went up. Up the flue, up the stair, out of the chimney, over the Isles in their chains and the lake in its bed and the Emberwood in its spring, a dawn at midnight, a second star rising out of a volcano to take its place in a sky that rearranged itself - politely, anciently, making room like a library reshelving - around its returned keeper's heart.

In the cavern, in the new light, an enormous dragon lay with a mended star shining through his scales like sun through a leaf, and wept, and laughed, in the same

breath, at a volume that knocked every hat off within three miles, beginning with Seren's.

"IT HOLDS," said Vaelgorath, in wonder, in ruin, in joy. "CHILDREN. IT HOLDS."

"It holds," said Mira, through the light and the noise and everything, "because nobody's holding it. That's the whole trick. That's all it ever was."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Star, Mended



A treasure stays. A star is what the whole sky is organised around.

The Star, mended, did not stay in the cavern, and it did not, strictly, stay in Vaelgorath either - and that, Kharzul said on the long climb up, with the dragon's light travelling ahead of them up the shut ways like a lamp carried by the dark itself, was the difference between a treasure and a star. A treasure stays where it is put. A star is the thing the whole sky is organised around, and you cannot keep it in a chest, not even a dragon's chest. You can only keep faith with it.

What Vaelgorath kept - what shone through his scales, steady as a hearth seen through a window from a

winter road - was the Star's hearth-light, its home-fire, the portion of it that belonged to its guardian. The Star itself went back to the sky over the course of that night, by stages the whole world watched: rising out of the chimney at midnight as a second dawn; pausing, courteously, over the Skybound Isles, where Aurelith's bell tolled it welcome and the cloud-sheep startled in their sleep like a field of small moons; crossing the lake above Thaldris, where the water went clear to the bottom for the first time in a century and the drowned city shone up through it, every window lit, like a library staying open late for a reader who had finally come home; and settling, at last, in the hour before dawn, into the place in the sky that had stood empty so long that the other stars had learned to lean away from it - where it fitted, Sera wrote, the way a word fits the sentence it was always meant for, which was the second time the trilogy had used that sentence, and the record permits it, because the second time was the one it was meant for.

Vaelgorath came up out of the mountain at dawn. A thousand years, and the deepest cavern, and he came up - through the crater, through the flue the sprites had cleared, folding and refolding himself through ways

that should not have held him and did, because the mountain, at full breath and in a mood to cooperate, made room the way families do. He emerged onto the peak above Ashford in the first light, with the mended Star setting its home-fire alight in his chest and the whole muster spread across the Gate square below him in a silence that had singing underneath it, and he looked at his world - his whole world, all four lands at once from that height, vale and lake and isles and forge, green and blue and silver and ember, healing in the light like a map being coloured in - for a very long time.

"IT IS SMALLER THAN I REMEMBER," he said at last, "AND BETTER. BOTH OF THOSE ARE THE CHILDREN'S FAULT." His great head swung down, down, until his eye was level with the square, with the tank (Pearl, composed, giving a small nod, keeper to keeper), with the treant in his coat, with the stag, with the shepherd and his aerial flock, with the smith and the keeper and the ferryman and the cat's whole impossible congregation. "I REQUIRE A NAME FOR WHAT I AM NOW. VAELGORATH THE HOLLOW STAR DRAGON IS A TITLE WITH THE MAIN FACT WRONG. IT WOULD CONFUSE THE CATALOGUE."

"I have a suggestion entered already," Pearl said, from the tank, without looking up, in the tone of a librarian who has had the card ready for a hundred years. "Vael, the Mended. Guardian of the Star. First name in the first book. See also: friend."

"VAEL," said the dragon, testing it, and the mountain repeated it gently, all the way down, flue and stair and Forge and deep, so that the sprites in their crannies heard their keeper take his short name for the first time. "VAEL. IT IS A DOOR-SIZED NAME. I APPROVE." The home-fire in his chest brightened, and some of the light ran, root-wise, down the mountain and into the ground, and the ash trees in the valley below the Gate - black-barked, stubborn, brave with new leaves - put out, all together, in one morning, their blossom: white, star-shaped, five-pointed, scented like rain on hot stone.

"THE STAR IS MENDED," said Vael, to his world, in a voice that the bells took up and the rain applauded and the lake repeated in rings. "LET THE KEEPERS KEEP IT THE NEW WAY. OPEN. NAMED. WITNESSED. SHARED." His eye found the four children, front and centre of the square, exactly where they had been standing since Emberwood without ever once being ordered to stand

there. "AND LET THE RECORD SHOW WHO CARRIED THE PIECES HOME."

"It shows," said Sera, holding up the notebook, the third volume, the last, with its iron-pen entries glowing faintly in the morning. "Page one. Every page. It shows."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The Four Lands Healing



Healing, like its opposite, deserves to be witnessed.

The road home took a month, and the expedition took it on purpose, land by land, at walking pace, because healing - like its opposite - deserves to be witnessed, and because no one, after three books, was in any hurry to arrive at the end of being together.

Emberwood Vale first, though it was last on the road: no, the road ran Forge, Lake, Isles, Vale, in the order the world presented itself, and Sera's record follows the road.

The Forge healed by working. That was its nature and its therapy: within a week the trial-bells had been hung

as the Upper Forge's new clock, all four notes and the scale Kharzul had built around them, and the time they struck was the expedition's time, matched to mortal heartbeats, in honour of a courtesy that had become a constitution. The sprites' ledger stood open beside the Forge Ledger, in a place of honour neither book had to argue about. The chimney drew. The bellows breathed. Kharzul took apprentices again - the first in fifty years, Vay among them, and, by special entry, one sprite per shift, rotating, named - and began, at the star-anvil, the work he had waited a century to begin: the mending of the world's small broken iron, sent in from all four lands in sacks and baskets, kettles and hinges and ploughshares and one, famously, travelling-clock, delivered by hound. Under the mountain, Vael's cavern stood open, with a stair rail, and lamps, and a reading chair built by Kharzul to a scale that had required its own entry in the Ledger, where Pearl's successor-catalogue would eventually be kept. The door stayed open. That was the entry that mattered, and Sera underlined it twice.

The lake healed by clearing. With the Star home, the water over Thaldris went, day by day, from kept to living: the slack-current gentled, the drowned city's

windows darkened at night in the proper way of a place whose work is done by daylight, and the Archive - the Archive did the most Librarian thing imaginable, which was to resume lending. Nerissa carried the first loan herself, up the new clear water, to Brinemarket: a waterproofed copy of the Book of Tides, restored, for the town library's new shelf, with a card in the front, in tide-wax, that read KEPT, THEN GIVEN, in Pearl's unmistakable paw. Ferryman Corin raised his fares by nothing and his standards by everything, and Second Thought, the boat, got a lantern at last that was also, by arrangement with the Forge, a bell.

The Isles healed by settling. The chains that had held the sky-islands since the Star fell - necessary then, a kindness then - loosened link by link as the winds remembered their old routes, until the Isles rode, not loose, never loose, but free in their courses like ships that have remembered the sea, and the Bridge of Bells became a road people walked for pleasure, ringing true for the joy of it. The Storm Roc Chick, fledged now and enormous and still convinced, at some level, that Tam was its mother, escorted the expedition's sky-crossing personally. Captain Vex, in a development that surprised no one who had been paying attention to the

vocabulary of this story, surrendered his commission, his crows, and his alarming correspondence, and took service under Aurelith as Keeper of Lost Things Found, a post the Zephyr Hound had invented and immediately appointed him to, on the sound principle that no one knows where lost things go like the man who used to steal them.

And Emberwood, when they came down at last into the Vale in the late spring light, healed by blossoming - which had been, all along, its own nature trying to happen. The Heart Tree stood in leaf and flower together, which old people said it had not done since before the Star fell, and Bramble, home in his hollow with his coat hung on a peg he had grown for it, was officially, by acclamation of the whole Vale at a meeting no one remembered calling, Keeper of the Wood, with Hush as his deputy and a ring of new saplings - star-blossomed, every one - coming up in the clearing where a stag had once set a trial and four children had first become an expedition.

At each land, they left one of the makings. That had been decided on the road, unanimously, in the way of the trilogy's best decisions: all at once, in a silence, and then in a rush of everyone explaining it to everyone

else. The cup went to the Archive, to stand in the Reading Room of Shells, for carrying what must not be spilled. The bell stayed at the Forge, first of the clock, striking the heartbeat hour. The pen went to the Isles, to the new Keeper of Lost Things Found, because records are how lost things stay found. And the key - Kael's key, the one that had opened the shut ways - came home to Emberwood, and was hung by Gran herself, on a nail by her own front door, under a small painted board, in Sera's best lettering: FOR THE NEXT DOOR. DO NOT WAIT A HUNDRED YEARS.

"Inventory," said Sera, on the last night of the road, at the last camp, with the Vale's lights coming on below them like a harbour. "Items: four makings, placed. Four shards, mended. One star, home. One dragon, renamed, employed, befriended. Balance carried forward: - " and she stopped, and for once in three volumes did not write a number, and closed the book on a column left honourably, deliberately blank, because some accounts are not meant to be closed by the person who opened them.

"Home tomorrow," said Mira, into the firelight, with the pack - empty, light, hers at last to carry or not as she

chose - beside her like an old dog. "Festival tomorrow. A year, almost to the day."

"Then we'd best sleep," said Seren, tuning the lute by the fire, with his hat off to the dark and the mended Star standing in it, first and brightest, keeping its faith with all of them. "Tomorrow, children, we are expected - and for once, in every land at once."

CHAPTER TWENTY

The Festival Again



The whole world of the trilogy, standing in one meadow, eating.

The Festival of Falling Stars had been held in Millbrook every year since the Star fell, in defiance of the falling, and it was held again that year in honour of the rising, and the difference - Gran said, supervising both from approximately the same spot by the same stall, with the same ladle - was mostly in the direction people looked while they ate.

Everyone came. That is not a figure of speech; Sera checked. The muster lists of two expeditions and a mending were laid end to end, and the Festival, that year, was simply the whole world of the trilogy standing

in one meadow in its best clothes, eating. Forge-folk in clean aprons, with Kharzul at their head in a coat that Vay had made him wear and a bell-maker's whole family at his elbow. Ashford grandmothers, inspecting Gran's stall with professional respect and being inspected back. Brinemarket bottle-sellers, sky-sellers from Bellhaven, Anselm with forty sheep in orbit over the meadow like a woolly constellation and a whistle he no longer needed and blew anyway, for punctuation. Ferryman Corin, who had brought Second Thought up the river on a cart for the occasion, because a boat, he said, should see a festival from the inside once in its life. Pearl, in state, in a tank on a flower-cart, with the Listening Shell and a queue of people waiting to have their regards recorded exactly. Nerissa, in the Mill Brook itself, which had been temporarily and respectfully deepened, with her head out among the lanterns like the figurehead of the entire proceeding. Skye, Aurelith's bell, the Hound and its day's lost property (three umbrellas, one wedding ring, returned within the hour, amid scenes), and - at dusk, by request, at a distance that was itself a courtesy, on the hill above the meadow with the star-blossom falling around him like slow snow - Vael, the Mended, Guardian of the Star,

watching his first festival in a thousand years, with a home-fire in his chest and his short name in everybody's mouth.

There was a Dawn Market too - there was always a Dawn Market; the trilogy had begun at one, and ended, properly, at another - and the expedition did its last trading there as the light came up, in the meadow, stall by stall, for the record.

Sold: the expedition's surplus wonders, at last, and at Festival prices, which in Millbrook meant whatever the seller's grandmother thought fair. The ember-map originals, both copies, to the new Museum of the Mending that the four lands were founding jointly in the Archive, the Forge, the Isles and the Vale in rotation - a museum that would travel, Sera explained, so that no land would have to shut its ways to visit its own history. Price: one promise, kept in advance, that admission would always be free to children, sprites, and cats. Sold: Sera's second-best notebooks, volumes one and two (the originals went to the Museum; the third she kept, because some records are also diaries). Given: the compass, to Tam, whose grandfather's it had never been and whose it now entirely was, south being easy and the rest of the directions having been personally walked

into good behaviour. Given: the rope. The good rope, the trilogy's rope, retired with honours to the Millbrook bell tower, where it hangs to this day and is rung only for beginnings.

And bought, with the expedition's last silver acorns - seven, exactly, carried out of three books and two countries and all four lands - bought from Gran's stall, by unanimous vote, at dawn, in the meadow, with the Star going down gold in the west as it had once fallen and now rose and set like a citizen: four ember-honey cakes, one pot of jam, and a flag. The flag was new, Millbrook-made, vale-green, and on it, in thread the colours of the four lands, Sera's design, stitched by every grandmother in the valley in rotation: a five-pointed star, mended, with the seam showing - gold thread, deliberately, proudly, because the seam was the story - and beneath it, no words at all, because by then the whole world knew the words.

Seren sang the finished song at noon, from the bandstand, with the Forge's bells and the tower's rope-bell and three hundred and eleven small bright accompanists providing, unasked and perfectly in tune, the harmony. It had verses for every land and a chorus for the road, and the last verse - the one Tam's bell had

written - it gave to the crowd, who sang it back at the hill, where a dragon wept openly and without embarrassment and pretended, for form's sake, that it was the blossom.

Then the Festival did what festivals do. It ate, and danced, and traded, and told the story wrong in the delightful ways that stories improve by, and the four children - Kael Thorn, who makes openings; Mira Solen, who carries what must not be spilled; Tam Reed, whose bell keeps the world's time; Sera Vayne, who keeps the record - ran the meadow until they were, for the first time in a year, simply and entirely twelve years old, with nowhere to be and nothing to mend, under a whole sky.

SERA'S LAST ENTRY, as she wrote it that night, by lantern-light, with the iron pen, in the third volume, on the final page: Inventory, final. One star, mended. Four lands, healing. One dragon, a friend. One expedition, home. Items carried forward: a key, a cup, a bell, a pen, placed where they are needed. A song, finished, and therefore begun. A book, this book, closed - not because the story is over. Because it is everyone else's turn to carry it now. Value: everything. Not for sale. Given away, with love, to whoever picks it up next.

The Story Ends - and Stays

THE STORY ENDS. The Shattered Star of Vaelthorne was always a story in three books: The First Shard, in which four friends met in Emberwood Vale and won the Shard of Roots; The Lake That Keeps a Library, in which they crossed the water and the sky and won the Shards of Tides and Winds; and this book, The Star, Mended, in which they went down into the fire, did the Forge's work, and carried the pieces home to the one who had been waiting longest for them.

WHAT STAYS. The Star is in the sky. The Forge's doors are open. The Archive lends. The Isles ride free in their courses. The Emberwood blossoms with star-flowers every spring, white and five-pointed, and the blossom is never picked for selling, by a law Gran made and every land adopted: some things are for looking at, together, for free.

WHAT GOES ON. Vael flies. Not often, not far, and always - the Isles' new Keeper of Lost Things Found keeps the record - home by dark, like a citizen. Kharzul's mending queue is three years long and is the Forge's pride. Pearl's catalogue of the mending runs to nine volumes and is, she insists, merely begun. Bramble

grows. Hush opines. The bell at the Forge strikes the heartbeat hour, and in Millbrook the good rope hangs in the tower, rung only for beginnings.

AND THE FOUR. They grew up, which is the one adventure no expedition can refuse. What they became is another story - several other stories, in fact, and some of them are yours to imagine, which is not a way of avoiding the question. It is the correct answer to it, in Vaelthorne, where the best doors are the ones left open, on purpose, with the key hung by them: FOR THE NEXT DOOR. DO NOT WAIT A HUNDRED YEARS.

Meet the New Friends

KHARZUL, GUARDIAN OF EMBERS. Master of the Cindervault Forge for two hundred years, maker of bells, keeper of a ledger he learned - late, completely, and in public - to keep properly. He assesses everything by weight, temper, and what it is for. What he is for, it turns out, is mending.

KEEPER VAY. Keeper of the Forge-Gate, captain of the bellows crew, apprentice again at an age when most people are done learning, which she regards as the Forge's highest compliment so far.

PIP THE COAL SPRITE. First spark off a good flint. Rescued from the Glass Desert, speaker for his people, clerk of the Covenant of Coals, and rider, by right, on any shoulder, beard, or anvil he chooses. His three hundred and ten fellow sprites are named, all of them, in the Forge Ledger, beginning with Ash, the eldest, whose crack healed into a silver seam.

VAEL, THE MENDED. Formerly Vaelgorath the Hollow Star Dragon. Guardian of the Star for more than a thousand years; caught it when it fell; was hurt, and locked away, and waited. Now mended, renamed by

catalogue, and a friend. First name in the first book. See also: a door, not a lock.

AND RETURNING. Bramble the treant, Keeper of Emberwood; Pearl the Archive Cat, memory and conscience of the expedition; Nerissa the Tide Serpent, bringer of rain and of libraries; Skye the griffon and the Storm Roc, grown; Anselm the Cloud Shepherd and his forty aerial sheep; the Zephyr Hound, and whatever it is carrying today; Captain Vex, reformed, Keeper of Lost Things Found; Antor the stag; Hush the owl; Ferryman Corin and Second Thought; the Sunken Librarian Prime, who kept a chair; and Seren the Bard, whose song is finished, and therefore begun.

The Expedition Inventory, Book Three

Kept in Sera Vayne's hand, from the third and final volume of the Expedition Inventory. Prices in silver acorns unless marked otherwise.

CARRIED IN. Three shards, singing - Roots, Tides, Winds. One star-bowed silver key (a veteran; retired with honours). One shepherd's whistle (returned to Anselm with a story as interest, Chapter Twelve, amid scenes). One boatman's knowledge of the way home. Seven silver acorns and a balance of gold gulls, carried out of Book Two.

SOLD IN ASHFORD. Spare bell-cord (six acorns). Two cloud-wool cloaks (to a laundry widow, for grandchildren Up Top). One small listening shell, the last (nine acorns, and thanks, recorded as currency).

BOUGHT IN ASHFORD. Four pairs of forge boots, iron-shod (Tam's gifted free: small feet, big errand). Heat salve, four pots. Clay-lined water skins. Twice-baked bread. Forge lamp oil, enough. One coil of light forge-chain, traded weight for weight plus two acorns.

FOUND IN THE GLASS DESERT. One sun-glass lens, grown in the dunes (used to free Pip; sold later to the Desert Warden as a warning beacon, at the price of safety). One coal sprite, Pip (not an item. A colleague. A grievance, carried properly, becomes a tool; a friend, carried properly, becomes family).

RECEIVED AT THE FORGE. The ember-map (given by the map-seller of Ashford: a promise the land made once, kept). The Great Bellows, mended (not received; returned to working order - the distinction matters, and is the book). The Covenant of Coals, re-sealed (asking, counting, names). Four makings: a key, a cup, a bell, a pen - placed, by land, where they are needed. The Shard of Embers (asked for, not taken; given up, in its turn, like all the rest).

BOUGHT AT THE MENDING MARKET. Deep-cave candles. Three hundred feet of forge-spun rope. Provisions for five, plus sprite twists. Guest-right gifts in the Forge manner: bread, salt, and a song, in that order.

CARRIED OUT. One star, mended (status: home; value: everything; not for sale). Four lands, healing. One dragon, a friend. Seven silver acorns, spent at dawn on honey cakes, jam, and a flag. One expedition, home.

Books balanced. The final column left blank on purpose, for whoever picks up the story next.

From Kharzul's Forge Ledger

From the Forge Ledger, kept by Keeper Vay in fire-salt ink, by order of Kharzul, Guardian of Embers. Extracts, with the Keeper's permission.

ON KEEPING. Nothing is kept in this mountain again that is not named. (First rule of the new keeping, entered the night of the bellows count and read aloud at first bell, every bell, since.)

ON NAMES. The sprites of the Cindervault, three hundred and eleven, are entered by name in this book, beginning with Ash, eldest, and ending, by clerk's privilege, with Pip. The dragon of the deep is entered first of all: VAEL, THE MENDED, GUARDIAN OF THE STAR. His chair - see Archive correspondence, Librarian Prime, one sentence, received and answered - is kept by the fire, in case of readers.

ON WORK. The Great Bellows: mended. The chimney: cleared. The trial-fire: lit, and burning yet. The clock of four bells: hung, striking the heartbeat hour, in honour of the courtesy that became a constitution - the work matched to the guest.

ON MENDING RECEIVED. Kettles, forty-one. Hinges, one hundred and nine. Ploughshares, a field's worth. One travelling-clock (by hound). One sky (by children). All work entered. All work counted. All workers named.

ON DEBTS. Seren of the Songs: one song, with interest. PAID, in full, in the square, with the whole mountain in harmony. The account is closed and the song is open, forever, to anyone who needs to sing it. That is what finished means, at the Forge.

From Sera's Notebook: Notes on Fire and Staying

Kept in Sera Vayne's hand, final volume. Notes for whoever picks this up next, because a record is a way of staying forever, and staying - we learned in the deep, in the dark, in the loop - is the whole art.

On asking. Ask for the shard, the sprite, the song, the dragon. Asking is not a delay before the real work. Asking is the real work, arriving early and wearing its own face.

On counting. Count the work and name the workers. Work that is not counted becomes weather, and people are not weather. Three hundred and eleven names took until the deep of the night and it was the best-spent night of the expedition, including the night the Star came home.

On doors. Every shut way in this story was shut for a reason that had once been kind. Check your reasons yearly. Hang the key by the door. Do not wait a hundred years.

On fear. Physics wears a custom's coat. Mourning wears one too. Staying is harder than doing, and fixes more. A

grievance carried properly is a tool that has not been picked up yet, and a lock, given time and witnesses and tea - there was not, strictly, tea; there was bread, salt, and a song, in that order - can become a door again.

On endings. A mended thing is not what it was, and does not need to be, and is whole anyway. Leave the seam showing. Gold thread. The seam is the story.

Seren's Finished Song

Entered in Sera's hand at Seren's dictation, Millbrook, the morning after the Festival, the bard having finally - his word - stopped adding verses.

VERSE ONE, THE CATCHING. When the sky tore open and the Star came down burning, there was no army ready and no spell prepared, only a keeper with his wings out and his chest bared to the weather. He caught what the whole world dropped. The song asks you to remember that before it asks you anything else: most of history is somebody catching something, alone, in the dark, and being thanked late.

VERSE TWO, THE BREAKING. A star is not a stone. A star is a promise the sky makes to sailors, shepherds, children and cats, and a promise, caught too hard by a frightened world, breaks into keeping-places: roots to hold it, tides to tend it, winds to remember it, embers to keep it warm. Four lands, four keepers, four centuries of doing their best with a piece of the light, and calling the piece by the whole's name, because that is what keepers do.

VERSE THREE, THE LOCKING. The ways were shut for kindness and for fear, which are cousins. The song does not name a villain in this verse because there isn't one, and a song that invents villains to make the chorus easier is a song that will shut a way of its own. It names, instead, a door, a key, and a hundred years of people walking past both, meaning to come back tomorrow.

VERSE FOUR, THE CARRYING. Four children out of Emberwood with a pack, a rope, a notebook and a whistle, asking at every threshold and counting at every hearth, sewing by agreement, ringing by patience, staying - in the darkest room of the world - when staying was the hardest work of all. The chorus belongs to this verse, and the chorus is the part the crowd sings: Carry it gently, carry it truly, carry it only as far as the hands that are waiting.

THE LAST VERSE, THE MENDING. What is caught must be held. What is broken must be witnessed. What is mended is not what it was, and does not need to be, and is whole anyway. Leave the seam in gold. Let the door stand open. Read the names aloud at first bell. And when your own star falls - the song is quite clear that everyone's does, sooner or later, in one size or another -

may you be met, as Vael was met at last, by friends who are late, and sorry, and carrying the pieces home.

A Letter from Vael

Delivered by sprite-post, first class, glowing slightly, on the first anniversary of the Mending. Transcribed by Pearl, exactly, because nobody else could be trusted not to improve it.

TO THE FOUR, AND TO THE BARD, AND TO THE SMITH, AND TO THE SMALL BRIGHT KIN, AND TO THE CAT (IN CHARGE), GREETING.

I have flown, this year, eleven times. The record is kept in three places and I am told this is called accountability, which is friendship with paperwork. I have seen the Vale from above in blossom, which is the correct angle for it. I have seen my lake - the Archive's lake; the pronoun is under negotiation and the Librarian is winning - clear to its libraries. I have raced the Winds above the Isles and lost, courteously, to a griffon. I have slept, for the first time since the falling, without the dark getting in. These are my accounts. They balance.

Item: the home-fire you left in my keeping burns steady. Item: the chair by the fire has had one reader (a smith, mending his reading), eleven sprites (in rotation), and

one stag, who does not read but improves a room. Item: I am learning the names. Three hundred and eleven sprites, forty sheep, nine hundred years of keepers. A guardian's work is mostly names. I had forgotten. I am reminded nightly, at first bell, when the Forge reads them aloud and I answer from below, so the mountain is in conversation with itself again, top to bottom, like a house where the doors are open.

Item: the children are taller. This is entered as a formal complaint and a standing ovation.

When the next star falls - stars keep their own ledger and their own hours - this world will not shut its ways. It will send its keepers out by every road, with bread, salt and a song, in that order, and it will ask, and count, and name, and stay. That is the mending. The Star was only ever the demonstration.

Your friend, VAEL, THE MENDED, Guardian of the Star. First name in the first book. Door, not lock, ever after.

The End

...of the trilogy. The Star is in the sky, the doors are open, and the seam - gold thread, showing proudly - is the story.

The Shattered Star of Vaelthorne - Book One: The First Shard - Book Two: The Lake That Keeps a Library - Book Three: The Star, Mended
Written by Marcus Draper