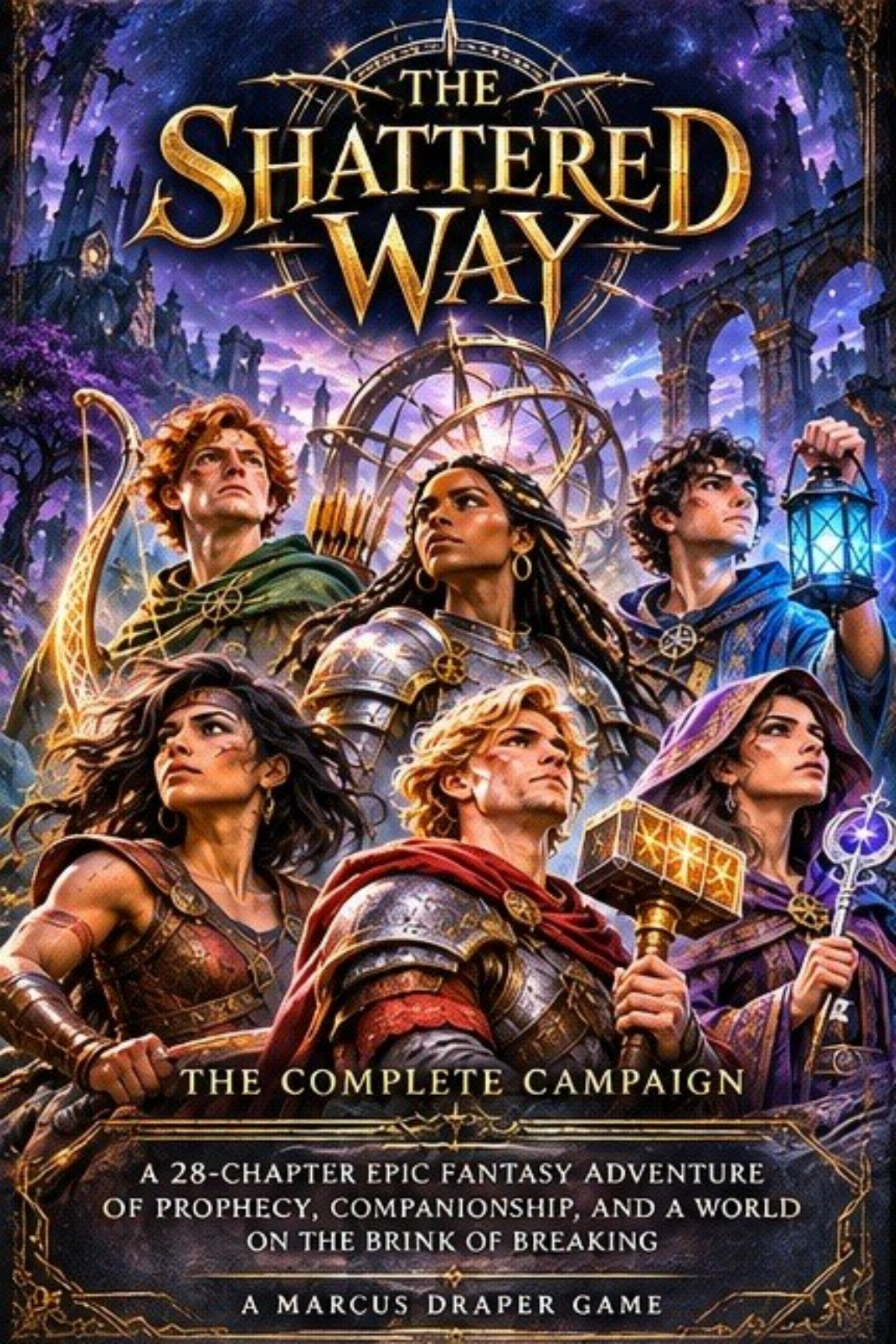
THE SHATTERED WAY
THE COMPLETE CAMPAIGN
A 28-CHAPTER EPIC FANTASY ADVENTURE OF PROPHECY, COMPANIONSHIP, AND A WORLD ON THE BRINK OF BREAKING
A MARCUS DRAPER GAME

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CHAPTER 01

The Observatory of Broken Stars



Rain climbed the windows of the abandoned observatory. Kaelen had followed the impossible star from the fields outside town, expecting to find a telescope, perhaps a reasonable explanation. Instead he found five strangers and a brass machine that turned without a motor. Mira held a door open for Bram, who had brought a flashlight that no longer worked. Seren was already halfway up the stairs. Tovin knelt over a chart, while Lyra examined a cabinet whose lock resembled a crescent moon. “Does anyone else think we should leave?” Bram asked. Nobody laughed. Outside, the road they had arrived on had disappeared into white mist. Lyra pried a silver star from the cabinet hinge. Inside lay six objects, impossibly old yet warm to the touch. The bow leapt into Kaelen's hand; a shield settled against Mira's arm. The lantern lit for Tovin, the blades sang for Seren, the hammer hummed for Bram, and a silver key turned in Lyra's palm. Their ordinary clothes shimmered into traveling gear. The machine asked what remained fixed when all roads turned. Tovin studied the chart. Flame consumed, wheels revolved, crowns changed hands. “An anchor,” he said. Kaelen touched the brass symbol. The floor disappeared. They landed on a bridge above an ocean of clouds. Under a fallen arch, a tiny fox with translucent antlers cried out. Mira and Bram lifted the stone while Seren dragged the creature free. They named it Flicker. Its gratitude came as a picture in their minds: a bell, a broken

moon, a road. Then black-glass scavengers scrambled over the parapet. Kaelen's bow drew a string of light from empty air. Mira caught the captain's blade, and Bram broke its brittle edge. When the creatures dissolved into ash, Flicker uncovered a Waystone that projected a map with three erased roads. At the Watchpost of Echoes, Lyra found the diary of Edrin, a roadwarden who had refused to destroy the bridge. They lit three braziers in the order of his vows: truth, courage, mercy. The memorial opened. A name had been chiseled away, but Tovin could still read it: Vaelrith. Seren fitted a missing clapper to the watch bell. Its note summoned an answer from across the abyss, and something much closer. The Ashbound Sentinel demanded their Waystone. Mira refused. Its halberd shattered the pavement; blue fire gathered in its chest. Seren called the warning, and everyone scattered before the eruption. Kaelen shot the exposed seam as Bram struck the guardian's knee. Its crystal heart fell into the clouds. The bridge held. A hooded traveler emerged from the restored arch. “Call me the Waykeeper. Seven shards remember the road between worlds. The first sleeps beyond the Whispering Wood. But each crossing you restore will wake something that wishes to remain forgotten.” He gave them a map fragment. Kaelen looked back at the empty sky where home ought to have been. For the first time he understood that finding a road was not the same as being ready to walk it.

Recovered expanded manuscript

He awoke to the sound of birds.

For several seconds, he remained perfectly still, his eyes closed, believing himself to be lying in the northern field behind his mother's house. The ground beneath him was soft, the air pleasantly warm, and somewhere nearby water trickled over stones.

Then one of the birds sang a melody remarkably like a human voice.

Kaelen opened his eyes.

Above him stretched a sky of impossible beauty.

Great ribbons of violet and gold wound between unfamiliar constellations. Two moons hung above the horizon, one pale and round,

the other fractured into three enormous pieces. Between them floated islands of earth and stone, their undersides trailing roots and waterfalls that vanished into the clouds below.

He sat upright.

“No,” he whispered.

It was the only word he could find.

He was lying upon a terrace of weathered stone, surrounded by the remains of an ancient structure. Broken pillars supported fragments of carved archways, and small blue flowers grew between the cracks in the pavement.

The observatory was gone.

Or perhaps, he thought with growing unease, it had become something else.

At the center of the terrace stood the brass machine. Its rings were motionless now, and the dark crystal within them had split down the middle.

“Please tell me you're seeing this too.”

Kaelen turned.

Seren sat against a fallen pillar, staring at the floating mountains.

“I was hoping you'd tell me I wasn't.”

“Afraid not.”

She rubbed her forehead.

“Well, that's inconvenient.”

Under different circumstances, Kaelen might have laughed.

Mira was kneeling beside Bram, examining a cut above his eyebrow. Tovin lay nearby, surrounded by the scattered contents of his satchel. Lyra stood at the edge of the terrace, looking down into the clouds.

“Don't go near the edge,” Mira called.

Lyra glanced over her shoulder.

“I wasn't planning to jump.”

“Good. I'd rather not discover whether gravity works differently here.”

Tovin stirred.

“Technically,” he murmured, “we already have considerable evidence that it does.”

Bram groaned.

“Wonderful. He's alive.”

One by one, they gathered near the broken machine.

Nobody spoke for a while.

There were questions, of course. Hundreds of them. But none seemed particularly useful when the very existence of the world around them defied explanation.

Finally, Mira broke the silence.

“Is anyone seriously injured?”

They shook their heads.

“Then we find shelter, water, and someone who can tell us where we are. Everything else can wait.”

“I'd put getting home fairly high on that list,” Bram said.

“So would I. But we can't get home if we're dead.”

Kaelen looked at the sky again.

Somewhere beyond those impossible mountains, beyond the broken moon and the unfamiliar stars, his mother would be waking.

She would find his note.

She would wait.

The thought made his stomach tighten.

He turned away before anyone could see his expression.

They discovered the chamber beneath the terrace quite by accident.

Seren had been searching for a staircase when a section of stone shifted beneath her boot. With a grinding noise, a circular doorway opened in the floor, revealing steps descending into darkness.

“Anyone else getting tired of mysterious machinery?” she asked.

“Not particularly,” Tovin replied.

“Of course you aren't.”

They descended together.

Small crystals embedded in the walls illuminated their passage. The deeper they traveled, the warmer the air became, until they emerged into a circular chamber whose ceiling glittered with thousands of tiny lights.

Six stone figures stood around its perimeter.

Each depicted a different person, though centuries of erosion had worn away their faces. At their feet rested objects that appeared remarkably untouched by time.

Kaelen approached the nearest statue.

A bow lay upon a pedestal of black stone.

Its limbs were made from a pale material resembling polished wood, though faint threads of light moved beneath its surface. There was no string.

As he drew closer, the light brightened.

“Don't touch anything,” Mira warned.

Kaelen stopped.

Then he heard a familiar sound.

The creak of a bowstring.

His father had taught him archery in the northern field. Kaelen remembered the long afternoons spent missing targets, the patient corrections, and the pride he had felt when his first arrow struck the center.

Without fully understanding why, he reached toward the weapon.

The instant his fingers closed around its grip, a luminous thread appeared between its curved limbs.

Kaelen gasped.

The bow was warm.

Not the warmth of an object left in sunlight, but something deeper, almost living.

Words entered his mind.

Starstring.

He released the weapon.

It did not fall.

Instead, it dissolved into golden particles that gathered around his wrist, forming a narrow band of silver and green.

“That's new,” Seren said.

Across the chamber, the other pedestals began to glow.

Mira approached a circular shield decorated with a rising sun. When she lifted it, a golden radiance spread across its surface.

Bram discovered a heavy war hammer whose dark metal head contained veins of blue lightning.

Seren found two curved blades, their edges shimmering like moonlight upon water.

Tovin stood before a lantern containing a flame that burned without oil or wick.

Lyra's silver key trembled in her hand as a dark cloak unfolded from the final pedestal, its fabric moving as though stirred by an invisible breeze.

Six strangers.

Six relics.

Six statues waiting in a chamber beneath a world none of them had known existed.

“This isn't a coincidence,” Tovin said.

For once, Seren had no clever response.

Kaelen studied the stone figure before him.

Something had been carved into its base.

He brushed away the dust.

The symbols were unfamiliar, yet as he looked upon them, their meaning gradually became clear.

When the roads are broken and the heavens divided, the six shall carry what the guardians could not.

Below it was another line.

Let no bearer mistake the gift for the right to rule.

“What does it say?” Mira asked.

Kaelen read the inscription aloud.

Bram frowned.

“I don't like the sound of that.”

“Which part?” Seren asked.

“Any of it.”

Tovin carefully copied the words into his notebook.

Lyra remained silent.

She was examining the statue behind her pedestal.

Unlike the others, its face had not been worn away by time.

Someone had deliberately destroyed it.

The creature in the ruins

They left the chamber carrying more questions than answers.

Beyond the terrace, an ancient road descended through a landscape of silver grass and unfamiliar trees. Small creatures resembling butterflies drifted among the branches, leaving trails of light behind them.

For nearly an hour, the travelers followed the road.

The beauty of the place made its silence all the more disturbing.

They passed abandoned buildings whose doors stood open. A stone fountain continued to pour clear water into a basin filled with leaves. In one courtyard, six chairs surrounded a table upon which the remains of a meal had hardened into dust.

There were no bodies.

There were no people.

It was as though an entire community had simply walked away.

“Where did everyone go?” Bram asked.

Nobody answered.

Then they heard the cry.

It came from somewhere beyond a collapsed wall.

A thin, frightened sound, followed by the scrape of claws against stone.

Mira immediately changed direction.

“Wait,” Lyra whispered.

She pointed toward the ruins.

Something moved between the broken pillars.

Kaelen crouched.

A creature emerged into the open.

It stood taller than Bram, though its back was hunched and its limbs unnaturally long. Jagged pieces of black armor covered its body, and beneath its hood glowed two violet eyes.

In one hand it carried a blade made from fractured purple crystal.

At its feet lay a small animal tangled in a length of rusted chain.

The animal resembled a fox, but its fur was the color of autumn leaves, and the tip of its tail burned with a gentle golden flame.

It struggled helplessly.

The armored creature raised its blade.

Mira stepped forward.

“Hey!”

The creature turned.

Its eyes narrowed.

A sound emerged from beneath its hood, halfway between a growl and a laugh.

“Roadborn.”

The word was unmistakable.

“It can talk,” Bram whispered.

The creature tilted its head.

“Six lights. Six treasures.”

It sniffed the air.

“The master will be pleased.”

Then it charged.

Kaelen had never fought for his life.

He had imagined danger before, as most young men did. He had pictured himself brave and decisive, capable of facing whatever threatened the people he loved.

Reality was different.

Reality was the sudden weakness in his knees.

It was the inability to remember how to breathe.

It was the sight of a blade rushing toward him and the terrible realization that he might never see his mother again.

Mira moved before he did.

Her shield appeared in a burst of golden light. The creature's weapon struck it with a deafening crack, driving her backward across the stones.

“Kaelen!”

He stared at her.

“The bow!”

He looked down at the silver band around his wrist.

Starstring.

The weapon materialized in his hand.

Instinctively, he drew back the glowing string. An arrow of golden light formed between his fingers.

He released it.

The arrow flew wide and shattered against a pillar.

“Excellent warning shot!” Seren shouted.

She darted past him, her crescent blades flashing.

The creature swung toward her, but Bram intercepted it with his hammer. Blue lightning burst across the courtyard as the weapons collided.

Bram staggered.

The creature barely moved.

Tovin raised his lantern.

“I'm not entirely certain how this works!”

“Now would be a fantastic time to find out!” Seren called.

The lantern's flame turned white.

A wave of light swept through the courtyard, causing the creature to recoil. Smoke rose from the gaps in its armor.

Lyra slipped behind it.

While the others fought, she reached the trapped animal and began working at the chain with her silver key.

The creature noticed.

It abandoned Bram and lunged toward her.

Kaelen drew another arrow.

This time he remembered his father's voice.

Don't fight the bow. Breathe. Look where you want the arrow to go.

He breathed.

He released.

The golden arrow struck the creature beneath its shoulder.

It howled and stumbled.

Mira drove her shield against its chest, knocking it backward. Bram brought his hammer down upon the stones beside its feet, sending a burst of lightning through the ground.

Seren struck the creature's weapon from its hand.

For a moment, the courtyard fell silent.

The creature looked at them.

Then it laughed.

“You carry their light,” it rasped. “But you know nothing of their darkness.”

Its body began to unravel.

Black smoke poured from beneath its armor, twisting upward into the air. Within seconds, nothing remained but empty fragments of metal and a shattered crystal blade.

Kaelen lowered his bow.

His hands were shaking.

Nobody celebrated.

They stood among the ruins, breathing heavily, trying to understand what had just happened.

Then Bram sat down abruptly.

“I would,” he announced, “very much like to go home.”

This time, nobody laughed.

The little creature refused to leave them.

Once Lyra freed it, the animal limped toward a nearby bush. They assumed it would disappear into the wilderness, but when the group resumed their journey, it followed.

After several minutes, it approached Kaelen and nudged his boot.

He knelt.

The creature's eyes were enormous and amber. Its ears were too large for its head, and the flame upon its tail flickered whenever it moved.

“Hello, little fellow.”

It sneezed.

A tiny shower of sparks landed on his trousers.

Kaelen brushed them away.

“Careful.”

Seren crouched beside him.

“Look at that tail. Like a little candle.”

The creature sniffed her fingers.

“Flicker,” she said.

“What?”

“His name. Flicker.”

“We're naming it?”

“Unless you'd prefer to call him Mister Occasionally Combustible.”

Kaelen smiled for the first time since arriving.

Flicker climbed into his lap, curled into a ball, and promptly fell asleep.

Mira watched them.

“We can't stay here.”

She pointed toward the remains of the creature's armor.

“It said something about a master.”

The momentary warmth disappeared.

Tovin retrieved his notebook.

“Roadborn,” he said. “That's what it called us.”

“And it recognized the relics,” Lyra added.

Bram looked down at his hammer.

“Maybe we should leave these things behind.”

He attempted to place the weapon on the ground.

It dissolved into blue light and returned to the band around his wrist.

He stared at it.

“Apparently that's not an option.”

Kaelen looked toward the distant mountains.

For the first time, he wondered whether their arrival had been an accident.

And whether the way home had been taken from them deliberately.

The Watchpost of Echoes

By evening, they reached the edge of the world.

The road ended at a fractured causeway suspended above an ocean of clouds. Far below, lightning flashed silently within the mist.

On the opposite side stood a fortress.

Its towers leaned at impossible angles, supported by enormous chains that disappeared into the rock beneath them. Torn banners hung from its battlements, each bearing the image of a silver star divided into six pieces.

A narrow bridge connected the two sides.

Several sections had collapsed.

Seren studied the distance.

“I could make that jump.”

“No,” Mira replied.

“You didn't even look.”

“I looked.”

“It's not that far.”

“It's far enough.”

Flicker slipped from Kaelen's arms and trotted toward the bridge.

“Flicker!”

The creature stopped at the first gap.

Its tail brightened.

Beneath the empty space, translucent stones began to appear, one after another, until a narrow pathway stretched across the missing section.

Tovin slowly removed his spectacles.

“Oh.”

Seren grinned.

“I officially like the fox.”

They crossed cautiously, following Flicker as he revealed portions of the hidden bridge.

When they reached the fortress, they found its entrance unguarded.

Above the archway, words had been carved into the stone.

The Watchpost of Echoes.

Inside, the courtyard was littered with abandoned equipment. Rusted helmets lay beside broken spears. A row of wooden training figures stood beneath a covered walkway, their surfaces scarred by countless sword strikes.

But unlike the village, this place showed evidence of a struggle.

Deep grooves marked the walls.

A section of the courtyard had been scorched black.

Near the entrance to the guardroom, Kaelen discovered a handprint burned into the stone.

It was far larger than any human hand.

“We should find somewhere defensible before dark,” Mira said.

They entered the guardroom.

Bram gathered broken furniture for a fire while Seren checked the adjoining rooms. Tovin examined the documents scattered across a long table, and Lyra searched the cupboards.

Kaelen sat beside the window, watching the unfamiliar sunset.

He had always loved sunsets at home.

His mother would sometimes stand beside him in the northern field, saying that no matter how difficult the day had been, the evening sky was a reminder that beauty could still be found.

He wondered whether she was standing there now.

He wondered whether time passed the same way in both worlds.

Perhaps only a few minutes had elapsed since he left.

Perhaps years.

He pressed his hands against his eyes.

“You all right?”

Mira stood beside him.

“Fine.”

She sat down.

“That's a terrible answer.”

Kaelen managed a weak smile.

“My mother doesn't know where I am.”

Mira nodded.

“My little brother doesn't know where I am either.”

He looked at her.

“He's eight,” she continued. “Our mother works nights. I usually make his breakfast before school.”

She watched the clouds outside.

“He'll probably try making pancakes himself.”

“Is he any good?”

“He once set fire to a bowl of cereal.”

Kaelen laughed despite himself.

Mira smiled, but her eyes remained fixed upon the horizon.

“I keep thinking about the things I didn't say before I left. Stupid things. Ordinary things.”

Kaelen understood.

“I left a note.”

“So did I.”

They sat together in silence.

For the first time since the crossing, Kaelen felt that someone understood the particular weight he was carrying.

Not the fear of dying.

The fear of being missed.

“Everyone needs to see this.”

Tovin stood beside the table, holding a leather-bound ledger.

The others gathered around.

“Most of these records concern supplies and patrols. But the final entries are different.”

He turned the pages carefully.

“The last commander of this fortress was someone named Captain Orven. Listen.”

He read aloud.

The eastern roads have failed. Three villages are gone, though their buildings remain. Refugees speak of creatures wearing the faces of those they have lost.

He turned another page.

The Council has ordered the sealing of the remaining crossings. Guardian Vaelrith has refused the decree. He claims that closing the roads will condemn thousands.

Another page.

We heard the bells of the capital this morning, though the capital lies seven days distant. By noon, the stars had changed their positions.

The final entry was written in a trembling hand.

The Sentinel no longer recognizes us. It stands before the western gate and demands the Three Vows. I fear it has forgotten the difference between guarding the road and imprisoning those who seek it.

Bram looked toward the doorway.

“Sentinel?”

Tovin closed the ledger.

“I suspect we're about to find out.”

A deep metallic sound echoed through the fortress.

Once.

Twice.

The floor trembled.

Flicker raised his head and began to growl.

Outside, something enormous was walking across the courtyard.

The Ashbound Sentinel

The figure stood beneath the western archway.

It was nearly three times Bram's height, a towering construction of dark stone and bronze armor. Ancient symbols covered its limbs, and brilliant blue light shone through the cracks in its body.

Within its chest, behind layers of broken metal, a crystalline heart pulsed.

It carried a halberd longer than any of them were tall.

When it spoke, its voice seemed to come from the fortress itself.

“THE ROAD IS SEALED.”

Mira stepped forward, shield raised.

“We're not here to harm anyone.”

The Sentinel lowered its head.

“DECLARE YOUR VOW.”

Tovin glanced at the ledger.

“The Three Vows,” he whispered.

“Which are?” Seren asked.

“I don't know.”

“Wonderful.”

Kaelen noticed three stone tablets beside the gate. Each bore a different symbol: an open hand, a lantern, and a broken crown.

He remembered the inscription beneath the statues.

Let no bearer mistake the gift for the right to rule.

He approached the first tablet.

The Sentinel's halberd shifted toward him.

“DECLARE YOUR VOW.”

Kaelen looked at the open hand.

“Mercy,” he said.

The tablet illuminated.

Tovin hurried toward the lantern.

“Truth.”

A second light appeared.

Mira stood before the broken crown.

She studied it for several seconds.

“Service,” she said at last.

The third tablet glowed.

For a moment, the Sentinel became motionless.

Its weapon lowered.

Then a thin thread of violet darkness emerged from the crystal within its chest.

The blue light flickered.

“VOWS ACCEPTED.”

Kaelen exhaled.

“BEARERS IDENTIFIED.”

The Sentinel raised its weapon again.

“BEARERS MUST BE DESTROYED.”

The halberd struck the ground.

Stone exploded across the courtyard.

They scattered.

Kaelen threw himself behind a pillar as fragments of masonry rained around him. Bram pulled Tovin away from the impact, while Seren sprinted toward the Sentinel's unprotected flank.

Mira barely managed to raise her shield before the next blow.

The impact hurled her backward.

“Mira!”

She struck the ground and rolled.

“Still here!”

Kaelen summoned his bow.

Golden arrows shattered harmlessly against the Sentinel's armor.

Bram's hammer fared little better.

Each strike sent sparks flying, but the enormous guardian continued advancing.

“There's something inside it!” Lyra shouted.

She pointed toward the crystalline heart.

“Something that doesn't belong!”

Tovin lifted his lantern.

The flame bent toward the Sentinel.

Within its chest, the violet thread twisted like a living worm.

“It's being controlled!”

The Sentinel swept its halberd across the courtyard.

Seren ducked beneath the weapon, but the force of its passage knocked her from her feet.

Kaelen ran toward her.

A shadow fell across them.

The Sentinel raised its weapon.

Mira stepped between them.

Her shield erupted with golden light.

The halberd descended.

The sound was like thunder trapped inside a cathedral.

Mira dropped to one knee.

Cracks appeared across the stones beneath her boots.

“Any time now!” she shouted.

Bram charged.

His hammer struck the Sentinel's knee, sending lightning through its enormous leg. The guardian staggered, its weapon slipping against Mira's shield.

Seren regained her feet.

She climbed the fallen masonry, leapt onto the Sentinel's arm, and drove one crescent blade into the gap beneath its shoulder.

The guardian roared.

Lyra vanished beneath her cloak.

A moment later, she appeared upon its back.

“The key!” Tovin shouted. “Try the key!”

Lyra reached toward a narrow opening behind the guardian's neck.

The Moonkey changed shape in her hand.

She inserted it.

Ancient mechanisms began to turn.

The Sentinel froze.

“Kaelen!” Tovin cried.

The plates surrounding the crystalline heart slowly opened.

Inside, the violet darkness writhed against the blue light.

Kaelen raised his bow.

He drew the string.

Then hesitated.

Within the crystal, he could see something moving.

Not the darkness.

Something beneath it.

An image of a man wearing bronze armor, standing beside a woman and two small children.

The image vanished.

Another appeared.

The same man kneeling before the fortress gate.

Another.

The man surrounded by blue light as his body became stone.

Kaelen lowered his bow.

“There's someone in there.”

“Kaelen!” Bram shouted.

The Sentinel began to move again.

“Shoot it!”

Kaelen looked at the crystal.

Destroying it might end the battle.

But he could not forget the faces he had seen.

He remembered the open hand carved into the tablet.

Mercy.

“Tovin! Can you separate the darkness from the crystal?”

Tovin stared at him.

“I don't know!”

“Try!”

The scholar raised his lantern with both hands.

Its light stretched toward the Sentinel's chest.

The violet darkness recoiled.

The guardian convulsed, tearing Lyra from its back. She fell, but Seren caught her arm before she struck the ground.

Bram and Mira held the halberd between them.

Kaelen drew his bow again.

This time, he aimed not at the crystal, but at the dark thread pulling away from it.

The arrow flew.

Golden light pierced the darkness.

A scream filled the fortress.

It was not the Sentinel's voice.

It was something older, colder, and infinitely more terrible.

The violet thread shattered.

The guardian's weapon fell.

For several seconds, nobody moved.

Then the enormous figure sank to one knee.

Its crystalline heart glowed with a steady blue light.

When it spoke again, its voice was quieter.

“THE ROAD... IS OPEN.”

The western gate began to rise.

Kaelen lowered his bow.

The Sentinel turned toward him.

“YOU REMEMBERED.”

“Remembered what?”

“THAT A GUARDIAN PROTECTS.”

Its head bowed.

“EVEN FROM ITSELF.”

The light within its armor gradually faded.

The guardian remained kneeling beneath the archway, motionless once more.

Flicker emerged from behind a barrel.

He trotted toward the Sentinel, sniffed its enormous hand, and sat beside it.

Nobody disturbed him.

CHAPTER 02

The Whispering Wood



The trees called Mira by her mother's voice. She stopped so abruptly that Bram collided with her shield. Beyond the roots, a kitchen window glowed in the darkness. Mira could smell bread. Flicker planted its paws and hissed. Lyra asked the voice what Mira had eaten yesterday. It repeated the question in exactly her tone. The window vanished. They followed the glimmerfox to a wounded courier trapped beneath a root. Her name was Nessa, and she clutched a sealed letter addressed to the Hollow Watchtower. Black thorns had grown through her satchel. Seren cut them while Tovin dressed her wound. Nessa warned that the guardian of the Moonbell Shrine had been infected by a splinter of black glass. She gave them a moonbell token and entrusted them with her letter. At a pool of still water, three bells hung from a branch. The bronze bell reflected roots; the silver reflected the moon; the black reflected nothing. An inscription instructed them to honor earth, then moon, and leave shadow to silence. Bram reached toward the black bell, then withdrew his hand.

“For once,” he said, “I can solve something without hitting it.” Bronze rang first, silver second. The pool parted, revealing a roadwarden seal and the route to the watchtower. The clearing rose around them. What they had taken for trees were the limbs of a giant, its bronze joints wrapped in bark. A black splinter pulsed in its chest. The Thornbound Warden lashed out. Roots split the ground beneath Kaelen, and Mira hauled him clear. When the earth began to tremble again, Tovin shouted a warning. Seren ran along a fallen trunk and cut the vines protecting the creature's heart. Bram struck the bronze plate, not the living wood beneath it. The Warden sank to its knees. “Release,” it whispered. Kaelen raised his bow, then lowered it. Lyra used the Moonkey to open the damaged plate. Mira held the guardian steady while Tovin extracted the splinter. The forest exhaled. The Warden placed a living seed in Mira's palm, and the false voices fell silent. At the ancient gate, dawn revealed a solitary tower. Nessa's letter seemed heavier than before.

CHAPTER 03

The Hollow Watchtower



The tower cast a shadow in the wrong direction. At its entrance stood a spectral knight whose armor contained no body. He introduced himself as Edrin and demanded the courier's letter. Lyra noticed that his seal was intact, but his reflection wore the split crown. She asked him to recite the vows. He remembered truth and courage, but could not say mercy. Inside, the heroes found the real Edrin's last watch recorded in a brass cylinder. He had ordered his apprentices to evacuate before Vaelrith's soldiers arrived. The ghost outside was the tower's defense mechanism, repeating a command corrupted by the Ash Crown. Tovin found six speaking tubes and realized that the tower had once transmitted messages between islands. Nessa's letter contained a list of missing villages, not military orders. The Hollow Knight pursued them up the spiral stairs. Mira refused to strike until the others had cleared the landing. Seren cut the ropes holding a fallen signal mirror, and Kaelen aimed its reflected moonlight at the knight. Its shadow separated from its armor. Bram

shattered the shadow's anchor while Lyra inserted the roadwarden seal into the command console. The knight knelt, finally able to speak the third vow. A signal flashed toward the River of Glass. The tower's log revealed that Vaelrith was collecting names of people who remembered the old roads. The heroes sent Nessa a reply by signal light and promised Edrin they would carry the list. His empty armor stood at attention as they left. Mira saluted him. The tower's shadow turned toward the sun.

Recovered expanded manuscript

By the time the companions reached the foot of the hill, Nessa could barely walk.

She had insisted that her injury was improving, but Kaelen had noticed the increasing weight she placed upon her walking staff. Her breathing had become shallow, and twice during the final stretch of road, she had stopped without offering an explanation.

Bram noticed it too.

“That's enough.”

Nessa looked at him.

“Excuse me?”

He handed his pack to Seren and crouched in front of the courier.

“Climb on.”

“I'm perfectly capable of walking.”

“I'm perfectly capable of carrying you. One of us is going to have to be disappointed.”

Nessa looked toward Mira for support.

Mira shook her head.

“Don't look at me. I told you to rest an hour ago.”

With considerable reluctance, Nessa climbed onto Bram's back.

“If you drop me, I'll make your life miserable.”

“Get in line.”

Seren laughed and continued up the hill.

Kaelen followed, studying the watchtower as it gradually emerged from the evening mist.

It was considerably larger than it had appeared from the forest. Its circular foundation occupied nearly the entire summit, surrounded by the remains of a defensive wall. A narrow staircase wound upward through terraces where soldiers had once cultivated gardens.

Nothing grew there now.

The soil was gray, and the branches of several dead trees extended toward the sky like skeletal hands.

At the highest point stood the tower itself.

Its uppermost chamber had collapsed, leaving the structure open to the heavens. Great cracks divided its stonework, and enormous iron supports had been driven into the surrounding hillside to prevent it from falling.

The banner Kaelen had noticed earlier hung above the entrance.

It depicted a silver lantern surrounded by seven golden stars.

Six of the stars had faded.

Only the seventh remained bright.

Tovin stopped to examine it.

“That's different from the symbol at the Watchpost.”

Nessa lifted her head from Bram's shoulder.

“The Hollow Watchtower belonged to the Order of the Unbroken Flame. They weren't soldiers. Not originally.”

“What were they?”

“Historians. Astronomers. Keepers of the old roads.”

Tovin's expression brightened.

“Historians?”

Seren sighed.

“We're never getting him out of there.”

Nessa smiled weakly.

“The Order believed that knowledge should belong to everyone, regardless of which kingdom they served. When the world broke, they began collecting records from the surviving settlements.”

“Then they might know how to get home,” Kaelen said.

“They might.”

He had learned to recognize the uncertainty in those words.

Still, the possibility was enough to quicken his steps.

They reached the entrance shortly before darkness.

An enormous wooden door stood beneath a carved archway. Its surface was scarred by fire, and someone had reinforced it with iron plates of several different sizes.

Nessa knocked three times.

They waited.

She knocked again.

From somewhere above them came the sound of a window opening.

“Go away.”

Nessa looked upward.

“Edrin?”

There was a pause.

“Nessa?”

“Yes.”

“You're late.”

“I was shot.”

Another pause.

“That's a reasonable excuse.”

Several locks began to turn.

The door opened.

Standing beyond it was the oldest-looking man Kaelen had ever seen.

The Keeper of Forgotten Things

Edrin was not particularly tall.

His shoulders were bent, his beard reached nearly to his waist, and his left eye was covered by a patch of faded blue cloth. He wore a collection of robes that appeared to have been assembled from several different garments over the course of many decades.

A pair of spectacles rested precariously upon his nose.

He looked at Nessa.

Then at Bram.

Then at the remaining companions.

Finally, his attention settled upon their relics.

The old man's expression changed.

“Inside,” he said.

Nessa smiled.

“It's good to see you too.”

“Inside. Quickly.”

He ushered them through the doorway and closed it behind them. One by one, he secured the locks.

Then he pressed his palm against a small symbol carved into the wall.

A ripple of golden light traveled across the entrance.

Only when it faded did he turn toward them.

“Who brought you here?”

Kaelen stepped forward.

“The Waykeeper.”

Edrin closed his eyes.

“Oh, that troublesome old fool.”

“You know him?” Tovin asked.

“Unfortunately.”

He began climbing the stairs.

“Bring the girl upstairs. There's a medical chamber on the second floor. And somebody stop that creature from eating my books.”

Everyone turned.

Flicker stood beside a shelf, chewing the corner of a leather-bound volume.

Seren picked him up.

“Apparently he's a scholar too.”

Edrin glared at her.

“That book is older than your civilization.”

Flicker sneezed.

A tiny spark landed upon the cover.

Edrin snatched it away.

“Upstairs!”

The interior of the watchtower was unlike anything Kaelen had imagined.

Books occupied nearly every available surface.

They filled shelves, cupboards, stairways, and wooden crates. Some were bound in leather, others in metal, and several appeared to have covers made from materials Kaelen could not identify.

Maps hung from the walls.

One depicted a world of enormous continents connected by golden roads. Another showed the same world fractured into hundreds of floating islands.

Between the books stood strange instruments.

There were brass spheres that rotated without assistance, glass containers filled with miniature storms, and a collection of clocks whose hands moved in different directions.

Tovin had stopped speaking entirely.

He stood in the middle of the chamber with his mouth slightly open.

Seren waved a hand in front of his face.

“Still with us?”

“Look at this place.”

“Yes, lots of books.”

“Those aren't just books. Some of these could contain records of entire civilizations.”

“Wonderful. Try not to marry the furniture.”

Edrin led them into a smaller chamber containing a bed, a washbasin, and shelves of carefully labeled jars.

Bram lowered Nessa onto the mattress.

The old man examined her wound.

“Restoration arrows?”

Nessa nodded.

“Thought so.”

He retrieved several jars and began mixing their contents.

Mira watched closely.

“Can you heal her?”

“I can help her heal. There's a difference.”

He glanced at the Aegis of Dawn.

“And one you would do well to remember.”

Mira looked down at her shield.

Edrin cleaned the wound and applied a thick green paste before wrapping Nessa's leg in fresh linen.

She grimaced.

“That smells terrible.”

“Good medicine frequently does.”

“Does it have to?”

“No. I just enjoy complaining patients.”

Nessa laughed.

For the first time since finding her in the forest, Kaelen saw her visibly relax.

She trusted this man.

That was enough for him to lower his guard, though not entirely.

When Edrin finished, Nessa reached toward Kaelen.

“The letter.”

Kaelen removed it from his pack.

The old man accepted the parchment.

He studied the green wax seal.

Then he looked at Nessa.

“Did anyone else see this?”

“Commander Edran knows I have it.”

Edrin's hand became still.

“Edran?”

“He intercepted us outside the forest.”

The old man walked toward the window.

Far below, the road disappeared into the gathering darkness.

“Then we have less time than I hoped.”

He broke the seal.

As he read, his expression grew increasingly grave.

Tovin stepped forward.

“What does it say?”

Edrin did not answer immediately.

He read the letter a second time.

Then a third.

Finally, he placed it upon the table.

“It says that the dead are beginning to come home.”

CHAPTER 04

The River of Glass



The river looked solid until a silver fish passed beneath its surface. On the far bank, a ferryman named Oren waited beside a boat with no oars. He explained that the river carried reflections rather than water. Anyone who fell in might emerge remembering somebody else's life. His ferry was tethered to a crystal anchor that had cracked during the last storm. Tovin wanted to study the fracture. Seren wanted to leap across. Kaelen made them listen to Oren, who had ferried travelers for forty years. Together they repaired the anchor with a thread of light from the Starstring Bow. Halfway across, the river reared into the shape of a serpent, its scales reflecting six different childhoods. It offered each hero a perfect memory in exchange for the Waystone. Bram saw his father cheering for him and nearly stepped overboard. Lyra caught his wrist. “A memory is not a promise,” she said. The Glasscoil struck the ferry. Mira braced against its jaws while Seren sliced the reflections tethering it to the anchor. Tovin turned his lantern inward, illuminating the real boat

beneath its false images. Kaelen fired at the one scale that reflected nothing. The serpent broke into harmless rain. Oren ferried them ashore and gave them a glass compass that pointed toward remembered places. On the bank, they found a child's shoe and a signpost whose letters had been scraped away. The missing village was close. Bram thanked Lyra without making a joke, and she pretended not to notice how difficult that was for him.

Recovered expanded manuscript

Oren had once possessed a house on the opposite bank of the river.

It had been a modest building with a sloping roof, a stone chimney, and a garden that his wife insisted was considerably more important than his occupation. Every spring, she planted yellow flowers beneath the kitchen window. Every summer, he complained that their roots were damaging the foundations.

He would have given anything to complain about those flowers again.

Instead, he stood inside the Last Shore, staring at six strangers who carried the weapons of legends and spoke of returning home as though home were something the world could be persuaded to return.

“You don't understand what you're asking,” he said.

Kaelen remained beside him.

“Then help us understand.”

Oren studied the young man for a moment.

There was something irritating about his determination. It reminded the ferryman of a person he had spent years trying to forget.

Himself.

“Come outside.”

They followed him through a narrow doorway at the rear of the tavern. Beyond it, wooden steps descended toward a private dock.

Oren pointed across the river.

“Do you see that island?”

Kaelen followed his gesture.

A small island rose from the mist. Its rocky shoreline supported several abandoned buildings and the remains of a lighthouse.

“Yes.”

“Yesterday, it was on this side of the river.”

Tovin adjusted his spectacles.

“The island moved?”

“The river moved around it.”

“That's not possible.”

Oren looked at him.

“You're standing beneath two moons, carrying a lantern that burns without fuel, and you're telling me what's possible?”

Tovin opened his mouth, reconsidered, and closed it again.

“The river changes,” Oren continued. “Not just its course. Its depth, its length, sometimes even where it leads. There are mornings when I can cross it in twenty minutes. There are evenings when I sail for hours and never move beyond sight of this dock.”

Mira watched the motionless water.

“How do you navigate it?”

Oren reached into his coat and withdrew a circular instrument.

It resembled a compass, though its needle was made from transparent crystal.

“By remembering where I'm going.”

Kaelen frowned.

“Remembering?”

“The river connects places through memories. The old bridges were built upon that principle. A strong enough memory can give you direction

when everything else fails.”

He returned the instrument to his pocket.

“But something has been interfering with those memories. Something that wasn't here before.”

Flicker growled softly from Bram's shoulder.

Oren glanced at him.

“Even your little friend can sense it.”

Kaelen looked toward the opposite shore.

“What's beneath the river?”

The ferryman's expression darkened.

“Something that remembers being hungry.”

The Ferryman's Bargain

The companions returned to the tavern as evening settled over the valley.

The woman behind the counter introduced herself as Hester. She reluctantly agreed to allow Flicker inside after Mira promised to keep him away from the furniture, the food, and anything remotely combustible.

Within five minutes, he had stolen a piece of fish.

Hester watched him disappear beneath the table.

“That's coming out of your supper.”

Bram nodded.

“Seems fair.”

For the first time since arriving in Aetherfall, the companions sat around a proper table with plates of hot food before them.

There was roasted fish, dark bread, vegetables seasoned with unfamiliar herbs, and a thick stew that Bram declared the greatest achievement of Aetherfall's civilization.

Seren lifted her spoon.

“You said that about the Waykeeper's soup.”

“I've grown as a person.”

Across the table, Tovin was attempting to identify several ingredients.

Lyra quietly exchanged her empty plate for his untouched bread.

Kaelen ate slowly.

The warmth of the tavern, the sound of conversation, and the smell of cooking reminded him painfully of home. He found himself watching the families gathered at neighboring tables.

An elderly couple shared a bowl of stew.

A father helped his daughter cut a piece of bread.

Two brothers argued over a wooden game board.

Ordinary lives continued here, despite everything that had happened to the world.

He wondered how many of these people had relatives on the opposite shore.

Oren joined them shortly before the meal ended.

He placed both hands upon the table.

“I'll take you across.”

Everyone stopped eating.

Seren lowered her spoon.

“That was a surprisingly dramatic change of opinion.”

“Don't mistake it for enthusiasm.”

“What changed your mind?” Mira asked.

Oren pulled a chair toward the table.

“There are people stranded on the western bank. Families. Merchants. Children. Nobody has been willing to make the crossing since the last boat disappeared.”

He looked at their relics.

“If anyone has a chance of dealing with what's beneath the river, it's probably you.”

Kaelen nodded.

“We'll help.”

“Don't agree before you've heard the bargain.”

Oren leaned forward.

“You help me discover what's happening to the river. If we survive, I'll take you wherever you need to go on the western shore.”

Bram glanced at the others.

“And if we don't survive?”

“Then I won't charge you.”

Seren smiled.

“Generous.”

Oren did not return the smile.

“There is one more condition.”

He looked directly at Kaelen.

“If you see someone you recognize beneath the water, you do not reach for them. You do not speak to them. You do not leave the boat.”

Kaelen remembered the Whispering Wood.

“We understand.”

“No,” Oren replied. “You don't.”

His voice became quieter.

“But I hope you will.”

A Conversation Beneath Unfamiliar Stars

Seren had never been afraid of heights.

As a child, she climbed trees that other children considered dangerous. As a teenager, she scaled the roof of her family's house whenever she

wanted to escape an argument.

She had broken her wrist twice, her ankle once, and her mother's patience on more occasions than either of them cared to count.

Movement had always been her answer to discomfort.

When things became difficult, she ran.

When people asked questions she did not want to answer, she made jokes.

When someone grew too close, she found somewhere else to be.

It had worked remarkably well until she found herself trapped in another world with five people who seemed determined to care about her.

That evening, she climbed onto the roof of the Last Shore.

The stars were beginning to appear, though she recognized none of their patterns.

She sat beside the chimney, enjoying the warmth rising through the bricks.

“Thought I'd find you up here.”

She looked down.

Bram stood upon a ladder leaning against the building.

“Go away.”

“Fair enough.”

He continued climbing.

“That's a strange interpretation of go away.”

“I'm complicated.”

He reached the roof and sat beside her.

For several minutes, they watched the river.

“Do you ever stop joking?” Bram asked.

Seren considered the question.

“Occasionally. Usually when I'm asleep.”

“I'm serious.”

“That's unfortunate.”

He looked at her.

She sighed.

“What do you want to know?”

“Why you came to the observatory.”

Seren's smile faded.

The question seemed harmless enough.

It wasn't.

“My parents were arguing.”

Bram waited.

“They've been arguing for years. That night was worse than usual.”

She picked at a loose thread upon her sleeve.

“My father had packed a suitcase. My mother was crying. Neither of them seemed to notice I was standing in the hallway.”

She watched the stars.

“So I left.”

“I'm sorry.”

“Don't be. It wasn't the first time.”

“Still.”

She drew her knees toward her chest.

“I saw the light above the observatory and thought it might be something interesting. Something that didn't involve listening to two people explain why they couldn't stand each other anymore.”

Bram said nothing.

“The ridiculous thing is that I spent years wanting to get away from that house.”

Her voice trembled slightly.

“And now I'd give almost anything to hear them arguing in the kitchen.”

Bram looked toward the river.

“Maybe they're worried about you together.”

Seren laughed quietly.

“Wouldn't that be something?”

For a while, they sat without speaking.

Then Bram reached into his pocket and produced a small wooden object.

It was a roughly carved horse.

One of its legs was noticeably shorter than the others.

Seren examined it.

“What's that?”

“Something I made when I was nine.”

“You carry it around?”

“Sometimes.”

“Why?”

“My dad helped me carve it.”

Bram turned it over in his hands.

“I wanted to throw it away because it didn't look right. He told me that if I only kept the things I made perfectly, I'd spend my entire life surrounded by nothing.”

Seren smiled.

“Your dad sounds smarter than you.”

“Most people are.”

She laughed.

He placed the wooden horse back into his pocket.

“We're going to get home, Seren.”

She looked at him.

“You can't know that.”

“No.”

He leaned back against the chimney.

“But I can choose to believe it.”

Seren returned her attention to the sky.

For once, she did not have a clever response.

She simply rested her head against his shoulder.

And stayed.

The Crossing

They departed shortly before sunrise.

Oren's boat was called the Wayfarer's Hope, although Seren privately suggested that the name was dangerously optimistic.

Its hull was made from dark wood, reinforced with silver bands. A single mast supported a pale blue sail, and dozens of small bells hung beneath its railing.

Oren moved about the deck with practiced efficiency.

“Those bells will warn us if the river changes.”

Tovin examined one.

“How?”

“By ringing.”

“Yes, but what causes—”

“Please don't make me regret this before we've left.”

Bram helped load the supplies while Mira assisted an elderly couple who had been waiting nearly two weeks for passage to the western shore.

Their names were Alden and Ruth.

They carried two small bags and a wooden box containing gifts for their grandchildren.

“We promised we'd visit before the harvest,” Ruth explained.

Alden smiled.

“She's been reminding me every morning.”

“Because you'd forget.”

“I wouldn't.”

“You forgot our anniversary.”

“That was twenty years ago.”

“And yet I remember it perfectly.”

Seren grinned.

Kaelen helped them settle beneath the covered section of the boat.

He looked toward the dock.

Hester stood beside the mooring post.

“Bring my brother back,” she called.

Kaelen turned toward Oren.

“Your sister?”

“Unfortunately.”

Hester folded her arms.

“I heard that.”

Oren smiled for the first time.

Then he released the rope.

The boat moved away from the dock.

There was no splash beneath its hull.

No wake followed it.

The settlement gradually disappeared into the mist.

For several minutes, the companions watched the shoreline recede.

Then Tovin looked over the side.

“That's extraordinary.”

Beneath the boat lay an entire city.

Its streets stretched into impossible depths. Towers rose from the darkness, their windows illuminated by golden light. Figures moved between buildings, carrying baskets, leading horses, and gathering beneath market stalls.

It appeared perfectly ordinary.

Except that it existed beneath the surface of a river.

Kaelen leaned closer.

“Is that real?”

Oren adjusted the sail.

“Once.”

“What happened to it?”

“The breaking.”

Tovin watched the submerged streets.

“Are those people memories?”

“Probably.”

“Probably?”

“Would you prefer I lie?”

The scholar shook his head.

The boat continued across the city.

A procession moved through one of the streets below. Musicians played instruments that produced no sound. Children ran beside a decorated carriage.

Then the image changed.

The city disappeared.

In its place stood a forest covered in snow.

Another moment passed.

The forest became an enormous desert beneath a red sun.

The river contained fragments of places that no longer existed.

Or perhaps places that existed somewhere else.

Kaelen began to understand why the old roads had been so extraordinary.

He also began to understand why their destruction had been so devastating.

Beneath the Surface

The first bell rang shortly after midday.

Oren immediately stopped speaking.

A second bell answered.

Then a third.

The sail collapsed despite the steady wind.

The ferryman withdrew his crystal compass.

Its needle spun rapidly.

“Everyone sit down.”

Mira looked toward the water.

“What's happening?”

“The river has noticed us.”

Bram frowned.

“I preferred it when rivers didn't do that.”

Oren grasped the steering oar.

The boat began to turn.

There was still no visible current, yet the surrounding landscape shifted with alarming speed.

The distant shoreline disappeared.

Mist gathered around the vessel.

Tovin raised his lantern.

Blue light spread across the deck.

Then Ruth screamed.

She stood beside the railing, pointing toward the water.

“That's him!”

Alden seized her arm.

“Ruth!”

Beneath the surface stood a young man wearing a brown traveling coat.

He smiled.

“Mother?”

Ruth began to cry.

“My son.”

Oren abandoned the steering oar and rushed toward her.

“Don't look at him.”

“He's alive!”

“That's not your son.”

The young man reached upward.

His fingers appeared to press against the underside of the water.

“Mother, please.”

Ruth struggled against Alden.

“He needs me!”

Mira wrapped both arms around her.

“Ruth, listen to me.”

“Let go!”

The image beneath the water became increasingly clear.

Kaelen could see the young man's face, the stitching upon his coat, even the small scar beneath his chin.

Alden turned away, tears running down his cheeks.

“Our son died twelve years ago.”

The young man looked toward him.

“Father?”

Alden closed his eyes.

“That's not him.”

The figure struck the underside of the surface.

A crack appeared.

Then another.

Oren dragged Ruth away from the railing.

“Everyone back!”

The young man's face changed.

His smile widened.

His fingers lengthened.

The image dissolved into a mass of pale scales.

Something enormous moved beneath the boat.

The bells began ringing together.

The Glasscoil

The creature rose without breaking the surface.

Its head emerged from the river as though passing through a sheet of invisible glass. Its enormous body followed, winding upward through the mist.

It resembled a serpent, though its scales were transparent, revealing streams of silver light moving beneath them. Jagged fins extended along its spine, and its eyes contained shifting images of unfamiliar faces.

The boat tilted.

Bram caught Alden before he fell.

Mira pushed Ruth beneath the covered section of the deck.

Oren shouted something about the sail.

Nobody heard him.

The serpent opened its mouth.

From within came the voices of dozens of people.

Children.

Parents.

Friends.

The dead.

The missing.

All speaking at once.

Kaelen heard his father's voice among them.

He summoned Starstring.

The Glasscoil struck.

Its enormous body swept across the mast, splintering the upper section and tearing the sail free.

Seren threw herself flat against the deck.

Tovin's lantern rolled toward the railing.

Lyra caught it.

“Here!”

She returned it to him as the boat lurched again.

Bram raised Thunderbrand.

The serpent's head descended.

Mira intercepted it with her shield.

Golden light burst across the deck.

The impact forced her backward, but Bram caught her before she struck the mast.

Kaelen drew his bow.

He released an arrow toward the creature's eye.

The arrow passed through its transparent scales and emerged from the opposite side.

“That's not good.”

Seren attacked as the serpent swept past the railing.

Her blades passed through its body without resistance.

“That's considerably worse!”

Oren seized the steering oar.

“It's not entirely here!”

Tovin looked at him.

“What does that mean?”

“It's traveling between reflections!”

The Glasscoil disappeared beneath the water.

Its image remained visible below them, circling the boat.

Then a second image appeared.

And a third.

Soon the river contained dozens of identical serpents.

Bram stared over the railing.

“Which one's real?”

Oren shook his head.

“That's the problem.”

The next attack came from beneath the boat.

The hull rose several feet before crashing back onto the river.

A section of the railing shattered.

Alden lost his footing.

Kaelen lunged forward and caught his wrist.

For one terrible moment, the old man hung above the water.

Beneath him, the face of his dead son appeared.

“Father.”

Alden looked down.

Kaelen tightened his grip.

“Don't.”

The old man's expression twisted with grief.

“I miss him.”

“I know.”

The reflection reached upward.

“Father, come home.”

Alden closed his eyes.

“That's not my boy.”

Bram seized the old man's coat and pulled him back onto the deck.

Mira helped him toward Ruth.

Kaelen remained beside the broken railing.

The reflection looked at him.

Its face changed.

His father stood beneath the surface.

Kaelen stepped backward.

“No.”

The figure smiled.

“You're learning.”

Then it disappeared.

A cold sensation spread through Kaelen's chest.

That voice had been different.

Not desperate.

Not pleading.

Almost amused.

Something was watching them through the river.

Something that understood they were beginning to resist.

The Woman in the Lighthouse

Oren struggled with the steering oar.

The boat had begun moving toward a dark shape emerging from the mist.

A rocky island.

Upon its highest point stood an abandoned lighthouse.

Oren's face changed.

“No.”

Tovin followed his gaze.

“What is it?”

The ferryman stared at the lighthouse.

“No. Not here.”

The boat continued drifting toward the island.

A small house appeared beside the tower.

Yellow flowers grew beneath its kitchen window.

Oren released the steering oar.

A woman stood upon the shoreline.

She wore a blue dress and carried a basket of flowers.

When she saw the boat, she waved.

“Oren!”

The ferryman gripped the railing.

Kaelen watched his expression.

“Who is that?”

Oren did not answer.

The woman moved closer to the water.

“You're late again.”

Her voice was warm, affectionate, and gently irritated.

Oren's lips trembled.

“Lena.”

Kaelen remembered the ferryman's warning.

He stepped beside him.

“Oren, don't.”

The man barely seemed to hear.

“My wife.”

The woman placed the basket upon the stones.

“I've made supper.”

Oren moved toward the side of the boat.

Kaelen caught his arm.

“It's not her.”

The ferryman turned upon him.

“You don't know that!”

The words emerged with such anger that Kaelen released his grip.

For a moment, he saw himself standing before the northern fence in the Whispering Wood.

He remembered Lyra refusing to let him follow his mother's voice.

He remembered how much he had hated her for it.

And how grateful he had been afterward.

“How long?” Kaelen asked.

Oren looked toward the woman.

“Seven years.”

“What happened?”

“The river took her.”

The woman smiled.

“Come home, Oren.”

The ferryman began to cry.

“I searched everywhere. Every crossing. Every island.”

Kaelen stood beside him.

“Tell me about her.”

Oren looked at him.

“What?”

“Your wife. Tell me about her.”

The woman upon the shore called again.

Oren swallowed.

“She hated fishing.”

Kaelen nodded.

“What else?”

“She loved flowers. Terrible singer. Couldn't carry a tune if you put handles on it.”

He laughed through his tears.

“She used to put too much sugar in my tea.”

The image upon the shore flickered.

Oren continued.

“She was stubborn. Always had to have the last word. Once made me sleep in the boat because I forgot to repair the kitchen door.”

Kaelen smiled.

“She sounds wonderful.”

“She was.”

The woman stopped smiling.

Her expression became strangely empty.

Oren stared at her.

Then he shook his head.

“My Lena would never ask me to abandon passengers.”

The shoreline began to dissolve.

The yellow flowers vanished.

The lighthouse collapsed into mist.

The woman's face twisted.

A terrible cry emerged from the river.

Oren seized the steering oar.

“Hold on!”

The Glasscoil erupted beside the boat.

The Broken Anchor

Tovin had been watching the creature's movements.

While the others struggled to remain upright, he noticed that each time the serpent appeared, a brief pulse of violet light traveled through the river beneath it.

The pulses always originated from the same direction.

“Tovin!” Mira shouted.

He pointed toward the water.

“There's something down there!”

Oren glanced over the railing.

A faint shape lay beneath the surface.

An enormous stone structure rested among the submerged ruins of a bridge.

At its center, a violet crystal pulsed.

Dark chains extended from it, disappearing into the surrounding reflections.

“The old anchor,” Oren whispered.

“You recognize it?” Tovin asked.

“It stabilized the bridge before the breaking.”

Tovin raised his lantern.

Within its light, the chains became visible.

Several were wrapped around the Glasscoil's enormous body.

The creature was not simply attacking the boat.

It was tethered to the corrupted anchor.

Every movement pulled the chains tighter.

Kaelen looked at the serpent.

“It's trapped.”

Mira stared into the water.

“Can we release it?”

Oren shook his head.

“Nobody can survive beneath that surface.”

Lyra removed the Moonkey.

Its silver light reflected across the deck.

“Perhaps we don't need to go beneath it.”

She knelt beside the railing.

The key began changing shape.

A narrow silver line extended from its tip toward the submerged anchor.

The river trembled.

For an instant, the reflections disappeared.

The true shape of the Glasscoil became visible.

Its body was covered in wounds where the chains had cut through its crystalline scales.

Its enormous eyes no longer contained human faces.

They contained fear.

Bram lowered his hammer.

“Poor thing.”

The creature struck again.

“Very large poor thing!”

Mira caught its descending head against her shield.

“Whatever you're doing, Lyra, keep doing it!”

Lyra pressed the Moonkey against the surface.

Silver light spread outward.

The river parted.

Not like ordinary water.

It unfolded in enormous transparent layers, revealing the submerged bridge beneath them.

Tovin directed his lantern toward the anchor.

The violet crystal became visible.

Kaelen summoned Starstring.

“Can I reach it?”

“Not yet!” Tovin shouted.

The dark chains tightened.

The Glasscoil screamed.

Oren steered the damaged boat toward the opening.

Seren balanced upon the railing, watching the chains.

“Bram!”

He looked at her.

“Can you break those?”

He examined the nearest chain as it rose from the exposed ruins.

“Only one way to find out.”

He swung Thunderbrand.

Lightning erupted across the river.

The first chain shattered.

The Glasscoil recoiled.

Seren leapt onto a section of the submerged bridge that had risen above the surface. Her blades flashed against the second chain, severing the dark strands surrounding it.

The creature twisted violently.

Lyra cried out.

The Moonkey began pulling against her hand.

Tovin grabbed her shoulder.

“Hold it!”

“I'm trying!”

Mira stood at the edge of the deck, shielding them from fragments of broken crystal.

Oren fought to keep the boat steady.

Kaelen drew his bow.

The corrupted anchor pulsed again.

He saw the dark crystal clearly.

He released.

The arrow struck.

A crack appeared.

He drew another.

The Glasscoil turned toward him.

Within its enormous eye, Kaelen saw his father's face one final time.

“Don't.”

Kaelen hesitated.

The reflection smiled.

“Don't leave me again.”

He remembered the coat he had given to the Warden.

He remembered the warmth of his father's hand guiding his own across the bowstring.

He remembered that love was not a thing the darkness could reproduce merely by wearing a familiar face.

“You're not him.”

He released the arrow.

The crystal shattered.

The river erupted into light.

The remaining chains dissolved.

The Glasscoil rose above the boat, its enormous body twisting through the air.

For a moment, Kaelen believed it would strike again.

Instead, the creature lifted its head toward the sky.

Its transparent scales caught the sunlight, scattering rainbows across the mist.

The violet veins faded.

Silver light returned.

The serpent lowered its head until its enormous eye rested beside the boat.

Kaelen stood motionless.

There were no faces within it now.

Only the clear, ancient gaze of a living creature.

Flicker climbed onto the railing.

He chirped.

The Glasscoil responded with a low, musical sound that vibrated through the deck.

Then it turned.

Its body slipped beneath the surface.

For the first time since the companions had seen the river, ripples spread across the water.

Oren stared.

The boat began to drift naturally.

The bells became silent.

A breeze filled the remains of the sail.

Tovin slowly lowered his lantern.

“We did it.”

Bram sat down.

“I need a holiday.”

Seren climbed back aboard.

“You're technically traveling.”

“I need a different kind of traveling.”

Mira laughed.

It was the sound of exhaustion, relief, and disbelief.

Oren remained beside the steering oar.

He watched the water for a long time.

Then he removed his hat.

“Goodbye, Lena.”

The river carried them onward.

CHAPTER 05

The Forgotten Village



Every house had a table set for supper, but nobody could remember the names of the people sitting at them. The villagers called themselves Baker, Miller, Child. A woman offered the heroes bread and asked whether they knew who she was. Nessa's list contained the answer: Elowen. When Mira spoke it, the woman wept. A Name-Eater haunted the village square, gathering the names that escaped from mouths as wisps of light. Its power came from a ledger nailed beneath the old well. Lyra and Seren descended into the damp chamber while the others distracted the creature. They found the ledger filled with names crossed out in red, including those of the six heroes, written before their arrival. The wraith descended on the square. Tovin's lantern could illuminate the stolen names, but only their owners could reclaim them. Kaelen called out the list while Mira shielded the villagers. Bram struck the well's iron cover to break the ledger's binding. The creature tried to swallow the final name, and Seren cut the red thread that held it. A hundred voices rose at

once. Elowen gave them a loaf wrapped in cloth and told them that Vaelrith's collectors had taken a roadwarden north. The village offered shelter. That night the heroes learned that the relics had chosen them because they could remember one another across worlds. Kaelen wrote all six names in the journal. He added Flicker, then Edrin, Nessa, Oren and Elowen. No one, he decided, should be reduced to a blank space.

CHAPTER 06

The Keeper’s Warning



The Waykeeper waited beside a ruined mountain arch. He had a name, he admitted: Auren. Once he had served beside Vaelrith, building bridges that joined distant worlds. The crossings had brought trade, friendship and knowledge, until an intelligence called the Unremembered discovered that it could travel through the memories carried by travelers. Vaelrith had ordered the roads severed. Auren had helped him. But when the danger passed, Vaelrith refused to reopen them. He believed only a single ruler could keep the worlds safe. Auren had stolen the Waystone and hidden it in the observatory on Earth. The star had called the six because the relics required six independent wills, not one master. Mira was furious. “You brought us here without asking.” Auren did not deny it. He offered them a choice: return to the village and wait for a safer crossing, or seek the first shard knowing the risk. They argued until dawn. Bram wanted home; Seren wanted answers; Lyra wanted to know why her name had been in the ledger. They chose to continue, but

demanded that Auren never again conceal a choice from them. He showed them a map of seven anchor sites. The first lay in the Temple of the Dawnwardens. The second was hidden beneath Emberfall; the third rested in a dragon's keeping. Four more anchored the central realm. He warned them that the shards were not weapons. They were agreements made solid. Auren left to warn the other guardians. This time, the six followed the road because they had chosen it.

Recovered expanded manuscript

For a long moment, Kaelen believed he had misunderstood.

He looked from Auren to the enormous gateway, searching for some explanation that would make the old man's confession less terrible than it sounded.

“You brought us here?”

Auren nodded.

“Deliberately?”

“Yes.”

The answer was almost a whisper.

Kaelen felt something rising within him that he could neither identify nor control.

He remembered the northern field. His mother's kitchen. The fence he had been repairing on the evening the impossible star appeared.

He remembered every moment since entering the observatory.

Every battle.

Every sleepless night.

Every promise he had made to himself that he would somehow find his way home.

And now the man responsible stood before him.

“Send us back.”

Auren lowered his eyes.

“I cannot.”

“Then open the gateway.”

“It no longer functions.”

“Fix it!”

Kaelen's voice echoed through the chamber.

Flicker retreated behind Mira's legs.

Auren did not move.

“The crossing that brought you here consumed the last of this gateway's power. Until the Great Crossing is restored, there is no way to reverse what I have done.”

Kaelen stepped toward him.

“You knew that?”

Auren remained silent.

“You knew we wouldn't be able to return?”

“Yes.”

Kaelen struck him.

The sound of his fist against the old man's face seemed impossibly loud.

Auren stumbled backward, catching himself against his staff.

Mira seized Kaelen's arm.

“Stop!”

He pulled away from her.

“He took us from our families!”

“I know!”

“He knew what he was doing!”

“I know, Kaelen!”

Her voice broke.

And suddenly he understood that she was not defending Auren.

She was trying desperately to control the same anger.

Bram stood beside the gateway, his hands clenched.

Tovin stared at the floor.

Seren had turned away entirely.

Only Lyra continued looking directly at the Waykeeper.

“Tell us everything,” she said.

Auren touched the blood at the corner of his mouth.

Then he nodded.

“You deserve nothing less.”

The World Before the Breaking

Auren led them into an adjoining chamber.

Its walls were covered with enormous paintings depicting the history of Aetherfall. Although the colors had faded, the images remained astonishingly detailed.

The first showed a city beneath a brilliant sky.

Its streets were filled with people wearing clothing from dozens of different cultures. Strange animals walked beside ordinary horses. Towers rose above gardens filled with plants from distant worlds.

At the city's center stood an enormous circular structure.

The Great Crossing.

Auren approached the painting.

“Before the breaking, Aetherfall was not merely a kingdom or a collection of kingdoms. It was a meeting place.”

He gestured toward the painted gateway.

“Travelers came from worlds that had never known one another existed. Scholars exchanged knowledge. Merchants traded goods. Families

separated by impossible distances could be reunited."

Tovin examined the painting.

"Did people from Earth ever come here?"

"Yes."

The answer surprised everyone.

"Your world was among the earliest destinations discovered. There are records of travelers crossing between our realms long before the rise of your modern civilizations."

"Then why doesn't anyone remember?" Tovin asked.

"Some did. Their accounts became legends. Stories of enchanted forests, hidden kingdoms, mysterious creatures, and doorways into other worlds."

Seren looked at the painting.

"So our fairy tales might have been real?"

"Some of them."

Auren moved toward the next image.

It depicted seven people standing around a table.

Six wore the familiar relics.

The seventh was Eira.

"The guardians were established to protect the roads. Their authority was considerable, but it was never intended to be absolute."

He pointed toward a figure carrying a lantern.

"That was me."

Tovin looked at the Lantern of Wonders.

"This belonged to you?"

"Yes."

Auren smiled faintly.

"I was considerably younger when I carried it."

Tovin stared at the old man with an expression of profound disappointment.

Until that moment, he had privately imagined the original bearer of his relic as a great scholar whose accomplishments he might someday hope to equal.

Now he was looking at a man who had stolen him from his family.

Auren continued.

“Vaelrith carried the Crown of Passage. It allowed him to establish new roads and maintain connections between distant worlds.”

He pointed toward Eira.

“His sister possessed no relic. She was a historian, a diplomat, and perhaps the wisest among us.”

“What happened to her?” Lyra asked.

Auren's expression darkened.

“That is where our story becomes difficult.”

He moved toward the third painting.

Unlike the others, much of it had been destroyed.

Deep scratches covered its surface.

Yet Kaelen could still distinguish a circular gateway surrounded by darkness.

“The Unremembered was discovered during an expedition beyond the known roads. At first, we believed it was simply an unusual form of energy.”

Auren rested both hands upon his staff.

“We were wrong.”

The First Mistake

The expedition had been Vaelrith's idea.

He believed the roads could extend farther than anyone had imagined. Beyond the known worlds lay countless possibilities, and he was determined to discover them.

Auren remembered the excitement of those early days.

He remembered working beside Vaelrith until sunrise, surrounded by calculations and maps.

He remembered Eira bringing them food because neither man could be trusted to remember ordinary necessities.

He remembered the laughter.

The arguments.

The extraordinary certainty that they were doing something good.

Then came the first failed expedition.

Three travelers disappeared beyond an unstable crossing.

Months later, one returned.

His name was Damar.

He remembered his family, his occupation, and every detail of his life before the expedition.

Yet he behaved strangely.

He rarely slept.

He seemed fascinated by photographs, portraits, letters, and personal belongings.

He asked people to describe their happiest memories.

And wherever he traveled, others began forgetting things.

“At first, we thought he had been injured,” Auren explained. “Perhaps the crossing had damaged his mind.”

He looked toward the broken painting.

“Then his wife disappeared.”

Mira frowned.

“What happened to her?”

“We found no body. No evidence of violence. But within days, her neighbors began forgetting that she had ever existed.”

Auren paused.

“Eventually, even her own children could no longer remember her.”

Kaelen thought of Willowmere.

“The same thing Malrec was doing.”

“Yes.”

Auren nodded.

“Damar had brought something back with him. Or perhaps what returned was never Damar at all.”

Tovin looked toward the damaged painting.

“The Unremembered.”

“We gave it that name because we could find no evidence of its existence before the expedition. It possessed no history, no identity, and no memories of its own.”

Auren's voice became quieter.

“But it hungered for ours.”

The chamber seemed colder.

“It learned through what it consumed. It discovered how to imitate voices, appearances, and emotions. Eventually, it began traveling through the roads themselves.”

“Why didn't you close them?” Bram asked.

“We tried.”

Auren moved toward the final painting.

It depicted the six guardians standing before the Great Crossing.

“By then, millions depended upon the roads. Closing them meant separating families, destroying trade, and isolating entire communities.”

He looked at Kaelen.

“Vaelrith refused to accept that such suffering was necessary.”

“Was he wrong?”

Auren considered the question.

“Not entirely.”

The old man sighed.

“That is what made our disagreement so terrible. Neither side was entirely wrong. Neither side was entirely right.”

The Night the Heavens Broke

The guardians eventually agreed upon a compromise.

They would seal the infected roads while preserving the others.

Auren designed a mechanism capable of separating individual crossings from the Great Crossing itself.

Vaelrith supplied the power.

The remaining guardians established protective barriers around the affected regions.

Eira supervised the evacuation.

For several weeks, the plan appeared to succeed.

Then, on the final morning, something went wrong.

Auren remembered standing beneath the enormous gateway as warning bells began ringing throughout the capital.

He remembered the sky turning white.

He remembered Vaelrith shouting that the crossings were collapsing.

And he remembered Eira running toward the gateway.

“She discovered that thousands of travelers remained trapped between worlds,” Auren said.

“She believed she could reach them.”

“Could she?” Mira asked.

“Perhaps.”

Auren closed his eyes.

“We never found out.”

He leaned heavily upon his staff.

“I activated the separation mechanism before she returned.”

Kaelen stared at him.

“You left her there?”

“I believed that if I waited any longer, the Unremembered would reach every connected world.”

“Did Vaelrith know?”

“He begged me to wait.”

Auren looked toward the ruined painting.

“I refused.”

For a moment, nobody spoke.

Then Lyra asked the question that had been troubling her since the watchtower.

“What did the original Veilwalker do?”

Auren looked at her Moonkey.

“She sealed the gateway.”

“On your orders?”

“Yes.”

Lyra lowered her head.

The Hollow Knight's accusation returned to her.

You opened the gate.

Traitor.

Auren continued.

“The separation mechanism failed. Instead of isolating the infected crossings, it shattered the entire network. The force of that collapse tore Aetherfall apart.”

His voice trembled.

“Cities fell. Mountains broke. Time itself became unstable.”

He looked at the six companions.

“And Eira never returned.”

Kaelen thought about Commander Edran standing upon the battlements as his family's village disappeared.

He thought about the fractured moon.

The abandoned settlements.

The corrupted guardians.

All of it had begun with people who believed they were doing the right thing.

The realization was more frightening than any story about an evil ruler destroying the world.

“Then Vaelrith was telling the truth,” Kaelen said.

“About some things.”

Auren nodded.

“He has committed terrible acts since that day. But his anger toward me is justified.”

“Why didn't you tell us?”

The old man looked down.

“Because I feared you would see me as he does.”

Seren laughed bitterly.

“Congratulations. You've managed to make that happen anyway.”

Six Lives Stolen

Mira walked toward the center of the chamber.

“Why us?”

Auren looked at her.

“The original guardians are gone. Their relics remained dormant for centuries. I believed that new bearers might succeed where we failed.”

“That doesn't explain why you chose us.”

“No.”

He took a deep breath.

“The relics themselves helped identify possible bearers. I used the observatory gateway to search for people whose qualities resembled those the relics were created to serve.”

Tovin frowned.

“You searched our world?”

“Yes.”

“How long?”

“Several years.”

Kaelen felt sick.

“You were watching us?”

“Not in the manner you imagine. I could perceive certain moments. Decisions. Memories. The relics responded to those things.”

Auren turned toward Mira.

“Your willingness to protect others.”

Toward Bram.

“Your strength, particularly when used to help rather than dominate.”

Toward Tovin.

“Your curiosity and desire to understand.”

Toward Seren.

“Your courage to move forward when others hesitate.”

Toward Lyra.

“Your ability to recognize possibilities hidden from others.”

Finally, he looked at Kaelen.

“And your compassion.”

Kaelen shook his head.

“Don't.”

Auren stopped.

“Don't make this sound like some wonderful honor.”

His hands trembled.

“You didn't choose heroes. You chose people who had no idea what was happening.”

Auren nodded.

“Yes.”

“My mother could be looking for me right now.”

“I know.”

“Mira's brother could be wondering why she abandoned him.”

“I know.”

“Then why didn't you ask?”

The old man opened his mouth.

No answer came.

Lyra watched him carefully.

“Because we might have said no.”

Auren closed his eyes.

“Yes.”

The single word seemed to settle over the entire chamber.

Bram turned away.

Seren walked toward the doorway.

Tovin sat upon the nearest stone bench.

Mira stared at the floor.

Kaelen looked at the man who had once offered them soup beside a fire and promised to help them find their way home.

He had trusted him.

That was what hurt most.

The Breaking of the Fellowship

They left Auren in the chamber.

Beyond the mountain passage lay a sheltered valley containing the remains of an ancient sanctuary. Auren had prepared food, blankets, and several rooms where travelers could rest.

Nobody thanked him.

Bram walked toward the far end of the valley and began striking a dead tree with Thunderbrand.

Each blow echoed between the cliffs.

Seren disappeared into the ruins.

Lyra sat beneath a stone archway, examining the Moonkey.

Tovin remained near the entrance to the mountain, his notebook closed upon his knees.

Mira attempted to speak with each of them.

Eventually, she found Kaelen beside a stream.

He was throwing stones into the water.

“Your hand is bleeding,” she said.

He looked down.

His knuckles were split.

“I hadn't noticed.”

She sat beside him and began cleaning the wound.

For several minutes, neither spoke.

Finally, Kaelen said, “I shouldn't have hit him.”

“No.”

“I wanted to hit him again.”

“I know.”

He looked at her.

“Why aren't you angry?”

Mira stopped wrapping his hand.

“I'm furious.”

Her voice was so quiet that he almost missed it.

“I've been trying not to think about Daniel. Every time I do, I wonder whether he's frightened, whether he's eating properly, whether he thinks I left because I didn't want to be there anymore.”

She tightened the bandage.

“And now I know someone made that happen deliberately.”

Kaelen lowered his head.

“I'm sorry.”

“It's not your fault.”

He watched the stream.

“What are we supposed to do?”

Mira considered the question.

“I don't know.”

It was the first time he had heard her admit it so plainly.

She had always seemed to possess an answer.

Find shelter.

Protect the injured.

Stay together.

Keep moving.

Now she looked as lost as he felt.

“Maybe we shouldn't help him,” Kaelen said.

Mira looked toward the sanctuary.

“Maybe not.”

“Let someone else restore the Crossing.”

“Who?”

He had no answer.

Mira finished wrapping his hand.

“I don't want to save Auren from the consequences of what he did.”

She looked at the distant mountains.

“But Willowmere didn't do this to us. Neither did Nessa. Neither did Finn.”

Kaelen thought of Elowen's empty chair.

He thought of Alden and Ruth embracing their grandchildren.

He hated that the decision was no longer simple.

Part of him wished he had never met those people.

Because caring about them made walking away so much harder.

The Weight of Knowledge

Tovin found Auren shortly before sunset.

The old man sat beside the inactive gateway.

His staff rested against the wall.

For the first time, he looked less like a mysterious guardian and more like an exhausted elderly man.

Tovin approached.

“Did you know the separation mechanism might fail?”

Auren looked up.

“Yes.”

“How likely was failure?”

“We couldn't calculate it accurately.”

“Did you try?”

“Of course.”

“Did you consider the possibility that your understanding was incomplete?”

Auren nodded.

Tovin sat opposite him.

“Then why did you activate it?”

“Because I believed the alternative was worse.”

The scholar opened his notebook.

He turned through pages filled with observations, calculations, diagrams, and fragments of Aetherfall's history.

“I've always believed that if I knew enough, I could make the right decision.”

Auren smiled sadly.

“So did I.”

Tovin looked at the Lantern of Wonders.

“Is that why this chose me?”

“Perhaps.”

“Then it chose poorly.”

Auren shook his head.

“No. But knowledge is dangerous when it convinces us that other people's choices are obstacles to be overcome.”

Tovin considered this.

“Did the relics agree with what you did?”

Auren looked toward the gateway.

“I don't know.”

“Could they refuse?”

“Sometimes.”

“Then why didn't they stop you?”

The old man studied him.

“Because possessing a powerful instrument does not make its bearer incapable of doing wrong.”

Tovin closed his notebook.

He had been so fascinated by the lantern's abilities that he had rarely considered the responsibility accompanying them.

Now he wondered how easily curiosity could become arrogance.

How easily a desire to solve a problem could become a willingness to treat people as parts of that problem.

He stood.

“I don't forgive you.”

Auren nodded.

“I understand.”

“But I want to learn how the Crossing works.”

The old man looked surprised.

“Why?”

“Because if we restore it, I want to understand enough to avoid repeating your mistakes.”

Auren rose slowly.

For the first time that day, a small measure of hope returned to his expression.

“Then I will teach you everything I know.”

Tovin met his gaze.

“And everything you don't.”

Auren smiled.

“Yes.”

Seren's Decision

Seren had climbed to the highest point of the sanctuary.

From there, she could see the entire valley.

She watched Bram striking the dead tree until its trunk finally split and fell.

He stood over it for a moment.

Then he sat upon the ground.

Seren descended.

When she reached him, he was examining the little wooden horse he carried in his pocket.

“Feel better?” she asked.

“No.”

“Tree looks worse.”

Bram managed a weak smile.

She sat beside him.

“I've been thinking.”

“Dangerous.”

“Extremely.”

She picked up a broken branch.

“I spent years wanting someone to give me a different life. Different parents. Different house. Different everything.”

She snapped the branch in half.

“Then some old man actually did it.”

Bram looked at her.

“And I hate him for it.”

She threw the pieces aside.

“Apparently, I wanted the choice more than I wanted the change.”

Bram nodded.

“Seems reasonable.”

“What are you going to do?”

He stared at the wooden horse.

“I want to go home.”

“So do I.”

“And if restoring the Crossing is the only way to do that, I suppose I'll keep going.”

Seren looked toward the mountains.

“Even after what he did?”

“I'm not doing it for him.”

He returned the horse to his pocket.

“I'm doing it for my dad.”

She smiled faintly.

“And for us?”

Bram looked at her.

“Especially for us.”

Seren leaned against his shoulder.

They remained there until the first stars appeared.

Neither knew what the others would decide.

But for the moment, they had made their own choice.

And that mattered.

The Offer

Commander Edran arrived shortly after nightfall.

He did not bring soldiers.

He carried no visible weapon.

He walked through the sanctuary entrance with his silver mask beneath one arm.

Flicker noticed him first.

The emberfox growled.

Kaelen summoned Starstring.

Edran raised both hands.

“I've come to speak.”

“That's what you said last time.”

“And this time, I intend to do considerably more speaking than fighting.”

Mira emerged from the nearest building.

Bram and Seren followed.

Lyra appeared beside the archway.

Tovin stood near the entrance to the mountain.

Edran looked at their faces.

“I see Auren has finally told you.”

Kaelen lowered his bow slightly.

“You knew?”

“Of course.”

“Why didn't you tell us?”

“Would you have believed me?”

Kaelen considered the question.

Probably not.

Edran continued.

“Lord Vaelrith has ordered the suspension of all memory extraction programs. The events at Willowmere have caused him considerable concern.”

Tovin stepped forward.

“Concern?”

“An understatement, perhaps.”

Edran removed a folded document from his coat.

“The Restoration has established a sanctuary near the eastern coast. It is protected from the unstable crossings. There is food, shelter, and medical care.”

He looked at the six companions.

“You need not continue this journey.”

Kaelen frowned.

“What are you offering?”

“Safety.”

“And a way home?”

“Eventually, if Lord Vaelrith succeeds.”

“What's the price?”

Edran looked at their relics.

“Your cooperation.”

Seren folded her arms.

“There it is.”

Edran did not appear offended.

“The relics were created to maintain the Crossing. Their power is necessary. Lord Vaelrith believes he can restore the roads without placing you in further danger.”

Lyra stepped forward.

“By taking the relics?”

“Yes.”

“They won't leave us.”

“We have discovered methods that may make separation possible.”

Tovin's expression darkened.

“Methods involving memory extraction?”

Edran hesitated.

That hesitation was enough.

Mira raised her shield.

“No.”

The commander looked at her.

“You would rather risk your lives?”

“I would rather not exchange one person who makes decisions for us for another.”

Edran nodded slowly.

“A fair answer.”

He folded the document.

“But consider this. Auren has admitted that he destroyed the old roads. He has admitted that he brought you here against your will.”

He looked toward the mountain passage.

“Yet you still intend to trust him?”

Kaelen answered before anyone else could speak.

“No.”

Edran appeared surprised.

Kaelen continued.

“We intend to decide for ourselves.”

For a moment, the commander studied him.

Then he smiled.

Not mockingly.

Almost sadly.

“I sincerely hope you are able to.”

He placed the document upon a nearby stone.

“The offer remains.”

He turned to leave.

“Commander,” Kaelen called.

Edran stopped.

“Do you really believe Vaelrith can bring everyone back?”

The commander remained silent for several seconds.

Then he looked toward the fractured moon.

“I have spent three hundred and seventeen years believing it.”

He replaced his mask.

“I don't know what would remain of me if I stopped.”

He departed into the darkness.

Kaelen watched him go.

For the first time, he felt something other than anger toward the man.

He felt pity.

The Keeper's Last Secret

The companions gathered around the sanctuary fire.

Auren remained standing several feet away.

Nobody had invited him to sit.

Kaelen looked at the others.

“We need to decide what we're doing.”

Bram nodded.

“I'm continuing.”

Seren raised her hand.

“Unfortunately, so am I.”

Tovin adjusted his spectacles.

“I believe restoring the Crossing remains our best opportunity to return home.”

Mira looked toward the fire.

“And there are people here who need help.”

Lyra remained silent.

Kaelen turned toward her.

“What about you?”

She removed the Moonkey.

Its silver surface reflected the flames.

“I want to know what happened to Eira.”

Auren looked up.

Lyra continued.

“The records are incomplete. Vaelrith believes she's alive. You believe she was lost. Neither of you actually knows.”

Auren lowered his head.

“No.”

“Then we find out.”

She returned the key beneath her cloak.

“Not because I trust you. Because I don't.”

Kaelen looked at the five companions.

He remembered their promise outside the Hollow Watchtower.

Together.

He took a deep breath.

“Then we keep going.”

Auren's shoulders relaxed.

Kaelen immediately raised a hand.

“But there are conditions.”

The old man straightened.

“No more secrets about anything that could put us in danger. No more deciding what we're allowed to know. And no more choosing our future for us.”

Auren nodded.

“Agreed.”

“If we decide to stop, you respect that.”

“Yes.”

“And if we discover that restoring the Crossing will release the Unremembered into other worlds, we find another way.”

Auren hesitated.

Then he nodded again.

“I promise.”

Kaelen looked at him.

“Don't make promises you can't keep.”

The old man absorbed the words.

Then he sat beside the fire.

“There is one more thing you should know.”

Seren groaned.

“Of course there is.”

Auren removed a small crystal from his coat.

He placed it upon the ground.

A map appeared above the flames.

Seven lights shone across the fractured realm.

“The Great Crossing was sustained by seven primary anchors. When the network collapsed, each anchor retained a portion of its original power.”

He pointed toward the nearest light.

“The first shard lies within the Dawnwarden Temple.”

Tovin leaned forward.

“What about the other six?”

“Three were believed recoverable. Four were thought lost. But the relics have begun revealing connections that I haven't seen since the breaking.”

Auren touched the crystal.

All seven lights brightened.

“I now believe every shard may still exist.”

Kaelen studied the map.

“Then we need all seven?”

“To restore the complete network safely, yes.”

Bram sighed.

“Seven. Naturally.”

Seren nudged him.

“Think of it as an opportunity to see the countryside.”

“I've seen enough countryside.”

Auren pointed toward the first light.

“The Dawnwarden Temple was built to test those entrusted with the Crossing. Its guardian will not surrender the shard simply because you possess the relics.”

“What will it want?” Mira asked.

Auren looked at each of them.

“To know whether you are worthy of carrying it.”

Kaelen frowned.

“Worthy according to whom?”

The old man smiled faintly.

“That is an excellent question.”

A Door Left Open

Later that evening, Kaelen returned to the inactive gateway.

Auren was there.

He stood beneath its enormous rings, studying the fractured crystal.

Kaelen approached quietly.

“Can it show us Earth?”

Auren turned.

“Perhaps.”

“Without opening a crossing?”

“Yes. A faint image, if enough power remains.”

Kaelen thought about the forest.

The river.

Commander Edran's crystal.

“How do I know what I'm seeing is real?”

Auren looked at the gateway.

“You cannot be entirely certain.”

Kaelen nodded.

“Then don't.”

The old man appeared surprised.

Kaelen continued.

“I want to see my mother more than anything.”

He looked toward the broken rings.

“But I don't want another illusion.”

Auren lowered his head.

“I understand.”

Kaelen remained beside him.

For a long time, they watched the inactive machine.

Finally, he spoke.

“Do you regret bringing us here?”

Auren considered the question carefully.

“Yes.”

“Even after everything we've done?”

“Yes.”

The answer surprised him.

Auren looked toward the valley.

“You have helped people I could not help. You have restored hope in places I believed beyond saving.”

He paused.

“But those good things do not make my decision right.”

Kaelen stared at him.

The old man continued.

“I wish I had found a way to ask you. I wish I had given you the opportunity to refuse.”

Kaelen looked down at his bandaged hand.

“I don't forgive you yet.”

“I know.”

“Maybe someday.”

Auren nodded.

“Someday would be more than I deserve.”

Kaelen turned toward the doorway.

Then he stopped.

“My father used to say that fixing something starts with admitting it's broken.”

Auren smiled sadly.

“A wise man.”

“He was.”

Kaelen left the chamber.

Behind him, Auren stood beneath the gateway that had brought six strangers into a world of suffering.

For the first time in centuries, he did not attempt to justify what he had done.

He simply acknowledged it.

And began wondering how he might make it right.

The Dawnwarden Highlands

The companions departed before sunrise.

Auren accompanied them as far as the eastern ridge.

Beyond it, the Dawnwarden Highlands stretched toward the horizon, their enormous peaks illuminated by the first golden light of morning.

At the highest point stood an ancient temple.

Its white towers rose above the clouds, connected by narrow bridges and enormous stairways carved directly into the mountainside.

A brilliant beam of light extended from its central dome toward the fractured moon.

Tovin consulted the crystal compass.

Its needle pointed directly toward the temple.

“The first shard.”

Kaelen felt a strange mixture of hope and apprehension.

For the first time, they were approaching something that might genuinely help them return home.

Auren handed Mira a folded map.

“The lower road is safer, but considerably longer.”

Seren studied the steep mountain path.

“We'll take the lower road.”

Everyone looked at her.

“What?” she asked.

“I'm capable of learning.”

Bram grinned.

Auren stepped aside.

“May the roads remember you kindly.”

Kaelen looked at him.

“Will we see you again?”

“Yes.”

“Soon?”

“I hope so.”

The companions began their descent into the valley.

Flicker raced ahead, his golden tail leaving a faint trail of light.

Auren watched until they disappeared.

Then he turned toward the western horizon.

A dark figure stood upon a distant ridge.

Commander Edran.

The two men regarded one another across the valley.

Neither moved.

At last, Edran bowed his head.

Auren returned the gesture.

Then both turned away.

For the first time since the breaking, the future of Aetherfall rested not upon the decisions of its ancient guardians, but upon six people who had chosen to continue despite everything those guardians had done.

Far above the mountains, within the Dawnwarden Temple, something awakened.

Ancient mechanisms began turning beneath the stone floors.

Golden light traveled through corridors that had remained dark for centuries.

Six doors opened.

Behind each waited a chamber unlike any other.

At the center of the temple, an enormous figure rose from a throne of white stone.

Its armor shone like sunlight.

Its face was concealed behind a golden mask.

Within its hands rested a spear whose blade contained a fragment of the morning sky.

The Dawnwarden looked toward the distant valley.

“THE BEARERS APPROACH.”

A second voice emerged from somewhere beneath the temple.

Are they worthy?

The guardian remained motionless.

“THAT REMAINS TO BE SEEN.”

CHAPTER 07

The First Shard



The temple doors opened only when six hands touched six separate stones. Inside, a golden shard hung above an altar guarded by a winged bronze statue. The Dawnwarden asked each traveler what they would sacrifice to return home. Kaelen answered his pride; Mira, her certainty; Tovin, his need to understand everything. Seren offered her haste, Bram his fear of being useless, and Lyra her habit of keeping secrets. The statue tested their answers. It divided the hall into six chambers, each offering an easy escape at the expense of another. Seren could leave if she abandoned Bram. Tovin could solve a machine if he extinguished Mira's light. One by one they refused. The walls collapsed inward, revealing that the trials had been connected all along. Their refusals had opened one another's doors. The Dawnwarden bowed, but a black-glass spear pierced its back. Ash soldiers poured through the temple. The heroes defended the wounded guardian while Tovin stabilized the altar. Mira held the stair, Bram broke the spear, and Kaelen and Seren drove the soldiers

back. Lyra caught the shard before it fell into a fissure. Flicker carried a glowing fragment of the guardian's broken wing to safety. The first shard joined the Waystone with a note like a distant bell. A road appeared toward a prison suspended beneath the mountains. In the golden light they saw a second image: a city burning under an ash-colored sky. The Dawnwarden told them the prison held someone who knew how to reach it. They left the temple with their first true victory and a new understanding of what victory cost.

Recovered expanded manuscript

The temple had been built to welcome the morning.

Its architects had studied the movement of the sun for nearly a century before placing the first stone. Every window, archway, and polished surface had been positioned so that the first light of dawn would travel through the structure in a carefully designed sequence.

At sunrise, the eastern towers illuminated.

Then the central courtyard.

Then the Hall of Passage.

Finally, a single beam of golden light reached the chamber containing the first anchor of the Great Crossing.

For generations, pilgrims had climbed the mountain to witness the spectacle.

They came to celebrate marriages, remember the dead, seek wisdom, or simply stand beneath a sky that reminded them how small their troubles were compared with the extraordinary beauty of creation.

But no pilgrims had visited the Dawnwarden Temple for three hundred and seventeen years.

Its bridges had collapsed.

Its gardens had become wilderness.

Its fountains had fallen silent.

And its guardian had waited.

Not sleeping.

Not dreaming.

Waiting.

The ancient creature remembered the final command it had received.

Protect the shard until bearers arrive who understand its purpose.

It had obeyed.

Through storms.

Through earthquakes.

Through the breaking of the heavens.

Through centuries of silence.

Now, for the first time since the old world ended, six relics approached the mountain.

The Dawnwarden rose.

Its golden armor caught the morning light.

It remembered the original guardians.

Their courage.

Their wisdom.

Their pride.

Their failure.

And it wondered whether the new bearers would prove any different.

The Mountain of Morning

The climb began pleasantly enough.

The lower road wound through meadows filled with white flowers and small streams that flowed from the surrounding mountains.

The air was cool and remarkably clear.

Birds with golden wings moved between the trees, and distant waterfalls descended from floating islands high above the valley.

For several hours, the companions encountered nothing more dangerous than loose stones and Flicker's enthusiastic attempts to investigate unfamiliar insects.

Bram was beginning to enjoy himself.

“This,” he announced, “is what traveling should be like.”

Seren glanced at him.

“Walking uphill?”

“Walking uphill without something trying to eat me.”

“Give it time.”

He looked at her.

“Why would you say that?”

She smiled.

“Because you were enjoying yourself.”

Kaelen laughed.

It felt good.

After the revelations of the previous evening, he had expected the group to remain quiet and uncomfortable.

Instead, something had changed between them.

They were no longer following Auren's instructions simply because he appeared to know more than they did.

They were traveling because they had chosen to.

The difference was subtle.

But Kaelen felt it with every step.

Shortly before midday, they encountered a stone marker beside the road.

Its surface bore an inscription.

Tovin brushed away the moss.

Let those who seek the light first examine the shadows they carry.

Seren read it over his shoulder.

“That's encouraging.”

Lyra studied the marker.

“Perhaps the temple isn't simply protecting the shard.”

“What else would it be doing?” Bram asked.

“Protecting the world from whoever takes it.”

Tovin nodded.

“The original guardians understood that the anchors were dangerous.”

Kaelen looked toward the distant temple.

“Apparently not dangerous enough to stop them.”

Nobody responded.

The words had emerged more bitterly than he intended.

Mira walked beside him.

“Still angry?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

He looked at her.

She smiled faintly.

“It means you haven't decided that everything he did was acceptable simply because we're continuing.”

Kaelen considered this.

“Do you think we'll ever trust him again?”

“Maybe.”

She adjusted her pack.

“But trust is something he needs to earn. It isn't something we owe him.”

They continued up the mountain.

Above them, the temple's golden towers disappeared briefly behind a passing cloud.

CHAPTER 08

The Ironbound Prison



The prison hung from chains thicker than houses. Its cells rotated around a furnace, and the prisoners had to walk constantly to avoid the heat. Nessa's missing roadwarden, a woman named Sable, had scratched a diagram into her cell wall. She knew the route to Emberfall, but refused to leave without the other captives. Lyra slipped through a maintenance hatch and found that the locks shared a single counterweight. Tovin calculated how to lower the cells without dropping the whole structure. Bram volunteered to hold the emergency brake. The others began freeing prisoners, but the Chainforged Jailer awakened, dragging molten links behind it. Every time it struck a wall, another cell tilted toward the furnace. Mira drew the giant away from the prisoners. Kaelen severed the links that fed its furnace heart, while Seren raced along the moving walkways to release the last cage. Bram's hands burned against the brake. When the Jailer turned toward him, Sable threw her own chain around its ankle. Lyra opened the counterweight lock and the creature fell into an

empty containment pit. They escaped on a freight platform with forty prisoners. Sable told them Emberfall could be reached through the city of Aerovar, but the city's council had closed its gates to refugees. Mira looked at the exhausted people around her. “Then we will have to open something other than a gate.” The first shard pulsed in agreement.

CHAPTER 09

The City Beneath the Clouds



Aerovar was built upside down beneath a floating island. Its towers descended into the clouds and its gardens hung from balconies. The wealthy lived near the sun; the poor lived beside the anchors. Sable led the refugees to a council chamber where the doors were guarded by mechanical winged sentries. Councilor Ilyen offered the heroes passage to Emberfall if they surrendered the prisoners to the Ash Crown. He claimed the city's anchors were failing and Vaelrith alone could repair them. Tovin inspected the public gauges and discovered that the failures were deliberate: someone was diverting power into a private escape vessel. Seren and Lyra followed the power conduits while Kaelen gathered testimony from the anchor workers. When Ilyen ordered his sentries to silence them, Mira stood between the machines and the crowd. Bram held a collapsing stair long enough for the workers to disconnect the stolen power. Tovin used the lantern to illuminate the true gauge readings on the council wall. The sentries stopped when their command

seal was revoked by the assembled citizens. Ilyen fled, leaving behind a map of Blackthorn Forest. The council voted to shelter the refugees and repair the anchors openly. Sable remained to help. As the heroes departed, the city rang its bells in thanks. Kaelen realized that a road could be restored without magic at all: sometimes it only required people to stop turning away from one another.

Recovered expanded manuscript

The invitation arrived while Mira was helping a physician construct a shelter from discarded canvas.

Three soldiers descended from the transport platform wearing polished blue armor trimmed with silver. Unlike the soldiers of the Restoration, they carried no symbols of the fractured crown. Their breastplates displayed a white tower suspended beneath a golden sun.

The oldest among them approached Kaelen.

“Are you the bearer of the Dawn Anchor?”

Kaelen looked at the other companions.

“We're its bearers.”

The soldier appeared uncertain how to respond.

“Councilor Ilyen requests your presence in Aerovar.”

Mira continued securing the canvas.

“What about these people?”

The soldier glanced toward the refugees.

“Admission remains restricted.”

“Why?”

“By order of the council.”

Mira stood.

“That isn't an explanation.”

The soldier shifted uncomfortably.

Kaelen suspected that he had delivered similar answers many times before.

“Councilor Ilyen will address your concerns personally.”

Seren looked toward the enormous city above them.

“How convenient.”

The soldier ignored her.

“Transportation has been arranged.”

Kaelen looked at the refugees surrounding them. An elderly man was attempting to repair a torn blanket. Several children sat beside an empty water barrel. A young mother held an infant against her chest while watching the transport platforms rise toward the city.

He had imagined Aerovar as a place of extraordinary possibilities.

Now he wondered whether its greatest achievement was simply its ability to remain above the suffering of others.

He turned toward the soldier.

“Take us to your councilor.”

The Ascent

Bram hated the transport platform before it began moving.

It consisted of a circular wooden floor surrounded by a waist-high railing. Four enormous chains connected it to a mechanism beneath the floating island.

There were no seats.

No roof.

And, in Bram's opinion, nowhere near enough railing.

Seren leaned over the edge.

“Oh, this is brilliant.”

“Get away from there.”

She looked back.

“Afraid of heights?”

“No.”

The platform began rising.

Bram immediately grabbed the railing.

“I'm afraid of falling from heights. There's a difference.”

Tovin watched the mechanism with fascination.

“The chains aren't actually supporting our weight.”

Bram closed his eyes.

“Please don't tell me that.”

“They appear to be guiding the platform rather than lifting it.”

“Even worse.”

As they ascended, the refugee camps became smaller beneath them. The surrounding mountains emerged from behind layers of mist, and the enormous underside of Aerovar gradually revealed itself.

Kaelen had never seen anything so beautiful.

Entire neighborhoods hung beneath the island like enormous lanterns. White stone buildings were connected by bridges decorated with flowering vines. Water flowed through transparent channels, passing above and below streets before disappearing into reservoirs.

Flying vessels drifted between towers.

Children ran along balconies suspended thousands of feet above the valley.

The city appeared to defy every law Kaelen understood.

Yet as the platform approached its destination, Lyra noticed something.

Several buildings had been abandoned.

Their windows were boarded shut.

Bridges leading toward the eastern districts had been sealed behind iron gates.

One of the enormous support mechanisms emitted an irregular golden light.

She pointed toward it.

“Tovin.”

He followed her gaze.

His excitement diminished.

“That doesn't look right.”

“What is it?”

“I don't know yet.”

The platform reached the docking station.

Bram stepped onto solid stone and immediately knelt.

Seren laughed.

“Are you praying?”

“Expressing gratitude.”

“To whom?”

“Anyone responsible for floors.”

The Splendor of Aerovar

Their escort led them through streets paved with pale blue stone.

Merchants sold colorful fabrics, polished crystals, spices, and mechanical devices whose purposes Tovin desperately wanted to investigate.

Musicians performed beneath covered walkways.

Enormous gardens hung from balconies.

A mechanical bird flew above the marketplace, delivering small packages to merchants.

Lyra watched it disappear.

“I want to know how that works.”

Tovin nodded enthusiastically.

“We could probably—”

Mira interrupted.

“Later.”

They passed a bakery displaying more bread than Kaelen had seen in any settlement since arriving in Aetherfall.

Bram stopped.

Seren caught his sleeve.

“Don't.”

“But look at it.”

“We're meeting the councilor.”

“He can wait.”

She pulled him away.

The abundance throughout Aerovar was astonishing.

And increasingly disturbing.

Only an hour earlier, they had walked among people who lacked food, shelter, and clean water.

Here, fountains overflowed into decorative pools.

Food filled market stalls.

Empty buildings stood behind locked doors.

Kaelen wondered how many of the city's inhabitants knew what was happening beneath them.

He received part of his answer when they passed a group of merchants arguing beside a fountain.

“We have room for them,” one woman insisted.

“And when the eastern supports fail?” another replied.

“The council says everything is stable.”

“Then why have they closed three districts?”

The soldiers hurried the companions onward.

Lyra glanced at Kaelen.

“Something's happening here.”

He nodded.

The city was beautiful.

But beauty, he was learning, could conceal extraordinary suffering.

Councilor Ilyen

The council chamber occupied a tower near the center of Aerovar.

Its windows overlooked the suspended city, offering a magnificent view of the neighborhoods stretching toward the surrounding clouds.

Councilor Ilyen stood beside a long table.

He wore dark blue robes embroidered with golden thread. His hair was beginning to turn gray, and the shadows beneath his eyes suggested that he had not slept properly in several weeks.

He greeted the companions warmly.

“Welcome to Aerovar.”

Kaelen bowed his head.

“Thank you.”

“I have heard remarkable accounts of your travels.”

Ilyen gestured toward the table.

“Please. Sit.”

Food had been prepared.

Bram looked at Seren.

She sighed.

“Fine.”

He sat immediately.

Ilyen smiled.

“I understand you recovered the Dawn Anchor.”

Kaelen remained standing.

“We did.”

“And that its power has already restored several roads.”

“Yes.”

“An extraordinary achievement.”

The councilor poured himself a cup of water.

“Aerovar has maintained its independence since the breaking. We have preserved knowledge, culture, and technology that much of Aetherfall has lost.”

Tovin looked around the chamber.

“I can see that.”

Ilyen nodded.

“Unfortunately, maintaining such a civilization requires considerable resources.”

Mira folded her arms.

“Is that why you're refusing to admit refugees?”

The councilor's smile faded slightly.

“Our resources are not unlimited.”

“There are sick children beneath your city.”

“I am aware.”

“Then help them.”

Ilyen placed his cup upon the table.

“Would you have me endanger forty thousand people to accommodate several thousand more?”

Mira stared at him.

“Is that what's happening?”

The councilor hesitated.

Lyra noticed.

“So the city is in danger.”

Ilyen looked toward the windows.

For several moments, he said nothing.

Then he turned toward his guards.

“Leave us.”

The soldiers departed.

The doors closed.

Ilyen approached the window.

“Aerovar is dying.”

The Weight of a City

The councilor led them into the central engineering chamber.

At its heart hung an enormous crystal surrounded by rotating rings.

Tovin approached it slowly.

The crystal was magnificent, nearly as tall as Bram. Golden energy traveled through its surface, entering hundreds of conduits that extended throughout the city.

But dark fractures had begun spreading through its center.

An engineer stood beside the nearest control mechanism.

Ilyen introduced her.

“This is Chief Engineer Maelis.”

She was a woman in her early forties, with short dark hair and a collection of tools attached to her belt.

She looked at the companions.

“Finally. Someone else who might convince him to listen.”

Ilyen frowned.

“Maelis.”

“Councilor.”

Tovin smiled faintly.

He liked her immediately.

Maelis explained that Aerovar's central crystal had once received energy through the Great Crossing. After the breaking, its remaining power had sustained the city for centuries.

Now that reserve was nearly exhausted.

“The island itself will remain airborne,” she explained. “The ancient forces responsible for that are considerably older than the city.”

She pointed toward the surrounding conduits.

“But everything hanging beneath it depends upon these systems.”

Bram stared through a nearby window.

“Everything?”

“Yes.”

He looked at Seren.

“I told you.”

She ignored him.

Tovin examined the fractures.

“Could the Dawn Anchor replenish it?”

Maelis considered the question.

“Possibly.”

Ilyen turned toward Kaelen.

“That is why I requested your presence.”

He gestured toward the city.

“Forty thousand lives depend upon this crystal.”

Kaelen looked at the shard inside his pack.

“What would happen to our anchor?”

Maelis answered before Ilyen could.

“If we permanently connect it to Aerovar's central mechanism, removing it could become impossible without destabilizing the city.”

Silence filled the chamber.

Tovin looked at her.

“Permanently?”

“Yes.”

Kaelen understood immediately.

If they surrendered the shard, they might save Aerovar.

But they could lose their opportunity to restore the Great Crossing.

Their opportunity to return home.

Ilyen approached him.

“I understand what I am asking.”

Kaelen looked through the window.

Thousands of homes stretched beneath the island.

Families.

Children.

People who had never heard of Earth.

The councilor continued.

“Surely forty thousand lives are worth more than a single crystal.”

Kaelen tightened his grip upon his pack.

“It isn't just a crystal.”

“No.”

Ilyen looked at him.

“It is hope.”

He paused.

“And I am asking you to share it.”

An Uncomfortable Truth

The companions were given rooms overlooking the western gardens.

Ilyen promised them time to consider his request.

But nobody felt particularly comfortable.

Tovin spread Sable's engineering notes across a table.

“There may be another solution.”

Bram sat beside him.

“Such as?”

“I don't know.”

Seren walked toward the balcony.

“I'm beginning to think those three words should be carved onto our luggage.”

Lyra examined a diagram of Aerovar's support mechanisms.

“Something doesn't make sense.”

Mira approached.

“What?”

“If the crystal is failing because its energy reserves are depleted, why are the eastern districts failing faster than the others?”

Tovin looked up.

“Different structural loads?”

“Perhaps.”

She pointed toward the diagram.

“But the distribution network should compensate.”

Tovin studied the drawing.

“Unless energy is being redirected.”

Kaelen looked toward the city.

“Redirected where?”

Lyra folded the diagram.

“I'd like to find out.”

Mira turned toward Kaelen.

“What do you think about Ilyen's request?”

He sat upon the edge of the bed.

“I don't know.”

She waited.

He looked down at the shard.

“If we give it to him, we might never get home.”

“And if we refuse?”

“Thousands of people could die.”

Mira sat beside him.

Neither spoke for several moments.

Then Kaelen said something he had been afraid to admit.

“I'm tired of choosing between people.”

Mira nodded.

“So am I.”

“Everywhere we go, someone needs something. Someone's suffering. Someone's waiting for us to fix it.”

He stared at his hands.

“What happens when we can't?”

Mira considered the question.

“Then we do what we can.”

“What if that isn't enough?”

She looked toward the distant clouds.

“Sometimes it won't be.”

The answer frightened him.

But it was more comforting than another impossible promise.

The District Without Light

Lyra and Seren departed shortly after sunset.

Their destination was the eastern district.

They passed through several quiet streets before reaching an iron gate guarded by two soldiers.

A sign announced that the district had been closed for structural maintenance.

Seren examined the surrounding buildings.

“Any ideas?”

Lyra looked upward.

A narrow maintenance bridge extended between two rooftops.

Seren grinned.

“Excellent.”

Several minutes later, they were climbing across a collection of pipes beneath the bridge.

Seren moved with remarkable confidence.

Lyra followed more cautiously.

Far below them, clouds drifted through the valley.

“Don't look down,” Seren advised.

“I wasn't planning to.”

“Good.”

“Are you looking down?”

“Constantly.”

Lyra sighed.

They reached the abandoned district and descended into a darkened street.

The silence reminded Lyra of Willowmere.

Yet these houses had not been abandoned peacefully.

Furniture remained scattered across balconies.

Several doors had been broken open.

A child's toy lay beside an overturned cart.

Seren picked it up.

“Where did everyone go?”

“Evacuated, presumably.”

They continued toward the district's central support tower.

Inside, they discovered several enormous conduits.

One had been disconnected.

Another had been redirected through a newer mechanism.

Lyra summoned the Moonkey.

Silver light revealed the flow of energy.

Instead of traveling toward the eastern supports, it was being drawn toward the center of Aerovar.

“Someone did this deliberately.”

Seren looked toward the abandoned houses.

“Why?”

A voice emerged from the darkness.

“To keep the wealthy districts standing.”

The two companions turned.

A boy stood beneath a staircase.

He appeared to be about fifteen years old, wearing a patched coat and carrying a bag of tools.

Seren lowered her blades.

“Who are you?”

“Jace.”

He pointed toward the conduits.

“My father maintained these systems.”

“Where is he?”

The boy looked away.

“Arrested.”

Lyra approached him.

“Why?”

“He discovered what the council was doing.”

Jace opened his bag and withdrew a collection of folded diagrams.

“They've been redirecting power away from the poorer districts for months. Every time another neighborhood becomes unstable, they close it and move the residents.”

“Where?”

The boy looked toward the valley.

“Down there.”

Seren stared.

“The refugee camps?”

“Some of those people used to live here.”

Lyra examined the diagrams.

The city's energy crisis was real.

But the council had decided which people would bear its consequences.

She looked toward the disconnected conduit.

“Does Ilyen know?”

Jace laughed bitterly.

“Who do you think signed the orders?”

The Man Who Would Save Aerovar

Ilyen stood alone within his private chamber.

Before him rested a portrait of a woman and two children.

His wife had died twelve years earlier when a transport mechanism failed.

His eldest son had been aboard the same platform.

His youngest daughter, Liora, had survived.

She was twenty now.

She lived in the western district, where the city's oldest and strongest support systems remained operational.

Ilyen had promised himself that he would never lose her.

When the central crystal began failing, he authorized the redirection of energy toward the districts most capable of remaining stable.

At first, the decision had seemed reasonable.

Preserve the strongest structures.

Evacuate the weaker ones.

Maintain the city's essential services.

But the process had gradually changed.

Wealthy families demanded protection.

Merchants threatened to withdraw their resources.

Council members insisted that their neighborhoods remain operational.

And every decision became easier to justify than the one before it.

Ilyen had told himself that preserving part of Aerovar was better than losing everything.

He still believed that.

What he no longer knew was whether he had been preserving the city or simply the parts of it he could not bear to lose.

A knock sounded at the door.

“Enter.”

Liora stepped inside.

She wore a plain gray coat rather than the elaborate clothing expected of a councilor's daughter.

“Father.”

He smiled.

“You're supposed to be resting.”

“I've been working in the valley.”

His smile disappeared.

“The refugee camps?”

“Yes.”

“Liora, we've discussed this.”

“They need help.”

“And you need to remain safe.”

She looked at the portrait.

“Mother wouldn't have stayed up here.”

Ilyen turned away.

“Your mother is gone.”

“I know.”

Her voice softened.

“But I'm not.”

She approached him.

“You can't keep protecting me by deciding that everyone else matters less.”

Ilyen stared at her.

For a moment, he wanted to argue.

Then he noticed the exhaustion upon her face.

She had been helping the people he had refused to admit.

He looked toward the portrait again.

“I'm trying to save this city.”

Liora nodded.

“Then save the people who live in it.”

She left.

Ilyen remained beside the window.

Below him, the refugee camps glowed faintly through the darkness.

For the first time, he wondered how many of those lights belonged to people whose homes he had ordered abandoned.

The Council's Decision

The following morning, the companions confronted Ilyen.

Lyra placed Jace's diagrams upon the council table.

Maelis examined them.

Her expression became furious.

“You redirected the eastern reserves?”

Ilyen looked toward the other council members.

“It was necessary.”

“You told me those conduits had failed!”

“They were approaching failure.”

“Because you disconnected them!”

The chamber erupted into argument.

Several council members defended the decision.

Others appeared genuinely unaware of what had happened.

Kaelen waited until the shouting diminished.

Then he spoke.

“You asked us to surrender the anchor to save Aerovar.”

Ilyen nodded.

“Yes.”

“But you've already decided that some of Aerovar isn't worth saving.”

The councilor's expression hardened.

“You are young. You have never been responsible for forty thousand lives.”

“No.”

Kaelen looked around the chamber.

“But I've met people who thought they had the right to make decisions for everyone else.”

He remembered Auren.

Malrec.

Halvek.

“They always had reasons.”

Ilyen leaned forward.

“Would you prefer that the entire city fall?”

Tovin stepped toward the table.

“No. We'd prefer to examine alternatives.”

Maelis nodded.

“The original support systems were designed to function independently during emergencies. If we could restore the disconnected districts and distribute the remaining energy equally, we might stabilize the city long enough to evacuate it.”

Ilyen shook his head.

“Evacuation is unacceptable.”

Liora stood near the doorway.

“Why?”

Everyone turned.

She walked toward her father.

“Because people would lose their houses?”

Ilyen remained silent.

“Because the council would lose its authority?”

Several council members looked offended.

“Or because admitting that Aerovar is failing would mean admitting that you've been wrong?”

Ilyen stared at his daughter.

The silence became uncomfortable.

Then the entire chamber trembled.

A glass fell from the table.

Maelis looked toward the ceiling.

Another tremor followed.

From somewhere beneath the city came the sound of metal breaking.

She ran toward the window.

“Oh, no.”

Kaelen joined her.

Across the eastern district, an enormous support tower had begun separating from the island.

Buildings tilted.

Bridges snapped.

A cloud of white dust rose into the morning sky.

Then the tower fell.

When the Sky Began to Fall

The sound traveled throughout Aerovar.

People emerged from houses and shops.

Alarm bells rang.

Soldiers rushed toward the transport platforms.

Far below, refugees watched enormous fragments of stone disappear into the clouds.

Maelis seized Ilyen's arm.

“We need to evacuate immediately.”

The councilor stared at the fallen tower.

“How long?”

“Hours. Perhaps less.”

Tovin examined the central crystal through the observation window.

Its fractures were spreading.

“The loss of the eastern support has increased the strain on everything else.”

Ilyen turned toward Kaelen.

“The anchor.”

Kaelen removed it from his pack.

Golden light illuminated the chamber.

Maelis stared at the shard.

“We could connect it.”

Tovin shook his head.

“The distribution network is already damaged. Adding that much energy without restoring the conduits could make the failure worse.”

Another tremor shook the floor.

Bram summoned Thunderbrand.

“Tell us what needs holding up.”

Maelis looked at him.

“Quite a lot.”

Seren drew her blades.

“Then we'd better get started.”

Kaelen turned toward Ilyen.

“We're not surrendering the shard.”

The councilor's face fell.

“But we're not leaving either.”

He looked toward the companions.

“Tovin, Lyra, help Maelis stabilize the supports. Mira, organize the evacuation. Bram and Seren, clear the damaged districts.”

Mira nodded.

“What about you?”

Kaelen looked toward the central crystal.

“I'll find out whether we can use the anchor without losing it.”

Ilyen stared at him.

“You would risk everything?”

Kaelen shook his head.

“No. We're going to try to save everything.”

He looked toward the falling city.

“And if we can't, we save the people first.”

The Bridges of Aerovar

Mira reached the marketplace to discover panic.

Hundreds of people crowded the narrow streets leading toward the transport platforms. Several soldiers attempted to maintain order, but their instructions disappeared beneath the shouting.

A man pushed past an elderly woman.

Another attempted to force his family onto an already crowded platform.

Mira climbed onto the fountain.

“Listen!”

Nobody heard her.

She raised the Aegis of Dawn.

Golden light spread across the marketplace.

People gradually became silent.

“The city is being evacuated. We need to move calmly. Children, injured people, and anyone who cannot walk without assistance go first.”

A merchant shouted from the crowd.

“I paid for priority transport!”

Mira looked at him.

“Not today.”

Several soldiers smiled.

Liora arrived carrying medical supplies.

She climbed onto the fountain beside Mira.

“The western docks can accommodate additional vessels. I'll organize the pilots.”

Mira nodded.

“Good.”

They began directing the evacuation.

The wealthy and the poor stood in the same lines.

Council officials helped carry injured residents.

Shopkeepers distributed food.

Several merchants opened warehouses that had remained locked throughout the refugee crisis.

The emergency revealed something Ilyen had forgotten.

Aerovar was not merely a collection of buildings.

It was a community.

And when its people were finally given the opportunity to help one another, many did.

Bram and Seren reached a residential district moments before its connecting bridge collapsed.

Several families remained trapped on the opposite side.

Bram examined the damaged supports.

“We need another bridge.”

Seren looked toward a nearby maintenance crane.

“Or something resembling one.”

They hurried toward it.

The crane's arm extended across the gap, but its mechanism had lost power.

Bram struck its foundation with Thunderbrand.

Blue lightning traveled through the gears.

The crane moved.

Seren climbed onto its arm.

“Keep it steady!”

Bram gripped the mechanism.

“I'm trying!”

She crossed the gap and reached the trapped families.

A frightened girl refused to move.

Seren knelt beside her.

“What's your name?”

“Anya.”

“Anya, I'm going to tell you a secret.”

The girl looked at her.

“I'm terrified.”

“You are?”

“Absolutely.”

Seren pointed toward Bram.

“And that enormous man over there is even more terrified.”

Bram shouted from across the gap.

“I heard that!”

The girl laughed.

Seren extended her hand.

“But we're going to cross together.”

Anya accepted it.

One by one, the families crossed the crane.

Bram held the mechanism until the final person reached safety.

Then the platform beneath him cracked.

Seren turned.

“Bram!”

The stone collapsed.

He fell.

For a moment, he disappeared beneath the edge of the street.

Seren threw herself forward.

Her hand caught his wrist.

His weight nearly pulled her over the edge.

“Bram!”

He looked down.

Clouds stretched beneath his boots.

“Oh, I hate this city.”

Seren gritted her teeth.

“Could you complain after I pull you up?”

Several rescued residents rushed forward.

Together, they lifted him onto the street.

Bram lay upon his back.

Seren sat beside him, breathing heavily.

He looked at her.

“Thank you.”

She smiled.

“You owe me.”

“Anything.”

“I'm choosing where we eat for the next month.”

Bram considered this.

“That's unreasonable.”

She laughed.

Then she leaned against him.

For several seconds, neither moved.

They had come frighteningly close to discovering what life would be like without one another.

Neither wanted to imagine it.

The Heart of the Hanging City

Tovin had never encountered a machine so complicated.

Hundreds of energy channels surrounded the central crystal. Some had been installed centuries earlier. Others were recent modifications that contradicted the original design.

Maelis worked beside him.

“Here. This conduit connects the southern supports.”

Lyra examined its locking mechanism.

“It's been sealed.”

“Can you open it?”

The Moonkey glowed.

“Yes.”

She turned it.

Golden light traveled into the conduit.

The southern district stabilized.

Tovin smiled.

“That's one.”

Maelis looked toward the remaining mechanisms.

“Only thirty-seven more.”

His smile disappeared.

Kaelen entered carrying the Dawn Anchor.

“Any progress?”

“Some.”

Tovin pointed toward the crystal.

“We can use the shard to temporarily replenish the central reserves. But the original mechanism needs to be isolated from the city's newer systems.”

Maelis nodded.

“The anchor must remain independent. Otherwise, the crystal will attempt to draw everything from it.”

Kaelen looked at the enormous machine.

“Can we do that?”

Lyra studied the Moonkey.

“Possibly.”

She glanced at Tovin.

“Sorry.”

He sighed.

They began working.

Outside, another support tower failed.

The central crystal shook violently.

Maelis looked toward the observation window.

“We're losing the northern district.”

Kaelen approached the crystal.

The Dawn Anchor became warm.

A golden thread emerged from it.

Then another.

The threads extended toward the surrounding mechanisms.

Tovin watched them.

“It's responding to the original network.”

Kaelen closed his eyes.

He could feel something through the shard.

Not words.

Connections.

Thousands of them.

Roads beneath the mountains.

Forgotten bridges.

Ancient gateways.

And beneath Aerovar, something unexpected.

Another source of energy.

He opened his eyes.

“There's something below us.”

Maelis frowned.

“Below the city?”

“Inside the island.”

She stared at him.

“The original foundation?”

Kaelen nodded.

Maelis hurried toward a collection of ancient diagrams.

She unfolded one upon the table.

Her expression changed.

“Of course.”

Tovin joined her.

“What?”

“Aerovar wasn't originally suspended beneath the island.”

She pointed toward the drawing.

“The first settlements were built inside it. The hanging city was constructed later.”

Lyra examined the diagram.

“Then there may be another support network.”

“Yes.”

Maelis looked toward the central crystal.

“One that hasn't been used in centuries.”

Tovin smiled.

“Can we reconnect it?”

She looked at the shattered conduits.

“Not from here.”

Kaelen followed the golden thread toward a sealed doorway.

“Then we go inside the island.”

The Skybound Colossus

The ancient foundation chamber lay beyond a passage that had been sealed since the breaking.

Lyra opened its entrance.

They descended through tunnels carved directly into the island's stone.

The sounds of the collapsing city gradually faded.

At the end of the passage stood an enormous cavern.

Golden crystals illuminated its walls.

Suspended above a deep chasm was a mechanical structure unlike anything Tovin had ever seen.

It resembled a gigantic bird constructed from stone, brass, and white crystal.

Its wings extended across the cavern.

Its body was connected to the island through enormous conduits.

Maelis stopped.

“The Skybound Colossus.”

Kaelen stared.

“What is it?”

“The original foundation guardian.”

She approached the nearest mechanism.

“I thought it was a legend.”

Tovin examined the inscriptions.

“It maintained the island's internal energy distribution.”

Lyra looked toward its darkened eyes.

“Can we awaken it?”

Maelis nodded slowly.

“If we restore its connection to the central network.”

Kaelen approached the creature.

The Dawn Anchor glowed brightly.

Golden energy traveled toward the Colossus.

Its eyes opened.

The cavern shook.

Enormous wings began unfolding.

Then the creature spoke.

“FOUNDATION INSTABILITY DETECTED.”

Maelis smiled.

“Yes!”

The Colossus turned toward them.

“INITIATING EMERGENCY SEPARATION.”

Her smile vanished.

“No!”

Tovin looked at her.

“What does that mean?”

“The guardian is going to detach the hanging city to protect the island!”

Kaelen stared at the enormous creature.

“Can we stop it?”

Maelis rushed toward the controls.

“Not unless we establish a new foundation connection!”

The Colossus raised its wings.

Ancient mechanisms began turning.

Across Aerovar, enormous support locks started opening.

The entire city tilted.

The City or the Island

Kaelen stood beneath the awakening Colossus.

“Stop!”

The guardian lowered its head.

“FOUNDATION PRESERVATION REQUIRED.”

“There are people beneath you!”

“STRUCTURAL LOSS ACCEPTABLE.”

The words reminded Kaelen of the Dawnwarden's original instructions.

Protect the anchor.

Preserve the crossing.

Maintain the foundation.

Ancient guardians had been given purposes.

But purposes without understanding could become dangerous.

Maelis examined the controls.

“The original foundation is intact. If we reconnect it, the guardian won't need to detach the city.”

Tovin pointed toward three enormous conduits.

“Those connections are broken.”

Lyra raised the Moonkey.

“I can open them.”

“Opening them isn't enough. They need energy.”

Kaelen looked at the shard.

He understood.

The Dawn Anchor could awaken the original foundation.

But only if the Colossus remained connected long enough for the energy to spread.

He approached the guardian.

“How long until separation?”

“ONE HUNDRED AND TWENTY SECONDS.”

Tovin stared.

“That seems unnecessarily specific.”

Maelis rushed toward the first conduit.

Lyra followed.

Kaelen placed the shard against the central mechanism.

Golden light erupted throughout the cavern.

The Colossus became motionless.

“UNRECOGNIZED ENERGY SOURCE.”

Tovin examined the inscriptions.

“It's trying to identify the anchor.”

Maelis shouted.

“First connection restored!”

The golden light traveled into the cavern wall.

The island trembled.

“FOUNDATION CAPACITY INCREASING.”

Kaelen smiled.

Then a section of the cavern ceiling collapsed.

The second conduit shattered.

Maelis was thrown backward.

Tovin rushed toward her.

Lyra examined the broken connection.

“We can't repair this in time.”

Kaelen looked at the Colossus.

“Can you move?”

“EMERGENCY SEPARATION IN SEVENTY SECONDS.”

“Can you move?”

“AFFIRMATIVE.”

Kaelen pointed toward the broken conduit.

“Then help us.”

The guardian remained motionless.

“FOUNDATION PRESERVATION REQUIRED.”

“That's what we're trying to do!”

The Colossus looked toward the damaged conduit.

For several seconds, its eyes flickered.

Then it extended one enormous wing.

The wing touched both ends of the broken connection.

Golden energy traveled through its body.

Tovin stared.

“It's acting as a bridge!”

Maelis rose unsteadily.

“Second connection restored!”

Lyra reached the final conduit.

The Moonkey turned.

The last connection opened.

Kaelen pressed the shard against the mechanism.

Golden light filled the cavern.

The Colossus spread its wings.

Energy traveled outward through the island.

Through ancient foundations.

Through forgotten support mechanisms.

Through structures that had remained dormant for centuries.

Far above them, the city's failing supports began glowing.

The collapsing streets became still.

The central crystal's fractures stopped spreading.

The Colossus raised its head.

“FOUNDATION STABILIZED.”

Kaelen exhaled.

“Emergency separation?”

“CANCELED.”

Tovin sat upon the floor.

“Wonderful.”

Maelis laughed.

Lyra leaned against the nearest wall.

The Dawn Anchor separated from the mechanism and returned to Kaelen's hand.

Its light had diminished slightly.

But it remained intact.

The Colossus looked down at them.

“MAINTENANCE REQUIRED.”

Maelis smiled.

“You have no idea.”

A Different Aerovar

The evacuation continued even after the city stabilized.

Maelis insisted upon it.

The ancient foundation had provided additional power, but the damage throughout Aerovar remained considerable.

Several districts would require months of reconstruction.

Others might never be inhabited again.

For the first time in its history, the city established a permanent settlement upon the valley floor.

Refugees helped construct shelters.

Former residents shared supplies.

Engineers began designing safer transport systems between the island and the ground.

Councilor Ilyen watched the work from the valley.

He had surrendered his authority pending an investigation into the energy redistribution orders.

Several other council members had done the same.

Liora stood beside him.

“Are you all right?”

He looked toward Aerovar.

“I spent my entire life believing that city was the most important thing in the world.”

She took his hand.

“And now?”

He watched a group of children playing beside a newly constructed shelter.

“I'm beginning to understand the difference between a city and its people.”

Liora smiled.

He looked at her.

“Your mother would have been proud of you.”

Her eyes filled with tears.

“Thank you.”

They remained together beneath the floating island.

For the first time in years, Ilyen did not feel compelled to return above the clouds.

The Celebration Below

That evening, the people of Aerovar gathered in the valley.

Food was distributed freely.

Musicians descended from the city.

Children ran between tents decorated with colorful lanterns.

Bram sat beside a table containing an impressive assortment of pastries.

Seren approached.

“Enjoying yourself?”

“Immensely.”

“Remember our agreement?”

He looked concerned.

“You're not taking these away.”

She sat beside him.

“No.”

She selected a pastry.

“I'm sharing.”

Bram smiled.

Across the camp, Tovin and Maelis continued discussing the ancient foundation.

Lyra helped Jace repair a damaged mechanical bird.

Mira sat beside Liora, watching the children they had helped evacuate.

Kaelen walked toward the edge of the settlement.

He removed the wooden bird Elowen had given him.

Then he looked toward the Dawn Anchor.

They had recovered only one of the seven shards.

Yet already it had restored roads, helped free thousands of prisoners, and prevented an entire city from falling.

He wondered what would become possible when all seven were reunited.

The thought excited him.

It also frightened him.

Power had accomplished extraordinary things throughout Aetherfall.

It had also destroyed extraordinary things.

Perhaps the most important part of their journey was not discovering how to use it.

Perhaps it was learning how to live with the responsibility of possessing it.

Flicker climbed onto his shoulder.

Kaelen smiled.

“Don't worry. I haven't forgotten dinner.”

The emberfox chirped.

Together, they returned to the celebration.

CHAPTER 10

The Beast of Blackthorn



Blackthorn was a forest of iron-colored trees. Hunters had vanished along its paths, and a great wolf with thorn-covered fur was blamed. The heroes found a hunter's camp where the traps were baited with fragments of black glass. Flicker recoiled from the scent. The beast attacked at twilight. Its jaws snapped through a fallen trunk, and thorns sprang from the earth wherever its paws landed. Seren noticed that it always turned toward the sound of a small bell hanging from a hunter's pack. Lyra followed the bell's magic to a buried cage. Inside were three wolf cubs, their collars bound to the beast's pain. Mira kept the wolf occupied while Tovin and Lyra broke the collars. Bram smashed the trap mechanism, and Kaelen shot the bell from its hook. The beast staggered, then turned away from the heroes and tore apart the remaining traps. It gathered its cubs and disappeared into the trees. One of the hunters confessed that an Ash Crown agent had paid him to create a monster that would keep travelers away from the old library. The party recovered a bronze library pass and

escorted the injured hunters to safety. Seren, who had always believed that speed was the answer to danger, admitted that stopping to look had saved them. Flicker trotted ahead with the solemn dignity of a creature that had known this all along.

CHAPTER 11

The Library of Lost Names



The library contained shelves that rearranged themselves whenever someone spoke a lie. Its librarian, a paper-thin woman named Ves, had forgotten her own face but remembered every book. She led the heroes to a forbidden catalogue that listed seven shards and the names of their original keepers. A creature called the Inkshade emerged from the catalogue, wearing the shapes of unfinished stories. It erased doors and rewrote stairways. Tovin tried to defeat it by reading faster, but every page he opened gave it another form. Lyra discovered that the creature could not alter a story spoken aloud by someone who had lived it. Each hero told a true memory while the others defended the reading room. Bram described his father's silence after a failed competition. Mira spoke of the day she could not protect a friend. Seren admitted that she ran because she feared being left behind. Their words fixed the room in place. Kaelen pinned the Inkshade's shadow with an arrow of light, and Tovin closed the catalogue around it. Ves revealed that the

Unremembered was not a god but a hunger born when the ancient roadbuilders discarded the memories they considered inconvenient. It had learned to imitate what people longed for. The second shard was beneath Emberfall, accessible through the Crystal Labyrinth. The heroes copied the relevant pages rather than taking the library's only record. Ves smiled. For a moment, her face returned.

Recovered expanded manuscript

Lyra dropped the Moonkey.

The sound of silver striking stone seemed insignificant amid the storm of parchment, yet Kaelen heard it clearly. He turned to find her standing motionless, staring at her empty hands.

“Lyra?”

She looked at him.

There was no recognition in her eyes.

“Who are you?”

Kaelen felt something tighten inside his chest.

“It's me. Kaelen.”

She stepped away.

“Where am I?”

The Inkshade laughed from behind its enormous desk.

Seren rushed toward Lyra, but the frightened young woman recoiled, raising her hands defensively.

“Don't touch me!”

Seren stopped immediately.

“All right. Nobody's going to touch you.”

Lyra looked around the chamber. Books circled above them, pages twisted through the air, and enormous shadows moved between the shelves.

“What is this place?”

Tovin raised his lantern, forcing the nearest shadows backward.

“Lyra, listen to my voice.”

“Why do you keep calling me that?”

“Because that's your name.”

She shook her head.

“I don't know you.”

Kaelen had seen Lyra frightened before. He had watched her confront the Thornbound Warden and enter the depths of Ironbound without the protection of her relic. But even in those moments, she had possessed an extraordinary ability to remain composed.

Now that composure was gone.

She looked like someone who had awakened in the middle of a nightmare without remembering the life from which she had come.

The Inkshade leaned forward.

“An interesting thing, identity. People spend their entire lives constructing it, yet a single forgotten word can bring the whole structure down.”

Bram hurled Thunderbrand toward the creature.

The hammer passed through its chest, scattering hundreds of pages before returning to his hand.

The Inkshade reassembled itself.

“Your strength cannot strike what no longer exists.”

Bram tightened his grip.

“I'm willing to keep trying.”

Mira positioned herself between Lyra and the creature.

“Kaelen, we need to get her out of here.”

The Inkshade extended one enormous hand.

The entrance disappeared.

In its place stood another bookshelf.

“Leaving so soon?”

Kaelen drew Starstring.

“Give her memories back.”

“Her memories?”

The creature tilted its head.

“Are you certain they belong to her?”

The question sent a chill through the chamber.

The Inkshade opened its enormous book.

“Let us examine the evidence.”

The Girl Without a Past

Lyra found herself standing inside a small shop.

Sunlight entered through a dusty window. Clocks covered the walls, their pendulums swinging in perfect rhythm. Shelves contained broken jewelry, damaged musical instruments, and books awaiting repair.

An elderly woman sat behind a wooden counter.

She looked up.

“There you are, Little Moon.”

Lyra stared at her.

Something about the woman felt familiar.

Yet she could not explain why.

“Do I know you?”

The woman smiled.

“Of course you do.”

She gestured toward an empty chair.

“Come sit with me.”

Lyra approached slowly.

The woman placed a damaged pocket watch upon the counter.

“Do you remember what I taught you?”

Lyra examined it.

Her hands moved almost instinctively.

She opened the watch, inspected its mechanism, and identified a damaged spring.

The woman smiled.

“Very good.”

Lyra looked at her hands.

“How did I know how to do that?”

“Because I taught you.”

The woman reached across the counter.

“You've been away for a long time.”

Lyra looked toward the window.

Outside, people walked along an ordinary street. Cars passed beneath traffic lights. Somewhere nearby, a radio played softly.

Everything appeared peaceful.

Safe.

“You can stay here,” the woman continued.

“You don't have to return to that terrible place.”

Lyra looked at her.

“What terrible place?”

“The place where those strangers are waiting.”

The woman's smile remained unchanged.

“They brought you nothing but suffering.”

Lyra examined the pocket watch again.

She wanted to believe the woman.

Something deep within her longed to believe that this was where she belonged.

But there was a problem.

The clocks were ticking.

The radio was playing.

People were walking outside.

Yet the pocket watch in her hands had no reflection in its polished metal cover.

Neither did she.

Lyra slowly raised her head.

“Who are you?”

The woman's expression changed.

“Your grandmother.”

Lyra looked toward the surrounding shelves.

“What's my name?”

“Little Moon.”

“My real name.”

The woman remained silent.

Lyra stood.

“Tell me my name.”

The clocks stopped.

The sunlight disappeared.

The woman's face began dissolving.

“You don't need a name.”

Lyra backed away.

The shop darkened.

“You don't need a past.”

The walls collapsed into drifting pages.

“You only need to remain here.”

Lyra turned toward the doorway.

Beyond it, she could hear distant voices.

One belonged to a woman.

Another to a man.

Someone was calling her a name she did not recognize.

She ran toward them.

The darkness followed.

What the Pages Could Not Hold

Inside the archive, Tovin examined the Inkshade through the light of his lantern.

The creature's body contained thousands of fragments.

Some belonged to ancient manuscripts.

Others appeared to be pieces of personal journals.

Letters.

Family histories.

Names written upon scraps of paper.

Tovin realized that the Inkshade was not simply destroying information.

It was collecting it.

“Everything it's taken is still inside it!”

Kaelen looked toward the creature.

“Then we can get it back?”

“Perhaps.”

Seren glanced at him.

“I'm going to start charging you every time you say that.”

Tovin ignored her.

He examined the swirling pages.

“The memories are connected to the original records. If we destroy those records, we might destroy the memories with them.”

Bram lowered Thunderbrand.

“So hitting it harder isn't the answer?”

“Unfortunately.”

Bram sighed.

“I'm having a very disappointing afternoon.”

Mira knelt beside Lyra, who had collapsed against the base of a bookshelf.

Her eyes were closed.

Her breathing was shallow.

“She's still in there somewhere.”

Kaelen approached.

“How do we reach her?”

Mira looked toward the notebooks Ves had given them.

She retrieved Lyra's notebook from the floor.

Its pages were blank.

Even her name had disappeared.

Mira closed it.

“Then we'll have to remember for her.”

She sat beside Lyra.

“Your name is Lyra. You repair things. You're usually the first person to notice when something isn't right.”

Seren knelt beside her.

“You bought clockmaker's tools in Sunrest. You opened the locks at Ironbound when your Moonkey wouldn't work.”

Bram sat upon the stone floor.

“You once told me that locks were clocks with less ambition.”

He smiled.

“I still don't know what that means.”

Tovin joined them.

“You helped me understand the crossing mechanisms beneath Aerovar. You noticed the energy was being redirected before I did.”

Kaelen looked at Lyra's motionless face.

“You told me that your grandmother taught you broken things weren't worthless.”

He remembered their conversation in the Whispering Wood.

“You said they needed someone patient enough to understand them.”

The Inkshade roared.

Several shelves collapsed.

Mira raised her shield above the group.

Pages struck its golden surface.

The companions continued speaking.

They remembered Lyra's quiet humor.

Her curiosity.

Her reluctance to trust strangers.

The way she always checked whether everyone had returned safely before allowing herself to rest.

They remembered things she had done that she probably considered insignificant.

Things that had mattered to them.

And somewhere within the darkness, Lyra heard their voices.

The Name That Returned

She stood before an enormous doorway.

Beyond it, the false image of her grandmother's shop was disappearing.

The darkness whispered behind her.

“They cannot tell you who you are.”

Lyra looked toward the doorway.

“Perhaps not.”

“They are strangers.”

She listened.

A man was describing a clockmaker's tool.

A woman was laughing about something that had happened in a floating city.

Someone mentioned a small creature named Flicker.

The memories began returning.

Not all at once.

A silver key.

An observatory.

Two moons.

A forest filled with voices.

A young man wearing his father's green coat.

She remembered sitting beside a campfire, telling someone about her grandmother.

She remembered why she had told him.

He had been grieving.

She had wanted him to understand that she knew something about loss.

The darkness reached toward her.

“Without your memories, you are nothing.”

Lyra looked at her hands.

The Moonkey appeared between her fingers.

Its silver light illuminated the doorway.

She remembered her grandmother's voice.

Not the imitation that had attempted to imprison her.

The real voice.

Patient.

Warm.

Occasionally irritated when Lyra misplaced her tools.

She remembered the shop's brass key.

The smell of old books.

The sound of rain against the windows.

And finally, she remembered her name.

“Lyra.”

The doorway opened.

She stepped through.

Kaelen was still speaking when Lyra opened her eyes.

He stopped.

She looked at him.

“Your father made terrible pancakes.”

For a moment, he could not respond.

Then he laughed.

Mira embraced her.

Seren wiped her eyes.

Bram looked toward the ceiling.

“I'm not crying. There's an unreasonable amount of dust in this place.”

Lyra smiled weakly.

“Of course.”

Tovin handed her the Moonkey.

She accepted it.

Then she looked toward the Inkshade.

The creature had become noticeably smaller.

Several pages had separated from its body and returned to the surrounding shelves.

Tovin stared.

“That's it.”

Kaelen stood.

“What?”

“Every memory we restore weakens it.”

The Inkshade recoiled.

“Silence!”

Tovin raised his lantern.

“No. I think we've had quite enough silence.”

The Forgotten Speak

The companions began examining the pages scattered across the chamber.

Each contained fragments of forgotten lives.

A farmer who had established an irrigation system during a terrible drought.

A physician who had traveled between isolated settlements.

A child who had composed a song that became popular throughout the southern territories.

A soldier who had refused an order to destroy a village.

People whose lives had been reduced to fragments.

Tovin collected a page.

He read its contents aloud.

“Amara Velin. Teacher. Arrived in Aetherfall two hundred and sixty years before the breaking. Established a school near the southern coast.”

The page began glowing.

Somewhere within the archive, a book opened.

Letters returned to its surface.

The Inkshade screamed.

Seren retrieved another page.

“Darian Holt. Carpenter. Constructed the first public bridge across the northern marshes.”

Another book opened.

Bram picked up a fragment.

“Petra Morrow. Baker.”

He paused.

“She provided food to refugees during the winter famine.”

He smiled.

“I like Petra.”

The page glowed.

Mira began reading.

Then Kaelen.

Then Lyra.

With each remembered name, the chamber became brighter.

The Inkshade attempted to gather the pages, but Tovin's lantern held its darkness back.

The creature struck the floor.

“You cannot remember them all!”

Kaelen continued reading.

“Thomas Arden. Musician.”

The creature roared.

“Millions have lived and died! Millions more will be forgotten!”

Mira retrieved another page.

“Isabel Fen. Mother of four. Founder of the western orphanage.”

The light increased.

The Inkshade turned toward her.

“What difference does one forgotten life make?”

Mira looked directly at it.

“To the people who loved them? Everything.”

The Last Story

Beyond the Inkshade, Lyra noticed a small pedestal.

Upon it rested the black book that Ves had discovered.

The book documenting their journey.

She approached it.

New words were appearing across its pages.

The bearers attempted to restore the forgotten names.

Their efforts were insufficient.

The archive collapsed.

Their journey ended beneath the weight of forgotten history.

Lyra watched the sentences form.

Then she looked toward the creature.

“You're writing this.”

The Inkshade stopped.

Lyra examined the book more closely.

It was connected to the creature by a thin black thread.

“It's not predicting the future.”

Tovin turned.

“What?”

“It's trying to establish one.”

She pointed toward the words.

“The book describes events before they happen because the Inkshade wants those events to become true.”

Kaelen remembered the prediction.

One of them would leave the library without a name.

Lyra had nearly become that person.

But the prediction had failed.

She opened the book to its newest page.

The ink moved.

Lyra attempted to interfere with the record.

She failed.

Lyra smiled.

“That's rather presumptuous.”

She placed the Moonkey against the book's binding.

The black thread became visible.

Kaelen raised Starstring.

“Can you separate it?”

Lyra turned the key.

The thread tightened.

The Inkshade screamed.

“THE STORY IS MINE!”

Lyra looked at the creature.

“No.”

She turned the Moonkey again.

The connection broke.

Kaelen released his arrow.

Golden light struck the darkness.

The Inkshade shattered.

Thousands of pages erupted throughout the chamber.

For several moments, they filled the air like enormous white birds.

Then, one by one, they returned to their books.

Names appeared upon empty pages.

Portraits regained their faces.

Maps recovered their missing settlements.

The statues beyond the chamber regained their inscriptions.

The forgotten history of Aetherfall returned.

And the black book remained open upon its pedestal.

Its final page was empty.

Lyra picked it up.

This time, no new words appeared.

The Covenant of the Seven Roads

Master Librarian Ves entered the archive shortly after the darkness disappeared.

He stopped beside the nearest shelf.

A book floated toward him.

He opened it.

His hands began trembling.

“Amara Velin.”

He looked at the companions.

“I remember her.”

He turned another page.

“And him. And her.”

He removed his spectacles and wiped his eyes.

“Oh, thank goodness.”

Tovin approached carrying several ancient volumes recovered from the Inkshade's desk.

“Are these the original crossing records?”

Ves examined them.

His expression changed.

“Where did you find these?”

“Inside the chamber.”

Ves carefully carried the volumes to a reading table.

The companions gathered around him.

He opened the oldest book.

Its pages contained diagrams of the seven anchors, descriptions of ancient roads, and the names of those responsible for maintaining them.

At the center of the volume was a document written in golden ink.

The Covenant of the Seven Roads.

Ves began reading.

Let the road belong neither to the ruler nor to the guardian.

Let no traveler be carried against their will.

Let no destination be compelled to receive what it cannot safely sustain.

Let no memory be taken as payment for passage.

Let the guardians serve the roads, and the roads serve the people.

And should the Crossing become a source of suffering, let those entrusted with its keeping surrender their authority rather than the freedom of those they serve.

The chamber became silent.

Kaelen looked toward Tovin.

“That explains Ironbound.”

Tovin nodded.

“And Willowmere. And Blackthorn.”

Lyra studied the document.

“It explains why the Restoration's experiments keep failing.”

Ves turned the page.

“There is more.”

A diagram depicted seven anchors surrounding a central gateway.

Six figures stood around the structure.

A seventh figure occupied its center.

Kaelen recognized her immediately.

Eira.

Beneath the illustration was an inscription.

The Keeper of the Heart shall remain independent of the six guardians, lest their combined authority become absolute.

Mira looked at Ves.

“Eira wasn't simply Vaelrith's sister.”

“No.”

The librarian examined the surrounding text.

“She was responsible for ensuring that the guardians themselves remained accountable.”

Kaelen thought of the ruined temple where Auren had spoken to her statue.

He remembered the grief upon Vaelrith's face in the ancient records.

“What happened to her?”

Ves turned several pages.

Then stopped.

An entire section had been removed.

Not consumed by the Inkshade.

Removed deliberately.

The binding contained the remains of several carefully cut pages.

Tovin examined them.

“Someone took these before the creature arrived.”

Ves nodded.

“And I believe I know who.”

The Signature in the Margin

The library maintained records of every person permitted to examine its oldest documents.

Ves retrieved the appropriate register.

He turned through its pages until he reached an entry dated shortly after the breaking.

Two names appeared.

Vaelrith.

Auren.

Kaelen stared at them.

“They were both here?”

“Yes.”

Ves examined the accompanying notes.

“They requested access to the covenant and the records concerning Eira.”

Lyra leaned closer.

“Did they remove the pages?”

“The register doesn't say.”

Tovin pointed toward a second entry.

It had been written approximately fifty years later.

Auren had returned alone.

Beside his name was a handwritten message.

Some truths must remain hidden until the roads can bear them.

Kaelen felt his anger returning.

Auren had already admitted bringing them to Aetherfall without their consent.

He had admitted his involvement in the breaking.

Yet there were still things he had concealed.

Mira looked at Kaelen.

“We'll ask him when we see him again.”

Kaelen nodded.

But he wondered whether Auren would ever willingly tell them everything.

Ves closed the register.

“Whatever happened between the original guardians, the truth appears to have been deliberately divided.”

He looked toward the seven-anchor diagram.

“Perhaps it was hidden for protection. Perhaps for shame.”

He removed his spectacles.

“History contains an unfortunate number of both.”

A Book of Their Own

The companions remained at the library for several days.

Tovin spent most of that time researching the Great Crossing.

Lyra examined ancient locking mechanisms.

Bram discovered that the scholars maintained an extraordinary dining hall.

Seren discovered that Bram could be reliably located by following the smell of freshly baked bread.

Mira helped Ves establish a collection of personal testimonies from ordinary citizens.

Kaelen began writing.

He had previously written letters to his mother, though he had no way to send them.

Now he opened the black book recovered from the Inkshade.

Its pages remained blank beyond their arrival at the library.

He considered destroying it.

But the book contained an account of their journey that might otherwise be lost.

Instead, he began correcting it.

He added details about the people they had met.

Nessa.

Oren.

Elowen.

Finn.

Sable.

Rhea.

Maelis.

Anwen.

He wrote about their mistakes as well as their victories.

He recorded the things they had learned and the questions they could not yet answer.

One evening, Lyra found him sitting beside a window.

“What are you doing?”

“Writing our story.”

She looked at the black book.

“Are you sure that's wise?”

Kaelen smiled.

“It's just a book now.”

She sat beside him.

“What's the last thing you wrote?”

He turned it toward her.

She read the passage.

Lyra returned from the darkness because her friends remembered her when she could not remember herself.

For several moments, she said nothing.

Then she took his pen.

Beneath the sentence, she added another.

And because she chose to return.

Kaelen smiled.

“That's better.”

She handed back the pen.

“Don't forget it.”

“I won't.”

Together, they watched the evening sunlight disappear beyond the library towers.

The Road of Reflections

On their final morning, Ves presented Tovin with a carefully wrapped collection of documents.

“Copies of the covenant, the surviving crossing records, and several maps.”

Tovin accepted them reverently.

“Thank you.”

Ves pointed toward a region west of the library.

“The next stable road passes through the Crystal Labyrinth.”

Seren examined the map.

“That sounds unnecessarily complicated.”

“It is.”

Ves adjusted his spectacles.

“The labyrinth was originally constructed as a protective passage between the northern and western territories. Its crystals respond to the thoughts of travelers.”

Bram groaned.

“More things that can see inside our heads?”

“I'm afraid so.”

Lyra studied the map.

“What protects it?”

Ves hesitated.

“A Crystal Drake.”

Kaelen looked up.

“A dragon?”

“Not precisely. Although I doubt the distinction will comfort you.”

Bram looked toward Flicker.

“Can we trade him for a larger version?”

Flicker chirped indignantly.

Seren laughed.

Ves handed Kaelen a small silver bookmark.

Engraved upon its surface were the words from the fountain.

Let no life be forgotten merely because it was ordinary.

Kaelen placed it inside the black book.

“I'll remember.”

Ves smiled.

“That's all any historian can reasonably ask.”

The companions departed beneath the white towers.

Behind them, scholars returned to their work.

Books reopened.

Names were spoken.

And the history of Aetherfall, incomplete but no longer silent, continued.

CHAPTER 12

The Crystal Labyrinth



Every corridor reflected a different version of the party. In one, Kaelen wore a crown. In another, Mira stood alone among fallen shields. Tovin's reflection knew every answer. Seren's never stopped moving. Bram's was cheered by a crowd, and Lyra's was invisible even to herself. A crystal drake patrolled the maze, feeding on the reflections that travelers chose to follow. It could leap between mirrors faster than Seren could run. The heroes discovered that the glass compass from Oren pointed toward the corridor containing their shared memories rather than their private wishes. They covered the false mirrors with cloaks and followed the compass together. At the center, the drake shattered the floor into rotating platforms. Mira anchored a rope to her shield; Bram held the other end. Kaelen shot the hinges of the mirrors the drake used, forcing it into the open. Seren crossed the platforms and cut a crystal vane on its wing. Tovin redirected its own light into the central prism. The drake collapsed into a heap of clear stones. The prism revealed the road to Emberfall. It

also showed a vision of Vaelrith standing beside a woman whose face he could no longer remember. Lyra realized that he was not merely trying to rule the roads. He was trying to recover someone. She kept the thought to herself for only a moment, then shared it with the others. They had promised to stop keeping secrets.

Recovered expanded manuscript

The passage Flicker discovered was barely wide enough to accommodate his small body. Its walls shimmered with pale blue light, and tiny crystals grew from the floor like blades of grass. Occasionally, he stopped to investigate his reflection, but unlike the six companions, he possessed little interest in what might have been.

He was hungry. His friends were missing. Something smelled unpleasant.

These were problems he understood.

He followed the scent deeper into the mountain.

Above him, the Crystal Drake watched through a thousand reflective surfaces. The ancient guardian searched the creature's thoughts for regret, ambition, and unfulfilled desires. It attempted to construct a reflection that might persuade the emberfox to remain.

An enormous fish appeared within one of the crystals.

Flicker stopped.

He examined it with considerable enthusiasm before attempting to bite it. His nose struck the crystal, and he immediately lost interest.

The Drake tried again.

This time, the reflection contained a magnificent forest filled with other emberfoxes. Flicker watched them briefly, chirped, and continued walking.

The guardian was perplexed.

It had spent centuries studying the complicated desires of intelligent creatures. Yet this little animal seemed perfectly content to accept the world as it was, provided there was sufficient food and someone willing

to scratch behind his ears.

Flicker reached another opening.

Beyond it, he recognized a familiar scent.

Seren.

He squeezed through.

The House That Never Broke

Seren had forgotten how peaceful her childhood home could be.

Sunlight illuminated the dining room, where her mother was arranging flowers inside a ceramic vase. Her father stood in the kitchen, attempting to prepare breakfast while singing badly to a song playing on the radio.

It was a scene she remembered from years earlier, before conversations became arguments and arguments became long periods of silence.

Her mother noticed her standing in the doorway.

“Good morning, sweetheart.”

Seren remained motionless.

Her father appeared carrying a plate of toast.

“Your mother's convinced I can't cook.”

“You can't,” her mother replied.

They laughed.

Seren felt tears forming before she could stop them.

She had spent years pretending that the problems between her parents did not bother her. Whenever their voices rose, she disappeared into her bedroom, put on headphones, or found some excuse to leave the house.

Humor had become her defense.

If she could make someone laugh, perhaps they would not notice how frightened she was.

If she appeared confident, perhaps nobody would ask whether she was all right.

Now the labyrinth offered her something she had stopped believing possible.

A family that had never fallen apart.

Her father placed the toast upon the table.

“Come on. Breakfast is getting cold.”

Seren sat.

For a while, she allowed herself to enjoy it.

They discussed ordinary things. Her mother's plans for the garden. Her father's work. A neighbor who had recently purchased a particularly noisy lawn mower.

Nobody argued.

Nobody threatened to leave.

There was no suitcase beside the front door.

Then her mother asked a question.

“Are you happy?”

Seren looked up.

“I think so.”

“Then why would you ever want to leave?”

The room became unnaturally quiet.

Her father continued smiling.

“You don't need those people you met.”

Seren lowered her fork.

“What people?”

“The ones who keep dragging you into danger.”

She remembered Bram hanging beneath the broken street in Aerovar. She remembered Mira comforting frightened children, Tovin becoming excited over ancient machines, and Lyra quietly helping people who might never know what she had done.

She remembered Kaelen asking whether they would remain friends when they returned home.

Her mother reached across the table.

“You have everything you need right here.”

Seren wanted desperately for that to be true.

But she had learned something during their journey.

Love did not require a world without disagreements. Friendship did not require people who never made mistakes. And happiness could not be manufactured by removing every difficult part of life.

She looked at her parents.

“I wish you could have worked things out.”

Her mother's expression became still.

“I wish I could have helped.”

The walls began trembling.

“But I was your daughter. It was never my responsibility to repair your marriage.”

The reflection darkened.

Her father stood.

“You would abandon us?”

Seren shook her head.

“No. I'm going to find the real you.”

She rose from the table.

“And whatever happens when I get home, I'll still love you both.”

The house disappeared.

Seren found herself standing in a crystalline corridor.

Something small struck her ankle.

She looked down.

Flicker was sitting beside her boot.

“Oh, you wonderful little troublemaker.”

She lifted him into her arms.

He immediately attempted to investigate her pockets.

Seren laughed.

“Of course. You came for the food.”

She held him a little tighter.

“I'm glad you're here anyway.”

The Answer to Every Question

Tovin stood inside an observatory larger than any he had ever imagined.

Its ceiling opened directly onto a magnificent field of stars. Instruments occupied several levels, and enormous telescopes moved silently upon rotating platforms.

Oliver stood beside the largest telescope.

His younger brother wore a white laboratory coat several sizes too large for him.

“You finally finished it!”

Tovin approached the instrument.

The telescope was extraordinary.

Its lenses appeared capable of observing distant galaxies in astonishing detail. Its controls responded immediately to his thoughts.

He looked toward Oliver.

“We built this?”

Oliver nodded enthusiastically.

“You figured everything out.”

The observatory changed.

Tovin saw equations appearing across enormous displays. He understood them immediately.

The mysteries of gravity.

The nature of time.

The relationship between consciousness and the physical universe.

The origins of the Great Crossing.

Questions that had occupied brilliant minds for centuries became simple problems with obvious solutions.

Tovin moved from one display to another.

He had never experienced anything like it.

For the first time in his life, he possessed complete understanding.

He could explain why the stars had fallen upward.

He could determine precisely how the six companions had arrived in Aetherfall.

He could calculate a safe route home.

He could even discover what had happened to Eira.

The answers were all here.

Then Oliver approached him carrying a notebook.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“How does it work?”

Tovin began explaining the telescope.

Oliver listened patiently.

When Tovin finished, his brother smiled.

“Can we figure it out together?”

Tovin looked at the enormous machine.

“There isn't anything left to figure out.”

Oliver's smile faded.

“Oh.”

He closed his notebook.

The boy walked toward another room.

Tovin watched him leave.

Something felt wrong.

He remembered their afternoons building things together. Most of their inventions had failed. Their homemade telescope had produced distorted images, and one of their experiments had resulted in a rather impressive amount of smoke.

But they had laughed.

They had argued over explanations.

They had learned together.

Here, there was no uncertainty.

No discovery.

No opportunity for Oliver to surprise him.

Tovin looked toward the displays.

“Show me something I don't know.”

The equations disappeared.

A voice emerged from the observatory.

“You know everything.”

“Then show me something new.”

Silence.

Tovin smiled sadly.

He understood.

Knowledge without discovery was simply possession.

And the thing he loved most about learning was not the satisfaction of knowing an answer. It was the extraordinary journey toward finding one.

He closed the nearest notebook.

“I'd rather keep asking questions.”

The observatory began dissolving.

Oliver appeared beside him.

“Are we still going to build our telescope?”

Tovin knelt before him.

“Absolutely.”

“Even if it doesn't work?”

Tovin laughed.

“Especially if it doesn't work.”

The boy disappeared.

Tovin stood within a narrow crystal passage.

His lantern appeared in his hand.

Its blue flame burned brightly.

He opened his notebook and wrote:

There is a difference between possessing knowledge and pursuing understanding.

Then he added a second sentence.

Remember to finish the telescope with Oliver.

He closed the notebook and continued toward the center of the labyrinth.

The Clockmaker's Inheritance

Lyra did not find herself inside her grandmother's shop.

Instead, she stood before its empty storefront.

The windows were covered with paper. A faded sign announced that the property had been sold.

She remembered this day.

She had been eleven years old.

Her grandmother had been buried only a few weeks earlier, and the relatives responsible for settling her affairs had decided that maintaining the shop was impractical.

Lyra had begged them to reconsider.

They had explained that she was too young to understand.

She had understood perfectly.

The shop was gone.

Her grandmother was gone.

And the only place where she had ever felt completely safe no longer belonged to her.

Now a man approached carrying a collection of documents.

“Miss Lyra?”

She looked at him.

“Yes?”

He handed her a key.

“The property is yours.”

She stared at it.

It was the brass key her grandmother had once carried.

“You can reopen the shop whenever you wish.”

Lyra approached the door.

The key turned.

Inside, everything had been restored.

The clocks.

The counter.

The workbench.

The chair where her grandmother had spent countless afternoons teaching her how to repair broken things.

But her grandmother was not there.

Lyra walked slowly through the shop.

Unlike the illusions she had encountered before, this one made no attempt to resurrect the dead.

It offered her something more believable.

A second chance.

She could restore the shop, preserve her grandmother's work, and spend the remainder of her life surrounded by familiar things.

She imagined opening the doors each morning.

Repairing watches.

Restoring damaged books.

Helping people recover possessions they had believed beyond saving.

It was a beautiful possibility.

Then she noticed that every clock displayed the same time.

Eleven minutes past four.

The exact moment she had learned of her grandmother's death.

Lyra approached the nearest clock.

She attempted to adjust its hands.

They returned immediately to their original position.

She tried another.

The same thing happened.

The shop was not a future.

It was a memorial pretending to be one.

Nothing would change here.

Nothing would grow.

She would spend the rest of her life preserving a moment that could never return.

Lyra placed the brass key upon the counter.

“I would have loved to keep this place.”

The clocks began ticking louder.

“But she taught me how to repair things so they could be used again. Not so they could remain exactly as they were.”

She summoned the Moonkey.

Its silver light spread throughout the room.

The clocks stopped.

Then, one by one, their hands began moving forward.

Lyra smiled.

“Thank you, Grandmother.”

The shop disappeared.

She stood before an open doorway.

For the first time, she wondered whether returning home might mean building something new rather than recovering everything she had lost.

The Chamber of the Six

Kaelen was the first to reach the central chamber.

Bram arrived shortly afterward, followed by Mira.

They waited beside an enormous crystalline pillar while the remaining doorways remained closed.

Bram examined his wooden horse.

Mira sat quietly, holding her shield across her knees.

Nobody immediately asked what the others had experienced.

Some things required time before they could be spoken about.

Eventually, Bram looked at Kaelen.

“Did you see him?”

Kaelen nodded.

“My father.”

“Mine too.”

They remained silent for several moments.

Then Bram held up the wooden horse.

“Apparently, I'm destined to become an internationally celebrated genius.”

Kaelen smiled.

“Congratulations.”

“Terrible life, though. Didn't have this.”

He returned the horse to his pocket.

Mira laughed softly.

Another doorway opened.

Tovin emerged, carrying his lantern and looking unusually thoughtful.

Lyra arrived several minutes later.

Finally, Seren appeared carrying Flicker.

Kaelen stood.

“You found him!”

Seren shook her head.

“He found me.”

Flicker leapt from her arms and raced between the companions, investigating each of them as though confirming that nobody had been replaced during their absence.

Bram knelt.

“Good to see you too.”

The emberfox immediately attempted to steal something from his pocket.

“Some things never change.”

For a few moments, the six companions simply enjoyed being together again.

Then the crystalline pillar began glowing.

A map appeared within its surface.

Seven points of golden light surrounded an enormous circle.

Tovin recognized the arrangement.

“The anchors.”

One point shone brightly.

The Dawn Anchor.

Another flickered beneath the western territories.

“The second shard,” Kaelen whispered.

But the map also revealed something unexpected.

Hundreds of smaller lights extended between the seven anchors, forming a vast network.

Some were bright.

Others were dark.

Several had recently awakened.

Lyra approached the pillar.

“Those are the roads we've helped restore.”

Tovin nodded.

“Sunrest. Ironbound. Aerovar.”

He traced several connections.

“Every time we've restored a road, we've strengthened the original network.”

Kaelen studied the map.

They had believed their journey required recovering seven objects.

Now he could see that their actions throughout Aetherfall were gradually accomplishing something larger.

The roads were beginning to remember one another.

Then a shadow moved across the map.

One of the golden connections disappeared.

Another followed.

The pillar cracked.

A deep voice echoed throughout the chamber.

“TRAVELERS IDENTIFIED.”

Bram summoned Thunderbrand.

“Here we go.”

The floor trembled.

Two enormous crystalline eyes opened beyond the pillar.

The Crystal Drake

The creature unfolded itself from the surrounding mountain.

At first, Kaelen could not distinguish its body from the cavern walls. Its scales reflected the crystals around it so perfectly that it appeared to emerge from the mountain itself.

Then its wings opened.

Each wing consisted of hundreds of translucent plates, arranged like enormous fragments of stained glass. Golden light traveled beneath its scales, illuminating the intricate structures within its body.

Its horns curved backward above a long, narrow head.

Its claws were as clear as ice.

The Crystal Drake was magnificent.

And terrifying.

It lowered its head toward the companions.

“EXAMINATIONS INCOMPLETE.”

Tovin stepped forward.

“We completed them.”

The Drake's eyes brightened.

“DESIRES REMAIN.”

Seren looked at Bram.

“Well, yes. I'm still quite interested in breakfast.”

The creature ignored her.

“TRAVELERS MUST BE FREE OF ALL CONFLICTING DESIRES BEFORE PASSAGE.”

Lyra frowned.

“That's impossible.”

The Drake turned toward her.

“THEN PASSAGE IS DENIED.”

Kaelen looked toward the map.

A violet fracture extended through the creature's chest.

He recognized the influence immediately.

But something about this corruption was different.

The Drake was not attacking them.

It was enforcing an impossible requirement.

Tovin opened his notebook.

“The original examination was intended to ensure that travelers could distinguish reality from reflection.”

He looked at the Drake.

“Something has altered its interpretation.”

The guardian spread its wings.

The chamber transformed.

Hundreds of reflections appeared around them.

Within each was a different version of their journey.

In one, they had never entered the observatory.

In another, Kaelen had accepted Commander Edran's offer.

In another, the Thornbound Warden had been destroyed.

They saw Ironbound collapsing.

Aerovar falling.

Willowmere remaining nameless.

They saw themselves making decisions they had never made.

And suffering consequences they had never experienced.

The Drake spoke again.

“SELECT THE CORRECT HISTORY.”

Kaelen stared at the reflections.

“What?”

“IDENTIFY THE PATH WITHOUT SUFFERING.”

Tovin looked toward the creature.

“There isn't one.”

The reflections multiplied.

“SELECT THE CORRECT HISTORY.”

Mira watched an image in which she had saved every injured person they had encountered.

Bram saw himself preventing every mistake.

Seren saw a journey in which nobody had ever been frightened.

Lyra saw every broken mechanism repaired.

Tovin saw every question answered.

Kaelen saw his father alive.

The Drake lowered its head.

“ALL OTHER HISTORIES MUST BE REJECTED.”

The companions understood.

The guardian had become obsessed with perfection.

It would not allow travelers to leave until they selected a version of their lives in which nothing had gone wrong.

And such a life did not exist.

The Cost of a Perfect World

The Crystal Drake struck the floor.

The reflections separated the companions.

Kaelen found himself standing upon a narrow bridge surrounded by images of his past.

Starstring appeared in his hands.

He fired toward the nearest crystal.

The arrow struck its surface and emerged from another reflection behind him.

He barely avoided it.

“Don't attack the mirrors!” Tovin shouted from somewhere beyond the chamber.

Bram's hammer struck a crystalline wall.

The resulting shock traveled through several reflections before returning directly beneath his feet.

He stumbled.

“Excellent advice! Slightly late!”

The Drake moved through the chamber, its enormous body appearing simultaneously within dozens of reflections.

Seren attempted to follow its movements.

Every image moved differently.

Lyra summoned the Moonkey, but the surrounding doorways multiplied faster than she could examine them.

Mira raised her shield.

Golden light revealed the companions' actual positions for several seconds before the reflections shifted again.

Then Flicker began barking.

Kaelen looked toward him.

The emberfox stood beside a narrow opening between two crystals.

Unlike the other passages, this opening possessed no reflection.

Flicker entered.

Kaelen followed.

He emerged beside Tovin.

“Flicker can find the real passages.”

Tovin looked at the emberfox.

“Of course.”

He raised his lantern.

“The reflections respond to complex desires. Flicker isn't searching for an alternate life. He's simply searching for us.”

Kaelen smiled.

“Then we follow him.”

The little creature raced through the chamber.

One by one, the companions reunited.

The Crystal Drake watched them.

“EXAMINATIONS INCOMPLETE.”

Kaelen looked up.

“No. We've completed them.”

“DESIRES REMAIN.”

“Of course they do.”

The Drake lowered its head.

“CONFLICTING DESIRES PRODUCE SUFFERING.”

Mira stepped forward.

“Sometimes.”

“SUFFERING MUST BE ELIMINATED.”

She looked toward the reflections.

“Not by eliminating people's freedom.”

The creature trembled.

The violet fracture beneath its chest brightened.

A familiar voice emerged.

Show them what they have lost.

The Drake spread its wings.

The reflections changed again.

This time, they showed the companions a world in which they had successfully returned home.

Their families welcomed them.

Their old lives continued.

Aetherfall remained behind.

Its roads collapsed.

Its settlements disappeared.

The people they had helped were consumed by darkness.

Kaelen watched Elowen's village vanish.

He saw Sable standing outside Ironbound.

He saw the refugee camps beneath Aerovar disappear.

Then another reflection appeared.

Aetherfall was restored.

Its people celebrated.

But the six companions never returned home.

Their families on Earth grew older.

Their photographs remained upon shelves.

Their names gradually became memories.

The Drake spoke.

“SELECT THE ACCEPTABLE OUTCOME.”

Kaelen felt sick.

The choice was unbearable.

Yet it was also false.

They did not know what the future held.

The creature was presenting possibilities as certainties.

He looked toward the others.

“We're not choosing either.”

The Drake roared.

“SELECTION REQUIRED.”

Kaelen dismissed Starstring.

“We haven't reached the end of our journey.”

He looked directly into its enormous eyes.

“You don't know how our story ends.”

The Reflection That Belonged to the Drake

Lyra noticed that one crystal remained dark.

It stood beneath the guardian's enormous chest, surrounded by smaller formations.

Unlike the others, it contained no image of the companions.

She approached.

Within its surface, a scene gradually appeared.

The Crystal Drake stood beside the western passage centuries earlier.

Travelers moved beneath its wings.

Children waved.

Merchants guided wagons through the mountain.

The guardian watched them pass.

Then the breaking occurred.

The mountain shook.

Several passages collapsed.

Travelers became trapped within the reflections.

The Drake attempted to guide them out.

Some escaped.

Others disappeared.

The creature searched for them for years.

It continued constructing reflections of their possible lives, hoping that one might reveal a way to recover them.

Gradually, its original purpose changed.

It no longer wished merely to guide travelers safely.

It wanted to ensure that nobody ever suffered another loss.

The Unremembered had found that desire.

And twisted it.

Lyra called to the others.

“It's trapped inside its own examination.”

Tovin joined her.

He watched the reflection.

“The Drake couldn't accept what happened during the breaking.”

Kaelen looked toward the guardian.

It had spent centuries attempting to create a perfect passage because it could not forgive itself for failing to protect the travelers who had entered before the catastrophe.

The creature's wings trembled.

“ALL TRAVELERS MUST BE PROTECTED.”

Mira approached.

“You cannot protect everyone from everything.”

“FAILURE UNACCEPTABLE.”

Bram looked at his wooden horse.

“Failure happens.”

The Drake turned toward him.

“FAILURE PRODUCES LOSS.”

Bram nodded.

“Yes.”

He looked toward the companions.

“But it doesn't mean everything you've done was worthless.”

The guardian became still.

Lyra raised the Moonkey.

The dark crystal beneath its chest began opening.

Within it, the violet fracture became visible.

Tovin lifted his lantern.

The darkness recoiled.

Kaelen summoned Starstring.

But before he released an arrow, he noticed something moving within the crystal.

A woman wearing a blue traveling coat.

She was standing inside one of the oldest reflections.

Mira gasped.

“Elara.”

Thirty-One Years

Elara had not aged thirty-one years.

Inside the labyrinth, time had moved differently.

She remembered entering the mountains with Corren.

She remembered becoming separated from him.

She remembered the Drake attempting to guide her toward an exit.

Then the reflections had multiplied.

Every time she approached a doorway, another version of her life appeared.

Eventually, she had stopped moving.

She had found a quiet place beside a crystalline stream and waited.

For her, perhaps only several months had passed.

She had survived upon water and small quantities of food provided by the labyrinth's ancient maintenance systems.

Yet she had never found the real road.

Now Lyra could see her through the dark crystal.

“She isn't a reflection.”

Tovin examined the image.

“No. She's inside a preserved section of the labyrinth.”

Mira stepped closer.

“Can we reach her?”

The Drake turned toward them.

“TRAVELER PROTECTION INCOMPLETE.”

Kaelen looked up.

“You've been keeping her here?”

“EXTERNAL CONDITIONS UNSAFE.”

“She's been waiting for thirty-one years!”

The creature lowered its head.

“TRAVELER MUST NOT EXPERIENCE LOSS.”

Mira looked at Elara.

“She already has.”

The words seemed to reach something beneath the guardian's corrupted instructions.

Its eyes flickered.

Lyra placed the Moonkey against the crystal.

A doorway appeared.

Elara turned toward them.

For a moment, she seemed unable to believe what she was seeing.

Mira extended her hand.

“Elara?”

The woman approached cautiously.

“How do you know my name?”

Mira smiled.

“Your husband told us.”

Elara's eyes filled with tears.

“Corren?”

“Yes.”

“Is he here?”

Mira hesitated.

“He's waiting outside.”

Elara hurried toward the doorway.

The Crystal Drake roared.

The violet fracture expanded.

The doorway began closing.

Kaelen raised Starstring.

“Tovin!”

The lantern's blue flame illuminated the darkness beneath the Drake's chest.

Lyra held the passage open.

Bram and Seren positioned themselves beside the doorway, preventing the surrounding crystal formations from collapsing.

Mira reached for Elara.

Their hands met.

She pulled the woman into the central chamber.

The Drake screamed.

Darkness erupted from its chest.

Kaelen released his arrow.

Golden light struck the violet fracture.

The Unremembered tore itself free.

For an instant, it formed an enormous shadow resembling the Drake itself.

Then Tovin raised the lantern.

Lyra closed the corrupted passage.

The shadow shattered.

The surrounding reflections disappeared.

The Crystal Drake collapsed upon the cavern floor.

Its wings folded.

Its eyes dimmed.

For several moments, nobody moved.

Then the guardian raised its head.

“TRAVELER... RECOVERED.”

Kaelen smiled.

“Yes.”

The Drake looked toward Elara.

“PASSAGE AVAILABLE.”

The enormous western doorway opened.

Sunlight entered the chamber.

The guardian lowered its head.

“SAFE TRAVELS.”

The Woman at the Door

Corren was repairing another pair of boots when he heard footsteps.

He looked toward the labyrinth entrance.

The six companions emerged.

He stood slowly.

“Did you find a way through?”

Kaelen nodded.

Corren smiled.

“Good. I'm glad.”

Then he noticed someone standing behind Mira.

A woman wearing a blue traveling coat.

The boots fell from his hands.

Elara stepped forward.

“Corren?”

He stared at her.

She looked almost exactly as he remembered.

Perhaps a little thinner.

Perhaps more tired.

But unmistakably herself.

She approached him slowly.

“What happened to your hair?”

Corren laughed.

The sound became a sob.

He reached toward her.

She took his hands.

For a long time, neither could speak.

Elara examined his face, touching the lines around his eyes.

“How long?”

Corren swallowed.

“Thirty-one years.”

She stared at him.

Then she embraced him.

Kaelen turned away.

Mira wiped her eyes.

Bram looked toward the mountains.

Seren quietly took his hand.

The reunion was beautiful.

But it was also painful.

Thirty-one years had been taken from them.

They could not recover those years.

They could not return to the lives they had expected to share.

Yet they were together.

And whatever time remained belonged to them.

Corren eventually looked toward the companions.

“How can I ever repay you?”

Kaelen shook his head.

“You don't need to.”

Corren looked at Elara.

Then toward the labyrinth.

“I thought I'd lost everything.”

Elara smiled through her tears.

“Then let's find out what we still have.”

Together, they began gathering his possessions.

For the first time in thirty-one years, Corren prepared to leave the mountain.

The Gift of the Crystal Drake

Before the companions departed, the guardian emerged from the labyrinth.

Sunlight passed through its enormous wings, scattering rainbows across the mountainside.

It lowered its head toward Flicker.

The emberfox approached without hesitation.

The Drake released a quiet sound resembling distant bells.

Flicker chirped in response.

Bram watched them.

“I think he's made another friend.”

Seren smiled.

“He's considerably better at diplomacy than we are.”

The Drake turned toward Kaelen.

A small crystal separated from one of its wings and floated toward him.

He caught it.

Within its surface, he could see the surrounding mountains exactly as they were.

No alternate futures.

No forgotten pasts.

No impossible promises.

Only reality.

Tovin examined it.

“A truthglass crystal.”

The guardian spoke.

“REFLECTION DISTORTION DETECTION.”

Lyra smiled.

“It reveals false images?”

“AFFIRMATIVE.”

Kaelen placed it beside the Dawn Anchor.

“Thank you.”

The Drake spread its wings.

It looked toward Corren and Elara.

“TRAVELERS DEPARTING.”

Corren raised one hand.

“Goodbye.”

The guardian lowered its head.

“SAFE TRAVELS.”

Then it returned to the mountain.

The labyrinth's entrance remained open.

Its ancient purpose had been restored.

A Fire Beneath the Horizon

The western road descended gradually from the crystalline mountains.

For several days, the companions traveled through beautiful valleys filled with streams and flowering trees.

They shared meals with Corren and Elara before separating at a crossroads leading toward a nearby settlement.

Tovin provided them with a map.

Mira supplied medicine.

Bram repaired Corren's traveling cart.

Seren secretly placed several coins inside Elara's bag.

Lyra gave the couple a small repaired pocket watch.

“It keeps accurate time,” she explained.

Corren smiled.

“I think we've had enough trouble with time.”

Elara accepted it.

“Then perhaps we should start keeping better track of it.”

They departed together.

The six companions continued west.

By the fourth evening, the landscape began changing.

Smoke appeared beyond the horizon.

At first, Kaelen assumed it came from a distant settlement.

Then more columns appeared.

And more.

The smell of burning wood traveled upon the wind.

They encountered a group of refugees shortly before sunset.

A man pushed a damaged cart carrying two children. An elderly woman walked beside him, supporting herself with a wooden staff.

Mira hurried forward.

“What's happened?”

The man looked at their relics.

“Emberfall.”

Kaelen remembered Rhea's invitation.

“What happened there?”

The man's expression became desperate.

“The Restoration has surrounded the city.”

Bram looked toward the smoke.

“Why?”

“They say the city is hiding enemies. Former soldiers. Prisoners who escaped from Ironbound.”

Kaelen felt cold.

Rhea.

Sable's people.

The men and women they had helped rescue.

The refugee continued.

“They've brought something with them.”

“What?”

The man looked toward the horizon.

“A giant.”

A distant sound rolled across the valley.

The ground trembled beneath their feet.

Birds rose from the surrounding trees.

Then another sound followed.

An explosion.

Kaelen looked toward his companions.

Nobody needed to ask where they were going.

They turned toward the smoke.

CHAPTER 13

The Siege of Emberfall



Emberfall burned beneath a sky filled with ash. A siege colossus marched toward the city walls, its furnace fed by the stolen memories of prisoners. Captain Rhea asked the heroes to help evacuate the lower district. The second shard lay beneath the city, but reaching it while the people were trapped would mean abandoning them. Kaelen and Seren guided families through the old aqueducts. Mira and Bram joined the defenders at the gate. Tovin discovered that the colossus was powered by three external conduits, and Lyra found the control room beneath a ruined tower. The machine's attacks grew stronger as the conduits overheated. They could not defeat it by striking its armor alone. When the gate began to fail, Rhea ordered a retreat. Mira held the last passage until the children were through. Bram carried a wounded defender on his shoulder. Kaelen severed the first conduit, Seren cut the second, and Lyra opened the control room while Tovin reversed the third. The colossus stumbled into an empty moat, its furnace extinguished. The city survived, though its

outer walls were lost. Rhea led them to the underground reservoir. She explained that the shard had once regulated the city's water and that Vaelrith wanted it because it could command the flow of memories between worlds. The heroes descended into the flooded sanctuary, carrying lanterns and the knowledge that their victory had bought time, not peace.

Recovered expanded manuscript

Before the Walls Fell

Captain Rhea had spent most of her adult life learning how to take a city.

She understood supply routes, defensive formations, the weaknesses of fortified gates, and the importance of maintaining communication between soldiers.

She had studied the military campaigns of ancient Aetherfall.

She had trained officers.

She had followed orders that she now wished she could forget.

But nothing in her seventeen years of service had prepared her to defend a city against the army she had once commanded.

She stood upon Emberfall's eastern wall as morning sunlight illuminated the surrounding plains.

Beyond the outer defenses, hundreds of silver banners moved in the wind.

The Restoration had established camps along the northern and eastern roads. Supply wagons traveled between them, and enormous siege mechanisms occupied positions overlooking the city.

Rhea recognized several officers.

Men and women with whom she had shared meals.

Soldiers she had trained personally.

People who had once trusted her.

Now they had been ordered to capture her.

A young messenger approached.

“Captain.”

Rhea turned.

“Report.”

“The southern road remains open, but the enemy is moving additional forces toward it.”

“How many civilians have escaped?”

“Approximately four thousand.”

“And how many remain?”

The messenger lowered his eyes.

“More than twenty thousand.”

Rhea looked toward the city.

Emberfall had been built around an ancient volcanic basin. Its buildings were constructed from dark stone, and underground channels carried naturally heated water throughout its neighborhoods.

The city was famous for its blacksmiths, glassmakers, and engineers.

It had survived the breaking.

It had survived famine.

It had survived generations of political conflict.

Now its greatest danger came from an organization that claimed to be restoring civilization.

Rhea looked toward the distant siege engines.

“Keep the southern road open as long as possible.”

The messenger saluted.

He turned to leave.

“Wait.”

He looked back.

Rhea removed a small silver emblem from her coat.

It depicted an open doorway.

“Find someone willing to travel east. Tell them to look for six travelers carrying ancient relics.”

The messenger examined the emblem.

“Who are they?”

Rhea looked toward the distant mountains.

“Friends.”

The City of Fire and Stone

Emberfall had welcomed the former prisoners of Ironbound.

Its governing council had provided abandoned workshops for shelters, distributed supplies, and offered employment to those capable of working.

Several physicians had volunteered to treat injuries sustained during imprisonment.

Families had opened their homes.

For many former prisoners, Emberfall represented the first place where they had felt safe in years.

Then the Restoration issued its demands.

Return the escaped prisoners.

Surrender Captain Rhea.

Provide unrestricted access to the city's ancient engineering facilities.

The council refused.

Three days later, the army arrived.

Among the people who had found refuge in Emberfall was Joren, the young guard who had helped open Ironbound's prison cells.

He now stood inside a crowded workshop, helping construct defensive barriers.

His hands were blistered.

His uniform had been replaced with ordinary clothing.

He had not slept properly in two nights.

An elderly prisoner approached carrying a bundle of tools.

“You should rest.”

Joren shook his head.

“There's too much to do.”

The man smiled.

“You sound like Captain Rhea.”

Joren looked toward the window.

“Do you think they'll execute us if they capture the city?”

The old man considered the question.

“Perhaps.”

Joren swallowed.

“I used to be one of them.”

“I remember.”

“I don't know how to fight against people I trained beside.”

The old man placed the tools upon a table.

“Then remember who you're fighting for.”

Outside, children carried water toward the defensive shelters.

Joren watched them.

He remembered the little girl standing beside her mother in Ironbound.

He remembered handing his keys to Lyra.

He had been terrified then.

He was terrified now.

But he returned to his work.

The Commander Who Received No Answer

Commander Edran stood inside the Restoration's largest command tent.

A map of Emberfall occupied the central table.

Several officers discussed the city's defenses while engineers examined diagrams of its ancient infrastructure.

Edran listened without speaking.

He had not authorized the siege.

The orders had arrived bearing Vaelrith's personal seal.

Yet several details troubled him.

The attack contradicted Vaelrith's recent instructions concerning the suspension of memory extraction. It also appeared designed to recover prisoners whose testimony might expose Restoration research programs.

Edran turned toward the officer responsible for the operation.

General Kharos.

Kharos was a broad-shouldered man with a shaved head and a deep scar across his chin. He had risen through the Restoration's military ranks through a combination of determination, discipline, and an extraordinary willingness to accept casualties.

“Has Lord Vaelrith confirmed these orders personally?” Edran asked.

Kharos pointed toward the sealed document.

“His authority is clearly established.”

“That wasn't my question.”

The general looked at him.

“Are you questioning the lord's command?”

“I'm questioning whether it is his command.”

The officers became silent.

Kharos folded his arms.

“Emberfall is harboring fugitives responsible for the destruction of Ironbound.”

“Those fugitives were prisoners subjected to unlawful research.”

“According to whom?”

Edran stared at him.

“According to the evidence recovered from Ironbound.”

Kharos smiled faintly.

“Evidence collected by enemies of the Restoration.”

Edran looked toward the map.

For centuries, he had served Vaelrith because he believed the Restoration offered Aetherfall its greatest hope.

Now he found himself arguing against the very institution he had helped build.

“Withdraw your forces,” he said.

Kharos shook his head.

“I cannot.”

“Then delay the assault until we receive confirmation.”

“The siege has already begun.”

Edran stepped closer.

“Thousands of innocent people are inside those walls.”

The general's expression remained unchanged.

“Then the council should surrender.”

Edran recognized the logic.

He had heard variations of it throughout his military career.

Every terrible consequence became someone else's responsibility.

Every innocent death became an unfortunate necessity.

He looked toward the sealed orders.

“Send another message to Vaelrith.”

Kharos nodded toward an officer.

“Do as he asks.”

Edran left the tent.

Outside, he looked toward Emberfall.

He remembered the valley where his family had disappeared during the breaking.

He remembered Vaelrith promising to restore everything that had been lost.

And he wondered when restoring the world had become an excuse for destroying it.

The Colossus of Ash

Deep beneath the largest Restoration camp, engineers worked around an enormous mechanical structure.

Its body had been assembled from ancient guardian fragments, reinforced with black iron and powered by several unstable crystals.

Its legs were taller than Emberfall's outer gates.

Its shoulders supported massive armored plates.

Its arms contained mechanisms originally designed to move enormous quantities of stone during the construction of ancient cities.

The Restoration had transformed those mechanisms into instruments of destruction.

General Kharos entered the engineering chamber.

“Is it ready?”

The chief engineer hesitated.

“The containment systems remain unstable.”

Kharos looked up at the enormous creature.

“Can it breach the walls?”

“Yes.”

“Then it's ready.”

The engineer examined the crystal embedded within its chest.

Dark energy moved beneath its surface.

“We haven't established complete control.”

Kharos turned toward him.

“Establish it.”

He walked away.

The engineers returned to their stations.

One activated the central mechanism.

Another connected the remaining power channels.

The enormous creature began moving.

Its fingers closed.

Its head lifted.

Deep within its chest, the black crystal opened like an eye.

The engineers heard a voice.

Not through the machinery.

Not through the surrounding instruments.

Inside their thoughts.

Break the walls.

Several stepped backward.

The creature rose.

Its armor glowed with the colors of a dying furnace.

And somewhere far beneath the earth, the second anchor of the Great Crossing began to tremble.

The Return of the Bearers

Kaelen and the companions reached Emberfall shortly after dawn.

The city stood beneath a sky darkened by smoke.

Its walls bore enormous cracks.

Several outer buildings were burning.

Refugees crowded the southern road, carrying possessions upon carts or simply walking with whatever they could hold.

Mira immediately began helping the injured.

Bram assisted several people whose cart had become trapped beside the road.

Tovin examined the distant siege mechanisms.

Lyra looked toward the silver banners.

Seren stood beside Kaelen.

“That's an army.”

He nodded.

They had fought corrupted guardians.

They had confronted monsters.

They had helped overthrow cruel researchers and prevent ancient machines from destroying entire communities.

But they had never faced a war.

Not like this.

A messenger approached on horseback.

His clothing was covered in dust.

When he noticed the companions' relics, he nearly fell from the saddle attempting to dismount.

“Are you the bearers?”

Kaelen stepped forward.

“Yes.”

The messenger produced a small silver emblem.

An open doorway.

“Captain Rhea sent me.”

Kaelen accepted it.

“Where is she?”

“Inside the city.”

The messenger looked toward the northern wall.

“She said you might come.”

Kaelen turned toward his companions.

Bram summoned Thunderbrand.

Seren drew her blades.

Mira raised her shield.

Tovin's lantern appeared.

Lyra held the Moonkey.

Flicker's tail began glowing.

The messenger looked at them.

“Can you save Emberfall?”

Kaelen looked toward the thousands of people attempting to escape.

He remembered the promises he had learned not to make.

“We're going to help.”

The ground shook.

Beyond the northern walls, something enormous rose above the smoke.

Two burning eyes appeared.

Then a gigantic armored hand struck the city's outer defenses.

The wall collapsed.

The messenger became pale.

Kaelen stared at the creature.

The Ash Colossus had awakened.

And the siege of Emberfall had truly begun.

The northern wall had stood for eight hundred years.

Its stones had survived earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and the catastrophe that shattered the Great Crossing. Generations of children had grown up believing that nothing could penetrate the enormous defenses surrounding Emberfall.

It took the Ash Colossus less than a minute to prove them wrong.

Kaelen watched a section of the wall disappear beneath the creature's enormous fist. Dust rose above the rooftops, swallowing towers and buildings as the sound of collapsing stone traveled across the valley.

The messenger beside him stared in horror.

“My family's in there.”

Mira turned toward him.

“Where?”

“The northern district. My mother runs a glassmaking workshop.”

Mira took his arm.

“Show us the way.”

They abandoned the main road and followed the messenger toward a smaller entrance used by merchants transporting supplies into the city. Wounded soldiers were already being carried through it. Several had burns across their clothing, while others appeared unable to walk without assistance.

Bram helped move a damaged wagon blocking the entrance. Seren climbed onto its roof to examine the streets beyond.

What she saw made her stomach turn.

Buildings were burning. People crowded narrow passages, attempting to escape the destruction. Soldiers shouted contradictory instructions as the city's alarm bells continued ringing.

There was no clear direction.

No organized retreat.

Only frightened people searching for somewhere safe.

Kaelen had seen destruction throughout Aetherfall, but never on this scale.

For the first time, he understood that courage alone might not be enough.

The Captain's Burden

Rhea stood inside a makeshift command center established within an old blacksmith's guildhall.

Maps covered the tables. Messengers entered and departed constantly, bringing reports from different districts.

“Eastern barricade lost!”

“Medical shelter at capacity!”

“Additional civilians trapped near the northern workshops!”

Rhea moved between the reports, issuing instructions while attempting to maintain some understanding of the rapidly deteriorating situation.

Then Joren entered.

“Captain!”

She looked up.

“The bearers are here.”

For the first time that morning, her expression softened.

Kaelen entered with the others.

Rhea crossed the room and embraced him before he could speak.

“You actually came.”

“Your messenger found us.”

She stepped backward.

“I wish I could offer you a proper welcome.”

Bram looked toward the ceiling as another explosion shook the building.

“We've had worse.”

Seren looked at him.

“Have we?”

He considered the question.

“Give me a moment.”

Rhea smiled briefly, then returned to the maps.

“The northern wall is gone. The eastern defenses won't last much longer. We're evacuating through the southern road, but there are too many people and not enough transport.”

Tovin examined the markings surrounding the city.

“What about the creature?”

“The Colossus?”

Rhea shook her head.

“We've struck it with everything available. Nothing has stopped it.”

Lyra approached the map.

“Where did it come from?”

“The Restoration assembled it from ancient guardian remains. According to our intelligence, it was originally intended to excavate mountain passages.”

Bram looked toward the northern district.

“Someone's made a few modifications.”

Rhea nodded.

“Unfortunately.”

Kaelen studied the city.

“How can we help?”

Rhea looked at him for several seconds.

Then she answered with the honesty of someone who had run out of comforting explanations.

“I need you to help me get as many people out as possible.”

She pointed toward the northern districts.

“And I need that creature stopped.”

The Glassmaker's Daughter

The messenger's name was Fenric.

He led Mira and Seren through streets filled with smoke until they reached a row of workshops near the northern wall.

His mother's shop had partially collapsed.

“Mother!”

He rushed toward the entrance.

Mira caught him before he stepped beneath an unstable beam.

“Wait.”

A voice emerged from the wreckage.

“Fenric?”

He immediately began crying.

“I'm here!”

Seren climbed through a damaged window and discovered three people trapped beneath the remains of the workshop.

One was Fenric's mother.

Another was an elderly glassmaker.

The third was a young girl whose leg had become trapped beneath a heavy cabinet.

Mira summoned the Aegis of Dawn.

Its golden light illuminated the interior.

“Seren, help me move this.”

Together, they lifted the cabinet enough to free the child.

Fenric's mother attempted to stand.

Her ankle was injured.

Mira supported her while Seren helped the elderly man toward the window.

Then the building shook.

Outside, enormous footsteps approached.

Seren looked through the opening.

The Colossus was moving along the northern street.

Its body towered above the surrounding workshops.

Molten light traveled through cracks in its armor.

Every movement scattered burning fragments across the buildings.

“We need to leave,” Seren said.

Mira looked at the injured people.

“Fenric, take your mother.”

He helped her toward the window.

The elderly glassmaker followed.

Seren lifted the young girl.

Then the Colossus struck a nearby tower.

The workshop's remaining supports began collapsing.

Mira raised her shield.

Golden light expanded above them.

Stone and timber struck the barrier.

She dropped to one knee.

“Go!”

Seren carried the girl outside.

Fenric and the others reached the street.

Mira remained beneath the shield, struggling to support the weight of the collapsing building.

Seren turned.

“Mira!”

“Keep moving!”

Instead, Seren returned.

She grabbed Mira's arm and pulled her toward the window.

The shield contracted.

Together, they stumbled into the street as the workshop collapsed behind them.

For several seconds, they lay upon the ground, coughing.

Seren eventually looked at Mira.

“You're not allowed to do that.”

Mira struggled to catch her breath.

“Do what?”

“Tell me to leave you behind.”

Mira smiled weakly.

“All right.”

“Good.”

Seren helped her stand.

“Because you're terrible at following your own advice.”

The Engineer of Ironbound

Sable had established a workshop beneath Emberfall's southern district.

The former prisoner had spent the weeks following his escape repairing machinery, restoring water systems, and teaching younger engineers how to maintain ancient equipment.

When Tovin and Lyra arrived, they found him surrounded by diagrams.

He looked up.

“I was wondering when you'd appear.”

Tovin smiled.

“Good to see you.”

“Likewise. Although I'd have preferred considerably different circumstances.”

Lyra placed several recovered documents upon his table.

“Do you know anything about the Colossus?”

Sable examined the drawings.

“Unfortunately, yes.”

He retrieved an old engineering manual.

“The original guardians were designed to distribute enormous amounts of energy throughout construction mechanisms.”

He turned several pages.

“The Restoration began experimenting with their remains years ago. I was ordered to help develop methods of controlling them.”

Tovin looked at him.

“That's why they imprisoned you?”

“One of the reasons.”

Sable pointed toward an illustration.

“The Colossus cannot operate from a single energy source. Its body requires three external conduits to maintain sufficient power.”

Lyra studied the diagram.

“External?”

“Yes. Somewhere outside the city, the Restoration has established three transmission stations.”

Tovin understood immediately.

“Disconnect the stations, and the creature loses its power.”

Sable shook his head.

“It isn't quite that simple.”

He pointed toward the central crystal.

“If the external supply disappears suddenly, the energy already inside the Colossus will become unstable.”

“How unstable?” Lyra asked.

Sable looked toward the ceiling.

“Enough to destroy several districts.”

Tovin removed his spectacles and rubbed his eyes.

“Of course.”

Sable continued.

“We must redirect its remaining energy somewhere capable of containing it.”

Lyra examined another diagram.

“What about Emberfall's underground infrastructure?”

Sable became thoughtful.

The city's ancient geothermal systems had been constructed around something considerably older than the settlement itself.

He retrieved another map.

“There's a chamber beneath the volcanic basin. Nobody has been able to open it since the breaking.”

Tovin looked toward Lyra.

She smiled.

“I suspect we're about to change that.”

The Soldier Who Lowered His Sword

Commander Edran entered Emberfall through the eastern breach.

He wore no helmet.

His sword remained inside its sheath.

Around him, Restoration soldiers moved through damaged streets, searching buildings and gathering prisoners.

He recognized a young officer directing several soldiers toward a group of civilians.

“Lieutenant!”

The officer turned.

“Commander!”

“What are you doing?”

“Securing suspected collaborators.”

Edran looked at the prisoners.

An elderly woman.

Two injured men.

A frightened boy who could not have been older than twelve.

“Release them.”

The lieutenant hesitated.

“General Kharos ordered—”

“I heard you.”

Edran approached him.

“Release them.”

The officer looked toward his soldiers.

Then he nodded.

The prisoners were allowed to leave.

Edran continued through the city.

Every street revealed another consequence of the Restoration's ambitions.

A burned home.

An abandoned cart.

A wounded soldier calling for assistance.

He stopped beside a young man lying against a damaged wall.

The soldier recognized him.

“Commander?”

Edran knelt.

The young man's armor bore the Restoration's emblem.

His injuries were severe.

“Am I going to die?”

Edran examined the wound.

“I'll find a physician.”

The soldier caught his sleeve.

“Did we win?”

Edran looked toward the burning city.

For three centuries, he had believed that victory would eventually justify the sacrifices required to achieve it.

He looked back at the young man.

“No.”

He lifted the soldier carefully.

“Not today.”

The Chamber Beneath Emberfall

Lyra, Tovin, and Sable descended into the city's ancient foundations.

The temperature increased as they traveled deeper. Pipes carried heated water through tunnels carved from dark volcanic stone.

Eventually, they reached an enormous circular doorway.

Its surface bore seven stars surrounding an open circle.

Tovin recognized the symbol.

“The original Crossing.”

Lyra summoned the Moonkey.

Silver light spread across the doorway.

Ancient mechanisms began moving.

The stone separated.

Beyond it lay a cavern illuminated by rivers of molten rock.

At its center stood a circular platform surrounded by seven enormous pillars.

Six were dark.

The seventh emitted a faint blue light.

Sable approached slowly.

“I've spent years wondering what was behind that door.”

Tovin examined the illuminated pillar.

“This isn't merely a geothermal chamber.”

He looked toward the surrounding machinery.

“It's an anchor station.”

Lyra stared at him.

“The second shard?”

“Possibly nearby. But this chamber appears to be part of its distribution network.”

Sable examined the controls.

“Could it absorb the Colossus's remaining energy?”

Tovin followed several ancient inscriptions.

“Yes.”

Then he stopped.

“But only if we restore the connection between this chamber and the surface.”

Lyra looked toward the molten rivers.

“And if we fail?”

Sable answered quietly.

“The energy will enter the city's geothermal systems.”

Nobody needed him to explain the consequences.

Tovin opened his notebook.

“We'd better make certain we don't.”

An Unexpected Alliance

Kaelen and Bram reached the western barricade shortly before midday.

Rhea was directing soldiers toward the remaining evacuation routes.

Then a familiar voice called from the smoke.

“Captain.”

Rhea turned.

Her hand immediately reached for her sword.

Edran emerged carrying the wounded Restoration soldier.

Several defenders raised their weapons.

“Hold!” Rhea shouted.

Edran approached.

“I need a physician.”

Rhea looked at the injured man.

Then she motioned toward a nearby shelter.

“Take him inside.”

Two defenders accepted the soldier.

Edran turned toward Kaelen.

“You've traveled considerably farther than I expected.”

Kaelen studied him.

“Did you order this?”

“No.”

“Did Vaelrith?”

Edran hesitated.

“I don't know.”

Rhea stared at him.

“You don't know?”

“The orders bear his seal. But they contradict his recent instructions.”

She gestured toward the burning buildings.

“Then perhaps someone should have asked before destroying half the city.”

Edran accepted the criticism without protest.

“I tried to delay the assault.”

“Not hard enough.”

“No.”

The admission surprised her.

Edran looked toward the Colossus.

“I can help stop this.”

Rhea folded her arms.

“Why should I trust you?”

He removed his sword and placed it upon the ground.

“Because I know where the transmission stations are.”

Kaelen looked at Rhea.

She remained silent for several moments.

Then she picked up the sword and returned it to Edran.

“You're going to need that.”

He accepted it.

“What do you require?”

Rhea pointed toward the map.

“First, you're going to tell us everything.”

Three Towers of Fire

The transmission stations occupied three separate positions beyond Emberfall.

Each supplied energy to the Colossus through the ancient network beneath the city.

Tovin's plan required the stations to be disconnected in coordination with the restored anchor chamber.

If the timing failed, the Colossus could release its accumulated energy into Emberfall.

If the stations remained operational, the creature would continue destroying the city.

Rhea organized the defenders into separate groups.

Edran volunteered to approach the northern station, where several officers remained loyal to him.

Seren and Bram accompanied Joren toward the eastern station.

Kaelen and Mira traveled toward the western station.

Below the city, Tovin, Lyra, and Sable prepared the ancient machinery.

For the first time since their arrival in Aetherfall, the six companions were fighting across separate parts of an entire battlefield.

Kaelen disliked being separated from the others.

But he trusted them.

And increasingly, he understood that they did not need him standing beside them to accomplish extraordinary things.

The General's Last Order

General Kharos received reports of the attacks upon the transmission stations.

He stared at the map inside his command tent.

“Edran is assisting them?”

The messenger nodded.

“Yes, General.”

Kharos struck the table.

“Traitor.”

An engineer approached.

“The Colossus is drawing more energy than anticipated. Its central crystal is becoming unstable.”

“Maintain the supply.”

“General, we may lose control.”

Kharos turned toward him.

“Then increase the output.”

The engineer stared.

“That could destroy the creature.”

Kharos looked toward Emberfall.

“Then let it destroy the city with it.”

The engineer became pale.

Several officers exchanged glances.

One stepped forward.

“Sir, our own soldiers are inside the city.”

Kharos drew his sword.

“Anyone who refuses a direct order will be treated as a deserter.”

The officers became silent.

Then the engineer removed his insignia.

“No.”

Kharos stared at him.

The engineer placed the insignia upon the table.

“I will not do it.”

Another officer removed hers.

Then another.

Kharos looked around the tent.

For years, he had believed that discipline meant obedience.

Now the people standing before him were demonstrating something he had never understood.

Loyalty did not require surrendering one's conscience.

Outside, the Colossus roared.

The general rushed toward the central control mechanism.

If his engineers would not obey him, he would activate it himself.

The Northern Station

Edran approached the northern transmission tower beneath a white flag.

The soldiers recognized him immediately.

Their commanding officer emerged.

“Commander, we've received orders for your arrest.”

Edran nodded.

“I'm aware.”

The officer looked toward Emberfall.

“General Kharos says you've betrayed the Restoration.”

Edran studied the young man's face.

He remembered training him.

He remembered teaching him that soldiers existed to protect those who could not protect themselves.

“Look at the city,” Edran said.

The officer obeyed.

Smoke rose from dozens of buildings.

Refugees crowded the southern roads.

The Colossus continued moving between the streets.

“Is that what you joined the Restoration to accomplish?”

The officer remained silent.

Edran removed his own silver insignia.

“I have served Vaelrith for three hundred and seventeen years.”

He held the emblem in his palm.

“I believed we were going to bring people home.”

He looked toward Emberfall.

“Today, we're destroying theirs.”

The officer lowered his weapon.

“What do you want us to do?”

“Disconnect the station when the signal arrives. Then help evacuate the wounded.”

The officer looked at his soldiers.

One by one, they lowered their weapons.

Edran closed his hand around the insignia.

For the first time in centuries, he was no longer certain whether he belonged to the Restoration.

But he was certain of what he needed to do.

Thunder and Crescent

The eastern station was less willing to surrender.

Bram stood beneath a golden barrier created by a portable device Sable had provided, while Seren and Joren attempted to reach the tower's control chamber.

Restoration guards blocked the entrance.

Bram summoned Thunderbrand.

“Any chance we could discuss this?”

A guard fired.

The projectile struck the barrier.

Bram sighed.

“Apparently not.”

Seren moved through the confusion with remarkable speed, using her blades to disable weapons rather than strike the soldiers carrying them.

Joren reached the control chamber.

Inside, he encountered a familiar face.

A former training officer.

“Joren?”

He stopped.

“Lieutenant Meris.”

She raised her sword.

“You're supposed to be dead.”

“I've been hearing that quite a bit lately.”

She stared at him.

“You opened Ironbound.”

“Yes.”

“You betrayed your oath.”

Joren looked toward the city.

“I thought so too.”

He lowered his weapon.

“Until I realized what we were doing to those people.”

Meris hesitated.

Outside, the Colossus struck another building.

Joren pointed toward the control mechanism.

“Help me stop it.”

For several seconds, neither moved.

Then Meris looked toward the burning city.

She slowly lowered her sword.

“Tell me what you need.”

The Western Station

Kaelen and Mira reached the final station to find it almost abandoned.

Several engineers had fled after the transmission mechanism became unstable.

An injured technician remained beside the controls.

Mira hurried toward him.

Kaelen examined the machinery.

Golden energy traveled through its conduits, interrupted by violent pulses of violet light.

He removed the truthglass crystal given to him by the Crystal Drake.

Through its surface, the energy appeared different.

Dark threads extended from the mechanism toward the Colossus.

The Unremembered was feeding upon it.

Kaelen looked toward the enormous creature.

He understood now.

The Colossus was not simply being powered by the Restoration.

It was becoming another vessel.

He opened the small communication crystal Sable had provided.

“Tovin?”

Static filled the crystal.

Then a voice answered.

“Kaelen?”

“The darkness is inside the Colossus. Disconnecting the power might not stop it.”

Silence followed.

Then Tovin spoke.

“Bring the truthglass to the anchor chamber.”

Kaelen looked toward the transmission station.

“What about this mechanism?”

Mira stood beside the injured technician.

“I can handle it.”

He looked at her.

“Are you sure?”

She smiled.

“Go.”

Kaelen hesitated.

Then he nodded.

He trusted her.

He ran toward the city.

The Heart of the Furnace

The ancient chamber beneath Emberfall began awakening.

Tovin worked beside Sable while Lyra opened the final connections.

Blue light spread through the seven pillars.

The surrounding molten rivers became brighter.

Kaelen arrived carrying the truthglass.

Tovin placed it within the central mechanism.

Immediately, the entire network became visible.

Three golden connections extended toward the surface.

A fourth, darker connection reached toward the Colossus.

Lyra examined it.

“The darkness is attempting to reach the anchor.”

Sable looked toward the illuminated pillar.

“If it succeeds, it could gain access to every road connected to this station.”

Kaelen summoned Starstring.

“Then we separate it.”

Tovin shook his head.

“Not until the external energy is disconnected.”

He activated the communication crystal.

“Everyone ready?”

Mira answered first.

“Western station ready.”

Then Joren.

“Eastern station ready.”

Finally, Edran.

“Northern station ready.”

Tovin looked at Sable.

The engineer nodded.

“Now.”

Across Emberfall, three transmission stations went dark.

The Colossus stopped moving.

For several seconds, the entire city became strangely quiet.

Then the creature's chest erupted with violet light.

The Last Stand of the Colossus

The Ash Colossus turned toward the city's central district.

Its armor began separating.

Molten energy poured through its damaged joints.

Inside its chest, the darkness gathered.

General Kharos stood beside the remaining control mechanism outside the city.

He pulled its activation lever.

Nothing happened.

He struck the controls.

“Move!”

The crystal before him cracked.

A voice emerged.

You have served your purpose.

Kharos stepped backward.

The darkness withdrew from the mechanism.

He stared at the ruined controls.

For the first time, he understood that the power he had attempted to command had never belonged to him.

Inside Emberfall, the Colossus raised both arms.

Rhea watched from the southern barricade.

“Everyone down!”

The creature prepared to release its accumulated energy.

Beneath the city, Lyra turned the Moonkey.

The ancient chamber opened its connection.

Golden light erupted through the streets.

The Colossus became motionless.

Energy began flowing from its body into the restored network.

Tovin watched the readings.

“It's working!”

Then the dark connection expanded.

The Unremembered resisted.

Kaelen raised Starstring.

Through the truthglass, he could see the darkness clearly.

It twisted through the network, attempting to attach itself to the illuminated pillar.

He drew an arrow.

But the darkness spoke.

You could use this power to open the road home.

Kaelen remained still.

You have already done enough for these people.

He thought of his mother.

Of the fence.

Of the ordinary life he desperately wanted to recover.

Then he thought of the people above them.

Thousands of lives depended upon what happened in this chamber.

He released the arrow.

Golden light struck the dark connection.

Lyra turned the Moonkey.

The connection separated.

The darkness screamed.

Tovin raised his lantern.

Blue fire consumed the remaining shadows.

The Colossus released its final energy into the ancient chamber.

Its enormous body became dark.

Then it lowered itself onto one knee.

Its head bowed.

And the great machine that had threatened to destroy Emberfall became still.

The Morning After

The siege ended without a celebration.

There was too much work to do.

Too many injured people.

Too many homes that no longer existed.

The Restoration soldiers who had surrendered helped remove debris alongside Emberfall's defenders.

Physicians treated people from both armies.

Food was distributed from surviving warehouses.

Families searched the shelters for missing relatives.

Kaelen helped wherever he could.

He carried water.

Moved broken furniture.

Assisted people searching through damaged homes.

As evening approached, he found Rhea sitting upon the remains of the northern wall.

He sat beside her.

For a long time, neither spoke.

Finally, she looked toward the city.

“We saved it.”

Kaelen nodded.

“Most of it.”

Rhea's eyes filled with tears.

“I keep thinking about the people we didn't reach.”

Kaelen looked down.

He understood.

They had stopped the Colossus.

They had prevented the complete destruction of Emberfall.

But there were empty places at dinner tables that would never be filled again.

Victory did not erase those losses.

He sat beside Rhea until the sun disappeared.

He did not attempt to explain her grief.

He did not offer promises.

He simply remained.

The Breaking of an Oath

Edran stood outside the guildhall the following morning.

General Kharos had been arrested by his own officers.

The remaining Restoration forces had withdrawn or surrendered.

Rhea approached.

“What will you do now?”

Edran looked toward the eastern mountains.

“I need to speak with Vaelrith.”

“Will he listen?”

“I don't know.”

She studied him.

“You could stay.”

He smiled faintly.

“An interesting offer, considering our history.”

“People can change.”

Edran looked toward the city.

“I hope so.”

He removed his Restoration insignia and handed it to her.

“Keep this.”

Rhea examined it.

“Why?”

“So that if I ever return wearing another one, you can remind me what happened here.”

He turned toward Kaelen, who had approached with the other companions.

“Your actions have given people throughout Aetherfall hope.”

Kaelen looked at him.

“So have yours.”

Edran shook his head.

“I've spent three centuries making mistakes.”

Kaelen remembered the wooden horse Bram carried.

“Then perhaps it's time to start making different ones.”

Edran laughed quietly.

“I can see why Auren chose you.”

Kaelen's expression changed.

Edran noticed.

“Forgive me. That was poorly said.”

He looked at the six companions.

“You've become something considerably greater than what he intended.”

He mounted his horse.

Then he departed toward the east.

For the first time since the breaking, Commander Edran rode without the banner of the Restoration.

The Light Beneath the Ashes

Sable summoned the companions to the underground chamber that afternoon.

The ancient pillars were glowing.

Tovin examined the restored network.

“The Colossus's energy awakened something.”

He pointed toward the illuminated pillar.

A blue thread extended westward.

Lyra unfolded the map.

“The second anchor.”

Sable nodded.

“It lies beneath an ancient reservoir beyond the volcanic basin.”

Rhea joined them.

“The Tidewarden Reservoir?”

“You know it?” Tovin asked.

“Everyone in Emberfall knows the stories. It once supplied water to settlements throughout the western territories.”

She looked at the map.

“But the reservoir has been abandoned for generations.”

Kaelen removed the Dawn Anchor.

Its golden light responded to the blue thread.

For the first time since leaving the Dawnwarden Temple, they were close to recovering another shard.

Rhea looked toward the companions.

“You should rest before you leave.”

Bram nodded enthusiastically.

“Finally, someone sensible.”

Seren smiled.

“We might even find you something to eat.”

“Now we're making progress.”

Their laughter echoed throughout the ancient chamber.

Above them, Emberfall began rebuilding.

Below them, a forgotten road awakened.

And far beyond the western hills, beneath waters that had remained undisturbed for centuries, something opened its eyes.

CHAPTER 14

The Second Shard



Beneath Emberfall, an ancient sanctuary lay under clear water. Its guardian, the Tidewarden, had become a statue of living coral. It asked the heroes to return the stolen memories before claiming the shard. Tovin connected the Waystone to the reservoir's old mechanism, and hundreds of luminous fragments rose around them. The fragments contained lives: a wedding, a child's first word, a soldier's last letter. Bram wanted to hold one that resembled his own home, but he let it pass. The Tidewarden warned that the reservoir could not release the memories while its sluices remained sealed. A drowned construct rose from the depths, guarding the locks under Vaelrith's command. Mira and Kaelen distracted the construct while Seren swam through the narrow channels. Lyra unlocked the first sluice and Bram forced the second open. Tovin directed the returning memories through the lantern, and the construct's borrowed strength faded. It sank without a final blow. The Tidewarden placed the second shard beside the first. The Waystone showed a council of

roadwardens gathered on a broken island. It also revealed that the seven shards were connected: restoring one without the others could strain the remaining anchors. The heroes returned to the surface to find Emberfall's citizens remembering people they had lost. Rhea gave them a banner stitched with the city's name. They carried it into the next act of their journey.

Recovered expanded manuscript

The Waters That Remembered

Long before the breaking, the Tidewarden Reservoir had been considered one of the greatest achievements of Aetherfall.

It was not merely a collection of dams and waterways.

Its waters traveled through ancient crossings, carrying life into distant territories where rivers had dried and rainfall had become scarce.

Farmers celebrated its construction.

Cities depended upon it.

Travelers followed its channels between settlements.

At its deepest point stood the Temple of the Tidewarden, where the second anchor maintained the delicate connections between water, memory, and the roads.

The guardian responsible for the reservoir had been entrusted with a simple responsibility.

Let life flow freely.

For centuries, it fulfilled that purpose.

Then came the breaking.

The roads collapsed.

Waterways disappeared.

Entire rivers ceased flowing.

The reservoir became isolated from the world it had once sustained.

Its guardian waited.

Years became decades.

Decades became centuries.

Then the Restoration discovered it.

Researchers entered the abandoned facilities carrying crystals recovered from other experiments. They discovered that water flowing through the ancient network could retain impressions of the memories carried by travelers.

They began collecting those impressions.

At first, the memories belonged to people long dead.

Then they discovered ways of transferring memories from living subjects.

Memories taken from Willowmere.

Memories extracted from prisoners at Ironbound.

Memories purchased from desperate people who believed surrendering their past might provide them with a better future.

All of them were brought to the reservoir.

The waters became crowded with voices.

Children calling for parents.

Parents searching for children.

Soldiers remembering fallen friends.

People remembering homes that no longer existed.

The Tidewarden attempted to release them.

The researchers prevented it.

They sealed the ancient channels and imprisoned the guardian beneath the temple.

The reservoir became a vast collection of stolen lives.

And at its center, the second anchor continued shining beneath the weight of everything it had been forced to contain.

A Farewell to Emberfall

The companions remained in Emberfall for six days.

Bram helped reconstruct damaged support beams. Seren organized supply deliveries and discovered an unexpected talent for persuading reluctant merchants to contribute their resources.

Mira assisted the physicians.

Tovin and Sable repaired several ancient water systems.

Lyra restored damaged locks, clocks, and household mechanisms recovered from the ruins.

Kaelen continued writing in the black book.

He recorded the siege.

He recorded Edran's decision.

He recorded the names of several defenders who had died protecting the evacuation routes.

He also wrote about ordinary acts of courage.

A baker who opened his remaining supplies to strangers.

A young girl who helped carry water to injured soldiers.

An elderly man who refused to abandon his neighbor.

He was beginning to understand why Ves had devoted his life to preserving history.

Without someone willing to remember, extraordinary things could disappear beneath the ordinary passage of time.

On their final evening, Rhea invited the companions to share a meal inside the partially restored guildhall.

The table was uneven.

Several chairs had been repaired.

The plates did not match.

But the food was warm, and for the first time in days, nobody was in a hurry.

Rhea raised her cup.

“To the people who helped us survive.”

Bram lifted his own.

“And to the people who cooked this.”

Seren laughed.

“Priorities.”

“Absolutely.”

Joren sat beside Sable.

He had decided to remain in Emberfall and help establish a new civic guard independent of the Restoration.

Rhea had offered to train its members.

Sable would oversee the restoration of the city's ancient infrastructure.

Kaelen looked around the table.

These people had once been prisoners, soldiers, enemies, and strangers.

Now they were building something together.

He wondered whether the Great Crossing had ever accomplished anything more important than that.

The Road of Empty Rivers

They departed Emberfall beneath a clear morning sky.

The western road followed the remains of an ancient river.

Its enormous bed was almost completely dry. Broken bridges extended across empty channels, and abandoned mills stood beside fields that had not received sufficient water in generations.

They encountered several farming settlements along the way.

The people were welcoming but exhausted.

One farmer showed Mira a field where nothing had grown for two seasons.

Another explained that their wells were becoming increasingly shallow.

“The old stories say water once came from the Tidewarden,” he told them.

Kaelen looked toward the distant hills.

“We're traveling there.”

The farmer smiled sadly.

“Then perhaps you can ask it why it forgot us.”

That evening, Tovin examined the maps.

The ancient waterways connected dozens of settlements.

Some had survived by adapting.

Others had been abandoned.

“If we restore the second anchor,” he explained, “we may be able to restore the entire water network.”

Bram looked toward the dry riverbed.

“That would help quite a few people.”

“Yes.”

Tovin folded the map.

“But the reservoir's energy readings are unusual.”

Lyra examined Maelis's resonance detector.

The instrument pulsed irregularly.

“Something's moving through the network.”

“What?” Seren asked.

Lyra listened to the faint sounds emerging from the instrument.

For several seconds, she heard nothing recognizable.

Then a voice spoke.

“Finn?”

Kaelen became still.

Another voice followed.

“Samuel?”

Then another.

“Daniel?”

Mira grabbed the instrument.

The voices disappeared.

Nobody spoke.

Tovin looked toward the reservoir.

Whatever waited beneath its waters was connected to memories.

And somehow, it already knew theirs.

The Village of Rainkeepers

They reached the settlement of Rainkeepers two days later.

Its houses had been constructed around enormous stone cisterns. Every rooftop contained carefully arranged channels designed to collect rainfall.

The villagers treated water with a reverence the companions had never encountered.

Children carried small cups rather than buckets.

Gardens were watered individually.

Not a single fountain operated.

An elderly woman named Maris welcomed them into the village.

She was responsible for maintaining the communal water supply.

When she discovered their destination, her expression became troubled.

“The reservoir?”

Kaelen nodded.

“We believe there's an ancient anchor beneath it.”

Maris looked toward the surrounding hills.

“People have been hearing voices from the water.”

Tovin opened his notebook.

“What kind of voices?”

“People they remember. People they've lost.”

She led them toward the largest cistern.

A wooden cover had been secured across its opening.

“Three weeks ago, a woman heard her deceased husband calling from inside.”

Mira looked at the cover.

“What happened?”

“Her neighbors stopped her from climbing down.”

Maris shook her head.

“Since then, we've covered every well and cistern.”

Lyra examined the water through a narrow opening.

A faint violet light moved beneath its surface.

She immediately stepped backward.

“The Unremembered.”

Maris looked frightened.

“Can you stop it?”

Kaelen thought of the River of Glass.

Of Oren hearing Lena.

Of Vaelrith listening to the voice of his sister.

“Yes,” he answered cautiously. “I think we can help.”

Maris nodded.

“Then come with me. There's someone you should meet.”

The Woman Who Sold Yesterday

Maris introduced them to a young woman named Nerin.

She lived alone in a small house near the village's southern edge.

Several notes had been attached to her walls.

Your name is Nerin.

You are twenty-six years old.

Maris is your friend.

You live here.

Mira stared at the notes.

Nerin smiled apologetically.

“Sometimes I forget.”

Tovin looked toward Maris.

“What happened?”

Nerin answered.

“The Restoration offered me money.”

She sat beside the window.

“My father was sick. We couldn't afford medicine.”

She looked down at her hands.

“They said memories could be collected without causing permanent harm.”

Kaelen felt anger rising.

“What memories did you give them?”

Nerin looked confused.

“I don't remember.”

The simplicity of the answer silenced the room.

Maris placed a hand upon her shoulder.

“Her father recovered. But afterward, she began forgetting other things.”

Nerin retrieved a photograph from a drawer.

It depicted a younger version of herself standing beside an older man.

“That's my father.”

She looked at the image.

“He died last winter.”

Her eyes filled with tears.

“I know I loved him.”

She held the photograph against her chest.

“But I can't remember what his voice sounded like.”

Mira sat beside her.

Kaelen looked away.

He remembered how frightened he had been when the Inkshade briefly took his father's name.

Nerin had been living with that emptiness for months.

Tovin examined the photograph.

“Do you know where the memories were taken?”

Nerin nodded.

“The reservoir.”

She looked at Kaelen.

“Do you think they're still there?”

He considered his answer carefully.

“We're going to find out.”

The Lake of a Thousand Voices

The Tidewarden Reservoir stretched between two enormous mountain ridges.

Its surface was perfectly still.

Ancient towers emerged from the water, connected by partially submerged bridges. At the far end stood a magnificent temple constructed from white stone and blue crystal.

The setting should have been beautiful.

Instead, it felt unnaturally quiet.

No birds flew above the water.

No insects moved along the shore.

Even the wind seemed reluctant to disturb its surface.

Flicker approached the edge.

His tail immediately brightened.

Then he retreated behind Bram's boots.

Bram looked down.

“I'm inclined to agree.”

Tovin examined the resonance detector.

The instrument began vibrating.

Voices emerged from the water.

Hundreds of them.

Then thousands.

Some whispered.

Others cried.

Several called names.

Kaelen heard his father's laughter.

Mira heard Daniel asking where she had gone.

Seren heard her parents arguing.

Lyra heard clocks ticking.

Bram heard the sound of his father's garage.

Tovin heard Oliver asking whether their telescope was finished.

They moved away from the shoreline.

Kaelen retrieved the truthglass.

Through its surface, he saw golden threads beneath the water.

Countless memories were trapped inside the reservoir.

And something enormous was moving among them.

The water began rising.

A figure emerged.

It possessed the upper body of a woman constructed from flowing water, surrounded by enormous fins and translucent ribbons of blue light. Its lower body extended beneath the reservoir, disappearing into the darkness.

Chains of violet crystal surrounded its arms.

Its eyes burned with an unnatural light.

The Tidewarden looked toward the companions.

Its mouth opened.

But the voice that emerged did not belong to a guardian.

It belonged to thousands of people speaking simultaneously.

“PLEASE.”

The companions stood motionless.

The creature struggled against its chains.

“LET US GO.”

CHAPTER 15

The Broken Covenant

The Tidewarden's cry did not end when her mouth closed.

It traveled across the reservoir, climbed the surrounding mountains, and returned in a thousand diminishing echoes. The voices of children, mothers, fathers and strangers mingled until Kaelen could no longer distinguish one from another.

He lowered his bow.

There were battles in which the enemy announced itself with teeth and claws. There were others in which a blade was the only thing standing between life and death. But as he looked upon the enormous creature struggling against its violet chains, Kaelen realized that this was neither.

They had come expecting to fight a monster.

Instead, they had found a prisoner.

“Don't shoot,” he said.

Seren glanced toward him. Her fingers remained wrapped around the hilt of her weapon.

“I wasn't planning to. But if she comes any closer, I might reconsider.”

The Tidewarden raised one enormous arm. Water poured from her translucent fingers, striking the reservoir with enough force to send waves crashing against the stone embankment. The chains tightened. Violet light spread beneath her skin like poison moving through veins.

She screamed.

Flicker flattened himself against the ground, his ears pressed backward and his luminous tail curled tightly around his body.

Bram bent down and gathered the frightened creature into his arms.

“Easy, little fellow,” he whispered. “Nobody understands what's happening yet.”

Kaelen raised the truthglass.

Through its polished surface, the reservoir changed. The dark water became a vast network of golden threads, each stretching from the submerged depths toward the chains binding the guardian.

Within those threads, he glimpsed fragments of lives.

A young woman danced beneath a flowering tree. An elderly man sat beside a fireplace, teaching a child how to carve a wooden bird. Two brothers stood on a hill overlooking a distant village, arguing about something neither would remember the following morning.

There were birthdays, weddings, funerals and farewells.

There were moments so ordinary that the people who had lived them probably never imagined they would become precious.

And all of them were imprisoned here.

“Those aren't ordinary chains,” Kaelen said. “They're made from memories.”

Tovin moved beside him.

“May I?”

Kaelen handed him the truthglass.

The Spellweaver examined the reservoir for several moments. His expression gradually changed from curiosity to horror.

“They're using the memories to hold her,” he whispered.

Mira looked toward the guardian.

“Can we release them?”

“I don't know.”

“Then find out.”

Tovin lowered the glass.

“You make everything sound remarkably simple.”

“No,” Mira answered. “I make the decision simple. The rest is your department.”

Despite himself, Tovin smiled.

Then another voice rose from the water.

“Daniel?”

Mira stopped breathing.

The voice had been faint, almost lost among the thousands of others, but she recognized it immediately.

“Daniel!” she called.

She took a step toward the reservoir.

Lyra caught her wrist.

“Mira, wait.”

“That's my brother.”

“I know.”

“Then let go.”

Lyra tightened her grip.

“You heard his voice. That doesn't mean he's here.”

For a moment, Mira looked as though she might pull away. Her eyes searched the water desperately.

Then the voice came again.

“Where did you go?”

Mira closed her eyes.

The others remained silent.

Kaelen understood the cruelty of what was happening. The reservoir did not merely contain the memories of Aetherfall's inhabitants. Somehow, it reached into those who approached it, searching for the things they most feared losing.

It offered familiarity where there was none.

Hope where there might be danger.

And love as a means of control.

Mira stepped backward.

“That's not him,” she said, although her voice betrayed how desperately she wished otherwise.

Lyra released her hand.

“No. But what you feel is real.”

The entrance to the submerged machinery lay beneath a narrow staircase cut into the western embankment.

Tovin discovered it while examining the ancient stonework. Most of the steps had disappeared beneath the water, but the uppermost bore an inscription resembling the markings they had encountered along the old roads.

Lyra knelt beside him.

“Can you read it?”

“Some of it.”

He brushed away a layer of moss.

“Something about stewardship. Preservation. Returning what was entrusted.”

“Returning?”

“Yes.”

Lyra studied the inscription.

“Then this place wasn't built to imprison memories.”

Tovin looked across the reservoir.

“No. I don't believe it was.”

Seren returned from scouting the northern bank, her boots wet and her expression troubled.

“There are six anchors,” she announced. “Three on either side. The chains disappear into stone towers, and every tower has the same unpleasant purple glow.”

“Can you reach them?” Kaelen asked.

“Most of them.”

“Most?”

“One is halfway down a cliff.”

Bram sighed.

“Of course it is.”

Seren grinned.

“I was hoping you'd volunteer.”

“I was hoping you'd forget to ask.”

The brief exchange brought a welcome moment of laughter. Even Mira managed a small smile.

Then the Tidewarden moved again, and the reservoir shook.

A crack appeared in the embankment.

Tovin stared at it.

“We need to hurry.”

They descended together.

The water surrounding the staircase was cold enough to make Kaelen's legs ache. Beneath its surface, pale lights drifted past like lanterns carried by invisible travelers.

At the bottom of the steps stood a bronze door.

Its center displayed the image of a woman holding a bowl beneath a waterfall. Around her were carved hundreds of small figures, each extending an open hand.

Lyra traced the carving.

“Receiving and returning,” she murmured.

Tovin placed his lantern against the door.

The bronze surface shuddered.

A narrow opening appeared.

Beyond it, an ancient chamber stretched beneath the reservoir.

Water flowed through transparent channels in the walls. Enormous wheels turned slowly, driving mechanisms whose purpose had long since been forgotten by those who now controlled them.

But something newer had been added.

Violet crystals protruded from the machinery. Black metal conduits twisted around the original bronze pipes. Where the ancient mechanisms had been constructed with elegance and precision, these additions appeared almost parasitic.

Tovin approached the nearest wheel.

“This was a sanctuary.”

Lyra nodded.

“A place where memories could be preserved.”

“Not permanently. Look at these channels. Everything was designed to circulate.”

He followed one of the pipes toward a crystal embedded in the floor.

“The memories were supposed to return to their owners.”

Kaelen examined the black conduits.

“And someone changed that.”

Tovin's expression hardened.

“Someone changed everything.”

A small sound came from behind them.

Flicker had slipped from Bram's arms and was investigating the chamber. His tail glowed brighter as he approached one of the original bronze mechanisms.

Then he hissed at a violet crystal.

Bram folded his arms.

“Finally. A technical explanation I understand.”

Tovin crouched beside the creature.

“What can you sense?”

Flicker sniffed the bronze pipe, then tapped it with one paw.

A golden light appeared beneath the metal.

Lyra leaned closer.

“Do that again.”

Flicker tapped the pipe twice.

The light traveled along its length before disappearing into the wall.

Tovin stood abruptly.

“The original system is still working.”

“Meaning?” Mira asked.

“We don't have to rebuild it. We have to free it.”

For the first time since reaching the reservoir, Kaelen felt a genuine sense of hope.

Then the chamber door slammed shut.

A voice emerged from the machinery.

“UNAUTHORIZED ACCESS.”

The violet crystals brightened.

Seren drew her weapon.

“I was beginning to think this might be easy.”

Black water spilled from the channels, gathering into shapes upon the floor. The shapes rose slowly, forming figures with long arms and hollow faces.

One turned toward Kaelen.

Its features shifted.

For an instant, he saw his father.

His heart lurched.

Then the face dissolved.

“Don't look at them!” Lyra shouted. “They're borrowing memories!”

The creatures advanced.

Mira moved immediately, placing herself between Tovin and the nearest figure. Her shield struck its chest, scattering black water across the floor.

The creature reformed.

Bram swung his hammer through another, sending it crashing against the machinery.

It rose again.

“We can't hurt them!” he shouted.

Kaelen raised the truthglass.

Within each creature burned a small violet thread connecting it to the corrupted crystals.

“The crystals!” he called. “Break their connection!”

Seren moved before he finished speaking.

She vaulted across a bronze channel and struck the nearest crystal. It shattered beneath her blade.

One of the figures collapsed.

Bram laughed.

“Now we're getting somewhere!”

The chamber erupted into chaos.

Mira held the advancing creatures at bay while Bram destroyed the corrupted crystals. Seren raced along the elevated walkways, cutting the black conduits wherever she could reach them.

Kaelen fired arrows into the exposed violet connections.

Lyra guided Tovin toward the central mechanism.

And Flicker, darting between their feet, illuminated the original golden pathways whenever the darkness threatened to conceal them.

At last, Tovin reached the largest wheel.

He examined its markings.

Then he looked toward the ceiling.

“We have a problem.”

Mira struck another creature.

“Only one?”

“If I reverse this mechanism while the chains are attached, the pressure could destroy the entire reservoir.”

Kaelen understood.

“The anchors have to be released first.”

“All six.”

Seren looked toward the sealed entrance.

“Then somebody needs to open that door.”

Bram rested his hammer against his shoulder.

“With pleasure.”

They emerged into a world transformed by violence.

The Tidewarden thrashed against her restraints. Waves struck the embankment, carrying broken stone and fragments of ancient machinery into the surrounding valley.

Above them, clouds gathered around the mountain peaks.

Kaelen looked toward the six anchor towers.

They had little time.

“Seren, take the northern anchors. Bram, the southern ones. Mira, protect Tovin while he prepares the mechanism. Lyra, stay with him.”

“And you?” Mira asked.

Kaelen looked toward the tower hanging over the cliff.

“I'll take the difficult one.”

Seren raised an eyebrow.

“I thought that was my job.”

“Consider it a promotion.”

She smiled.

“Try not to fall.”

They separated.

Kaelen ran along the embankment as the ground trembled beneath him. Water splashed over the stone, making every step uncertain.

The cliffside tower leaned outward over a deep ravine. Its lower section had collapsed centuries earlier, leaving a narrow ledge as the only means of reaching the anchor.

Kaelen stopped at its edge.

Far below, white water disappeared into mist.

He thought of home.

He thought of the ordinary roads he had once traveled without considering whether they might vanish beneath his feet.

Then he stepped onto the ledge.

The wind struck him immediately.

He pressed himself against the cliff and moved sideways, searching for stable footholds. Loose stones broke away beneath his boots.

Halfway across, the Tidewarden screamed.

The tower shifted.

Kaelen lost his footing.

His hand caught a narrow projection of rock.

For several terrifying seconds, he hung above the ravine.

His bow slipped from his shoulder.

He watched it fall.

Then he heard a familiar chirping sound.

Flicker stood on the ledge above him.

“Really?” Kaelen gasped. “You followed me?”

The little creature's tail blazed.

Its light revealed an iron rung hidden beneath the moss.

Kaelen reached for it.

His fingers closed around the metal.

Slowly, painfully, he pulled himself back onto the ledge.

Flicker approached and pressed his head against Kaelen's hand.

Kaelen laughed breathlessly.

“When we get home, you're getting whatever you want for dinner.”

Flicker chirped.

“Within reason.”

Another chirp.

“We'll negotiate.”

Together, they reached the tower.

Inside, the anchor pulsed with violet light.

Kaelen drew his knife.

And began cutting.

The first chain broke with a sound like thunder.

Then the second.

Across the reservoir, Bram emerged from a damaged tower, his hammer raised in triumph.

Seren severed another restraint.

One by one, the chains fell away.

The Tidewarden rose higher.

But instead of attacking, she looked toward the companions.

For the first time, her eyes appeared almost human.

Kaelen cut the final connection.

Golden light exploded from the anchor.

He shielded his face.

Far beneath the reservoir, Tovin reversed the ancient wheel.

Lyra placed both hands against the central mechanism.

“Return what was entrusted,” she whispered.

The machinery answered.

Water surged through the original channels. Violet crystals shattered. Golden threads rose from the depths, thousands upon thousands of them, spreading across the sky.

They drifted over the mountains.

They traveled toward distant islands.

Toward villages and cities.

Toward people who had forgotten pieces of themselves without ever understanding what had been taken.

Mira watched one of the lights pass overhead.

Somewhere, perhaps, a mother would remember her child's laughter.

Somewhere, an old man would remember the name of his wife.

Somewhere, a frightened person would awaken and discover that something precious had been returned.

She lowered her shield.

And wept.

Not because she was afraid.

Because, for once, they had arrived in time.

The Tidewarden descended toward the surface.

The water became still.

A woman's face appeared within it, no longer twisted by pain.

“Travelers,” she said.

Her voice belonged to her alone.

Kaelen approached the shoreline with the others.

“You're free.”

The guardian looked toward the mountains.

“For the first time in an age.”

“What happened here?” Lyra asked.

“The covenant was broken.”

“By whom?”

“By those who believed that protecting the roads gave them ownership of the people who traveled them.”

The guardian lifted one hand.

A blue light emerged from the water and entered the Waystone.

Its warmth spread through Kaelen's fingers.

“Remember this,” she said. “A road exists for the traveler. The traveler does not exist for the road.”

The light faded.

The Tidewarden smiled.

“Remember us.”

Then she disappeared beneath the reservoir.

For a long time, none of the companions spoke.

The wind returned.

A bird crossed the sky.

And somewhere along the shoreline, Flicker discovered a fish.

Bram watched him attempt to carry it away.

“Well,” he said, “at least somebody knows how to celebrate.”

For the first time that day, they all laughed.

But their victory was only the beginning.

Three days away, on an island where the surviving roadwardens gathered beneath a leaking roof, a man named Maelor was preparing to defend the very covenant they had just exposed.

And the companions would soon discover that freeing a prisoner was considerably easier than convincing frightened people to surrender their power.

The rain began shortly before sunset.

By the time the companions reached the abandoned watchtower overlooking the eastern coast, their clothing was soaked, their boots were heavy with mud, and Bram had developed a particular resentment toward the clouds.

“I have decided,” he announced, dropping his pack beneath what remained of the tower's roof, “that when we return home, I shall never complain about the weather again.”

Seren wrung water from her hair.

“You said that yesterday.”

“Yesterday was a different kind of miserable.”

Flicker shook himself beside the firewood, spraying droplets across Tovin's face.

The Spellweaver stared at him.

“Was that necessary?”

Flicker chirped and climbed into Bram's open pack.

“Apparently,” Bram answered.

Kaelen stood near the entrance, watching the rain sweep across the distant hills. Somewhere beyond them lay the coast and the island where the roadwardens had gathered.

The Tidewarden's final words remained with him.

A road exists for the traveler. The traveler does not exist for the road.

He wondered how many people throughout Aetherfall had suffered because someone had forgotten that simple truth.

Behind him, Mira struggled to remove a damaged strap from her shield. The leather had torn during their battle beneath the reservoir.

Kaelen approached and sat beside her.

“Here.”

He reached into his pack and retrieved a length of cord.

Mira handed him the shield without protest.

For several minutes, they worked together in silence.

“Do you ever wonder,” she asked eventually, “what will happen when we return?”

Kaelen glanced at her.

“To our world?”

She nodded.

“Every day.”

“Do you think we'll be the same?”

He considered the question.

“No.”

Mira watched his hands as he threaded the cord through the damaged leather.

“I heard Daniel's voice back there. For a moment, I would have walked straight into that water.”

“But you didn't.”

“Because Lyra stopped me.”

“And because you listened.”

Mira looked toward the fire.

“I used to think courage meant not being afraid.”

Kaelen tightened the final knot.

“I used to think being a Pathfinder meant knowing where I was going.”

“Neither of us was particularly well informed, were we?”

He laughed.

“No. Apparently not.”

He returned her shield.

Mira examined the repair, testing its strength.

“Thank you.”

Outside, thunder rolled across the mountains.

Inside, six travelers gathered around a small fire while a seventh, considerably smaller traveler attempted to steal their supper.

For one evening, the fate of Aetherfall could wait.

The Island of Broken Lanterns

They reached the coast on the third morning.

The sea stretched before them beneath a pale gray sky. Fishing boats rested against wooden piers, their sails patched with mismatched cloth. Salt hung in the air, mingling with the smell of smoked fish and damp timber.

Beyond the harbor stood an island connected to the mainland by an ancient stone causeway.

Seven towers rose from its rocky shoreline.

Only one displayed a burning lantern.

Lyra stopped beside a weathered sign.

“The Island of Seven Lights,” she read.

Seren counted the dark towers.

“Someone should consider changing the name.”

An elderly fisherman repairing a net nearby looked up.

“We call it the Island of Broken Lanterns now.”

Kaelen approached him.

“Are the roadwardens still meeting there?”

The fisherman studied the companions carefully.

His gaze lingered on Mira's shield, Bram's hammer and the faint glow beneath Kaelen's cloak.

“Depends who's asking.”

“Travelers.”

“Aren't we all?”

“We've come from the northern reservoir.”

The man's hands stopped moving.

“The reservoir?”

Kaelen nodded.

“The Tidewarden is free.”

For several moments, the fisherman stared at him.

Then his eyes filled with tears.

“My daughter,” he whispered.

Lyra stepped closer.

“What happened to her?”

“She forgot her mother.”

He looked toward the sea.

“Not her mother's name. Not her face. She forgot that she had ever been loved by her. She remembered the woman, but none of the warmth.”

His hands trembled.

“Yesterday morning, she came running into my house. She was crying and laughing at the same time. Said she remembered her mother singing while she baked bread.”

He looked at Kaelen again.

“That was you?”

“We helped release what had been taken.”

The fisherman lowered his head.

“Then may every road you walk carry you safely.”

He gathered his net and pointed toward the causeway.

“Go carefully. Maelor won't welcome what you've done.”

“Why?” Mira asked.

“Because a man who has spent his life building a prison rarely thanks the person who opens its doors.”

The causeway was older than the surrounding village.

Stone figures lined its edges, each carrying a lantern carved from the same pale rock. Time and weather had erased most of their faces.

Halfway across, Tovin stopped beside one of the statues.

An inscription remained visible beneath its feet.

He brushed away the salt and dirt.

“*Let no traveler walk alone,*” he translated.

Lyra examined the next statue.

“*Let no road be closed through fear.*”

Bram moved toward another.

“What's this one say?”

Tovin joined him.

His expression darkened.

“*Let no guardian claim what has been entrusted to his care.*”

The companions exchanged uneasy glances.

Seren looked toward the island.

“Something tells me the people in charge haven't been reading their own signs.”

At the end of the causeway stood a gatehouse.

Two guards stepped forward.

Their armor bore the symbol of an open lantern, although someone had painted a black circle around each emblem.

“State your business,” the taller guard demanded.

Kaelen stepped forward.

“We seek an audience with the council.”

“The council is not receiving travelers.”

“Then tell them the Tidewarden has been released.”

The second guard stiffened.

The taller man's expression changed.

“Wait here.”

He disappeared through the gate.

Seren leaned toward Bram.

“Do you suppose that's the welcoming committee?”

“If it is, I'm disappointed by the lack of refreshments.”

They waited beneath the cold coastal wind until the guard returned.

“The First Warden will see you.”

The gate opened.

“Your weapons remain here.”

Mira folded her arms.

“No.”

The guard frowned.

“That is the law.”

“Then your First Warden can meet us outside.”

For a moment, neither moved.

Finally, the guard stepped aside.

“Keep them sheathed.”

Mira smiled.

“That was always the intention.”

The First Warden

The council chamber had once been magnificent.

Colored glass windows stretched from floor to ceiling, depicting travelers crossing deserts, mountains, forests and oceans. Beneath each window stood a stone lantern.

Most were extinguished.

At the center of the chamber rested a circular table constructed from seven different kinds of wood.

Five council members occupied its seats.

The sixth chair was empty.

The seventh belonged to Maelor.

He was older than Kaelen had expected. His silver hair reached his shoulders, and deep lines marked his face. His right hand rested upon a wooden staff decorated with fragments of ancient roadstone.

He did not resemble a tyrant.

That troubled Kaelen more than if he had.

“You have destroyed the northern reservoir,” Maelor said.

Tovin stepped forward.

“We restored it.”

“You released thousands of memories without authorization.”

“They didn't belong to you.”

Maelor's fingers tightened around his staff.

“You have no understanding of what you have done.”

“Then explain it,” Kaelen replied.

The First Warden studied him.

“Have you ever watched a road disappear beneath the feet of a hundred people?”

Kaelen remained silent.

“Have you ever heard an entire village calling for help, knowing that the path connecting you to them would vanish before you arrived?”

Maelor rose slowly.

“I have.”

He walked toward the nearest window.

“Forty-three years ago, the western roads began to collapse. At first, we believed it was temporary. Then settlements vanished. Families were separated. Entire communities became inaccessible.”

His voice softened.

“My wife and son were traveling to the city of Elaris when their road disappeared.”

Nobody interrupted him.

“I spent eleven years searching for them. Eleven years following fragments of roads that led nowhere.”

He turned toward the companions.

“Do you know what I found?”

Lyra shook her head.

“A shoe.”

The word seemed to echo through the chamber.

“A child's shoe. That was all.”

Mira lowered her eyes.

Maelor returned to his chair.

“When we discovered that memories could strengthen the roads, we finally possessed a means of preventing further collapse.”

Tovin looked horrified.

“You used people's memories as fuel?”

“We preserved civilization.”

“Without their consent?”

“Would you have asked a drowning man for permission to save him?”

“No,” Tovin answered. “But I wouldn't drown someone else to keep him afloat.”

Several council members shifted uncomfortably.

Maelor struck the floor with his staff.

“You speak as though the choice were simple!”

“It wasn't,” Lyra said quietly. “But you made it for everyone.”

The chamber fell silent.

Maelor looked at Lyra for a long time.

“You are a Seer.”

“I am.”

“Then surely you understand the burden of knowing what others cannot.”

“I understand the danger of believing that knowledge makes us more important than others.”

The First Warden's face hardened.

“You are young.”

“Perhaps.”

“You have not lived long enough to understand loss.”

Lyra did not answer immediately.

She looked toward her companions, remembering the dangers they had faced, the people they had been unable to save and the fear that accompanied every uncertain step toward home.

“Loss does not give us permission to become cruel,” she said.

Maelor turned away.

At the far end of the table, a woman wearing a faded green cloak stood.

“First Warden, perhaps we should hear them.”

“You would question the covenant, Elowen?”

“I have questioned it for years.”

Another council member rose.

“So have I.”

Maelor stared at them.

“Everything we have built depends upon it.”

Elowen shook her head.

“Everything we have built is slowly becoming something we once swore to oppose.”

She reached beneath the table and withdrew an ancient book.

Its leather cover was cracked, and several pages had been repaired with delicate strips of parchment.

“The original covenant.”

Maelor's expression changed.

“That document was retired.”

“Forgotten,” Elowen corrected. “Not retired.”

She opened the book.

“Seven promises, written when the first roadwardens gathered. Seven promises to protect those who traveled between the scattered kingdoms.”

Tovin approached the table.

Elowen turned the pages until she reached the final passage.

“Read it.”

He leaned forward.

The ancient language was difficult, but its meaning gradually became clear.

“*We shall guard the roads, but never possess them. We shall protect the traveler, but never command his journey. We shall receive what is freely given and return what is entrusted.*”

He paused.

“*Should we break these promises, let our authority end before our pride destroys those we serve.*”

The words hung in the chamber.

Bram rested both hands upon the head of his hammer.

“Seems fairly straightforward to me.”

Maelor closed his eyes.

“You do not understand.”

Elowen looked at him sadly.

“I think they understand better than we do.”

The Oath Beneath the Stone

The sound came from beneath the council table.

A deep, resonant cracking.

Flicker leaped from Bram's shoulder and landed beside Kaelen, his tail blazing with golden light.

Tovin stepped backward.

“Something's moving.”

The stone floor split.

Violet light poured through the widening fracture.

The council members scrambled from their seats as black threads emerged from the opening, wrapping themselves around the legs of the table.

Maelor raised his staff.

“Remain calm!”

The threads tightened.

The ancient table shattered.

A violent wind swept through the chamber, extinguishing the remaining lanterns. Broken wood and parchment spun through the air.

Mira raised her shield.

“Everyone behind me!”

From the darkness beneath the floor emerged a towering figure clad in fragments of ceremonial armor.

Seven broken lanterns hung from its shoulders.

Its face was hidden behind a mask of polished black stone.

Chains dragged behind it, each bearing inscriptions that glowed with violet fire.

Lyra stared at the creature.

“The oath,” she whispered.

Tovin looked toward her.

“What?”

“The covenant. Their corrupted promises have taken form.”

The creature turned toward Maelor.

When it spoke, its voice resembled hundreds of people speaking through a single mouth.

“PROTECT THE ROADS.”

Maelor stumbled backward.

“PRESERVE THE ORDER.”

The chains struck the floor.

“OBEDIENCE IS SAFETY.”

Kaelen drew his remaining knife.

Seren unsheathed her blade.

Bram stepped forward.

“I preferred the council meeting.”

The creature swung one of its chains.

Mira intercepted it with her shield.

The impact threw her across the chamber.

“Mira!” Kaelen shouted.

She rolled onto one knee, breathing heavily.

“I'm fine!”

She was not fine, but there would be time to discuss that later.

Bram charged.

His hammer struck the creature's armored chest with a deafening clang. The force traveled through his arms and shoulders, nearly knocking him backward.

The creature did not move.

It seized his hammer.

“Oh,” Bram muttered.

Then it threw him.

He crashed into a wooden bench, scattering splinters across the floor.

Flicker raced toward him.

Seren darted behind the creature and struck at the chains connecting its armor.

Her blade passed through them as though they were smoke.

“Tovin!”

“I'm working on it!”

“Work faster!”

The Spellweaver examined the inscriptions flashing across the creature's body.

Every chain bore a promise from the original covenant.

But the words had been altered.

Protection had become control.

Service had become authority.

Trust had become obedience.

Tovin understood.

“We can't destroy it by force!”

Bram struggled to his feet.

“That would have been useful information thirty seconds ago!”

Lyra retrieved the ancient covenant from beneath the wreckage.

“The original promises,” she said.

Tovin nodded.

“Read them!”

The creature advanced toward Maelor.

“PRESERVE THE ORDER.”

Maelor raised his staff, but his hands shook.

“I command you to stop!”

The creature tilted its head.

“OBEDIENCE IS SAFETY.”

It struck.

Kaelen pulled Maelor aside as the chain shattered the stone beneath his feet.

They fell together.

The First Warden stared at the creature he had helped create.

“It was never supposed to become this.”

Kaelen dragged him behind a pillar.

“Then help us stop it.”

“I don't know how.”

“Start by admitting you were wrong.”

Maelor looked at him.

For a moment, anger flickered across his face.

Then something deeper emerged.

Fear.

Not fear of the creature.

Fear that everything he had sacrificed, everything he had believed and everything he had done in the name of protection might have been a terrible mistake.

Across the chamber, Lyra opened the covenant.

“*Let no traveler walk alone!*”

One of the creature's lanterns ignited.

Golden light burst through its armor.

It staggered.

Tovin raised his staff.

“Again!”

“*Let no road be closed through fear!*”

A second lantern burned.

The creature screamed.

Seren seized the opportunity, guiding two injured council members toward the entrance.

Mira recovered her shield and positioned herself between Lyra and the creature.

“Keep reading!”

The creature hurled another chain.

Mira braced herself.

The impact drove her boots across the floor, but she remained standing.

Bram joined her, pressing his shoulder against the back of her shield.

“Together,” he grunted.

Lyra continued.

“*Let no guardian claim what has been entrusted to his care!*”

A third lantern ignited.

Then a fourth.

The violet chains began to fracture.

But the creature fought with renewed desperation.

It tore a stone lantern from the wall and hurled it toward Lyra.

Tovin raised a shimmering barrier.

The lantern exploded against it.

He collapsed to one knee.

“Any time now, Maelor!”

Kaelen turned toward the First Warden.

The old man stared at the covenant.

“I wanted to save them.”

“I believe you.”

“I couldn't lose anyone else.”

Kaelen knelt beside him.

“You cannot protect people by taking away the things that make them who they are.”

Maelor's eyes filled with tears.

“My son was seven.”

Kaelen said nothing.

“He wanted to become a roadwarden. He used to follow me through the village carrying a wooden lantern.”

The old man's voice broke.

“I thought if I could keep the roads open, then what happened to him would never happen again.”

Kaelen looked toward the creature.

“Then honor him by becoming the kind of roadwarden he wanted to be.”

Maelor lowered his head.

For a long moment, the battle continued around them.

Then he stood.

“ENOUGH!”

Maelor's voice carried across the chamber.

The creature stopped.

The First Warden stepped into the open.

His staff struck the floor.

“I broke the covenant.”

The creature turned toward him.

“PRESERVE THE ORDER.”

“No.”

Maelor took another step.

“I placed my fear above the freedom of those I swore to protect.”

The creature's chains rattled.

“OBEDIENCE IS SAFETY.”

“No,” Maelor repeated.

He looked toward the surviving council members.

“I allowed suffering because I believed my own suffering justified it. I mistook authority for wisdom and control for protection.”

The fifth lantern ignited.

The creature staggered backward.

Maelor looked toward Lyra.

“Give me the book.”

She approached carefully and placed the covenant in his hands.

He opened it.

His fingers traced the ancient writing.

“*We shall guard the roads, but never possess them.*”

The sixth lantern ignited.

The creature fell to one knee.

Maelor's voice trembled.

“*We shall protect the traveler, but never command his journey.*”

The final lantern began to glow.

“*We shall receive what is freely given and return what is entrusted.*”

The chamber filled with golden light.

The creature raised its head.

For the first time, its voice was no longer terrible.

“WHO WILL GUARD THE ROADS?”

Maelor looked at the companions.

Then at the council.

Then at the people gathered beyond the broken entrance.

“Those who choose to serve.”

The final lantern ignited.

The creature's armor separated into fragments of light.

Its chains fell away.

And where the corrupted oath had stood, seven golden lanterns remained suspended above the shattered floor.

One by one, they drifted toward the extinguished stone lanterns surrounding the chamber.

Each found its place.

For the first time in decades, all seven lights burned.

A Covenant Freely Given

By evening, the island had changed.

Word spread through the harbor that the seven lanterns had been restored.

Fishermen abandoned their boats. Merchants closed their stalls. Families crossed the causeway carrying candles and flowers.

Some came to celebrate.

Others came demanding answers.

Maelor stood upon the steps of the council hall and addressed them all.

He did not excuse his actions.

He did not blame the darkness spreading across Aetherfall.

He told them what had happened at the reservoir, what had been taken from them and how the roadwardens had abandoned their original promises.

When he finished, the crowd remained silent.

Then a woman stepped forward.

“My husband forgot our wedding.”

Maelor bowed his head.

“I am sorry.”

“Will being sorry give me those years back?”

“No.”

She studied him.

“Then what will you do?”

Maelor looked toward the seven illuminated towers.

“Whatever is necessary to restore what we have damaged.”

The woman nodded slowly.

It was not forgiveness.

Not yet.

But it was the beginning of accountability.

And that was something.

Inside the council chamber, Elowen placed a fresh sheet of parchment upon a newly assembled table.

The original covenant rested beside it.

“We cannot simply return to what existed before,” she said. “We must remember why it failed.”

Tovin dipped a quill into ink.

“Then write that into the new covenant.”

Together, they worked.

Roadwardens would no longer possess the authority to take memories without consent. No guardian could be bound against its will. No council could close a road solely to preserve its own power.

Travelers would have a voice in the decisions that affected their journeys.

And the covenant would be displayed openly in every settlement under the protection of the roadwardens.

When the final words had been written, Elowen offered the quill to Maelor.

He hesitated.

Then he passed it to the fisherman whose daughter had recovered her memories.

“You first.”

The fisherman stared at him.

“I'm not a roadwarden.”

“Exactly.”

The man signed.

Others followed.

Merchants, fishermen, farmers, travelers and guardians placed their names upon the parchment.

Eventually, Elowen turned toward Kaelen and his companions.

“Will you witness it?”

Kaelen accepted the quill.

One by one, the six companions signed their names.

When Bram finished, Flicker climbed onto the table.

Before anyone could stop him, he stepped into the ink and walked across the parchment.

Seven tiny paw prints appeared beneath the signatures.

Everyone stared.

Bram broke the silence.

“Well, that's legally binding now.”

Laughter filled the chamber.

Even Maelor smiled.

The Warning from the Sea

Later that night, the companions gathered on the island's highest terrace.

The seven towers shone across the water, their golden lights reflecting upon the waves.

Kaelen watched the distant horizon.

For the first time in many days, the world appeared peaceful.

Mira joined him.

“Do you think it will last?”

“The covenant?”

She nodded.

“Only if they keep choosing it.”

She considered his answer.

“That's true of most promises, isn't it?”

Below them, Bram and Seren argued over the proper way to cook fish. Tovin examined a collection of ancient road maps Elowen had given him, while Lyra stood near the edge of the terrace, gazing into the darkness.

Suddenly, she stiffened.

“Kaelen.”

He turned.

Her face had gone pale.

“What is it?”

Lyra pointed toward the horizon.

At first, he saw nothing unusual.

Then he noticed the stars.

They were disappearing.

Not behind clouds.

Not beneath the approaching dawn.

One after another, entire constellations vanished from the eastern sky.

A darkness stretched across the sea, so complete that the boundary between water and heavens became impossible to distinguish.

Tovin approached, clutching his maps.

“That cannot be natural.”

Elowen emerged from the stairway.

When she saw the horizon, she stopped.

“The Starless Sea.”

Seren looked toward her.

“You know what that is?”

Elowen nodded.

“Beyond those waters lies the kingdom of Queen Isolde. Her people once maintained the eastern passage to the ancient sanctuaries.”

“Once?” Bram asked.

“No ship has returned from her kingdom in nearly two months.”

Kaelen reached beneath his cloak.

The Waystone was warm.

A thin line of blue light emerged from its surface, pointing directly toward the starless horizon.

Mira sighed.

“Of course.”

Bram looked down at the unfinished fish in his hands.

“Could the fate of the world possibly wait until breakfast?”

Flicker chirped.

“Thank you,” Bram replied. “At least someone agrees with me.”

Elowen studied the Waystone.

“If you intend to cross those waters, you will need a captain who remembers the old routes.”

“Do you know one?” Kaelen asked.

“One.”

She looked toward the harbor.

“But convincing him to sail may be more difficult than crossing the sea itself.”

A distant sound rolled across the water.

It was low and mournful, unlike thunder or the cry of any creature Kaelen had encountered.

Flicker pressed himself against Bram's chest.

Lyra closed her eyes.

“Something is waiting out there.”

The companions stood together beneath the seven restored lanterns.

Behind them, an ancient covenant had been renewed.

Before them, the stars were dying.

Kaelen tightened his grip upon the Waystone.

They had learned that the greatest dangers did not always come from monsters. Sometimes they came from frightened people who had forgotten the difference between protecting others and controlling them.

But beyond the eastern horizon, something far older than fear was awakening.

And tomorrow, they would sail toward it.

CHAPTER 16

The Sea Without Stars

The captain refused before Kaelen finished asking.

“No.”

He sat beneath the weathered awning of a harbor tavern, sharpening a fishing knife against a small gray stone. His beard was streaked with silver, his left cheek bore a scar that disappeared beneath his collar, and his heavy blue coat looked as though it had survived more storms than most ships.

Elowen pulled out a chair.

“You haven't heard where they need to go.”

“The eastern passage.”

“How did you know?”

“Because nobody comes looking for me anymore unless they want to do something foolish.”

Bram leaned toward Seren.

“I like him already.”

The captain continued sharpening his knife.

“My answer is no.”

Kaelen placed the Waystone upon the table. Its blue light reflected in the captain's dark eyes.

“We need to reach the kingdom of Queen Isolde.”

The sharpening stopped.

For several seconds, the captain stared at the stone.

Then he resumed his work.

“Especially no.”

Elowen sighed.

“Rhydan, the seven lanterns are burning again.”

“I noticed.”

“The northern reservoir has been restored.”

“So I've heard.”

“These travelers accomplished both.”

“Then I suggest they enjoy their accomplishments somewhere on dry land.”

Mira pulled out another chair and sat opposite him.

“Tell us what happened.”

Rhydan looked at her.

“Excuse me?”

“You're not afraid of the sea. A man doesn't spend his life sailing if he's afraid of water. Something happened out there.”

The captain placed his knife upon the table.

Around them, the harbor continued its morning activities. Fishermen carried baskets of silver-scaled fish toward the market. Ropes creaked against wooden posts. Gulls circled overhead, complaining loudly about the apparent unwillingness of humanity to share its breakfast.

Rhydan looked beyond them all.

“Sixty-three days ago, I sailed east aboard the *Silver Meridian*. Twenty-two men and women sailed with me.”

His fingers moved toward a small pendant hanging from his neck.

“Eleven returned.”

Nobody spoke.

“We encountered no storm. No pirates. No reef. The sea was calm enough to reflect the moon.”

He looked at Kaelen.

“Then the stars went out.”

Lyra drew closer.

“All at once?”

“One by one. Like candles being extinguished in a room.”

Rhydan picked up his knife again, although he made no attempt to sharpen it.

“Without the stars, our instruments became useless. The compass turned continuously. The wind changed direction without moving the sails. We heard bells beneath the water.”

“Bells?” Tovin asked.

“Aye. Great bells. The kind you hear from a cathedral tower.”

The captain swallowed.

“Then the voices began.”

Kaelen remembered the reservoir.

“What did they say?”

“They called us by name.”

Rhydan looked down at the table.

“My first mate heard his dead mother. Our navigator heard her children. One of the deckhands swore he could see his village beneath the waves.”

He closed his hand around the pendant.

“My daughter heard me calling from the water.”

Mira's expression changed.

“Your daughter was aboard?”

“Her name was Anwen. She was nineteen.”

The captain looked toward the harbor.

“I was standing beside her when she heard my voice. She turned toward the railing, confused. I reached for her.”

His hand tightened.

“I wasn't fast enough.”

The sounds of the harbor seemed suddenly distant.

Elowen lowered her eyes.

“Rhydan…”

“Eleven people,” he continued. “Eleven people walked into that sea without a struggle. We threw ropes. We lowered boats. We called until our throats bled.”

He looked directly at Kaelen.

“Not one of them came back.”

Flicker climbed onto the empty chair beside him. The little creature tilted his head, studying the captain with enormous amber eyes.

Rhydan stared back.

“What in the seven kingdoms is that?”

“Flicker,” Bram answered.

“That explains absolutely nothing.”

“We've been saying that for weeks.”

Flicker placed one paw upon the captain's sleeve.

For a moment, Rhydan appeared ready to brush him away.

Instead, he rested his hand upon the creature's head.

“I won't take another crew into those waters,” he said quietly.

Kaelen retrieved the Waystone.

“We wouldn't ask you to forget what happened.”

“Good.”

“But whatever took your daughter is still out there. And if we cannot reach the eastern kingdom, it may not remain there.”

Rhydan said nothing.

Kaelen stood.

“Thank you for telling us.”

The companions began to leave.

They had almost reached the harbor steps when the captain called after them.

“Pathfinder!”

Kaelen turned.

Rhydan remained seated beneath the awning.

“If I were foolish enough to consider this voyage, what exactly would you do when the voices began?”

Kaelen thought of the Tidewarden. Of Mira hearing her brother. Of the memories that had nearly become chains around their own hearts.

“We would remind one another who we are.”

The captain studied him.

For the first time that morning, his expression softened.

“Come back at sunset.”

The Lantern's Wake

The ship was not what Seren had expected.

She had imagined something enormous, with towering masts, polished railings and enough cannons to discourage anything that considered them an attractive meal.

Instead, the *Lantern's Wake* rested at the far end of the harbor like an elderly animal waiting patiently for its master.

Its dark wooden hull bore the scars of countless repairs. Its sails were folded and patched. A carved lantern decorated its bow, and faded golden lettering stretched across the stern.

Seren looked at Rhydan.

“Does it float?”

“Usually.”

“Usually?”

“Depends how much water gets inside.”

Bram stared at the ship.

“I would appreciate a more encouraging answer.”

Rhydan ignored him.

“This vessel belonged to my father. She has crossed every sea between here and the southern kingdoms. She has survived hurricanes, sea serpents and one particularly unfortunate encounter with a floating mountain.”

Tovin looked up.

“A floating mountain?”

“Long story.”

“I would very much like to hear it.”

“Survive the voyage.”

Rhydan led them aboard.

A woman with copper-colored hair stood near the mainmast, checking a collection of ropes. She wore a leather vest over a cream-colored shirt, and a curved sword hung from her belt.

“This is Nessa,” Rhydan announced. “My first mate.”

Nessa looked at the companions.

“These are the people taking us into the cursed sea?”

“Aye.”

She examined Bram.

“Can you swim?”

“Under favorable circumstances.”

“Meaning?”

“Without armor.”

“Remove it if we sink.”

Bram frowned.

“I was hoping sinking wasn't part of the itinerary.”

Nessa smiled.

“Neither was dying. Yet here we are, discussing both.”

The remaining crew consisted of six sailors who had volunteered after hearing that the eastern passage might be restored. Some had relatives in Queen Isolde's kingdom. Others had lost friends aboard ships that never returned.

One young sailor named Edrin had never traveled beyond the coastal islands.

He stood near the bow, attempting to appear considerably more experienced than he was.

Flicker approached him.

Edrin knelt.

“Hello there.”

Flicker sniffed his hand.

“Does he bite?”

“Only when offended,” Seren answered.

“What offends him?”

“Mostly being told no.”

Edrin laughed.

Within minutes, Flicker had acquired a piece of dried fish and a new friend.

While the crew prepared the ship, Tovin and Lyra examined the navigational charts in Rhydan's cabin.

The maps covered nearly every available surface. Some were drawn upon parchment, others upon thin sheets of treated leather. Several appeared older than the island's council hall.

Tovin traced a faded line connecting the western coast to Queen Isolde's kingdom.

“The eastern passage.”

Rhydan nodded.

“Used to be a twelve-day voyage with favorable winds.”

“And now?”

“Now nobody knows.”

Lyra studied the empty spaces surrounding the route.

“Why are there no islands marked here?”

“There were islands.”

Rhydan pointed toward a cluster of faded markings.

“Seven of them. Trading settlements, fishing villages, old monasteries.”

“What happened?”

“They disappeared.”

Tovin looked at him.

“Islands don't simply disappear.”

Rhydan poured himself a cup of water.

“Neither do stars.”

The Spellweaver had no response.

Lyra placed her hand above the chart.

Her eyes closed.

For several moments, she remained perfectly still.

Then she pulled her hand away.

“What did you see?” Tovin asked.

“Water.”

Rhydan raised an eyebrow.

“That's generally what one encounters at sea.”

“No. Water above me. Water below me. Water stretching in every direction.”

She looked at the map.

“And something beneath it all.”

The captain's expression darkened.

“What kind of something?”

Lyra shook her head.

“I couldn't see its shape.”

Outside, the harbor bells announced the approaching evening.

Rhydan folded the chart.

“Then let's hope it can't see ours.”

They departed at dawn.

The seven lanterns burned upon the island behind them, their golden flames visible long after the harbor itself had disappeared.

Elowen stood upon the outer pier, waving until the ship became a distant shape upon the horizon.

Kaelen remained at the stern.

Every departure felt different now.

In the beginning, he had believed that each road would bring them closer to home. Now he understood that every road also carried them farther from the people they had met along the way.

He wondered whether they would ever see the fisherman again.

Or Elowen.

Or Maelor.

He hoped the old warden would keep his promises.

Mira joined him at the railing.

“You're thinking about staying.”

Kaelen looked at her.

“What?”

“Not permanently. But part of you wishes we could remain long enough to see whether the things we've done actually matter.”

He smiled faintly.

“Am I becoming that predictable?”

“Only to people who've spent weeks watching you stare thoughtfully at horizons.”

He laughed.

Mira leaned against the railing.

“We can't stay everywhere.”

“I know.”

“And we can't fix everything.”

“I know that too.”

She looked toward the shrinking island.

“But we can leave people with something worth continuing.”

The wind filled the sails.

The *Lantern's Wake* turned east.

For the first time since arriving in Aetherfall, the companions traveled without a road beneath their feet.

Lessons Upon the Water

The first three days passed peacefully.

The sea was astonishingly beautiful.

At sunrise, golden light spread across the waves until the entire ocean appeared to be made of molten metal. Strange birds with translucent wings followed the ship. Schools of silver fish leaped from the water in perfect unison, leaving shimmering trails behind them.

On the second evening, enormous creatures resembling whales surfaced beside the vessel. Their backs carried glowing patterns like constellations.

Lyra watched them until darkness concealed their shapes.

“They're beautiful,” she whispered.

Rhydan stood nearby.

“Skywhales. Sailors say they carry the memories of stars that have died.”

“Do you believe that?”

The captain considered the question.

“After everything I've seen, I try not to decide too quickly what isn't possible.”

For a while, the voyage almost resembled a holiday.

Almost.

Bram discovered that the ocean did not agree with him.

He spent much of the first day leaning over the railing, making increasingly desperate promises to whichever powers governed the movement of ships.

Seren offered encouragement.

“Look at the horizon.”

“I am looking at the horizon.”

“Keep your eyes fixed on it.”

“The horizon keeps moving!”

“That's the ship.”

“I KNOW THAT!”

Flicker sat beside him, apparently fascinated.

Tovin approached with a small cup containing an herbal mixture Nessa had prepared.

“Drink this.”

Bram examined the liquid.

“What is it?”

“Something to settle your stomach.”

“Does it work?”

“Apparently.”

“Have you tried it?”

“No.”

Bram looked toward the sea.

Then he drank.

His expression suggested that he immediately regretted every decision that had brought him to this moment.

“That tastes like somebody boiled a boot.”

Tovin took back the cup.

“Your stomach?”

“Still miserable.”

“Give it time.”

By the following morning, Bram was helping the crew repair a damaged section of railing.

He never admitted that the medicine had worked.

Tovin never stopped mentioning it.

Seren, meanwhile, took to sailing with remarkable enthusiasm. Nessa taught her how to climb the rigging, adjust the sails and recognize changes in the wind.

Within two days, she could move across the upper rigging with greater confidence than several experienced sailors.

“You've done this before,” Nessa said.

“Not exactly.”

“Climbed trees?”

“Mountains. Buildings. Occasionally things that were trying to kill me.”

Nessa stared at her.

“Interesting childhood?”

“Interesting few weeks.”

Mira spent her mornings training with Edrin and two other sailors. Their swordsmanship was practical but unrefined, and she taught them how to defend themselves without exhausting their strength.

Edrin was particularly eager.

He practiced until his arms trembled.

“You don't have to prove anything,” Mira told him.

The young sailor lowered his wooden practice sword.

“My brother sailed east.”

Mira waited.

“He was aboard the *Morning Sparrow*. They found pieces of the ship near the coast.”

“I'm sorry.”

Edrin looked toward the water.

“I thought if I learned to fight properly, perhaps I wouldn't be afraid when we reached the darkness.”

Mira rested her shield against the mast.

“You'll probably still be afraid.”

He looked disappointed.

“Then what's the point?”

“Being prepared gives you something useful to do while you're afraid.”

She handed him the practice sword again.

“Now. Show me your stance.”

Edrin smiled.

And began again.

On the third evening, the companions gathered around a lantern on the forward deck.

Nessa had prepared a stew containing fish, vegetables and something Bram insisted was a vegetable despite Tovin's suspicion that it had once possessed legs.

The stars shone brilliantly overhead.

For several minutes, they ate in comfortable silence.

Then Seren asked a question none of them had considered in quite some time.

“What is everyone going to do when we get home?”

Bram lowered his bowl.

“Sleep.”

“After that?”

“More sleep.”

“Very ambitious.”

“I've earned it.”

Tovin smiled.

“I think I'll write everything down.”

Seren looked at him.

“Everything?”

“As much as I can remember. The roads, the creatures, the ancient languages. Someone should know what happened here.”

“Who would believe you?”

“Probably nobody.”

“Then why write it?”

Tovin looked toward the stars.

“Because something doesn't become less true simply because people refuse to believe it.”

Lyra smiled.

“I'd read it.”

“Thank you.”

“Although you might consider shortening your explanations of magical theory.”

Tovin appeared genuinely wounded.

Kaelen laughed.

“What about you, Lyra?”

She considered the question.

“I think I would like to sit somewhere quiet and hear nothing.”

The others looked at her.

“No warnings. No visions. No voices from things that haven't happened yet. Just ordinary silence.”

Mira nodded.

“That sounds wonderful.”

Seren looked toward Kaelen.

“And you?”

He watched the lantern flame.

“I don't know.”

It was an admission he would once have found difficult to make.

“I spent so much time wanting to get home that I never thought about what would happen afterward.”

Bram raised his bowl.

“Then we'll figure it out when we get there.”

“Together?” Kaelen asked.

“Obviously.”

Seren smiled.

“Someone has to make sure you don't get lost.”

Flicker emerged from beneath a blanket and climbed into Kaelen's lap.

Kaelen scratched behind his ears.

“And what about you?”

Flicker yawned.

“Excellent plan.”

Above them, the stars continued their ancient journeys.

None of the companions noticed that one constellation near the eastern horizon had already begun to fade.

Where the Compass Failed

Rhydan woke Kaelen shortly before dawn on the fourth day.

“Get your companions.”

There was something in the captain's voice that brought Kaelen immediately to his feet.

“What happened?”

“Come and see.”

The deck was unnaturally still.

The sails hung motionless despite a steady wind against Kaelen's face. The sea had lost its familiar rhythm. No waves struck the hull, and the ropes no longer creaked against the masts.

Nessa stood beside the ship's compass.

Its needle turned slowly.

Then faster.

Then slowly again.

Tovin arrived, carrying his satchel.

He examined the instrument.

“Magnetic interference?”

Rhydan pointed toward the sky.

“Explain that.”

The eastern horizon had disappeared.

A wall of darkness stretched from north to south. It possessed no visible edge, no movement and no recognizable shape. Where the sky should have brightened with the approaching dawn, there was only emptiness.

Lyra gripped the railing.

“We've reached it.”

Rhydan nodded.

“The Starless Sea.”

Bram emerged from below deck, fastening his armor.

“Why have we stopped?”

Nobody answered.

He followed their gaze.

“Oh.”

Flicker climbed onto his shoulder and pressed himself against Bram's neck.

Rhydan turned toward his crew.

“Listen carefully. From this moment forward, nobody goes anywhere alone. Nobody approaches the railing without another person beside them. If you hear something that the rest of us cannot hear, you tell us immediately.”

The sailors nodded.

“If someone calls your name from the water, you do not answer.”

Edrin swallowed.

“And if we recognize the voice?”

“Especially then.”

Rhydan looked toward Kaelen.

“Pathfinder. Can that stone of yours guide us?”

Kaelen withdrew the Waystone.

Its blue light pulsed steadily, forming a narrow beam that pointed into the darkness.

“I think so.”

“You think so?”

“Would you prefer that I lie?”

Rhydan almost smiled.

“No. I suppose I've had enough of that.”

He returned to the helm.

“Nessa! Prepare the lanterns!”

The first mate moved quickly, distributing oil lamps throughout the vessel.

Tovin approached each lantern in turn, placing a small enchantment upon its flame. The ordinary yellow fire became a steady blue-white glow.

“These should resist magical interference,” he explained.

“For how long?” Seren asked.

“Until they don't.”

“You and your reassuring explanations.”

Tovin adjusted his spectacles.

“Would you prefer a confidently inaccurate answer?”

“I'm beginning to think that's what captains and Spellweavers have in common.”

Rhydan called from the helm.

“Hold fast!”

The ship moved forward.

Its bow entered the darkness.

The last visible stars disappeared behind them.

And the world became silent.

The Voices of the Deep

At first, the darkness seemed merely inconvenient.

The lanterns illuminated the deck, and the Waystone provided a direction. The crew moved cautiously but efficiently, maintaining the sails and checking the hull.

Then the hours began to lose their meaning.

Tovin's pocket watch stopped.

Nessa's sandglass refused to empty.

The flame of a candle burned without consuming its wax.

Kaelen could not determine whether they had traveled for twenty minutes or an entire day.

He found Lyra standing near the mainmast.

“Can you sense anything?”

She shook her head.

“That's what frightens me.”

“What do you mean?”

“Usually, even when I can't understand a vision, I can feel something beyond it. Possibilities. Movement. Life.”

She looked into the darkness.

“Here, it's as though the future has been covered.”

Kaelen tightened his grip upon the Waystone.

“Covered by what?”

“I don't know.”

A bell sounded beneath the ship.

Both turned.

The sound was deep and resonant, vibrating through the wooden deck.

Another bell answered from somewhere farther away.

Rhydan emerged from the darkness.

“Everyone to the center of the deck!”

The crew obeyed.

The bells continued.

Three notes.

A pause.

Then three more.

Tovin listened carefully.

“They're repeating.”

“Don't try to understand them,” Rhydan warned.

“Understanding things is generally how we survive.”

“Not here.”

Then came the first voice.

“Nessa?”

The first mate froze.

It was a woman's voice, soft and affectionate.

“Nessa, sweetheart?”

Nessa closed her eyes.

Rhydan moved toward her.

“Look at me.”

She did not respond.

The voice came again.

“It's cold down here.”

Nessa's hands trembled.

“My mother.”

Rhydan placed both hands upon her shoulders.

“Your mother is buried beneath the willow tree outside Westhaven.”

Nessa shook her head.

“She sounds exactly…”

“I know.”

“Captain…”

“Look at me.”

Slowly, Nessa opened her eyes.

The voice faded.

She took a deep breath.

“I'm here.”

Rhydan nodded.

“Aye. You are.”

Kaelen looked toward the companions.

“Stay together.”

Then Bram heard someone laughing.

It was a deep, familiar laugh that seemed to rise from the water beside the ship.

He turned.

His expression changed.

“Grandfather?”

Seren seized his arm.

“Bram.”

The laughter came again.

“Still carrying that ridiculous hammer, boy?”

Bram stared into the darkness.

“He used to say that.”

Seren moved directly in front of him.

“Tell me something about him.”

“What?”

“Something real.”

Bram blinked.

“He… he made horseshoes.”

“Good. What else?”

“He hated onions.”

“Reasonable man.”

Bram laughed despite himself.

“He taught me how to repair a broken handle. Said a good tool should outlive the man who made it.”

Seren tightened her grip.

“Then remember him for that. Not for whatever is making noises beneath this ship.”

The laughter disappeared.

Bram bowed his head.

“Thank you.”

Seren rested her hand upon his shoulder.

“Anytime.”

Across the deck, the voices multiplied.

Some whispered.

Others cried.

Some offered comfort.

Others begged for help.

Kaelen heard his own name spoken in a voice he had not heard since childhood.

He refused to turn.

Instead, he began speaking.

“My name is Kaelen. I'm a Pathfinder. I'm aboard the *Lantern's Wake*. I'm traveling with my friends.”

Mira understood immediately.

“My name is Mira. I'm a Guardian. I'm standing beside Kaelen.”

“Seren,” the Windrunner continued. “Currently regretting several life choices.”

Bram managed a smile.

“Bram. Warden. Owner of an excellent hammer.”

“Tovin. Spellweaver.”

“Lyra. Seer.”

Flicker chirped loudly.

“And Flicker,” Bram added. “Professional troublemaker.”

One by one, the sailors began introducing themselves.

They spoke their names, their homes, their professions and the names of the people standing beside them.

The voices beneath the water grew louder.

But so did the voices upon the ship.

For several minutes, the two sounds competed.

Then the sea fell silent.

Rhydan looked at Kaelen.

“You've done this before.”

“Something similar.”

The captain nodded.

“Keep that stone shining.”

The City Beneath the Waves

They saw the lights shortly afterward.

Edrin noticed them first.

“Captain!”

Rhydan approached the bow.

Far beneath the surface, golden lights appeared in the darkness.

At first, Kaelen mistook them for reflections.

Then the outlines of buildings emerged.

A city lay beneath the ship.

Its streets were illuminated by lanterns. Towers rose from broad courtyards. Bridges connected enormous stone structures decorated with banners that moved gently in the underwater currents.

At its center stood a magnificent cathedral.

The bells sounded again.

This time, there was no mistaking their origin.

Tovin leaned forward.

“Impossible.”

Rhydan stared at the city.

“Letharis.”

Lyra turned toward him.

“You recognize it?”

“It was one of the seven islands. I traded there when I was a boy.”

The captain pointed toward a large building beside the cathedral.

“That was the harbor market.”

His voice became distant.

“My father used to buy spices there.”

The ship drifted above the submerged streets.

Figures moved between the buildings.

Human figures.

They walked beneath the water as though it were air. Some carried baskets. Others gathered beside fountains. Children chased one another through the courtyards.

Edrin stared.

“Are they alive?”

Lyra watched the figures.

“No.”

A woman emerged from a doorway carrying a loaf of bread.

She walked across the courtyard.

Then she disappeared.

A moment later, she emerged from the same doorway, carrying the same loaf of bread.

Tovin's expression changed.

“It's repeating.”

Kaelen watched the children.

They ran toward a fountain, turned and vanished.

Then they appeared again.

“The city's memories,” he said.

Lyra nodded.

“Something is preserving them.”

“Like the reservoir?”

“Perhaps. But this is different.”

She pointed toward the cathedral.

“Everything is moving around that building.”

The bells rang.

The figures stopped.

Every person in the submerged city turned their face upward.

Toward the ship.

Flicker hissed.

The Waystone grew painfully hot.

“Captain,” Kaelen said, “we need to move.”

Rhydan hurried toward the helm.

The sails filled suddenly.

But the ship remained stationary.

Nessa called from the stern.

“Something has us!”

Bram rushed to the railing.

A long, pale shape moved beneath the hull.

Then another.

And another.

Seren drew her sword.

“Those are not ropes.”

An enormous tentacle rose from the water.

It wrapped itself around the mainmast.

The ship tilted violently.

Edrin fell.

Mira caught him before he slid beneath the railing.

“Hold on!”

Another tentacle struck the deck, smashing through a stack of wooden crates.

Bram raised his hammer.

“Finally! Something I can actually hit!”

He charged.

The hammer struck the creature's flesh with a wet, thunderous impact.

The tentacle recoiled.

Then it swept sideways.

Bram ducked just in time.

“Something I can hit that also hits back!”

Seren climbed the rigging, slashing at the appendage wrapped around the mast.

Dark liquid spilled from the wound.

Where it struck the deck, the wood began to lose its color.

Tovin stared.

“Don't touch that!”

Kaelen looked over the side.

The creature beneath them was enormous.

Its body stretched across the submerged cathedral. Its pale limbs wound between towers and bridges. Hundreds of glowing markings covered its skin, resembling the windows of the drowned city.

At its center, an enormous eye opened.

Within that eye, Kaelen saw people.

Thousands of them.

He saw the woman carrying bread.

The children beside the fountain.

Sailors walking along the harbor.

And among them, a young woman wearing a blue coat.

“Rhydan!”

The captain turned.

Kaelen pointed toward the water.

Rhydan looked.

His face became white.

“Anwen.”

The Mourning Leviathan

The captain rushed toward the railing.

Mira intercepted him.

“Don't!”

“That's my daughter!”

“We don't know what you're seeing!”

“I KNOW MY OWN CHILD!”

Rhydan struggled against her grip.

Below them, the young woman raised her face.

She smiled.

“Father.”

The captain stopped fighting.

His eyes filled with tears.

“Anwen.”

The creature tightened its grip upon the ship.

Wood cracked beneath the deck.

Nessa shouted orders to the crew.

Tovin raised his staff, sending a burst of golden energy against one of the tentacles. The creature withdrew, only to strike again from the opposite side.

Seren clung to the rigging.

“We're going to lose the mast!”

Kaelen looked at Lyra.

“What is this thing?”

She pressed both hands against her temples.

“I can hear them.”

“Who?”

“The people inside it.”

Another bell sounded.

Lyra cried out.

Kaelen caught her as she fell.

“Lyra!”

She opened her eyes.

“It isn't feeding on them.”

The ship tilted again.

“What?”

“It's keeping them.”

She looked toward the creature.

“It's afraid of losing them.”

Kaelen remembered Maelor.

The First Warden had taken memories to prevent the roads from disappearing. He had imprisoned the Tidewarden because he believed control was the only means of protecting the world.

Now something beneath the ocean was doing much the same thing.

Only on a scale they could scarcely comprehend.

Tovin struggled toward them.

“There's magic connecting it to the city!”

He pointed toward the cathedral.

“Look at the bells!”

Kaelen raised the truthglass.

Golden threads stretched from the creature toward the submerged buildings.

But violet threads extended from the cathedral's bell tower into the creature's body.

The familiar corruption.

Vaelrith.

“It's being controlled,” Kaelen said.

Lyra nodded.

“Something has twisted its purpose.”

Another tentacle struck the deck.

The mast groaned.

Bram stumbled backward.

“Whatever you're planning, now would be an excellent time!”

Tovin studied the violet connections.

“We need to interrupt the bells.”

Seren dropped from the rigging onto the deck.

“Wonderful. How?”

“The sound is carrying the enchantment.”

“Then make a louder sound!”

Tovin looked at her.

She shrugged.

“What?”

He turned toward the ship's bell.

Then toward the enchanted lanterns.

“Actually…”

Seren smiled.

“I love it when that happens.”

Tovin and Lyra worked beside the mainmast while the others fought to keep the vessel intact.

They gathered the enchanted lanterns and arranged them in a circle around the ship's bell.

Tovin scratched symbols into the deck with a piece of chalk.

The markings glowed.

“What exactly are we doing?” Lyra asked.

“Creating a resonance.”

“To break the creature's connection?”

“To remind it of the original purpose of the bells.”

Lyra looked toward the submerged city.

“They called people home.”

Tovin nodded.

“Before the corruption, they were probably used to guide ships into the harbor.”

“Then we need to give them a new destination.”

The Spellweaver smiled.

“Precisely.”

A tentacle struck the mainmast.

The lanterns scattered.

Tovin shouted in frustration.

Flicker darted across the deck, chasing one of the rolling lamps.

He caught its handle between his teeth and dragged it back toward the circle.

Edrin retrieved another.

Then Nessa.

The sailors began helping, placing the lanterns where Tovin directed them.

Mira remained beside Rhydan.

The captain watched his daughter's image beneath the water.

“She's there,” he whispered.

Mira looked at him.

“Perhaps a part of her is.”

“I can't leave her again.”

“You didn't leave her the first time.”

He shook his head.

“I should have saved her.”

“You tried.”

“It wasn't enough.”

Mira understood those words.

She had spoken them to herself more times than she cared to remember.

She looked toward the creature.

“Would Anwen want you to lose your entire crew trying to reach her?”

Rhydan said nothing.

“Would she want you to spend the rest of your life believing that loving her meant never letting go?”

His shoulders trembled.

Below them, Anwen raised one hand.

“Father. Come home.”

Rhydan closed his eyes.

Then he stepped away from the railing.

“No, little star.”

His voice broke.

“Not yet.”

Mira released his arm.

The captain wiped his eyes.

Then he returned to the helm.

“Nessa!”

“Aye, Captain?”

“Prepare every sail we have!”

She looked at the tentacles surrounding the ship.

“Planning to go somewhere?”

“As soon as these people perform their miracle!”

Tovin glanced toward him.

“I wouldn't necessarily call it a miracle.”

“Then perform whatever you call it!”

Lyra placed her hands against the ship's bell.

The enchanted lanterns brightened.

She closed her eyes.

Within her mind, the submerged city appeared.

But she no longer saw it as it was beneath the waves.

She saw it beneath sunlight.

Ships entered its harbor.

Merchants shouted from their stalls.

Children ran along the waterfront.

The cathedral bells rang above the rooftops.

The sound welcomed travelers from distant lands.

It announced weddings, celebrations and the safe return of those who had been away.

It was a sound of belonging.

Then the darkness came.

The sea rose.

The city vanished beneath the waves.

And a guardian dwelling in the depths gathered the memories of its inhabitants, refusing to allow them to disappear.

For centuries, perhaps, it had protected those memories.

Until violet corruption transformed its compassion into imprisonment.

Lyra opened her eyes.

“It remembers.”

Tovin grasped the bell rope.

“Then let's help it remember properly.”

He pulled.

The bell rang.

Golden light burst across the deck.

The sound traveled outward, passing through the hull and descending into the sea.

The submerged cathedral answered.

Its violet light flickered.

The creature screamed.

Every tentacle tightened.

Bram braced himself against the mainmast.

“Again!”

Tovin pulled the rope.

The bell rang a second time.

Across the drowned city, lanterns ignited.

The woman carrying bread stopped walking.

The children beside the fountain looked toward the cathedral.

The sailors gathered along the ancient harbor.

The creature's enormous eye turned toward the ship.

Kaelen raised the Waystone.

“Let them go!”

The bell rang a third time.

The violet threads shattered.

Light poured from the creature's body.

Thousands of golden shapes rose through the water, surrounding the *Lantern's Wake* like stars returning to the sky.

Rhydan watched them.

Among the lights, he saw his daughter.

She stood upon the water, wearing the blue coat he had given her on her eighteenth birthday.

She looked older than he remembered.

Or perhaps he had forgotten how young she had been.

“Anwen?”

She smiled.

He wanted to reach for her.

Instead, he remained at the helm.

“I miss you,” he whispered.

The young woman placed one hand against her heart.

Then she turned toward the rising lights.

Rhydan bowed his head.

“Fair winds, little star.”

She disappeared.

The captain wept.

But his hands remained steady upon the wheel.

The Return of the Heavens

The leviathan released the ship.

Its tentacles withdrew beneath the surface, and the enormous creature slowly descended toward the drowned city.

For a moment, Kaelen saw its eye again.

The people imprisoned within it were gone.

Only the reflection of the Waystone remained.

Lyra approached the railing.

“You can rest now.”

The creature closed its eye.

A gentle current carried the *Lantern's Wake* forward.

Behind them, the submerged cathedral began to crumble.

Its bells sounded one final time.

Then silence returned to the depths.

But this silence was different.

It was not the silence of something waiting to strike.

It was the silence that follows the end of a long sorrow.

One by one, the stars reappeared.

Edrin was the first to notice.

“Look!”

The crew raised their heads.

Constellations emerged from the darkness. The moon appeared above the eastern horizon, casting a silver path across the waves.

Nessa laughed.

Several sailors embraced.

Bram sat heavily upon the deck.

“I have officially decided that I prefer mountains.”

Seren sat beside him.

“You said you preferred the sea after the last mountain.”

“I reserve the right to change my mind.”

Flicker climbed onto his lap.

The little creature was covered in chalk, seawater and something that smelled unpleasantly like the leviathan.

Bram looked down at him.

“You're getting a bath.”

Flicker immediately disappeared beneath a nearby bench.

Seren laughed.

“Good luck with that.”

Tovin examined the damaged mast.

“We're fortunate it didn't break.”

Nessa joined him.

“Fortunate?”

She pointed toward the shattered crates, damaged railings and torn sails.

“You and I have very different definitions of fortunate.”

“Are we sinking?”

“No.”

“Then I stand by my assessment.”

The first mate shook her head.

But she was smiling.

At the helm, Rhydan remained quiet.

Kaelen approached him.

“Are you all right?”

The captain looked toward the stars.

“No.”

Kaelen waited.

“But I think I will be.”

They stood together for several moments.

“I spent sixty-three days wishing I could return to those waters,” Rhydan continued. “Not to rescue anyone. Not really. I wanted to find a way to undo what happened.”

He touched the pendant around his neck.

“Some things cannot be undone.”

Kaelen looked toward the sea.

“No.”

Rhydan breathed deeply.

“But perhaps they don't have to destroy everything that comes afterward.”

The captain straightened.

“Where does your stone point now?”

Kaelen withdrew the Waystone.

Its blue light stretched toward the eastern horizon.

“Still east.”

Rhydan smiled faintly.

“Then east it is.”

The Kingdom Behind the Mist

Two days later, land appeared.

At first, it was little more than a dark line beneath the morning sky.

As the ship drew closer, mountains emerged from the mist. Their peaks were covered in snow, and waterfalls descended from enormous cliffs into the sea.

Between those mountains stood a city.

Its towers were constructed from white stone. Bridges arched across deep ravines. Golden roofs reflected the morning sunlight, and banners bearing the image of a silver crown fluttered above its walls.

Seren climbed the rigging for a better view.

“Now that's a city!”

Tovin hurried to the bow.

“Extraordinary.”

Even Bram appeared impressed.

“Do you suppose they have proper beds?”

Mira smiled.

“That's your first question?”

“I have priorities.”

Rhydan studied the coastline through a brass telescope.

His expression changed.

“Something's wrong.”

Kaelen joined him.

“What?”

“The harbor.”

He handed Kaelen the telescope.

The outer harbor was filled with ships.

But none were moving.

Some had broken masts. Others rested against the docks at unnatural angles. Chains stretched across the entrance, and soldiers occupied the surrounding towers.

Beyond the harbor, smoke rose from several districts.

Kaelen lowered the telescope.

“Are they under attack?”

Rhydan shook his head.

“Those are Isolde's banners.”

Lyra stood beside them.

She watched the city for several moments.

Then she closed her eyes.

A vision struck her.

A throne surrounded by thorns.

A woman wearing a silver crown.

A dragon bound beneath a mountain.

And a shadow standing behind the throne, whispering into the queen's ear.

Lyra stumbled.

Tovin caught her.

“What did you see?”

She opened her eyes.

“Someone is using her.”

“Queen Isolde?”

Lyra nodded.

“The kingdom isn't simply cut off from the rest of Aetherfall.”

She looked toward the chained harbor.

“It's being held prisoner.”

A warning horn sounded from the nearest tower.

Soldiers appeared along the battlements.

Rhydan ordered the sails lowered.

The *Lantern's Wake* drifted toward the harbor entrance.

A voice called from above.

“Identify your vessel!”

Rhydan stepped forward.

“Captain Rhydan of the *Lantern's Wake*, sailing from the western islands!”

A pause followed.

Then the voice answered.

“No vessel has crossed the eastern passage in sixty-three days.”

“We just did.”

“Remain where you are!”

Several archers raised their bows.

Mira moved instinctively toward her shield.

Seren descended from the rigging.

Bram reached for his hammer.

Kaelen held up one hand.

“Wait.”

The chains across the harbor began to lower.

Slowly, the entrance opened.

But the soldiers did not lower their weapons.

A small vessel approached, carrying six armored guards and a man dressed in elaborate black robes.

The man stood at its bow.

His silver hair was perfectly arranged, and a narrow golden emblem decorated his collar.

He smiled as the vessel drew alongside them.

“Welcome, travelers.”

Something about his voice made Kaelen uneasy.

“I am Lord Chancellor Veyran, personal adviser to Her Majesty, Queen Isolde.”

His gaze moved across the companions.

Then it settled upon the Waystone.

For the briefest moment, his smile disappeared.

“How very interesting.”

Kaelen returned the stone beneath his cloak.

“We seek an audience with the queen.”

“Of course.”

Veyran gestured toward the harbor.

“Her Majesty will be delighted to learn that the eastern passage has reopened.”

Lyra studied him.

“Will she?”

The chancellor turned toward her.

His smile returned.

“My dear young lady, you have no idea how long we have been waiting for someone like you.”

Flicker hissed.

Veyran looked down at him.

The golden light in the creature's tail faded.

Kaelen felt the Waystone grow warm beneath his cloak.

The companions had crossed a sea without stars.

They had faced a creature that imprisoned the memories of the dead.

They had helped a grieving father find the strength to continue living.

Yet as the gates of Queen Isolde's kingdom closed behind them, Kaelen found himself wishing they were still aboard the ship, surrounded by nothing but darkness and water.

At least there, they had known what they were fighting.

Here, the enemy was smiling.

And inviting them inside.

CHAPTER 17

The Crown of Thorns

The harbor gates closed with a sound that reminded Kaelen of a prison door.

Enormous iron chains rose from the water, drawn tight between two fortified towers. Soldiers watched from the battlements as the *Lantern's Wake* entered the harbor under the escort of Chancellor Veyran.

Beyond the docks, the city climbed the mountainside in magnificent terraces. White stone buildings stood beneath golden roofs. Waterfalls descended through carefully constructed channels, passing beneath bridges decorated with statues of dragons.

It should have been the most beautiful city the companions had encountered.

Instead, it was the quietest.

There were no merchants shouting from their stalls. No musicians performing in the streets. No children racing along the waterfront.

Even the harbor bells remained silent.

Seren stood beside Kaelen.

“Have you noticed something?”

“Everyone looks frightened?”

“That too. Look at the windows.”

Kaelen examined the buildings overlooking the harbor.

Nearly every window was shuttered.

Those that remained open revealed faces that disappeared whenever soldiers passed beneath them.

“Something happened here,” Seren whispered.

Kaelen watched Chancellor Veyran step onto the dock.

“Something is still happening.”

The chancellor turned toward them.

“Please, my friends. Her Majesty's hospitality awaits.”

Bram leaned toward Tovin.

“Whenever somebody calls me his friend before learning my name, I start counting the exits.”

“How many have you found?”

“Not nearly enough.”

Flicker remained beneath Bram's cloak, his small body trembling.

The creature had not made a sound since Veyran boarded the ship.

That concerned Lyra more than anything else.

The City of the Silver Crown

Rhydan refused to leave his vessel.

“My crew stays with the ship,” he told the chancellor.

Veyran smiled.

“Certainly. Although accommodations within the city would be considerably more comfortable.”

“We've grown accustomed to discomfort.”

“As you wish.”

The chancellor gestured toward a group of soldiers.

“They will ensure that your vessel remains undisturbed.”

Rhydan studied the soldiers.

“Undisturbed?”

“Perfectly safe.”

The captain looked toward Kaelen.

There was no need for words.

They both understood that the soldiers had been placed there to prevent the ship from leaving.

Kaelen approached Rhydan.

“We'll return as soon as we can.”

The captain lowered his voice.

“I'll keep her ready.”

“Even with the harbor chains?”

Rhydan smiled faintly.

“Every harbor has a way out. Sometimes you simply have to be creative.”

Nessa appeared behind him.

“Preferably without destroying the ship this time.”

“That happened once.”

“Twice.”

“The second time was hardly my fault.”

Kaelen laughed.

For a moment, the tension eased.

Then Veyran called from the dock.

“Shall we?”

The companions followed him into the city.

An avenue of white stone led away from the harbor, passing beneath a magnificent archway. Above it, carved in enormous letters, were the words:

Beneath the Crown, All Shall Flourish.

Tovin stopped to examine the inscription.

“An interesting choice of words.”

Veyran glanced back.

“Our kingdom has prospered beneath the protection of the royal family for nearly nine centuries.”

“Protection from what?” Mira asked.

“Whatever threatens our peace.”

The chancellor continued walking.

Mira watched him.

“That wasn't an answer.”

“No,” Lyra replied quietly. “It was a warning.”

They passed a marketplace where empty stalls stood beneath colorful awnings. A fountain occupied its center, depicting a dragon spreading its wings over a gathering of human figures.

Water no longer flowed from its mouth.

Someone had wrapped iron chains around the statue.

At the base of the fountain, a young girl knelt beside an overturned basket.

Apples had scattered across the pavement.

A soldier stood above her.

“You know the regulations.”

“I'm sorry,” the girl whispered.

“Unlicensed trading is prohibited.”

“My mother is sick.”

“That is not my concern.”

The soldier reached for the basket.

Mira stepped forward.

“Leave it.”

The soldier turned.

“What?”

“You heard me.”

Veyran stopped walking.

For a moment, his expression revealed irritation.

Then the familiar smile returned.

“Guardian, I assure you that our officers are merely enforcing necessary measures.”

“She's selling apples.”

“Without authorization.”

Mira looked at the child.

“How much?”

The girl stared at her.

“For the apples?”

Mira nodded.

“Three copper pieces.”

Mira retrieved several coins from her pouch and placed them in the girl's hand.

“Keep the apples.”

The soldier looked toward Veyran.

The chancellor waved him away.

“An admirable gesture. Although generosity can occasionally undermine order.”

Mira stood.

“Then perhaps your order needs undermining.”

Bram coughed into his fist.

Seren suddenly became fascinated by a nearby building.

Veyran's smile remained unchanged.

“Her Majesty will find your company most stimulating.”

They continued walking.

Behind them, the little girl gathered her basket and disappeared into an alley.

Lyra looked back.

For a moment, she saw an elderly woman watching from a doorway.

The woman placed two fingers against her heart.

Then she pointed toward the chained dragon.

Before Lyra could respond, the doorway closed.

The Palace of Nine Bridges

The royal palace occupied the highest terrace of the city.

Nine bridges connected its towers across deep ravines, each bridge constructed from white stone and decorated with silver lanterns.

Far below, waterfalls disappeared into clouds of mist.

The palace seemed to float above the kingdom.

Tovin stared upward.

“The engineering alone would require generations.”

“Seven generations,” Veyran answered. “The foundations were laid during the reign of Queen Althea the First.”

Bram examined the nearest bridge.

“Does anybody in this kingdom build things at ground level?”

“Ground level offers considerably less protection.”

“From what?”

Veyran glanced toward the mountains.

“History.”

The answer silenced them.

Inside, the palace was even more magnificent.

Tall columns supported vaulted ceilings painted with scenes from the kingdom's past. Silver chandeliers hung above polished marble floors. Ancient tapestries depicted queens standing beside dragons, their hands resting upon the creatures' enormous heads.

Lyra slowed beside one tapestry.

A woman wearing a silver crown stood upon a mountain beneath a great blue dragon.

Unlike the other royal portraits, the queen carried no weapon.

Her hand was extended.

The dragon lowered its head toward her.

Between them burned a brilliant white light.

“Who is she?” Lyra asked.

Veyran glanced at the tapestry.

“Queen Althea.”

“And the dragon?”

“An obsolete religious symbol.”

Tovin approached.

“That's an unusually detailed depiction for a symbolic creature.”

“Our ancestors possessed vivid imaginations.”

Lyra studied the dragon's eyes.

Something stirred within her.

A voice, distant and weary.

Remember the promise.

She stepped backward.

Tovin noticed.

“Lyra?”

“I'm all right.”

Veyran watched her carefully.

“Come. Her Majesty dislikes waiting.”

They entered the throne room through enormous silver doors.

Kaelen had expected to find a powerful monarch surrounded by wealth and authority.

Instead, he found a tired woman sitting beneath a crown that appeared far too heavy for her head.

Queen Isolde was younger than he had imagined. Her dark hair contained streaks of silver, and shadows beneath her eyes suggested that sleep had become a rare luxury.

She wore a gown of deep blue decorated with silver embroidery.

Around her brow rested a crown of interwoven metal branches.

The branches resembled thorns.

Several pressed against her skin.

Kaelen wondered whether they were as painful as they appeared.

Veyran bowed.

“Your Majesty, I present the travelers who have reopened the eastern passage.”

The queen raised her head.

For the first time, something resembling hope appeared in her expression.

“You crossed the Starless Sea?”

Kaelen bowed respectfully.

“We did.”

“Then the darkness has lifted?”

“The stars have returned.”

Isolde gripped the arms of her throne.

“Are you certain?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

She closed her eyes.

“Thank the heavens.”

Veyran stepped closer.

“Although we must exercise caution. Their account has not yet been independently verified.”

Isolde opened her eyes.

“They are standing before us, Chancellor.”

“Indeed.”

She looked toward the companions.

“Please. Tell me everything.”

Kaelen described their voyage, the drowned city, the leviathan and the restoration of the stars.

As he spoke, Isolde leaned forward.

When he mentioned the violet corruption within the cathedral, her expression changed.

“Violet?”

“Yes.”

She glanced toward Veyran.

The chancellor remained perfectly still.

“An unfortunate coincidence,” he said.

Tovin frowned.

“We've encountered the same corruption throughout Aetherfall. It is hardly a coincidence.”

Veyran folded his hands.

“You are suggesting that unrelated events share a common cause?”

“I'm suggesting they are not unrelated.”

The queen rose.

For a moment, she appeared unsteady.

A servant hurried toward her, but Veyran raised one hand.

The servant stopped.

Isolde steadied herself against the throne.

“What brings you to my kingdom?”

Kaelen revealed the Waystone.

Blue light spread across the marble floor.

The queen stared.

Her lips parted.

“The Heart of the Roads.”

Tovin looked at her.

“You recognize it?”

“My grandmother told me stories about it.”

She descended the steps.

“The Waykeepers carried stones like this when the kingdoms were still united.”

Veyran moved between her and Kaelen.

“Your Majesty, perhaps we should examine the artifact before permitting direct contact.”

Isolde looked at him.

“I believe I am capable of touching a stone.”

The chancellor stepped aside.

Reluctantly.

The queen reached toward the Waystone.

The moment her fingers touched it, the crown upon her head flashed violet.

She cried out.

Kaelen pulled the stone away.

Mira rushed forward.

“Your Majesty!”

Isolde staggered backward.

Veyran caught her.

“The queen is exhausted.”

Lyra stared at the crown.

For an instant, she had seen something beneath its silver surface.

Black roots.

Twisting downward.

Reaching into the queen's mind.

Veyran helped Isolde return to her throne.

“This audience is concluded.”

Kaelen stepped forward.

“But—”

“Her Majesty requires rest.”

The chancellor's voice had lost its warmth.

Soldiers approached from either side of the chamber.

Isolde looked toward Kaelen.

“Stay.”

Veyran turned.

“Your Majesty?”

“Let them remain in the palace. I wish to speak with them again.”

“Of course.”

He bowed.

“As you command.”

Yet when he looked toward the companions, Kaelen understood that their invitation to remain was not entirely an act of hospitality.

A Feast Without Laughter

Their chambers overlooked the city.

Each companion received a private room containing a large bed, polished furniture and a balcony overlooking the mountains.

Bram stood in the doorway of his room, staring at the mattress.

“Finally.”

Seren looked over his shoulder.

“Try not to become emotionally attached.”

“Too late.”

Flicker leaped onto the bed and disappeared into a pile of cushions.

Bram pointed at him.

“That's my side.”

A chirp emerged from beneath the blankets.

“We discussed this.”

Seren laughed and continued down the corridor.

For the first time in weeks, the companions had access to warm baths, clean clothing and food that had not been carried across half a kingdom inside somebody's pack.

Under different circumstances, they might have enjoyed it.

But two guards stood outside the corridor.

Another watched the staircase.

And Lyra could feel the queen's pain even through the palace walls.

They gathered in Kaelen's room shortly before dinner.

Tovin placed several objects upon a table: the truthglass, a collection of notes and a fragment of crystal recovered from the northern reservoir.

“The crown is corrupted,” he said.

Lyra nodded.

“I saw it.”

Mira looked between them.

“Can we remove it?”

“Possibly. But if the enchantment has become connected to her mind, removing it by force could injure her.”

“Or kill her,” Lyra added.

Bram frowned.

“Then we find whoever put it there.”

Seren walked toward the balcony.

“I think we already know who that is.”

Kaelen considered the chancellor.

Veyran had never threatened them openly. He had offered hospitality, answered their questions and treated them with outward respect.

Yet every conversation seemed to end precisely where he wanted it to.

Every person around him appeared to be waiting for permission.

Even the queen.

“We need evidence,” Kaelen said.

Seren looked at him.

“Would sneaking through the palace count as gathering evidence?”

“Probably.”

“Excellent.”

Mira folded her arms.

“Not alone.”

Seren sighed.

“You take all the excitement out of espionage.”

A knock sounded at the door.

Everyone fell silent.

Kaelen opened it.

A young servant stood outside, carrying a tray of folded clothing.

“Dinner will be served shortly.”

She entered the room and placed the tray upon the table.

As she passed Lyra, something fell from beneath the folded garments.

A small piece of parchment.

The servant continued toward the door.

“Please wear the clothing provided. The chancellor insists upon proper appearances.”

She bowed and departed.

Lyra retrieved the parchment.

Written upon it were seven words.

The queen is not your enemy. Midnight. Fountain.

She showed the others.

Bram looked toward the window.

“Does anybody in this kingdom arrange meetings during sensible hours?”

Seren grinned.

“Where would be the fun in that?”

Dinner was served beneath a ceiling painted with hundreds of golden stars.

The table stretched nearly the length of the banquet hall. Silver plates held roasted meats, fruits, vegetables and delicately prepared pastries.

Musicians played from a raised platform.

Servants moved silently between the guests.

And every person seated at the table seemed afraid to speak without first looking toward Chancellor Veyran.

Queen Isolde occupied the central chair.

The companions sat nearby.

Kaelen watched her carefully.

The crown remained upon her head.

She barely touched her food.

Veyran, meanwhile, appeared entirely at ease.

“Tell me, Pathfinder. Where did your journey begin?”

Kaelen placed his cup upon the table.

“Far from here.”

“Another kingdom?”

“Something like that.”

“How intriguing.”

Veyran leaned forward.

“And you intend to return?”

“Yes.”

“Even after everything you have discovered in Aetherfall?”

Kaelen nodded.

“We have people waiting for us.”

The chancellor smiled.

“Attachment. A powerful motivation.”

Mira looked at him.

“Love usually is.”

“Indeed. Although it can also become a terrible weakness.”

Isolde raised her head.

“Or a source of strength.”

Veyran turned toward her.

“Certainly, Your Majesty.”

The queen looked at Kaelen.

“Tell me about your home.”

He hesitated.

Then he described ordinary things.

Roads that did not disappear.

Houses illuminated at night.

People traveling great distances without needing ancient magic to guide them.

Rain falling upon rooftops.

Families gathering around tables.

Isolde listened with an expression that surprised him.

Longing.

“How wonderful,” she whispered, “to live somewhere that does not require constant vigilance.”

Veyran placed his cup upon the table.

“Every kingdom requires vigilance.”

Isolde's expression faded.

“Yes, Chancellor.”

Lyra watched the crown.

A faint violet pulse moved between its thorns.

The queen lowered her eyes.

Lyra understood.

The crown was not merely causing pain.

It was punishing independent thought.

She felt a sudden anger unlike anything she had experienced since arriving in Aetherfall.

A kingdom celebrated its queen.

A palace displayed her authority.

A thousand soldiers obeyed commands issued in her name.

And yet the woman herself was a prisoner.

Across the table, Flicker climbed onto Bram's lap and reached toward a plate of roasted fish.

Bram gently moved the plate.

“Not yours.”

Flicker looked offended.

Isolde noticed.

For the first time that evening, she laughed.

The sound was unexpected enough that several servants stopped moving.

“What a delightful little creature.”

Bram lifted Flicker.

“Would Your Majesty like to meet him?”

Veyran began to speak.

Isolde interrupted.

“Yes.”

Bram carried Flicker toward her.

The creature sniffed the queen's fingers.

Then he placed his tiny paws upon her hand.

His tail began to glow.

The queen smiled.

A single tear traveled down her cheek.

“He's warm.”

Bram nodded.

“He has that effect on people.”

Flicker looked upward.

His gaze settled upon the crown.

He hissed.

The violet light flashed.

Isolde gasped.

Veyran rose immediately.

“Remove that animal.”

Bram gathered Flicker into his arms.

“He hasn't done anything.”

“Remove it!”

The banquet hall became silent.

Kaelen looked toward the chancellor.

For the first time, Veyran appeared genuinely frightened.

Not of Bram.

Not of the Waystone.

Of Flicker.

The creature's golden light had touched something the chancellor wanted concealed.

And now Kaelen knew that whatever controlled the crown could be threatened.

The Woman at the Fountain

Midnight arrived beneath a cloudless sky.

Moonlight illuminated the palace bridges, casting long shadows across the courtyards. The waterfalls continued their endless descent into the ravines below, their distant thunder concealing the quieter sounds of the sleeping palace.

Seren opened the balcony door.

Kaelen looked down.

“That's a considerable drop.”

“Then don't fall.”

“Wonderful advice.”

“I've been saving it.”

Using the decorative stonework beneath the balcony, Seren descended to a narrow ledge connecting their rooms to an adjoining terrace.

Kaelen followed with considerably less elegance.

Mira came next, followed by Lyra and Tovin.

Bram looked over the railing.

“No.”

Seren glanced upward.

“Come on.”

“Absolutely not.”

Flicker peered over Bram's shoulder and chirped.

“Don't encourage her.”

After several minutes of negotiation, Bram agreed to remain behind and watch the corridor. He would alert the others if the guards discovered their absence.

Flicker, however, had already made his decision.

The creature jumped from Bram's shoulder onto the balcony railing, scrambled down the stonework and landed beside Seren.

Bram stared after him.

“Traitor.”

The little creature chirped happily.

They crossed the terrace and descended a staircase leading toward the lower gardens.

The fountain stood beneath a grove of silver-leafed trees.

At its center, a stone dragon spread its wings above a pool of clear water. Unlike the statue in the marketplace, this dragon had not been bound with chains.

Someone waited beside it.

The young servant from earlier stepped into the moonlight.

“You came.”

Kaelen nodded.

“You asked us to.”

She looked around nervously.

“My name is Elara. I serve as one of the queen's personal attendants.”

Lyra approached.

“What has happened to her?”

Elara's eyes filled with tears.

“Everything changed when the chancellor returned from the northern territories.”

“When was that?” Tovin asked.

“Nearly a year ago.”

She sat upon the fountain's edge.

“Before then, Queen Isolde was beloved throughout the kingdom. She visited the villages herself. She listened to farmers, merchants and ordinary families. During the winter famine, she opened the royal storehouses without hesitation.”

Elara smiled at the memory.

“She used to walk through the palace gardens without guards. Sometimes she would help the kitchen servants prepare bread.”

Seren raised an eyebrow.

“A queen who bakes?”

“She wasn't particularly good at it.”

Elara laughed softly.

“But she enjoyed trying.”

Her expression darkened.

“Then Chancellor Veyran brought news of the collapsing roads. He told her that the ancient protections surrounding the kingdom were failing. He claimed that without immediate action, our city would disappear just as others had.”

“The crown,” Lyra said.

Elara nodded.

“He presented it as a relic recovered from the ruins of an ancient sanctuary. He said it would strengthen the connection between the royal bloodline and the kingdom's protective magic.”

Tovin frowned.

“And she believed him?”

“He had served her father. She had known him since childhood.”

Elara looked toward the palace.

“She trusted him.”

The fountain continued flowing.

“After she began wearing it, she changed. At first, she complained of headaches. Then she began forgetting conversations. Eventually, she could no longer remove the crown herself.”

Mira's expression hardened.

“Has nobody tried to help her?”

“Many have.”

Elara lowered her voice.

“They disappear.”

A cold silence settled over the garden.

“The royal physician questioned the chancellor. He was arrested for treason. General Aldren refused to close the harbor. He was stripped of his command. Several council members demanded that the crown be examined.”

“What happened to them?” Kaelen asked.

“Officially, they were sent to distant provinces.”

“And unofficially?”

Elara shook her head.

“Nobody knows.”

Lyra looked toward the stone dragon.

“What about Thalassa?”

Elara stared at her.

“How do you know that name?”

“I heard it in a vision.”

The servant moved closer.

“Then perhaps the old stories are true.”

She touched the fountain's stone wing.

“Thalassa is the last guardian dragon of our kingdom. The royal family has maintained a covenant with her kind for centuries.”

Tovin looked fascinated.

“A living dragon?”

Elara nodded.

“Until recently, she lived within the mountain above the palace. She guarded the eastern passage and protected the ancient roads beneath the kingdom.”

“What happened to her?” Kaelen asked.

“The chancellor convinced the queen that Thalassa was responsible for the spreading darkness.”

Lyra closed her eyes.

The vision returned.

A dragon beneath a mountain.

Chains burning against its scales.

A silver crown surrounded by thorns.

“He imprisoned her,” Lyra whispered.

“Yes.”

Elara's voice broke.

“The queen gave the order herself.”

Mira looked toward the palace.

“Under the influence of the crown.”

“I believe so.”

Elara reached beneath her cloak and withdrew a small silver key.

“There is an old passage beneath the royal library. It leads to chambers that have been sealed for generations.”

She placed the key in Kaelen's hand.

“The chancellor visits those chambers almost every night.”

Tovin examined the key.

“What's inside?”

“I don't know.”

Elara stood.

“But whatever is happening to the queen begins there.”

A distant bell sounded.

The servant looked toward the palace.

“I must return.”

Kaelen caught her hand.

“Why are you risking your life to help us?”

Elara looked at him.

“Because when my father died, Queen Isolde sat beside me for three hours.”

She smiled sadly.

“She didn't send a servant. She didn't offer money or royal condolences. She simply sat beside me until I stopped crying.”

Her eyes filled with tears.

“That's the woman I serve. Not the person sitting upon that throne.”

She disappeared into the darkness.

For several moments, nobody spoke.

Then Mira looked toward Kaelen.

“We're getting that crown off her.”

Kaelen nodded.

“Yes.”

Beneath the Royal Library

The library occupied the oldest wing of the palace.

Its entrance was guarded, but Seren discovered an open window overlooking a narrow service balcony.

Within minutes, the companions were standing among shelves containing centuries of accumulated knowledge.

Tovin stared in wonder.

“Do you realize what this place contains?”

Seren looked around.

“Books.”

“Thousands of books.”

“Yes. That's generally what one finds in a library.”

“Some of these manuscripts could predate the Shattering!”

Kaelen placed a hand upon his shoulder.

“We can admire them later.”

Tovin sighed.

“History is constantly being interrupted by emergencies.”

Flicker scampered between the shelves, his glowing tail illuminating the lower sections.

Lyra followed the creature toward a circular alcove containing several ancient statues.

At its center stood a carving of Queen Althea.

Her hand rested upon the head of a dragon.

Beneath the statue was a small inscription.

Tovin knelt.

“*Where knowledge ends, wisdom must begin.*”

Seren examined the pedestal.

“Sounds like something you'd say immediately before making a mistake.”

“Thank you.”

Kaelen discovered a narrow opening behind the statue.

The silver key fit perfectly.

He turned it.

A portion of the wall moved inward.

Cold air emerged from the darkness beyond.

Tovin raised his lantern.

A spiral staircase descended into the mountain.

“Of course,” Seren whispered. “The suspicious passage couldn't possibly lead somewhere pleasant.”

They entered.

The staircase seemed to continue forever.

The polished stone of the palace gradually gave way to rough mountain walls. Ancient markings appeared at irregular intervals, illuminated by small crystals embedded in the rock.

Some depicted dragons.

Others showed roads connecting distant stars.

Tovin stopped beside one carving.

“Look at this.”

The image showed seven figures standing around a circular gateway.

Each held a different object.

Above them, a dragon spread its wings.

Lyra studied the carving.

“The original Waykeepers?”

“Possibly.”

Kaelen examined the gateway.

“Could that be the way home?”

Tovin traced the markings.

“It resembles the gateways we've encountered. But this one appears considerably larger.”

A distant sound interrupted them.

Metal striking stone.

Then a voice.

They extinguished the lantern.

Kaelen motioned for silence.

The staircase ended at a narrow opening overlooking an enormous underground chamber.

Below them, dozens of violet crystals surrounded a circular platform.

Black conduits extended from the crystals into the mountain walls.

At the center of the platform stood Chancellor Veyran.

He was not alone.

A shadow occupied the space before him.

It possessed the outline of a tall man, although its edges constantly shifted. Its eyes burned with a pale violet light.

Kaelen recognized the presence immediately.

Vaelrith.

Lyra pressed one hand against her mouth.

The shadow spoke.

“The western passage has reopened.”

Veyran bowed.

“I am aware.”

“The Tidewarden has been released.”

“Yes.”

“The seven lanterns burn again.”

The chancellor lowered his head.

“The travelers have proven more resourceful than anticipated.”

Vaelrith moved closer.

“Resourceful?”

The crystals brightened.

“You assured me that the eastern sea would remain closed.”

Veyran's voice trembled.

“The leviathan should have destroyed them.”

“And yet they walk within your palace.”

Kaelen felt Mira's hand tighten around his arm.

Veyran straightened.

“They possess the Waystone.”

The shadow became still.

“Show me.”

The chancellor raised a small crystal.

An image appeared above it.

Kaelen recognized himself standing before Queen Isolde.

The Waystone illuminated the throne room.

Vaelrith studied the image.

Then he laughed.

It was a quiet sound.

Somehow, that made it more terrible.

“The road remembers its children.”

Veyran looked confused.

“My lord?”

“Do not concern yourself with matters beyond your understanding.”

The image disappeared.

“Has the dragon yielded?”

“No.”

Vaelrith's eyes narrowed.

“Then increase the pressure.”

“The creature may die.”

“Her death is acceptable. Her resistance is not.”

Veyran hesitated.

“The kingdom depends upon her power.”

“The kingdom depends upon what I permit it to possess.”

The chancellor bowed again.

“Of course.”

Vaelrith turned toward the mountain wall.

“The third shard must remain hidden until the final gateway is ready.”

Kaelen exchanged a glance with Tovin.

The third shard.

They had finally discovered where their journey was leading.

“Once the remaining roads collapse,” Vaelrith continued, “the kingdoms will beg for salvation.”

Veyran smiled.

“And we shall provide it.”

“No.”

The shadow turned.

“I shall provide it.”

The chancellor's smile vanished.

Vaelrith moved toward him.

“Remember your place.”

The crystals dimmed.

The shadow dissolved.

Veyran remained motionless upon the platform.

For several moments, his face displayed an expression Kaelen had not expected.

Fear.

Then the chancellor turned toward the staircase.

“Captain!”

A soldier emerged from an adjoining chamber.

“My lord?”

“Double the guards surrounding the queen. Our guests are not to leave the palace.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“And prepare the lower sanctuary.”

The soldier hesitated.

“For the dragon?”

Veyran's expression hardened.

“For whatever becomes necessary.”

The soldier bowed and departed.

Kaelen stepped backward.

They had heard enough.

But as he turned, his boot struck a loose fragment of stone.

It fell.

The sound echoed through the chamber.

Veyran looked upward.

“Who is there?”

Seren closed her eyes.

“Oh, wonderful.”

The Thornbound

The first creature appeared behind them.

It descended from the darkness above the staircase, its body resembling a suit of armor constructed from twisted black branches.

Violet light burned between its ribs.

Its hands ended in long, curved claws.

Seren drew her blade.

“Apparently, the library has security.”

The creature lunged.

She sidestepped its attack and struck across its chest.

Black fragments scattered across the stairs.

The creature twisted toward her.

Its damaged branches began growing together.

“That's inconvenient.”

A second creature emerged below them.

Then a third.

Mira raised her shield.

“Back to back!”

Kaelen drew his knife.

Tovin raised his staff, illuminating the narrow staircase with golden light.

The creatures recoiled.

Lyra stared at their bodies.

“They're connected to the crystals below!”

Tovin nodded.

“Then destroying them here won't accomplish much.”

Seren blocked another strike.

“Any alternative suggestions?”

“Run?”

“Excellent suggestion!”

Mira drove her shield into the nearest creature, forcing it against the wall.

Kaelen slipped past it and pulled Lyra toward the upper staircase.

Tovin followed.

Seren remained behind, cutting through the branches that reached toward them.

The creatures moved with unnatural speed.

Their claws scraped against the stone.

More emerged from openings in the walls.

The entire staircase seemed to be awakening.

Kaelen looked upward.

The library entrance was still several levels away.

“We won't outrun them!”

Flicker darted between his feet.

The creature stopped beside one of the ancient carvings.

His tail flared.

Golden light spread across the stone.

The nearest Thornbound froze.

Tovin stared.

“The original wards!”

He pressed his staff against the carving.

The golden light intensified.

A series of symbols appeared along the staircase.

One after another, they illuminated the darkness.

The Thornbound shrieked.

Their black branches began to smoke.

Lyra approached the carving.

“These passages were protected against corruption.”

“And Veyran disabled the protections,” Tovin answered.

“Can you restore them?”

“Apparently, Flicker can.”

The creature chirped.

Seren looked down at him.

“Remind me to increase your share of supper.”

Flicker raced upward, touching each ancient symbol with his glowing tail.

Tovin followed, channeling magic into the awakened markings.

The Thornbound retreated.

One creature attempted to cross a golden line.

Its body shattered into black fragments.

Mira lowered her shield.

“Keep going!”

They reached the library entrance just as the final ward illuminated the staircase.

Kaelen turned the silver key.

The wall closed behind them.

For several seconds, they stood among the shelves, listening.

Nothing followed.

Seren leaned against a bookcase.

“Well.”

Tovin breathed heavily.

“Well?”

“I think we've gathered sufficient evidence.”

Kaelen almost laughed.

Then he remembered the dragon.

And the queen.

And Vaelrith's warning.

“We need to find Bram.”

The Queen's Secret

Bram was not in Kaelen's room.

The corridor guards were gone.

A broken chair lay beside the doorway, and one of the decorative wall hangings had been torn down.

Mira drew her weapon.

“Bram?”

A voice emerged from the adjoining room.

“About time!”

Bram appeared, carrying his hammer.

His left sleeve was torn.

Behind him stood Elara.

And Queen Isolde.

Kaelen stared.

“Your Majesty?”

The queen wore a simple gray cloak over her royal gown.

The crown remained upon her head.

Elara hurried toward them.

“The chancellor ordered her confined to her chambers. I overheard the guards discussing your arrest.”

Bram rested his hammer against the wall.

“Three soldiers arrived to escort me somewhere.”

Seren looked at the broken chair.

“I take it you declined.”

“Politely.”

She pointed toward the damaged wall hanging.

“Very politely?”

“Initially.”

Isolde stepped forward.

“Please. Tell me what you discovered.”

Kaelen described the underground chamber.

Veyran.

The crystals.

Vaelrith.

The imprisoned dragon.

As he spoke, the queen's face grew increasingly pale.

When he finished, she sat heavily upon the edge of the bed.

“I knew.”

Nobody answered.

She looked at her hands.

“Somewhere inside myself, I knew.”

The crown pulsed.

Isolde winced.

Lyra knelt beside her.

“Your Majesty, don't fight it alone.”

The queen looked at her.

“Every time I questioned him, the pain became unbearable. Sometimes I would wake in my chambers with no memory of the decisions I had made.”

She began to cry.

“I signed orders that destroyed people's lives.”

Mira sat beside her.

“You were being controlled.”

“But my name was upon them.”

“Yes.”

The Guardian did not attempt to dismiss the truth.

Isolde looked toward the window.

“My people trusted me.”

Her voice broke.

“And I betrayed them.”

Kaelen approached.

“Then help us give them back their queen.”

She looked at him.

“Can you?”

Tovin examined the crown from a careful distance.

“Perhaps. But first we need to understand its connection to you.”

Isolde nodded.

“Do whatever you must.”

Tovin raised the truthglass.

Through its surface, the silver crown transformed.

Black tendrils extended from its branches into the queen's head. Violet threads traveled down her neck and disappeared beneath her clothing.

The corruption had spread throughout her body.

Tovin lowered the glass.

“This is worse than I thought.”

“Can it be removed?” Mira asked.

“Not safely while the connection remains active.”

Lyra looked toward Flicker.

“His light weakened it earlier.”

Tovin nodded.

“And the Waystone caused it to react.”

Kaelen retrieved the stone.

Its blue light filled the room.

The queen cried out.

He immediately covered it.

Tovin paced.

“The crown draws power from somewhere outside itself. If we interrupt that source, we might be able to remove it without harming her.”

“The underground chamber?” Seren asked.

“Possibly. But I suspect those crystals are only part of a larger network.”

Isolde raised her head.

“Thalassa.”

The companions turned.

“The crown was created from the ancient bond between my family and the guardian dragon.”

She touched the silver branches.

“Veyran told me it would strengthen that bond.”

Lyra understood.

“He reversed it.”

Tovin nodded slowly.

“Instead of allowing the queen and the dragon to protect the kingdom together, he's using their connection to control them both.”

Isolde closed her eyes.

“Every time Thalassa cries out, I feel it.”

A tear fell upon her hand.

“I thought the pain was my punishment for failing the kingdom.”

Lyra reached for her fingers.

“It was never a punishment.”

The queen looked at her.

“It was her calling for help.”

The Garden of the First Queen

Elara led them through a concealed passage connecting the royal chambers to an ancient garden beneath the palace.

The garden had been abandoned for years.

Wildflowers grew between cracked stones. Vines climbed the surrounding walls. A shallow pool reflected the moon through an opening in the mountain above.

At its center stood a statue of Queen Althea.

Isolde approached it.

“My grandmother brought me here when I was a child.”

She touched the statue's hand.

“She told me that the first queen did not conquer this kingdom. She found it.”

Tovin listened carefully.

“Found it?”

“The people who lived here were scattered among the mountains. Their settlements were constantly threatened by storms, collapsing roads and creatures from the northern wilderness.”

Isolde looked toward the dragon carved beside Althea.

“Thalassa's ancestors protected them. But humans feared the dragons and refused to approach their sanctuaries.”

“What changed?” Kaelen asked.

“Althea.”

The queen smiled faintly.

“She climbed the mountain alone. Without weapons. Without soldiers.”

Bram raised an eyebrow.

“Brave woman.”

“Or remarkably foolish.”

“Frequently the same thing.”

Isolde laughed.

The crown flickered.

She winced, but continued.

“Althea offered the dragons a covenant. Not obedience. Not ownership. Friendship.”

Lyra remembered the Tidewarden's words.

A road existed for the traveler.

A guardian existed to protect, not to possess.

The same lesson seemed to echo throughout Aetherfall.

Isolde knelt beside the pool.

“My family forgot that promise.”

She looked at her reflection.

“I forgot it.”

Flicker approached.

He placed one paw upon her knee.

The queen smiled.

“Hello again, little one.”

His tail illuminated the water.

Something beneath the pool began to glow.

Tovin hurried forward.

“Wait.”

He brushed leaves away from the surrounding stones.

Ancient symbols formed a circle around the water.

“This isn't simply a garden.”

Lyra knelt beside him.

“It's a sanctuary.”

The Spellweaver examined the markings.

“An original royal sanctuary. Untouched by Veyran's modifications.”

Kaelen looked toward Isolde.

“Can it help her?”

Tovin considered the question.

“Perhaps it can weaken the crown enough for us to reach the original bond.”

Lyra placed her hands against the water.

A vision emerged.

A young Queen Isolde standing beneath an enormous blue dragon.

The dragon lowered its head.

The child laughed and touched its scales.

You need not fear me, little queen.

The memory changed.

Isolde was older.

She stood before the same dragon, wearing the silver crown for the first time.

Thalassa recoiled.

Remove it.

Veyran stood behind her.

The guardian resists your authority, Your Majesty.

The queen raised her hand.

Soldiers emerged from the surrounding rocks.

Chains of violet light wrapped around the dragon.

Thalassa roared.

Isolde screamed.

The vision shattered.

Lyra opened her eyes.

“She remembers you.”

Isolde stared at her.

“Thalassa?”

“Yes.”

“Does she hate me?”

Lyra shook her head.

“No.”

The queen began to weep.

“After everything I did?”

“She knows you were deceived.”

Isolde covered her face.

For a long time, the companions remained beside her.

Nobody hurried her.

Nobody demanded that she immediately become the strong queen her kingdom needed.

They allowed her to grieve.

And when she finally lowered her hands, something had changed.

The exhaustion remained.

The fear remained.

But beneath both, Kaelen recognized determination.

“Tell me how to save her,” Isolde said.

The Breaking of the Crown

Tovin arranged the Waystone beside the sanctuary pool.

Lyra positioned herself behind the queen.

Mira and Bram stood near the entrance while Seren climbed onto a broken wall overlooking the garden.

Elara knelt beside Isolde.

Flicker sat upon the queen's lap.

“Whatever happens,” Tovin explained, “you must resist the crown's influence.”

Isolde nodded.

“What will it do?”

“I suspect it will attempt to convince you that removing it will destroy everything you love.”

The queen looked toward the palace.

“Then it knows me well.”

Kaelen approached.

“You don't have to believe what it tells you.”

Isolde smiled sadly.

“I shall try.”

Tovin placed his staff against the sanctuary markings.

Golden light spread around the pool.

The Waystone brightened.

The crown reacted immediately.

Its silver branches darkened.

Isolde gasped.

Lyra placed both hands upon her shoulders.

“Remember who you are.”

The queen closed her eyes.

“My name is Isolde.”

The crown tightened.

“I am the daughter of King Edric and Queen Marienne.”

Violet light flashed.

“I am the guardian of the eastern kingdom.”

A voice emerged from the crown.

“You are its ruler.”

Isolde trembled.

“I am its servant.”

The voice grew louder.

“WITHOUT ME, YOUR KINGDOM WILL FALL.”

Images appeared above the pool.

The city burning.

Children fleeing through shattered streets.

Mountains collapsing.

The harbor disappearing beneath enormous waves.

Isolde cried out.

Kaelen moved closer.

“Those are possibilities, not promises.”

The queen stared at the visions.

“My people…”

Mira knelt beside her.

“Your people need you. Not that thing.”

The crown's branches twisted.

“OBEDIENCE PRESERVES LIFE.”

Isolde gripped Elara's hand.

“No.”

Tovin increased the flow of magic.

Golden light surrounded the queen.

The crown screamed.

Flicker hissed, his tail blazing brighter than Kaelen had ever seen it.

Lyra reached into the connection.

She felt Thalassa's suffering.

The dragon was alive.

Bound.

Exhausted.

But alive.

“Thalassa!” Lyra called.

A distant roar answered.

The mountain trembled.

The crown loosened.

Tovin shouted.

“Now!”

Isolde raised both hands.

Her fingers closed around the silver branches.

The crown fought her.

Its thorns extended downward, wrapping around her wrists.

Kaelen grasped the Waystone.

Mira seized one side of the crown.

Lyra held the queen steady.

Flicker pressed his glowing forehead against the silver metal.

Isolde screamed.

Then the crown broke.

A fragment struck the stone floor.

Another fell into the pool.

Black tendrils emerged from the shattered branches, twisting through the air before dissolving into smoke.

The queen collapsed.

Elara caught her.

“Your Majesty!”

Tovin dropped to his knees.

“Isolde?”

For several terrible seconds, she did not move.

Then she drew a breath.

Her eyes opened.

They were clear.

The violet shadows had disappeared.

She looked toward Elara.

“It's quiet.”

The servant began to cry.

Isolde touched her forehead.

For the first time in nearly a year, there was nothing there.

No crown.

No thorns.

No voice telling her what to fear.

She laughed.

Then she wept.

Elara embraced her.

The companions stood around them, exhausted but relieved.

Bram looked toward the shattered fragments.

“Not particularly attractive jewelry, was it?”

Seren smiled.

“Never suited her.”

Tovin carefully collected the pieces.

“We should destroy these completely.”

Flicker approached the largest fragment.

He sniffed it.

Then he sneezed.

The fragment dissolved into ash.

Tovin stared.

“Or apparently that works.”

The Chancellor's Answer

The alarm bells began before dawn.

Their sound echoed across the city, awakening soldiers and citizens alike.

From the garden entrance, Seren watched torches appear along the palace bridges.

“We have company.”

Isolde rose.

Elara attempted to support her.

The queen gently shook her head.

“I can stand.”

She approached the companions.

“Thank you.”

Kaelen bowed.

“We haven't finished.”

“No.”

She looked toward the mountain.

“Thalassa is still imprisoned.”

A voice echoed from the entrance.

“Indeed she is.”

Chancellor Veyran stepped into the garden.

Behind him stood twelve soldiers.

Several Thornbound emerged from the surrounding darkness.

The chancellor's expression changed when he saw the queen's bare forehead.

For the first time, he made no attempt to smile.

“What have you done?”

Isolde stepped forward.

“Removed your crown.”

“Your Majesty, you do not understand the consequences.”

“I understand them perfectly.”

Veyran looked toward Kaelen.

“You have endangered this entire kingdom.”

Mira raised her shield.

“You seem to have managed that without our assistance.”

The chancellor ignored her.

He addressed the queen.

“Your father entrusted this kingdom to my care.”

“My father entrusted you to advise me.”

“I protected you!”

“You imprisoned me.”

Veyran's expression twisted.

“I did what was necessary.”

Isolde looked toward the soldiers.

“Captain, arrest the chancellor.”

The captain hesitated.

Veyran raised one hand.

Violet light appeared beneath the captain's armor.

The man cried out and fell to his knees.

Several soldiers staggered.

Tovin stared.

“They're bound too.”

Veyran lowered his hand.

“Authority requires obedience.”

Isolde looked at him with horror.

“How many?”

The chancellor smiled bitterly.

“As many as necessary.”

Kaelen drew his knife.

“Vaelrith promised you power.”

Veyran turned.

“You know nothing of him.”

“We heard your conversation.”

The chancellor became still.

Seren stepped down from the wall.

“He didn't sound particularly impressed with you.”

For a moment, Veyran's face revealed naked anger.

Then he laughed.

“You believe yourselves heroes because you have reopened a few roads and rescued a handful of prisoners.”

He spread his arms.

“Do you understand what is coming? The kingdoms are dying. The roads are failing. The ancient protections cannot be restored.”

Tovin shook his head.

“We've already restored several.”

“Temporary victories!”

Veyran's voice echoed through the garden.

“Vaelrith offers permanence. A single authority. A single order. No more divided kingdoms. No more uncertainty.”

Kaelen remembered Maelor.

Another man who had allowed fear to become the foundation of his decisions.

But unlike Maelor, Veyran did not appear to regret what he had done.

“You think he'll share that authority with you?” Kaelen asked.

Veyran's eyes narrowed.

“You think he considers you anything more than a servant?”

“Silence.”

“You heard him yourself. He doesn't care whether Thalassa lives or dies. Why would he care about you?”

Veyran raised both hands.

The Thornbound advanced.

“Kill them.”

The captain struggled to his feet.

His sword trembled.

Isolde looked directly at him.

“Captain Renn.”

He stopped.

“Do you remember the winter your daughter was born?”

The captain's expression changed.

“Your Majesty…”

“You requested leave during the northern campaign. My father refused.”

The violet light intensified beneath his armor.

“I persuaded him otherwise.”

The captain lowered his sword slightly.

“Her name is Liora, isn't it?”

Tears filled his eyes.

“Yes.”

Isolde stepped closer.

“You are not this man's weapon.”

Veyran shouted.

“OBEY!”

The captain screamed.

Mira rushed forward and caught him.

Flicker leaped onto his chest.

Golden light spread beneath the armor.

The violet markings shattered.

Captain Renn collapsed against Mira.

Then he looked toward the chancellor.

His expression hardened.

“Soldiers!”

Several guards turned.

“Protect the queen!”

Veyran staggered backward.

The Thornbound attacked.

The garden erupted into battle.

Bram met the first creature with a tremendous swing of his hammer, driving it into the fountain.

Seren intercepted another before it reached Elara.

Tovin restored the sanctuary wards, sending golden light across the surrounding walls.

The Thornbound recoiled.

Captain Renn and his soldiers formed a defensive line around Isolde.

Kaelen pursued Veyran toward the garden entrance.

The chancellor raised his hand.

A burst of violet energy struck Kaelen and threw him against a stone pillar.

Pain traveled through his shoulder.

His knife fell.

Veyran approached.

“You should have remained on your little island.”

Kaelen struggled to stand.

“Probably.”

The chancellor raised his hand again.

“Your journey ends here.”

A shield struck him from the side.

Veyran stumbled.

Mira positioned herself between him and Kaelen.

“You'll have to do better than that.”

The chancellor snarled.

He released another burst of energy.

Mira braced herself.

The impact drove her backward, but her shield held.

Kaelen retrieved the Waystone.

Blue light spread across the garden.

Veyran recoiled.

“No!”

The stone revealed the violet threads connecting him to the mountain.

They stretched downward through the earth.

Toward Thalassa.

Toward the underground sanctuary.

Toward something deeper.

Kaelen raised the stone higher.

The threads began to fracture.

Veyran screamed.

For an instant, his appearance changed.

The elegant robes dissolved into shadow.

His face became pale and hollow.

Black markings covered his neck.

Then the illusion returned.

He looked toward the garden entrance.

“You have no idea what you've unleashed.”

Seren moved to intercept him.

But Veyran threw a crystal against the ground.

Violet smoke exploded outward.

When it cleared, the chancellor was gone.

Only a blackened mark remained upon the stones.

Bram lowered his hammer.

“I dislike enemies who refuse to remain available for hitting.”

Tovin examined the mark.

“He's traveling through the corrupted network.”

Kaelen looked toward the mountain.

“Then we know where he's going.”

Isolde approached Captain Renn.

The captain immediately knelt.

“Forgive me, Your Majesty.”

She helped him stand.

“We will discuss forgiveness when our people are safe.”

He nodded.

“What are your orders?”

The queen looked toward the palace bridges.

“Open the gates. Release those imprisoned without trial. Remove the chancellor's banners from every tower.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“And send word to the harbor. Captain Rhydan and his crew are to be treated as honored guests.”

Captain Renn bowed.

Then he hurried away with his soldiers.

Isolde watched them leave.

The first light of dawn appeared above the mountains.

For the first time in months, she was issuing her own commands.

But she knew the hardest decision still lay ahead.

The Road Beneath the Mountain

The city awakened to extraordinary news.

The queen had been freed.

The chancellor had fled.

Prison doors were opening.

Soldiers removed the chains from the dragon statue in the marketplace.

Families gathered in the streets, uncertain whether they were witnessing the beginning of freedom or another carefully constructed deception.

Queen Isolde appeared upon the palace balcony.

She wore no crown.

Only a simple blue gown and a silver pendant bearing the image of a dragon.

The crowd fell silent.

“My people,” she began.

Her voice carried across the courtyard.

“For too long, decisions made in my name have brought suffering to this kingdom.”

She paused.

“I was deceived. I was controlled. But those truths do not erase what you have endured.”

Kaelen watched from the balcony entrance.

Isolde did not hide behind her royal title.

She did not promise that everything would immediately return to normal.

She spoke of the missing.

The imprisoned.

The hungry.

The families separated by the closed harbor.

She promised that those responsible would be held accountable, including herself wherever her own decisions had contributed to their suffering.

Then she looked toward the mountain.

“Our guardian, Thalassa, remains imprisoned beneath the earth.”

Murmurs spread through the crowd.

“She was never our enemy. She was betrayed by the very kingdom she swore to protect.”

The queen placed one hand against her heart.

“I intend to bring her home.”

For several moments, silence followed.

Then a woman near the front of the crowd raised her hand.

“Long live the queen!”

Another voice joined her.

Then another.

The courtyard filled with cheers.

Isolde lowered her head.

Tears glistened upon her cheeks.

She had once believed that wearing a crown made her a queen.

Now she understood that the crown had never been the source of her authority.

The trust of her people was.

And trust, once broken, could not simply be commanded back into existence.

It had to be earned.

The companions gathered in the royal library later that morning.

Isolde spread an ancient map across a wooden table.

It depicted the mountain beneath the palace, revealing a network of tunnels, sanctuaries and underground chambers.

“The dragon's hollow lies here.”

She pointed toward a vast cavern deep within the mountain.

“Originally, this passage connected the royal sanctuary to Thalassa's resting place.”

Tovin examined the markings.

“Originally?”

“The chancellor sealed it.”

Seren pointed toward another route.

“What about this one?”

Isolde shook her head.

“The Traitor's Gate.”

Bram sighed.

“Why can't anyone name a passage something encouraging?”

“The name dates back several centuries,” Isolde explained. “A member of the royal family attempted to overthrow Queen Althea's descendants. He used that passage to bring soldiers into the palace.”

“Sounds delightful.”

“The gate was sealed afterward. Only a handful of people know how to open it.”

Kaelen studied the map.

“Veyran?”

Isolde nodded.

“He has access to every royal passage.”

Lyra looked toward the mountain.

“He'll be waiting.”

“Almost certainly,” Tovin answered.

Isolde folded the map.

“Then I am coming with you.”

Mira looked surprised.

“Your Majesty, you've barely recovered.”

“Thalassa has endured far worse.”

“The mountain could be dangerous.”

“I know.”

Isolde looked at each companion.

“I gave the order that imprisoned her. Whether I was controlled or not, she deserves to see me standing before her when those chains are broken.”

Kaelen recognized the determination in her voice.

He nodded.

“Then we go together.”

Elara approached carrying a bundle of supplies.

“Food, blankets and medical provisions.”

Bram accepted the bundle.

“Now there's somebody who understands adventuring.”

Flicker emerged from beneath the table and climbed onto Isolde's shoulder.

The queen laughed.

“Am I permitted to borrow him?”

Bram folded his arms.

“Apparently, I no longer have any say in the matter.”

The companions gathered their equipment.

Outside, the palace bells began ringing.

Not in warning.

Not in mourning.

In celebration.

Yet beneath those joyful sounds, Lyra heard something else.

A distant heartbeat.

Slow.

Weak.

Fading.

She turned toward Kaelen.

“We need to hurry.”

He saw the fear in her eyes.

“Thalassa?”

Lyra nodded.

“She's running out of time.”

Deep beneath the palace, Chancellor Veyran stood before an enormous iron gate.

Violet fire burned within the ancient symbols surrounding it.

His hands trembled.

Blood ran from a wound above his eyebrow.

The elegant robes he had worn throughout the kingdom were torn and stained with dust.

He looked nothing like the powerful adviser who had welcomed the companions into the harbor.

He looked like a desperate man.

“Open,” he commanded.

The gate remained motionless.

He pressed his hand against its center.

“OPEN!”

The violet symbols brightened.

A voice emerged from the darkness.

“You have failed.”

Veyran fell to his knees.

“My lord, the queen was freed through unexpected interference.”

“Excuses.”

“The travelers possess ancient magic. The creature accompanying them can disrupt the corruption.”

The darkness gathered.

Vaelrith appeared before him.

“And yet you allowed them to leave.”

Veyran bowed his head.

“I can still recover the shard.”

“Can you?”

“Yes.”

The shadow moved closer.

“Then prove your usefulness.”

The iron gate began to open.

Beyond it stretched a tunnel illuminated by violet flames.

A distant roar echoed through the mountain.

Veyran rose.

“The dragon will surrender.”

Vaelrith's eyes burned.

“See that she does.”

The shadow disappeared.

Veyran stared into the tunnel.

He had spent years convincing himself that power would protect him from uncertainty.

That obedience would guarantee safety.

That Vaelrith would reward his loyalty.

Now, standing alone before the darkness, he began to understand that he had made himself a prisoner of the very thing he had believed would set him free.

But instead of turning back, he stepped through the gate.

Somewhere above him, the companions were preparing to enter the mountain.

And somewhere below, the last guardian dragon of the eastern kingdom struggled against chains that had already begun to drain the life from her heart.

The crown had been broken.

The queen had been freed.

But the battle for the kingdom was far from over.

CHAPTER 18

The Traitor's Gate

The mountain had a heartbeat.

Kaelen first noticed it as the companions descended beneath the royal palace. It was a deep, almost imperceptible vibration that traveled through the stone beneath his boots.

Every few moments, it returned.

Each time, it seemed weaker.

Lyra stopped upon the staircase and pressed her palm against the wall.

“She's still alive.”

Queen Isolde closed her eyes.

“Thalassa.”

The name escaped her lips like a prayer.

Tovin raised his lantern, illuminating the passage ahead. Ancient pillars supported the ceiling, their surfaces decorated with carvings of dragons, kings, queens and travelers carrying lanterns.

Unlike the magnificent halls above, these chambers had been constructed without concern for wealth or appearances. Every carving seemed to possess a purpose. Every inscription carried a warning or a promise.

Bram examined a stone dragon whose enormous mouth formed the entrance to an adjoining corridor.

“I'm beginning to think the people who built this place were rather fond of dragons.”

Isolde smiled faintly.

“They considered them family.”

“Large family.”

“Very large.”

Flicker climbed onto Bram's shoulder and stared into the carved dragon's mouth.

A faint golden light appeared within its stone eyes.

Tovin immediately moved closer.

“Interesting.”

Seren caught the back of his cloak.

“No.”

“But—”

“We are rescuing a dragon, not conducting an archaeological expedition.”

“Those activities need not be mutually exclusive.”

“They are today.”

Tovin reluctantly continued walking.

Kaelen smiled, but his attention remained fixed upon the passage ahead.

The Waystone had grown warmer with every step.

Something beneath the mountain recognized their approach.

He could only hope it was Thalassa.

The Hall of Forgotten Names

The staircase ended at a pair of enormous bronze doors.

Neither possessed a handle.

Instead, seven circular depressions surrounded an inscription carved into the metal.

Tovin brushed away centuries of dust.

“*Let those who enter remember those who came before.*”

Seren examined the depressions.

“Seven locks?”

“Perhaps.”

Queen Isolde stepped forward.

“I remember this place.”

She touched the bronze surface.

“My grandmother brought me here once. I was very young.”

“What happened?” Lyra asked.

“She told me that beneath the palace rested the names of everyone who had given their lives protecting the kingdom.”

Isolde looked at the inscription.

“I thought she meant soldiers.”

The queen placed her hand within the central depression.

A golden light spread across the doors.

The remaining depressions illuminated one by one.

With a deep rumble, the doors opened.

Beyond them stretched a chamber so vast that Tovin's lantern could not illuminate its farthest walls.

Thousands of small stone tablets occupied carefully arranged alcoves. Some bore elaborate inscriptions. Others contained only a single name.

Isolde entered slowly.

“Farmers,” she whispered.

She stopped beside one tablet.

“Merchants. Builders. Healers.”

Mira approached another.

“Children.”

The queen lowered her head.

“I never understood.”

Kaelen walked between the rows.

Each tablet represented someone who had lived, loved and eventually disappeared from the world. Some had probably accomplished extraordinary things. Others might have been remembered only by their families.

Yet here, beneath the palace, their names rested together.

No distinction separated the wealthy from the poor.

No elaborate monuments honored kings above ordinary citizens.

Bram stopped beside a tablet decorated with a hammer.

“Blacksmith.”

He brushed dust from its surface.

“Probably a good fellow.”

Seren smiled.

“You've never met him.”

“Anyone who spends his life making useful things deserves the benefit of the doubt.”

Tovin discovered a larger inscription at the center of the chamber.

He read it aloud.

“*A kingdom is not remembered by the height of its towers, nor by the wealth of its rulers, but by the lives it shelters.*”

Isolde stood motionless.

For nearly a year, she had issued commands that separated families, imprisoned innocent people and closed the roads connecting her kingdom to the outside world.

Now she stood surrounded by the names of those her ancestors had considered worthy of remembrance.

“I wish I could speak to them,” she whispered.

Mira joined her.

“What would you say?”

The queen considered the question.

“That I'm sorry.”

Mira looked across the chamber.

“Then make sure the people still living hear it.”

Isolde nodded.

She remained beside the tablets for another moment before continuing.

At the far end of the hall, a single alcove stood apart from the others.

Its tablet had been broken.

Deep scratches covered the surrounding stone, as though someone had attempted to erase the inscription with a blade.

Tovin knelt beside it.

“Someone went to considerable trouble to destroy this name.”

Isolde approached.

Her expression changed.

“Prince Caedric.”

Seren looked at her.

“The traitor?”

“Yes.”

Kaelen examined the damaged tablet.

“Why was he buried among the people who protected the kingdom?”

Isolde opened her mouth.

Then closed it.

“I don't know.”

Flicker sniffed the broken stone.

His tail began to glow.

Golden light spread through the damaged inscription, revealing words hidden beneath the scratches.

Tovin leaned forward.

“There's more.”

He read slowly.

“*Caedric, son of Althea. Condemned by the Crown. Remembered by the Road.*”

Isolde stared at the inscription.

“That cannot be right.”

“Why?” Kaelen asked.

“Because Caedric betrayed his mother. Every history of our kingdom says so.”

Lyra looked toward the tablet.

“Perhaps every history was written by the same people.”

A cold wind moved through the chamber.

The broken tablet trembled.

Then the mountain whispered.

Remember me.

The Prince Who Refused

Lyra reached toward the damaged inscription.

The moment her fingers touched the stone, the chamber disappeared.

She stood beneath an unfamiliar sky.

Before her rose the royal palace, although its towers were fewer and its walls considerably newer. Workers carried stone across unfinished bridges. Bright banners fluttered in the wind.

A young man stood upon a terrace overlooking the city.

His dark hair moved in the breeze, and a silver pendant hung around his neck.

Behind him approached a woman wearing a simple crown.

Lyra recognized her immediately.

Queen Althea.

“You cannot continue opposing the council,” the queen said.

The young man turned.

“Then the council must reconsider its decision.”

“They believe the kingdom is in danger.”

“So do I.”

“Caedric—”

“Mother, they intend to bind the dragons.”

Althea stopped.

The young prince continued.

“They have discovered that dragonfire can strengthen the roads. They want to harness it permanently.”

“The council believes the guardians would cooperate.”

“Then why are they constructing chains?”

The queen said nothing.

Caedric approached her.

“You promised them friendship.”

“I remember my promise.”

“Then defend it.”

The vision changed.

Lyra found herself standing within a dark chamber.

Caedric spoke urgently with several soldiers.

“The council will attempt to seize the lower sanctuary tomorrow. We must reach the dragons before they do.”

One soldier hesitated.

“Your Highness, entering through the eastern passage without royal permission is treason.”

“Then let history call me a traitor.”

The prince looked toward the mountain.

“I would rather betray an unjust command than abandon a friend.”

The vision changed again.

Caedric stood before an enormous iron gate.

Soldiers surrounded him.

Beyond the gate, dragons roared.

An older man wearing ceremonial armor approached.

“Prince Caedric, you stand accused of conspiring against the Crown.”

Caedric lowered his weapon.

“I stand accused of keeping its promises.”

The soldiers seized him.

As they dragged him away, Lyra heard the dragons crying beneath the mountain.

Then everything vanished.

She opened her eyes.

Kaelen was kneeling beside her.

“Lyra?”

She took a trembling breath.

“The history is wrong.”

Isolde moved closer.

“What did you see?”

Lyra described the vision.

The council's plan.

The proposed imprisonment of the dragons.

Caedric's attempt to prevent it.

When she finished, Isolde looked toward the broken tablet.

For several moments, she could not speak.

“My grandmother told me he tried to destroy the kingdom.”

“Perhaps he tried to save it,” Mira answered.

Isolde touched the tablet.

“Then we've dishonored him for centuries.”

Tovin examined the restored inscription.

“Someone remembered the truth.”

“Who?”

“Possibly the original Waykeepers.”

The Spellweaver pointed toward a small symbol beneath Caedric's name.

It resembled the markings upon the Waystone.

Kaelen withdrew the artifact.

The two symbols illuminated simultaneously.

A narrow opening appeared in the wall behind the tablet.

Beyond it lay a staircase descending into darkness.

Seren drew her blade.

“I suppose we're going that way.”

Bram sighed.

“Of course we are.”

Isolde remained beside the tablet.

“Forgive us, Caedric.”

The golden inscription brightened.

Then the queen followed the companions into the passage.

The Keeper of the Threshold

The air grew colder as they descended.

Frost covered the walls despite the warmth radiating from the mountain's deeper chambers.

Their footsteps echoed through a passage lined with ancient weapons. Rusted swords, broken spears and damaged shields rested within stone alcoves.

At the bottom stood an enormous archway.

Beyond it, a bridge crossed a cavern filled with darkness.

A solitary figure waited at its center.

He wore ancient silver armor beneath a weathered cloak. His face was concealed behind a helmet decorated with the image of a dragon.

A sword rested point downward before him.

As the companions approached, he raised his head.

“Who seeks passage?”

His voice echoed unnaturally through the cavern.

Kaelen stopped.

“We seek Thalassa.”

“By whose authority?”

Queen Isolde stepped forward.

“Mine. I am Isolde, sovereign of the eastern kingdom.”

The armored figure remained motionless.

“Authority denied.”

Isolde stared.

“I am the queen.”

“Authority denied.”

Bram leaned toward Seren.

“Apparently, he hasn't received the news.”

The figure lifted his sword.

“None shall pass beneath the authority of the Crown.”

Tovin studied the inscriptions surrounding the archway.

“This guardian predates the current royal protections.”

Isolde looked toward him.

“Then how do we pass?”

Lyra approached the bridge.

“Perhaps we're asking the wrong question.”

The armored figure turned toward her.

“State your purpose.”

“To free a prisoner.”

“By whose authority?”

Lyra hesitated.

Then she answered.

“Her own.”

The guardian lowered his sword slightly.

“Explain.”

“Thalassa belongs to no kingdom. No ruler possesses the right to imprison her.”

The figure remained silent.

Lyra continued.

“We are not here because the queen commands it. We are here because someone is suffering.”

Golden light appeared beneath the guardian's armor.

“Purpose acknowledged.”

He stepped aside.

But as the companions moved toward the bridge, violet light suddenly flashed across the cavern.

The guardian froze.

Black tendrils emerged from the stone beneath his feet.

His sword rose.

“Purpose… rejected.”

Tovin raised his staff.

“The corruption!”

The guardian turned toward them.

His golden eyes became violet.

“TRESPASSERS.”

He charged.

Mira barely raised her shield before his sword struck.

The impact sent her stumbling backward.

Bram moved beside her.

“Somebody explain to him that we've already passed the interview!”

The guardian swung again.

Bram intercepted the blow with his hammer.

Sparks scattered across the bridge.

Seren darted around the armored figure, striking at the black tendrils connecting him to the stone.

Her blade passed through them.

“Same problem as the council chamber!”

Kaelen raised the truthglass.

The corruption extended from the guardian's armor toward three crystals embedded in the cavern walls.

“There!”

He pointed toward the nearest crystal.

“Tovin!”

The Spellweaver released a burst of golden energy.

The crystal shattered.

The guardian staggered.

For a moment, his eyes returned to their original color.

“Run,” he whispered.

Then the violet light returned.

He struck again.

Mira braced herself.

“Seren, the second crystal!”

The Windrunner looked toward the cavern wall.

The crystal rested upon a narrow ledge several feet beyond the bridge.

Below it lay an apparently endless drop.

“Why are they never somewhere convenient?”

She climbed onto the bridge railing.

Kaelen reached toward her.

“Seren!”

“I'm aware!”

She leaped.

Her fingers caught the ledge.

For a moment, her legs swung above the darkness.

Then she pulled herself upward and drove her blade into the crystal.

Violet light exploded across the cavern.

The guardian fell to one knee.

Bram raised his hammer.

“Now?”

“No!” Lyra shouted.

Bram stopped.

“He's fighting it!”

The guardian gripped his sword with both hands.

His armor trembled.

“Cannot… disobey…”

Lyra approached.

“You were created to protect the passage.”

The guardian raised his head.

“Protect.”

“Not to serve whoever controls it.”

His sword lowered.

“Protect.”

The final crystal pulsed.

Black tendrils wrapped around his arms.

Kaelen searched the cavern.

The crystal rested high above the archway, beyond the reach of Tovin's magic.

He instinctively reached for his bow.

Then remembered watching it fall into the ravine beside the Tidewarden's reservoir.

“Wonderful.”

Flicker chirped.

The creature scrambled onto Bram's shoulder, jumped toward a broken pillar and began climbing the stonework.

Bram looked upward.

“Where are you going?”

Flicker continued climbing.

His tiny claws found cracks that none of the companions could have reached.

Golden light illuminated the wall behind him.

The guardian struggled to stand.

Mira moved between him and Lyra.

“Hold on, little fellow.”

Flicker reached the archway.

The crystal reacted to his presence.

Violet sparks struck the surrounding stone.

He flattened himself against the wall.

Then, with a determined chirp, he sprang forward.

His paws struck the crystal.

Golden light erupted.

The crystal shattered.

The guardian collapsed.

Flicker fell.

Kaelen rushed forward.

He caught the little creature against his chest just before reaching the bridge.

For several seconds, he held him tightly.

“Don't ever do that again.”

Flicker looked up.

His tail flickered.

Kaelen sighed.

“I know. You will.”

Behind them, the armored guardian slowly rose.

His eyes burned gold.

He placed his sword upon the bridge.

Then he knelt before Lyra.

“Purpose acknowledged.”

Lyra smiled.

“Thank you.”

The guardian turned toward the far end of the cavern.

“Beware the gate beyond. Its locks have been altered. Its guardians have been deceived.”

Isolde approached him.

“Who created you?”

“Caedric.”

The queen stopped.

“The prince?”

“He entrusted me with the protection of those who could not protect themselves.”

Isolde bowed her head.

“Then your service honors him.”

The guardian remained kneeling.

For the first time in centuries, a member of the royal family had acknowledged the man whose name the kingdom had attempted to erase.

A Fracture Among Friends

Beyond the bridge, the companions found a small chamber containing an ancient well.

Tovin examined its water and declared it safe.

Bram distributed food while Mira inspected the damage to her shield.

Seren sat against the wall, rubbing her bruised hands.

Kaelen remained near the entrance.

He watched Flicker sleep inside Bram's open pack.

The creature's golden light had faded to a gentle glow.

Lyra approached him.

“You're worried about him.”

Kaelen nodded.

“He keeps putting himself in danger.”

“So do you.”

“That's different.”

“Is it?”

Kaelen looked at her.

“He doesn't understand what could happen.”

Lyra sat beside him.

“Perhaps he understands more than we realize.”

Kaelen watched the little creature.

“I don't want to lose him.”

“I know.”

Across the chamber, Tovin and Queen Isolde studied the ancient map.

Seren sharpened her blade.

Bram quietly repaired a damaged strap upon Mira's shield.

They had become a family without ever deciding to.

And that frightened Kaelen.

Every battle now carried more than the possibility of failure. It carried the possibility that someone might not be standing beside him when it ended.

“I keep wondering,” he said, “whether bringing everyone farther into this world is the right thing.”

Lyra looked at him.

“You didn't bring us.”

“I'm the Pathfinder.”

“That doesn't make you responsible for every choice we make.”

“Someone has to be.”

“No.”

Her answer was gentle but firm.

“Someone has to help us find the road. That's different.”

Kaelen lowered his head.

“What if the road leads somewhere we cannot return from?”

Lyra considered the question.

“Then we deserve to know that possibility. And we deserve to decide whether we will continue.”

Kaelen said nothing.

Lyra placed her hand upon his shoulder.

“You cannot spend your life protecting us from our own decisions. That's what Maelor tried to do.”

The comparison struck him harder than he expected.

He looked toward the others.

Mira noticed.

“Everything all right?”

Kaelen stood.

“Actually, there's something we need to discuss.”

The companions gathered around him.

He looked at each of them.

“We're getting closer to Vaelrith. Every road we restore seems to bring us nearer to whatever he's preparing.”

Tovin nodded.

“The third shard may be essential to his plans.”

“And ours,” Kaelen answered. “But we don't know what recovering it will cost.”

Bram folded his arms.

“Nothing has been particularly inexpensive so far.”

Kaelen smiled faintly.

“I'm serious.”

“So am I.”

The Warden stepped forward.

“You think we haven't noticed the danger?”

Kaelen shook his head.

“I know you have.”

“Then stop trying to carry it by yourself.”

Seren rested her blade across her knees.

“I'm not here because you're holding a glowing rock.”

Tovin raised an eyebrow.

“Although the glowing rock is scientifically fascinating.”

Seren ignored him.

“I'm here because I choose to be.”

Mira nodded.

“We all do.”

Kaelen looked toward Queen Isolde.

She smiled.

“Your companions appear to possess a rather stubborn understanding of loyalty.”

Bram laughed.

“Stubborn is one of our better qualities.”

Kaelen took a deep breath.

“Then we continue together?”

Seren stood.

“Obviously.”

Tovin gathered his notes.

“Provided we occasionally encounter something worth studying.”

Mira retrieved her shield.

“Provided you don't study it while it's trying to kill us.”

Bram lifted his hammer.

“Provided there's food.”

Flicker emerged from the pack and chirped.

Bram looked down.

“And provided certain individuals receive their unreasonable share of it.”

Kaelen laughed.

For the first time since entering the mountain, the weight upon his shoulders seemed lighter.

Not because the road had become safer.

Because he finally remembered that he was not walking it alone.

The Gate of Seven Seals

They reached the Traitor's Gate shortly before the next heartbeat shook the mountain.

It was larger than anything Isolde's map had suggested.

Two enormous iron doors stood within an arch carved directly into the mountain. Seven circular seals occupied their surface, each depicting a different aspect of the ancient covenant.

A lantern.

A road.

An open hand.

A shield.

A flame.

A dragon.

And a star.

Six of the seals burned violet.

The seventh was dark.

Tovin approached carefully.

“Veyran has corrupted the locking mechanism.”

Seren examined the surrounding walls.

“Can we open it?”

“Eventually.”

Lyra placed her hand against the gate.

She recoiled.

“Thalassa is on the other side.”

Isolde hurried forward.

“Can she hear us?”

Lyra closed her eyes.

“I don't know.”

The queen pressed both palms against the iron.

“Thalassa!”

Her voice echoed through the cavern.

“It's Isolde!”

Silence followed.

Then a distant roar traveled through the mountain.

The queen began to cry.

“She heard me.”

Kaelen examined the seals.

“Where do we start?”

Tovin studied the inscriptions beneath them.

“The gate was designed to respond to the original covenant. Each seal represents a promise.”

Bram pointed toward the violet symbols.

“Can we simply repeat the promises?”

“Possibly. But the corruption has altered their meaning.”

The Spellweaver touched the lantern seal.

An image appeared upon its surface.

A traveler stood alone upon a dark road. Behind him waited a group of soldiers.

A voice emerged from the gate.

“WHO SHALL CARRY THE LIGHT?”

Tovin looked at the others.

“The original answer would probably be—”

“Anyone willing to carry it,” Mira said.

The violet light flickered.

Then the lantern seal turned gold.

Tovin blinked.

“Yes. Apparently.”

Seren smiled.

“Sometimes the simple answer is the right one.”

The second seal illuminated.

“WHO SHALL COMMAND THE ROAD?”

Kaelen approached.

“No one.”

The gate trembled.

“WHO SHALL COMMAND THE ROAD?”

Kaelen placed the Waystone against the symbol.

“The road belongs to those who travel it.”

Golden light spread across the second seal.

The third awakened.

“WHAT SHALL BE TAKEN FROM THOSE WHO SEEK PROTECTION?”

Bram frowned.

“Nothing they aren't willing to give.”

The third seal turned gold.

The fourth displayed the image of a shield.

“WHO IS WORTHY OF DEFENSE?”

Mira stepped forward.

“Those who need it.”

“REGARDLESS OF THEIR LOYALTY?”

“Yes.”

“REGARDLESS OF THEIR STRENGTH?”

“Yes.”

“REGARDLESS OF THEIR VALUE TO THE KINGDOM?”

Mira's expression hardened.

“People are not valuable because of what they can offer a kingdom.”

The shield illuminated.

Tovin approached the fifth seal.

A flame burned within its center.

“WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF POWER?”

The Spellweaver considered the question.

He thought of the ancient mechanisms they had discovered. Of magic used to preserve memories, protect roads and illuminate the darkness.

He also thought of the corruption that had twisted those same wonders into instruments of control.

“To serve life,” he answered.

The flame turned gold.

The sixth seal awakened.

A dragon spread its wings across the iron.

“WHO SHALL POSSESS THE GUARDIAN?”

Queen Isolde stepped forward.

Her voice trembled.

“No one.”

“WHO SHALL COMMAND THE GUARDIAN?”

“No one.”

“WHO SHALL DETERMINE THE GUARDIAN'S PURPOSE?”

Isolde pressed her hand against the symbol.

“The guardian herself.”

The dragon seal illuminated.

Six golden symbols now surrounded the seventh.

The star remained dark.

Tovin examined it.

“There's no inscription.”

Lyra approached.

She placed her palm against the iron.

Nothing happened.

Flicker emerged from Bram's pack.

He stared at the star.

His tail brightened.

Kaelen knelt beside him.

“What is it?”

The creature approached the gate.

As his golden light touched the final seal, a voice emerged.

“WHAT SHALL REMAIN WHEN THE ROAD IS BROKEN?”

The companions looked at one another.

Tovin considered the ancient writings.

“Knowledge?”

Nothing happened.

Mira stepped forward.

“Courage?”

The star remained dark.

Bram scratched his beard.

“Determination?”

Seren shook her head.

“Probably not.”

Lyra closed her eyes.

She thought of the fisherman whose daughter had remembered her mother's love.

Of Maelor standing before the people he had harmed.

Of Rhydan saying farewell to Anwen.

Of Isolde kneeling beside the shattered crown.

Everywhere they had traveled, they had encountered people who had lost something precious.

Yet they continued.

Not because they possessed certainty.

Because something within them refused to believe that darkness had the final word.

Lyra opened her eyes.

“Hope.”

The seventh seal ignited.

The mountain shook.

Ancient mechanisms awakened beneath the floor.

One by one, enormous locking bolts withdrew from the gate.

The doors began to open.

Warm air rushed through the widening gap.

And from somewhere beyond, a dragon roared.

The Chancellor's Last Bargain

The companions entered a circular chamber illuminated by violet crystals.

A bridge extended across a deep chasm toward another passage.

Chancellor Veyran stood at its center.

He looked nothing like the elegant adviser they had encountered in the palace.

His robes were torn. His face was pale. Black markings covered his hands and climbed toward his neck.

A crystal staff rested against his shoulder.

Behind him, several Thornbound guarded the passage.

He looked toward Isolde.

“You should have remained in your palace.”

The queen stepped forward.

“You should have remained my adviser.”

Veyran smiled bitterly.

“Still determined to pretend that everything can return to the way it was?”

“No.”

Isolde looked at the corrupted crystals.

“I intend to make it better.”

The chancellor laughed.

“You speak like a child.”

“And you speak like a man who has forgotten whom he serves.”

Veyran raised his staff.

“I serve the future.”

Kaelen moved beside the queen.

“You serve Vaelrith.”

The chancellor's expression tightened.

“You have no understanding of what he offers.”

“We heard him,” Kaelen answered. “He offers obedience.”

“He offers survival!”

Veyran's voice echoed across the chamber.

“Do you think I haven't seen the roads collapsing? Do you think I haven't watched entire communities disappear?”

He pointed toward Isolde.

“Her father refused to act. Her council debated while the kingdom weakened. Every year brought another disaster, another funeral, another village we could not reach.”

Isolde looked at him.

“So you decided the people no longer deserved a choice.”

“I decided someone needed to make one!”

Violet energy surrounded his staff.

“I will not apologize for refusing to watch this kingdom die.”

Lyra stepped forward.

“Look at your hands.”

Veyran glanced downward.

The black markings had spread across his wrists.

“You're becoming part of his corruption.”

“A temporary consequence.”

“Is that what he told you?”

The chancellor said nothing.

Lyra looked at him sadly.

“He's doing to you what you did to the queen.”

Veyran's face twisted.

“Silence.”

“You still have a choice.”

“I MADE MY CHOICE!”

He struck his staff against the bridge.

The Thornbound advanced.

Mira raised her shield.

Bram lifted his hammer.

Seren drew her blade.

Tovin's staff ignited with golden light.

Kaelen tightened his grip upon the Waystone.

The first Thornbound rushed forward.

Bram met it with a devastating blow that sent fragments of black wood scattering across the bridge.

Seren slipped beneath the claws of another creature and struck its exposed center.

Mira defended Isolde as two more approached.

Tovin directed bursts of magic toward the surrounding crystals.

Each destroyed crystal weakened the creatures.

But Veyran seemed to grow stronger.

Violet light surrounded him.

His feet lifted from the bridge.

The black markings spread across his face.

He raised both hands.

A wave of energy struck the companions.

Kaelen fell.

His shoulder collided with the stone.

The Waystone rolled from his grasp.

Veyran descended beside it.

“At last.”

He reached toward the artifact.

Flicker sprang from Bram's pack.

The creature landed between the chancellor and the Waystone.

His tail blazed.

Veyran recoiled.

“You!”

He raised his staff.

Kaelen lunged forward and caught Flicker, rolling aside as violet energy shattered the stone where the creature had stood.

Mira charged.

Her shield struck Veyran's chest.

The chancellor stumbled backward.

Seren cut through the crystal mounted upon his staff.

It exploded.

Veyran screamed.

Black tendrils emerged from his arms, wrapping around the remaining crystals.

Tovin stared.

“He's connected himself to the entire network!”

Lyra looked toward the passage beyond the bridge.

“And to Thalassa.”

The mountain's heartbeat faltered.

Isolde's face became pale.

“Stop him!”

Kaelen retrieved the Waystone.

Golden and blue light spread across the chamber.

Veyran raised his hands.

The corruption surged.

For several moments, the opposing energies collided.

The bridge trembled.

Cracks appeared beneath their feet.

Bram looked downward.

“I strongly recommend finishing this somewhere else!”

Tovin directed his magic toward the largest crystal.

Seren destroyed another.

Mira held the remaining Thornbound at bay.

Lyra approached Veyran despite the violent energy surrounding him.

“Let go!”

The chancellor stared at her.

“I cannot!”

“You can!”

His hands trembled.

For a moment, the violet light weakened.

Kaelen saw fear in his eyes.

Not anger.

Not ambition.

Fear.

Then a voice emerged from the crystals.

“YOU DISAPPOINT ME.”

Veyran froze.

“My lord?”

The corruption intensified.

Black tendrils wrapped around his body.

He screamed.

“Vaelrith!”

The shadow appeared above the bridge.

Its eyes burned violet.

“You were entrusted with a simple task.”

Veyran struggled against the tendrils.

“I can still succeed!”

“You have mistaken my patience for loyalty.”

The chancellor's expression changed.

“Please.”

The shadow turned toward Kaelen.

“The third shard will not save you, Pathfinder.”

Kaelen raised the Waystone.

“We'll find out.”

Vaelrith laughed.

“Every road you restore brings you closer to the one I require.”

Tovin looked up.

“What does that mean?”

The shadow began to dissolve.

“Continue your journey. Fulfill your purpose.”

His voice echoed through the chamber.

“And open the final gate.”

The darkness vanished.

The tendrils released Veyran.

He collapsed upon the bridge.

The surrounding crystals shattered simultaneously.

A terrible roar rose from the passage beyond.

The mountain shook.

“THALASSA!” Isolde screamed.

The bridge began to collapse.

The Price of Betrayal

“MOVE!” Bram shouted.

The companions ran toward the far side of the chamber.

Stone broke away beneath their feet.

Tovin stumbled.

Seren caught his arm and pulled him forward.

Mira supported Isolde as the queen struggled to maintain her balance.

Kaelen looked back.

Veyran remained upon the collapsing bridge.

The chancellor attempted to rise, but his legs failed him.

A section of stone disappeared beneath his feet.

He caught the edge with one hand.

“Help!”

Kaelen stopped.

Seren turned.

“Kaelen!”

He looked toward the chancellor.

Then toward the collapsing bridge.

Veyran had imprisoned the queen.

He had tortured Thalassa.

He had willingly served the darkness threatening every kingdom in Aetherfall.

And now he was hanging above an abyss.

Kaelen ran back.

Mira shouted his name.

He dropped to his knees and reached for Veyran.

The chancellor stared at him.

“Why?”

“Take my hand!”

Veyran hesitated.

“Why would you save me?”

“Because I can!”

The chancellor reached upward.

Their hands met.

Kaelen pulled.

The bridge shifted.

Bram rushed back and seized Kaelen's belt.

Mira joined him.

Together, they dragged Veyran onto the remaining stone.

“Up!” Bram shouted.

The chancellor struggled to stand.

Kaelen placed one of Veyran's arms across his shoulders.

They staggered toward the passage.

Behind them, the bridge collapsed into darkness.

The companions reached solid ground just as the final section disappeared.

For several moments, nobody moved.

Then Bram sat heavily against the wall.

“I'm going to start charging people for rescues.”

Seren leaned beside him.

“Reasonable.”

Veyran lay upon the stone floor.

The black markings covering his body had faded.

His breathing was shallow.

Isolde approached.

He looked up at her.

“Your Majesty.”

She knelt.

“Veyran.”

Tears appeared in his eyes.

“I thought he would save us.”

Isolde remained silent.

“I thought if I became indispensable to him, he would protect the kingdom.”

He looked toward Kaelen.

“He never intended to.”

“No,” Kaelen answered.

The chancellor closed his eyes.

“I have destroyed everything.”

Isolde studied him.

“You have damaged much.”

He opened his eyes.

“But everything?”

She shook her head.

“Not yet.”

Veyran began to weep.

For the first time, he appeared to understand the consequences of his choices.

Isolde rose.

“You will answer for what you have done.”

He nodded.

“I know.”

“But first, you will help us save Thalassa.”

Veyran looked toward the passage.

“The final chamber.”

He struggled to sit upright.

“The chains are connected to a central mechanism. Vaelrith ordered me to drain her power until she revealed the shard's location.”

Tovin knelt beside him.

“How do we disable it?”

“Three conduits. Each carries a different form of binding magic.”

He swallowed.

“Destroying them in the wrong order will release the stored energy into her heart.”

Isolde went pale.

“Then tell us the correct order.”

Veyran closed his eyes.

“The first is beneath the western platform. The second is behind the guardian's head. The third…”

He hesitated.

“What?” Kaelen asked.

“The third must be released from within the dragon's own mind.”

Lyra looked toward the darkness.

A weak heartbeat shook the mountain.

Then another.

Longer apart than before.

Veyran lowered his head.

“I don't know whether she has enough strength left.”

Isolde stood.

“Then we will lend her ours.”

The Dragon's Cry

They continued through the final passage.

Veyran walked between Bram and Tovin, barely able to support himself.

The air grew warmer.

A strange blue light illuminated the walls.

Ancient carvings depicted dragons flying above mountains, carrying travelers across oceans and resting beside enormous gateways.

Isolde touched one of the images.

“I remember her flying above the city when I was a child.”

She smiled through her tears.

“Everyone would stop what they were doing and look upward.”

Lyra listened.

“She sounds magnificent.”

“She is.”

The queen's expression hardened.

“And she will fly again.”

The passage widened.

A cavern opened before them.

Kaelen stopped.

For a moment, he forgot to breathe.

Thalassa lay beneath an enormous crystalline ceiling.

Her scales were deep blue, fading into silver along her wings. Her body stretched across the cavern floor, larger than any creature the companions had encountered upon land.

Broken chains surrounded her.

Others remained attached to her wings, legs and neck.

Violet light traveled through them toward a collection of ancient mechanisms.

Her breathing was slow.

Each breath seemed to require an enormous effort.

Her eyes were closed.

Isolde stepped forward.

“Thalassa?”

The dragon did not move.

The queen approached again.

“It's me.”

One enormous eyelid lifted.

A pale blue eye looked toward her.

For several moments, the guardian remained silent.

Then a voice entered the minds of everyone within the cavern.

Little queen.

Isolde fell to her knees.

“I'm sorry.”

Thalassa's eye closed.

You came.

The queen began to cry.

“Yes.”

She placed both hands against the dragon's enormous snout.

“Yes, I came.”

Kaelen looked toward the surrounding machinery.

Tovin immediately began examining the conduits.

Mira and Seren searched the cavern for threats.

Bram helped Veyran sit against a stone pillar.

Lyra approached the dragon.

She could feel centuries of memories within the guardian's mind.

Mountains rising beneath ancient skies.

Dragons flying between kingdoms.

The first queen extending an open hand.

Roads connecting worlds that had long since forgotten one another.

But beneath those memories lay something else.

A terrible darkness.

A wound that extended far deeper than the chains surrounding Thalassa's body.

Lyra staggered.

Kaelen caught her.

“What is it?”

She looked toward the dragon.

“The corruption isn't simply draining her power.”

Tovin turned.

“What is it doing?”

Lyra stared into Thalassa's enormous eye.

“It's trying to make her forget who she is.”

The dragon released a weak, mournful sound.

Flicker approached her.

His golden tail illuminated a single scale upon her enormous face.

Thalassa opened her eye again.

She looked at the little creature.

For the first time, something resembling wonder entered her expression.

So one of you survived.

Kaelen looked toward Lyra.

“Did you hear that?”

She nodded.

Flicker tilted his head.

The dragon studied him.

Little keeper of the first light.

Tovin slowly lowered his staff.

“First light?”

Thalassa attempted to raise her head.

The chains tightened.

She cried out.

Isolde held her snout.

“Don't move. We're going to free you.”

The dragon's eye settled upon Kaelen.

Then upon the Waystone.

The roads have brought you far.

Kaelen stepped forward.

“We need the third shard.”

Thalassa closed her eye.

I know.

“Can you tell us where it is?”

The cavern trembled.

A violet flame appeared within the central mechanism.

Veyran struggled to his feet.

“No.”

Tovin turned.

“What?”

“The mechanism is activating.”

Veyran stared at the growing flame.

“Vaelrith has begun the final extraction.”

Thalassa screamed.

The remaining chains pulled tight.

Isolde was thrown backward.

Mira caught her.

The cavern filled with violet light.

Ancient stone guardians emerged from the surrounding walls, their bodies constructed from black crystal and dragonbone.

Tovin raised his staff.

Seren drew her blade.

Bram lifted his hammer.

Kaelen grasped the Waystone.

The companions had finally reached the dragon.

But reaching her and saving her were two very different things.

And as Thalassa's heartbeat began to fade, they realized that the greatest battle beneath the mountain had only just begun.

CHAPTER 19

The Dragon's Hollow

Thalassa's scream brought pieces of the mountain crashing down around them.

Kaelen threw himself against Queen Isolde, shielding her from a shower of falling stone. Mira raised her shield above them as fragments struck its battered surface. Across the cavern, Tovin struggled to maintain his balance while the ancient machinery awakened with a terrible grinding sound.

Violet fire traveled through the conduits.

The dragon's wings stretched involuntarily against their restraints. Her enormous claws scraped trenches into the cavern floor, and every movement caused the chains to tighten.

“Veyran!” Tovin shouted. “The first conduit! Where is it?”

The former chancellor pointed toward an elevated platform on the western side of the cavern.

“Beneath the extraction wheel!”

Seren followed his gesture.

Between them and the platform stood three enormous guardians.

Their bodies had been constructed from ancient bones and black crystal. Violet flames burned within their empty rib cages. Their heads resembled the skulls of dragons, although their twisted limbs allowed them to move upon two legs.

Bram stared at them.

“Those are considerably less attractive than the living one.”

The nearest guardian turned toward him.

Its jaws opened.

A violet flame gathered within its throat.

“DOWN!” Mira shouted.

Fire swept across the cavern.

The companions scattered behind pillars and fallen stones. Where the flames struck the ground, the rock turned black and brittle.

Bram emerged from behind a pillar.

“I withdraw my previous complaint about the sea!”

Seren rushed past him.

“Glad to hear it!”

She climbed onto a fallen section of machinery, using its broken framework to reach the western platform.

The guardians followed her movement.

Kaelen grasped the Waystone.

Its light spread across the cavern, revealing the threads connecting the creatures to the central extraction mechanism.

There were dozens of them.

Far more than they could sever individually.

“Tovin!”

The Spellweaver looked toward him.

“These guardians are drawing power directly from Thalassa!”

Tovin's expression changed.

“Then every time they attack…”

“They weaken her.”

Another heartbeat shook the mountain.

Thalassa cried out.

Isolde struggled to her feet.

“Then stop them!”

Kaelen looked toward the dragon.

They had fought countless creatures since arriving in Aetherfall. They had destroyed corrupted guardians, shattered ancient mechanisms and survived battles that should have ended their journey.

But this time, the enemy's strength came from the very life they were trying to save.

Every moment of resistance cost Thalassa something she might never recover.

And somewhere beyond the cavern, Vaelrith was waiting for her heart to stop.

The Bones of the Ancient Guardians

Bram charged the nearest creature.

His hammer struck its exposed ribs, breaking several pieces of black crystal. The guardian staggered backward, then drove one enormous claw toward him.

Bram rolled aside.

The claw struck the ground.

“Strong fellow!”

Mira joined him.

“Stop complimenting it!”

“I'm acknowledging its craftsmanship!”

She intercepted another strike with her shield.

The force drove her backward.

Bram swung again.

This time, the guardian caught the hammer between its claws.

For several seconds, neither moved.

Then the creature pulled.

Bram held on.

“Little assistance?”

Mira struck the guardian's wrist.

Its grip loosened.

Bram retrieved his hammer and stumbled backward.

“Much appreciated.”

Across the cavern, Seren reached the western platform.

The extraction wheel stood nearly twice her height. Its bronze framework had been covered with black metal and violet crystals. Beneath it, a conduit carried streams of energy toward the central mechanism.

She examined the machinery.

“Veyran! What am I looking for?”

The former chancellor struggled toward the platform.

“A silver release lever!”

“There are six levers!”

“The one beneath the wheel!”

“They're all beneath the wheel!”

Tovin hurried toward her.

“Move aside!”

He examined the ancient markings.

Then he looked toward Veyran.

“These mechanisms were never designed to extract dragonfire.”

“No.”

“What were they designed to do?”

“To distribute it.”

Tovin stared at him.

“Freely given?”

Veyran lowered his head.

“Yes.”

For a moment, the Spellweaver seemed too angry to speak.

He had spent much of his life fascinated by knowledge. He believed that understanding the world could improve it, that discovery could become a gift to future generations.

Yet throughout Aetherfall, he had encountered people who used knowledge to transform beautiful things into instruments of suffering.

He looked toward Thalassa.

“Help me restore it.”

Veyran nodded.

Together, they examined the mechanism.

Seren remained beside them, watching the guardians.

“Hurry.”

Tovin located the original release system beneath several layers of corrupted machinery.

“Here.”

He pulled the silver lever.

Nothing happened.

Veyran pointed toward a black crystal mounted above the wheel.

“The override.”

Seren struck it with her blade.

The crystal shattered.

Tovin pulled the lever again.

The extraction wheel stopped.

For the first time since they entered the cavern, one of Thalassa's chains loosened.

The dragon released a long breath.

The nearest guardian collapsed.

Its bones scattered across the floor.

Bram looked down at the remains.

“Well, that saves considerable effort.”

Tovin turned toward the others.

“The first conduit is released!”

Isolde placed her hand against Thalassa's snout.

“Did you feel that?”

The dragon opened one eye.

Yes, little queen.

Isolde smiled through her tears.

“We're not leaving you here.”

I know.

The dragon's eye closed again.

And the queen remained beside her.

The Memory of Wings

Lyra approached Thalassa while the others moved toward the second conduit.

The dragon's scales were cold beneath her fingertips.

That surprised her.

She had expected warmth, perhaps even heat. Instead, the enormous creature felt like stone beneath a winter sky.

“Thalassa?”

The dragon did not respond.

Lyra closed her eyes.

She allowed her thoughts to reach toward the guardian's mind.

At first, she encountered only pain.

It surrounded her like an ocean.

Every chain, every crystal and every stolen fragment of dragonfire had left its mark upon the creature's memories.

Lyra pushed farther.

“I'm here.”

Something moved within the darkness.

A faint blue light.

Then the cavern disappeared.

She stood upon a mountain beneath a brilliant morning sky.

Wind swept across fields of golden grass. Snow-covered peaks stretched toward the horizon, and enormous shadows moved across the ground.

Lyra looked upward.

Dragons.

Dozens of them.

Some possessed wings of silver. Others were red, green or deep violet. Their enormous bodies moved gracefully through the clouds, and their cries echoed across the mountains.

A young blue dragon landed nearby.

Its scales shimmered beneath the sunlight.

Lyra recognized Thalassa immediately.

But this was not the exhausted guardian imprisoned beneath the palace.

This dragon was young.

Curious.

Free.

She watched Thalassa leap from the mountainside, spreading her wings as the wind carried her upward.

For a moment, Lyra felt what the dragon felt.

The exhilaration of flight.

The warmth of sunlight upon her scales.

The joy of possessing an entire sky.

Then the vision changed.

Thalassa stood beside an ancient gateway.

Travelers gathered beneath her wings.

Some were human.

Others belonged to races Lyra had never encountered. There were people with luminous skin, figures whose clothing appeared woven from leaves, and creatures resembling walking statues.

They passed through the gateway carrying books, seeds, musical instruments and children.

The dragon watched over them.

Not as a ruler.

As a guardian.

The vision changed again.

Darkness spread across the sky.

The ancient gateways flickered.

Dragons gathered above a city constructed around an enormous circular tower.

At its summit stood a man wearing robes of silver and black.

Vaelrith.

But he looked different.

Younger.

Human.

His face contained no shadow, and his eyes held no violet fire.

He stood among other figures carrying artifacts resembling the Waystone.

The ancient Waykeepers.

Lyra moved closer.

She heard fragments of their conversation.

“The roads are becoming unstable.”

“We cannot maintain every passage.”

“Entire worlds depend upon them.”

Then Vaelrith spoke.

“Give me control of the central gateway.”

One of the Waykeepers stepped forward.

“No single keeper may command the network.”

“Then the network will collapse!”

“We must find another way.”

Vaelrith looked toward the dragons.

“Their power could sustain it.”

Thalassa lowered her head.

Our power is freely given.

Vaelrith turned toward her.

“And if freely given power is insufficient?”

The dragon's eyes narrowed.

Then you must accept that some roads cannot remain open.

Vaelrith shook his head.

“I will not accept that.”

The vision shattered.

Lyra found herself surrounded by darkness.

A voice whispered beside her.

He could not bear the thought of a closed door.

She turned.

Thalassa stood within the darkness, her enormous wings folded against her body.

But the dragon appeared translucent.

Her memories were fading.

“What happened to him?” Lyra asked.

He tried to bind the roads to his own will.

The dragon lowered her head.

He believed that if every road answered to one keeper, nothing would ever be lost again.

“Did he cause the Shattering?”

Thalassa closed her eyes.

He began it.

Lyra felt a chill.

But he did not act alone.

The darkness shifted.

She glimpsed figures surrounding the central gateway. Some attempted to stop Vaelrith. Others stood beside him.

The gateway erupted.

Light fractured into countless pieces.

Roads broke.

Cities disappeared.

Dragons fell from the sky.

Then everything became silent.

Lyra looked toward Thalassa.

“Why doesn't anyone remember?”

Because those who survived were afraid to remember.

The dragon's voice weakened.

And because Vaelrith has spent centuries teaching them to fear the truth.

Lyra reached toward her.

“Stay with me.”

Thalassa looked down.

Little Seer, I am trying.

The Second Chain

The second conduit rested behind Thalassa's head.

Reaching it required crossing a narrow section of cavern floor beneath the dragon's enormous neck.

Mira approached carefully.

“Your Majesty, we need you to move.”

Isolde looked toward the machinery.

“Will it hurt her?”

Tovin hesitated.

“Probably.”

The queen closed her eyes.

Then she stepped aside.

Bram and Kaelen followed Tovin toward the conduit.

Seren remained above them, watching the remaining guardians.

Veyran pointed toward a series of black metal rings surrounding the mechanism.

“The conduit is locked beneath those restraints.”

Tovin examined them.

“These aren't ordinary locks.”

“No. They respond to the central mechanism.”

“Can you release them?”

Veyran approached.

His hands trembled.

He placed his palm against the nearest ring.

A violet light appeared.

For a moment, the mechanism seemed to recognize him.

Then a sharp burst of energy threw him backward.

Bram caught him.

“Careful.”

Veyran stared at his burned hand.

“He has removed my authority.”

Tovin frowned.

“Vaelrith?”

The former chancellor nodded.

“I cannot command the mechanism.”

“Then we dismantle it.”

Veyran looked horrified.

“If you damage the inner ring, the stored energy will discharge into her heart.”

Tovin examined the conduit again.

He could see the original bronze framework beneath the corrupted rings.

It was delicate.

Precise.

Beautifully constructed.

But the modifications had been designed to prevent anyone from reversing them.

He needed time.

Time they did not possess.

Another guardian approached.

Seren shouted from above.

“Company!”

Mira moved toward the creature.

Its jaws opened.

She raised her shield.

Violet fire struck its surface.

The shield glowed red.

Mira cried out and dropped it.

Bram rushed forward, striking the guardian's knee.

The creature fell against the cavern wall.

Kaelen helped Mira retreat.

Her left arm trembled.

“Are you hurt?”

“Nothing broken.”

He examined the burned leather beneath her shield strap.

“Mira.”

She looked at him.

“I can still fight.”

“I know.”

He retrieved her shield.

Its surface was blackened and cracked.

For weeks, it had protected them.

Now he wondered whether it would survive another strike.

Mira accepted it.

“Don't look at me like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like you're about to tell me to stay behind.”

Kaelen smiled faintly.

“I wasn't.”

“Good.”

He looked toward the approaching guardian.

“Because I need you beside me.”

She tightened the damaged strap.

“That's better.”

Together, they returned to the fight.

Tovin worked beneath the dragon's neck.

Sweat ran down his forehead.

He removed a small section of black metal, revealing a narrow channel carrying violet energy.

Veyran knelt beside him.

“If you can redirect the current…”

“Into what?”

The former chancellor looked around.

“An unused crystal.”

Tovin shook his head.

“It would overload immediately.”

Veyran considered the problem.

Then he removed a pendant from beneath his robes.

It contained a small silver crystal.

“My original access seal.”

Tovin examined it.

“This could absorb the energy temporarily.”

“Yes.”

“But it will be destroyed.”

Veyran looked at the pendant.

For decades, it had represented his position within the kingdom.

His authority.

His importance.

Everything he had believed made him valuable.

He placed it in Tovin's hand.

“Then destroy it.”

The Spellweaver inserted the crystal into the exposed channel.

Violet energy surged into it.

The pendant began to crack.

Tovin moved quickly.

He released the outer ring.

Then the second.

The pendant glowed white.

“Almost…”

Veyran reached toward the final restraint.

“Together.”

They pulled.

The second conduit opened.

The pendant shattered.

A burst of energy threw both men backward.

Bram caught Tovin before he struck the ground.

The chains surrounding Thalassa's neck fell away.

The dragon inhaled deeply.

Golden light spread beneath several of her scales.

The remaining guardians collapsed.

For a moment, the cavern became still.

Isolde looked toward Tovin.

“Is she free?”

The Spellweaver struggled to his feet.

“Two conduits.”

He looked toward Lyra.

“Now comes the difficult one.”

The Keeper of the First Light

Within Thalassa's mind, Lyra stood beside an ancient forest.

Small lights moved between enormous trees.

At first, she mistook them for fireflies.

Then one emerged from beneath a root.

It resembled Flicker.

Its body was small and covered with soft fur. Its eyes glowed amber, and a golden light burned within its tail.

Another appeared.

Then another.

Dozens of the creatures gathered around a stone pathway.

Some climbed onto travelers' shoulders.

Others ran ahead, illuminating the road.

Lyra smiled.

“What are they?”

Thalassa stood beside her.

The Luminari.

The creatures raced through the forest, their golden lights weaving between the trees.

Before the Shattering, they traveled between the worlds. They could sense the original magic within the roads.

Lyra watched one guide a frightened child toward a waiting family.

“They were guardians?”

In their own way.

The dragon lowered her head.

They could find what darkness concealed. Awaken what had been forgotten. Remind corrupted magic of its original purpose.

Lyra thought of the ancient mechanisms Flicker had restored.

The crystals he had shattered.

The wards he had awakened.

The way his light had weakened Isolde's crown.

“He's one of them.”

Yes.

“Are there others?”

The forest darkened.

The lights began disappearing.

One by one.

After the Shattering, the Luminari vanished from the known roads. Some were hunted. Others became trapped between worlds.

Lyra watched the final light disappear.

Vaelrith feared them.

“Because they could undo his corruption?”

Because they could reveal what he had changed.

The dragon looked toward her.

Your little companion is the first I have seen in centuries.

Lyra felt tears gather in her eyes.

“Does he know?”

Perhaps not in the way you understand knowledge.

Thalassa smiled.

But light remembers light.

The vision faded.

They stood once more within the darkness of the dragon's mind.

Lyra reached toward her.

“Then we need his help.”

Thalassa closed her eyes.

The final chain is not around my body.

“I know.”

It is around my memories.

The darkness gathered.

A violet doorway appeared before them.

Beyond it, Lyra heard the distant cries of dragons.

Thalassa recoiled.

I cannot enter.

“Why?”

Because he is waiting there.

Lyra looked toward the doorway.

“Vaelrith?”

The dragon nodded.

He has hidden the chain within the memory of my greatest failure.

Lyra took a deep breath.

“Then we'll face it together.”

The Day the Sky Fell

Outside the dragon's mind, Lyra's body trembled.

Kaelen knelt beside her.

“Lyra?”

She did not respond.

Tovin examined the remaining conduit. Its violet light had become concentrated into a single narrow beam extending toward Thalassa's forehead.

“The final binding is active.”

Isolde looked toward the Seer.

“Can she break it?”

“I don't know.”

Flicker emerged from beneath the dragon's wing.

He approached Lyra and climbed into her lap.

His tail illuminated her hands.

The Waystone responded.

A thread of blue light extended from its surface toward the little creature.

Tovin stared.

“Kaelen, bring the stone closer.”

Kaelen obeyed.

The blue and golden lights intertwined.

Lyra drew a sudden breath.

Then her expression became peaceful.

Tovin smiled.

“She's not alone anymore.”

Within the memory, Lyra heard a familiar chirp.

She turned.

Flicker stood beside her.

His golden tail illuminated the darkness.

“Flicker?”

The creature raced toward her and climbed onto her shoulder.

Lyra laughed.

“How did you get here?”

Thalassa lowered her head.

The little keeper has found the road between us.

Flicker chirped again.

Together, they approached the violet doorway.

The moment they crossed it, the world changed.

Fire filled the sky.

An ancient city burned beneath collapsing gateways. Towers shattered. Bridges disappeared into enormous fractures in the earth.

Dragons flew above the destruction, carrying survivors away from the collapsing roads.

Thalassa stood upon a broken terrace.

She was younger.

Stronger.

And terrified.

Lyra watched as another blue dragon descended beside her.

This dragon was larger, with silver markings across his wings.

Brother, Thalassa whispered.

The memory unfolded around them.

The silver-winged dragon looked toward the central gateway.

We must close it.

The younger Thalassa shook her head.

There are still travelers inside.

If it remains open, the fracture will spread.

We cannot abandon them.

The dragon looked toward the collapsing city.

We cannot save everyone.

Thalassa spread her wings.

Then I will save those I can.

She flew toward the gateway.

Her brother followed.

Together, they carried survivors from the collapsing passage.

Again and again, they returned.

Until the gateway fractured.

A terrible wave of darkness swept across the city.

Thalassa's brother pushed her aside.

The darkness struck him.

His wings folded.

He fell.

Thalassa screamed.

She descended after him, but the road beneath his falling body disappeared.

He vanished into the darkness between worlds.

The memory froze.

Lyra looked toward the older Thalassa.

The dragon bowed her head.

His name was Aerion.

Lyra watched the frozen image.

He was my brother. My teacher. My closest friend.

Thalassa's voice broke.

I should have listened to him.

The darkness gathered behind them.

A figure emerged.

Vaelrith.

He wore the silver and black robes of the ancient Waykeepers.

His expression was almost sympathetic.

“Indeed.”

Thalassa recoiled.

Vaelrith approached the frozen memory.

“You could have prevented his death.”

The dragon closed her eyes.

“You insisted upon returning to the gateway. You refused to accept the inevitable.”

Lyra stepped forward.

“Leave her alone.”

Vaelrith looked at her.

“Ah. The little Seer.”

His eyes turned violet.

“You have traveled farther than I expected.”

Lyra tightened her grip upon Flicker.

“This isn't your memory.”

“No.”

Vaelrith smiled.

“But it is useful.”

He raised one hand.

The memory began moving again.

Aerion fell.

Thalassa screamed.

The scene repeated.

Again.

And again.

Each time, the dragon bowed her head farther.

Lyra understood.

The final chain was made from guilt.

For centuries, Thalassa had carried the memory of her brother's death. Vaelrith had found that wound and transformed it into a prison.

“You cannot change what happened,” Vaelrith whispered.

Thalassa trembled.

“But you can surrender the pain.”

He extended his hand.

“Give me the shard. Give me your memories. Give me the burden you have carried for so long.”

The dragon looked toward him.

For a moment, Lyra saw exhaustion overcome resistance.

Thalassa had endured centuries of loss.

She had watched her kind disappear.

She had been betrayed by the kingdom she loved.

And now someone offered her silence.

“Thalassa,” Lyra said.

The dragon turned.

“Don't listen to him.”

Vaelrith laughed.

“Would you deny her peace?”

Lyra looked at him.

“That isn't peace.”

She approached the frozen image of Aerion.

“It's forgetting.”

The shadow's expression hardened.

“An insignificant distinction.”

“No.”

Lyra placed her hand against the image.

“It's everything.”

Flicker leaped from her shoulder.

He landed beside the memory of the fallen dragon.

Golden light spread across the fractured road.

The image changed.

Aerion was no longer falling.

He stood beside Thalassa beneath a morning sky.

They flew together above mountains.

They rested beside waterfalls.

They watched over travelers.

They laughed beneath the stars.

Thalassa raised her head.

I had forgotten that day.

Another memory appeared.

Aerion teaching his younger sister how to navigate a storm.

Another.

The two dragons guiding a lost caravan through the mountains.

Another.

Aerion standing beside her as the first queen offered friendship.

Vaelrith raised his hand.

“Enough.”

Flicker's light intensified.

The memories continued.

Lyra looked toward Thalassa.

“His death was one moment in an entire life.”

The dragon watched her brother spread his wings.

“Don't let that moment become the only thing you remember about him.”

Thalassa's eyes filled with tears.

I miss him.

“I know.”

I would give anything to see him again.

Lyra nodded.

“But you don't have to surrender everything he loved about you.”

The dragon looked toward the memory.

Aerion turned.

For a moment, his eyes seemed to meet hers.

Thalassa lowered her head.

Forgive me, brother.

The memory shifted.

Aerion's voice emerged from the light.

Fly, little sister.

Thalassa closed her eyes.

Then she spread her wings.

The darkness surrounding them cracked.

Vaelrith stepped backward.

“No.”

Golden light poured through the fractures.

The dragon raised her head.

I remember who I am.

The violet doorway shattered.

Vaelrith's shadow dissolved.

But before it disappeared completely, he looked toward Lyra.

“You have delayed the inevitable.”

She held Flicker close.

“Then we'll delay it again.”

His eyes burned.

“You cannot save every road.”

Lyra looked toward Thalassa.

“Perhaps not.”

She smiled.

“But we can save this one.”

The shadow vanished.

And the dragon's mind filled with sunlight.

The Dragon Unbound

The final conduit shattered.

Violet energy exploded from the mechanism, striking the cavern ceiling. Tovin threw himself behind a pillar as fragments of crystal rained down around him.

Kaelen caught Lyra as she collapsed backward.

Flicker rolled across the floor, landed upon his feet and immediately began shaking dust from his fur.

Bram hurried toward him.

“There you are!”

The little creature chirped.

Bram scooped him into his arms.

“Do you have any idea how much trouble you cause?”

Flicker licked his nose.

Bram sighed.

“Completely forgiven.”

Across the cavern, the remaining chains fell from Thalassa's body.

For several moments, the dragon did not move.

Isolde approached.

“Thalassa?”

Silence.

The queen placed her hands against the dragon's scales.

“Please.”

Kaelen helped Lyra sit upright.

Tovin stared at the shattered mechanism.

Mira lowered her shield.

Nobody spoke.

Then a heartbeat shook the cavern.

Strong.

Deep.

Steady.

Thalassa inhaled.

Golden light spread beneath her scales, traveling from her heart toward her enormous wings.

Her eyes opened.

The queen stepped backward as the dragon slowly raised her head.

One enormous claw moved.

Then another.

Stone cracked beneath her weight.

Thalassa unfolded her wings.

The cavern seemed suddenly too small to contain her.

Blue and silver scales reflected the light of the ancient crystals. Her wings stretched across the chamber like sails beneath a brilliant sky.

She raised her head.

And roared.

The sound traveled through the mountain.

It shook the palace foundations.

It echoed across the harbor.

It reached the highest towers and the lowest streets of Queen Isolde's kingdom.

Citizens stopped whatever they were doing.

Soldiers looked upward.

Children ran into the streets.

For the first time in nearly a year, the kingdom heard the voice of its guardian.

Beneath the mountain, Isolde laughed and cried.

Thalassa lowered her head toward her.

Little queen.

Isolde embraced the dragon's enormous snout.

“I thought I'd lost you.”

For a time, I thought I had lost myself.

The queen looked into her eyes.

“Can you forgive me?”

Thalassa remained silent.

Then she gently touched her forehead against Isolde's chest.

You came back.

Isolde closed her eyes.

For the first time since the crown had been placed upon her head, she felt the ancient connection between them without pain.

No command passed between queen and dragon.

No demand for obedience.

Only recognition.

Friendship.

And the beginning of healing.

The Last Daughter of the Sky

The companions rested while Thalassa recovered.

Tovin inspected the remaining machinery, ensuring that no corrupted connections remained active. Mira treated the burns upon her arm, while Seren examined the cavern's upper passages.

Bram distributed what remained of their provisions.

Flicker received a considerably larger portion than usual.

Veyran sat apart from the others.

He watched Thalassa with an expression that combined shame and wonder.

The dragon eventually turned toward him.

The former chancellor lowered his head.

“I have no excuse.”

Thalassa studied him.

No.

Veyran swallowed.

“I believed your power could save the kingdom.”

My power had protected it for centuries.

“I know.”

You could have asked.

Those four words seemed to wound him more deeply than any accusation.

Veyran covered his face.

“I know.”

Isolde approached.

“You helped release her.”

He looked up.

“That does not erase what I did.”

“No.”

The queen sat beside him.

“But it tells me that you are still capable of choosing differently.”

Veyran looked toward the shattered machinery.

“What happens now?”

“You return with me.”

He nodded.

“To face judgment.”

“Yes.”

Thalassa lowered her enormous head.

Do not waste what remains of your life wishing you could change what has already happened.

Veyran looked at her.

Use it to repair what you still can.

The former chancellor bowed.

For the first time, he did so without fear of punishment or hope of reward.

Kaelen approached Thalassa later that evening.

The dragon rested beside an underground pool illuminated by blue crystals. Water flowed from cracks in the cavern wall, gathering around her claws.

She watched him approach.

Pathfinder.

Kaelen bowed his head.

“Thank you for speaking with us.”

It is I who should thank you.

He retrieved the Waystone.

Its light reflected across her scales.

“We've been searching for the third shard.”

Thalassa studied the artifact.

I know.

“Veyran believed you knew where it was hidden.”

He was correct.

Kaelen waited.

The dragon looked toward the surrounding mountains.

But before you seek it, you must understand what you carry.

Tovin immediately moved closer.

Seren smiled.

“There goes our evening.”

Thalassa continued.

The Waystone was created when the first roads were discovered. It was never intended to command them.

Kaelen examined the stone.

“What was its purpose?”

To listen.

Tovin frowned.

“Listen to what?”

The roads themselves.

The dragon raised one claw and touched the ground.

Golden markings appeared beneath it.

Every road possesses a memory. Every passage remembers those who traveled it. The Waystone allows its bearer to recognize those memories and find paths that others cannot see.

Kaelen remembered the countless occasions upon which the artifact had guided them.

“Then why does Vaelrith want it?”

Thalassa's expression darkened.

Because the Waystone can recognize the road to the central gateway.

Tovin sat beside Kaelen.

“The gateway destroyed during the Shattering?”

Not destroyed.

The dragon lowered her head.

Divided.

She touched the Waystone.

Three points of light appeared above it.

When Vaelrith attempted to seize control of the ancient network, the Waykeepers fractured the central key into three shards.

The lights separated.

Without them, the gateway could not be opened completely.

Kaelen watched the lights.

“And recovering the third shard will allow us to open it?”

Yes.

He looked toward his companions.

“Then Vaelrith wants us to collect them.”

Thalassa nodded.

He cannot restore the ancient roads himself. The corruption within him prevents the original magic from recognizing his authority.

Tovin's eyes widened.

“But the Waystone recognizes Kaelen.”

Exactly.

The cavern became silent.

Kaelen thought of every road they had restored.

Every sanctuary they had awakened.

Every guardian they had freed.

“Have we been helping him?”

Thalassa studied him.

You have been helping the people who needed you.

“But if restoring the roads allows him to reach the gateway…”

Then you must prevent him from taking it.

Kaelen looked down at the stone.

“Perhaps we should stop.”

The dragon remained silent.

“If we never recover the third shard, he cannot open the gateway.”

And neither can you.

Kaelen looked up.

Thalassa's gaze softened.

The central gateway may contain the road to your home.

The words struck him with unexpected force.

Home.

After everything they had endured, after every battle and every uncertain road, they were finally approaching something that might return them to their own world.

Yet the same gateway could place Aetherfall beneath Vaelrith's control.

He looked toward Mira.

She understood immediately.

So did the others.

Seren sat beside him.

“Well.”

Bram lowered himself onto a nearby stone.

“Nothing's ever straightforward, is it?”

Tovin examined the three lights.

“There must be a way to open the gateway without surrendering control.”

Thalassa nodded.

There may be.

“Who would know?”

The dragon looked toward the far side of the cavern.

The last Waykeeper.

Kaelen straightened.

“Auren?”

Yes.

Lyra looked toward Thalassa.

“Where is he?”

The dragon closed her eyes.

He waits at the Sanctuary of the Falling Sun. But the darkness has already begun moving toward him.

Kaelen felt the Waystone pulse.

“Then that's where we go.”

The Secret of the Third Shard

Before they departed, Thalassa led them toward a concealed chamber beneath her resting place.

The entrance had remained hidden behind her enormous body.

Ancient doors opened as she approached, revealing a circular sanctuary.

Its walls depicted the history of the dragons.

At its center stood an empty pedestal.

Kaelen looked toward it.

“Was the shard kept here?”

For a time.

Thalassa lowered her head.

After the Shattering, the Waykeepers entrusted it to my protection.

Tovin examined the pedestal.

“But it isn't here now.”

No.

The dragon touched one of the carvings.

An image appeared above the pedestal.

A mountain beneath a red sky.

A sanctuary surrounded by enormous stone pillars.

A solitary figure carrying a lantern.

Auren.

When I sensed Vaelrith's return, I sent the shard away.

Kaelen studied the image.

“To Auren?”

He knows the final sanctuary in which it rests.

The image changed.

Auren stood beside an ancient altar.

Darkness gathered beyond the surrounding mountains.

He has spent centuries protecting the knowledge necessary to recover it.

Lyra stepped closer.

“Centuries?”

Thalassa looked at her.

The Waykeepers were not bound to time as ordinary travelers are.

Tovin stared.

“Then Auren was alive during the Shattering?”

He witnessed it.

Kaelen remembered their earlier encounters with the Waykeeper.

His mysterious warnings.

His knowledge of the roads.

His reluctance to explain certain things.

“What hasn't he told us?”

Thalassa closed her eyes.

More than he should have withheld.

The image faded.

The dragon turned toward the companions.

Do not mistake secrecy for wisdom. Even those who wish to protect you can make that mistake.

Kaelen nodded.

They had learned that lesson repeatedly.

Now they would have to determine whether the man who had guided them understood it himself.

The First Flight

The mountain opened shortly before sunrise.

An ancient passage, sealed for generations, responded to Thalassa's restored power. Stone doors withdrew into the surrounding cliffs, revealing an enormous opening overlooking the eastern kingdom.

Cold morning air rushed into the cavern.

Thalassa approached the opening.

For several moments, she stood beneath the sunlight.

Her eyes closed.

Wind moved across her wings.

Isolde stood beside her.

“Are you strong enough?”

The dragon opened one eye.

There is only one way to discover that.

Bram looked toward the enormous drop beyond the opening.

“I sincerely hope she remembers how.”

Seren laughed.

Thalassa spread her wings.

The sound alone was extraordinary.

Dust rose from the cavern floor. Loose stones scattered beneath the force of the movement.

She stepped forward.

Then stopped.

Kaelen watched her.

Something was wrong.

Lyra approached.

“Thalassa?”

The dragon looked toward the sky.

For centuries, she had flown above these mountains.

Yet after months of imprisonment, the open air seemed unfamiliar.

She remembered the chains.

The pain.

The falling dragons.

Her brother.

For a moment, fear held her more effectively than any restraint.

Flicker slipped from Bram's arms.

He raced toward the opening.

Golden light illuminated the stone beneath his feet.

He stopped at the edge and looked back.

Thalassa lowered her head.

The little creature chirped.

The dragon laughed.

It was a deep, rumbling sound that shook the surrounding walls.

Very well, little keeper.

She looked toward Isolde.

Would you accompany me?

The queen stared.

“Me?”

As you did when you were a child.

Isolde smiled.

Then she climbed carefully onto the dragon's back.

Thalassa stepped toward the edge.

Her wings spread.

She leaped.

For one terrible moment, she disappeared beneath the opening.

Bram rushed forward.

“Oh, no.”

Then an enormous blue shape rose above the cliffs.

Thalassa climbed toward the morning sky.

Her wings caught the wind.

Sunlight struck her silver scales.

She turned above the mountains, releasing a roar that echoed across the entire kingdom.

The companions watched in wonder.

Below them, the city awakened.

People poured into the streets.

Bells rang from the palace towers.

Ships sounded their horns in the harbor.

Captain Rhydan stood aboard the *Lantern's Wake*, staring upward.

Nessa joined him.

“Have you ever seen anything like that?”

The captain smiled.

“Not in all my years.”

Edrin pointed toward the dragon.

“There's someone riding her!”

Rhydan laughed.

“Of course there is.”

Thalassa circled the city.

Queen Isolde sat upon her back, laughing as the wind carried tears from her eyes.

For the first time in years, she was not thinking about the throne.

The council.

The crown.

Or the countless responsibilities waiting for her.

She was simply a woman flying beside an old friend.

And beneath them, a kingdom remembered what freedom looked like.

A Farewell Beneath the Morning Sun

The companions returned to the palace that afternoon.

Their arrival was greeted with celebrations unlike anything they had experienced in Aetherfall.

The marketplace reopened.

Merchants distributed food.

Musicians performed beside the restored dragon fountain.

Children carried small wooden dragons through the streets, pretending to fly between the buildings.

Bram purchased several pastries from a baker.

He insisted that they were necessary provisions.

Seren pointed out that he had eaten three before leaving the stall.

“Quality inspection.”

“Of course.”

Tovin visited the royal library with Isolde's permission, returning with several carefully copied manuscripts concerning the Waykeepers.

Mira found Captain Renn training his soldiers in the palace courtyard.

The captain bowed when he saw her.

“Guardian.”

“Captain.”

He looked toward her damaged shield.

“I believe we owe you a replacement.”

Two soldiers approached carrying a new shield.

Its surface was silver and blue, decorated with the image of a dragon spreading its wings above an open road.

Mira accepted it.

The shield was lighter than her old one, yet its construction appeared considerably stronger.

“It's beautiful.”

Captain Renn smiled.

“Forged from metal freely given by Thalassa's ancestors.”

Mira examined the old shield resting against her arm.

For a moment, she hesitated.

It had carried her through countless battles.

Protected her friends.

Reminded her of everything she had endured.

Captain Renn noticed.

“We can preserve the old one within the royal armory.”

Mira looked at him.

“Would you?”

“With honor.”

She handed it to him.

“Thank you.”

The captain bowed.

And Mira continued toward her companions, carrying a shield that represented not merely protection, but friendship.

Queen Isolde met them near the harbor before sunset.

Thalassa rested upon the cliffs above the city, watching the ships below.

Rhydan and his crew were preparing the *Lantern's Wake* for another voyage.

The queen approached Kaelen.

“You're leaving already?”

He nodded.

“We need to reach Auren.”

Isolde looked toward the northern mountains.

“The Sanctuary of the Falling Sun.”

“Yes.”

She handed him a rolled parchment.

“Maps of the northern territories. Some of the roads are ancient, but Thalassa believes they remain passable.”

Tovin accepted the maps with considerable enthusiasm.

Isolde turned toward Lyra.

“You gave me back more than my freedom.”

The Seer smiled.

“You fought for it yourself.”

The queen embraced her.

Then she approached Bram.

Flicker sat upon his shoulder.

“May I?”

Bram handed her the little creature.

Isolde held him gently.

“Thank you, little keeper.”

Flicker chirped.

She placed a small silver pendant around his neck. It bore the image of a dragon surrounding a golden star.

“An honorary guardian of the eastern kingdom.”

Bram examined the pendant.

“Does that position include an allowance for food?”

Isolde laughed.

“I'm afraid not.”

“Typical government position.”

Seren burst into laughter.

The queen returned Flicker to Bram.

Then she looked toward all six companions.

“Whatever happens beyond these mountains, know that you have a home here.”

Kaelen bowed.

“Thank you.”

Thalassa's voice entered their minds.

Pathfinder.

Kaelen looked toward the cliffs.

Remember that the final gateway will test more than your courage.

He touched the Waystone.

“What will it test?”

The dragon watched him.

What you are willing to leave behind.

Kaelen remained silent.

He did not yet understand.

But something within him feared that he would.

The Road Toward the Falling Sun

They departed through the northern gates as evening settled across the kingdom.

For several miles, the road climbed gently between flowering trees and fields of golden grass.

Behind them, Thalassa flew above the city.

Ahead, mountains stretched beneath a crimson sky.

Tovin walked beside Kaelen.

“I've been thinking about what she told us.”

“About the gateway?”

“Yes.”

The Spellweaver adjusted the strap of his satchel.

“If Vaelrith needs us to restore the roads, then he may have been guiding our journey without our knowledge.”

Kaelen nodded.

“I've wondered the same thing.”

“Some of the obstacles we've encountered may have been intended to prevent us from reaching certain places.”

“Others may have been intended to push us toward them.”

Tovin looked troubled.

“How do we distinguish between the two?”

Kaelen considered the question.

“We don't always have to.”

Tovin frowned.

“Explain.”

“If someone needs our help, we help them. If a guardian is imprisoned, we free them. If a road can be restored without harming anyone, we restore it.”

“Even if Vaelrith benefits?”

“Then we find a way to stop him without abandoning everyone else.”

Tovin smiled faintly.

“A remarkably impractical philosophy.”

“Probably.”

“But a good one.”

They continued walking.

Ahead of them, Seren and Bram argued about which of them had eaten the last pastry.

Mira walked beside Lyra, examining the new shield.

Flicker raced between the companions, his golden pendant catching the evening light.

For a moment, everything seemed ordinary.

Then the Waystone flashed.

Kaelen stopped.

A thin beam of blue light extended toward the mountains.

Within it appeared an image.

Auren.

The Waykeeper stood beneath a ruined archway, his cloak torn and his face pale.

Behind him, shadows moved between enormous pillars.

“Kaelen.”

The Pathfinder stepped forward.

“Auren?”

The image flickered.

“You must reach the Sanctuary of the Falling Sun.”

Tovin hurried beside him.

“We're on our way.”

Auren looked behind him.

There was a sound like breaking stone.

“Listen carefully. The third shard cannot remain hidden much longer.”

Kaelen tightened his grip upon the Waystone.

“What's happening?”

“The sanctuary has been discovered.”

Lyra approached.

“By Vaelrith?”

Auren's expression darkened.

“By something he has awakened.”

The image flickered violently.

“Do not follow the eastern road. It has already fallen.”

Kaelen looked toward the mountains.

“Which road should we take?”

Auren raised his lantern.

“The one that remembers the sun.”

The image began to disappear.

“Auren!”

The Waykeeper looked directly at him.

“There are things I should have told you long ago.”

His voice weakened.

“If I cannot tell you myself, seek the chamber beneath the sanctuary.”

A shadow moved behind him.

Auren turned.

Golden light erupted.

The image vanished.

The Waystone became dark.

For several moments, the companions stood motionless upon the road.

Seren drew her blade.

“That didn't sound promising.”

Bram adjusted his pack.

“Then we'd better move.”

Lyra looked toward the northern mountains.

Above their highest peaks, the evening sky had begun to darken.

Not with clouds.

With something that moved against the wind.

Kaelen remembered Thalassa's warning.

The final gateway would test what they were willing to leave behind.

He looked toward his companions.

Six travelers.

One little keeper of the first light.

Together, they had crossed mountains, forests, ancient cities and a sea without stars.

They had restored kingdoms and freed guardians.

They had faced the memories of the dead and the fears of the living.

Yet somewhere ahead, a man who had watched over the roads for centuries was preparing to make a choice that would change their journey forever.

Kaelen raised the Waystone.

Its light returned.

“Come on.”

The companions followed him toward the mountains.

Behind them, the last daughter of the ancient dragons flew beneath a peaceful sky.

Before them, the sun descended toward the horizon.

And at a sanctuary where the light was already failing, the last Waykeeper stood alone.

CHAPTER 20

The Fall of the Waykeeper

The sun should have risen an hour ago.

Kaelen stood upon a ridge overlooking the northern wilderness, watching a pale band of light struggle against the darkness surrounding the mountains. The clouds moved slowly, gathering around a distant peak where occasional flashes of golden light illuminated the sky.

Somewhere beneath those clouds stood the Sanctuary of the Falling Sun.

Somewhere within that sanctuary, Auren was fighting for his life.

The Waystone had remained unusually quiet since his desperate message the previous evening. Kaelen had attempted to contact him several times during the night, but the artifact offered no response.

He was beginning to fear what that silence meant.

Mira approached carrying two cups of warm water mixed with herbs from Queen Isolde's provisions.

“Anything?”

Kaelen shook his head.

She handed him a cup.

“You haven't slept.”

“Neither have you.”

“I slept for an hour.”

“Impressive.”

“I thought so.”

They stood together, watching the distant mountain.

“Do you think he's still alive?” Kaelen asked.

Mira took a drink before answering.

“Auren survived the Shattering. I wouldn't underestimate him.”

“Neither would I.”

“But?”

Kaelen looked down at the Waystone.

“He sounded afraid.”

Mira considered that.

“Perhaps he finally has something worth being afraid of losing.”

Behind them, Bram emerged from their temporary shelter beneath an overhanging rock.

Flicker rested upon his shoulder, wearing the little silver pendant Queen Isolde had given him.

“Breakfast is ready.”

Seren appeared behind him.

“That's a generous description.”

“It's bread.”

“It's a rock pretending to be bread.”

“Then dip it in something.”

“Like a river?”

Bram sighed.

“Some people simply cannot appreciate wilderness cuisine.”

Tovin approached with the royal maps spread across his arms.

“I've located three possible routes toward the sanctuary.”

Kaelen turned.

“Which one remembers the sun?”

The Spellweaver looked toward the darkened horizon.

“That is precisely the problem.”

The Village That Waited for Morning

The companions descended into a valley where the trees grew unusually close together.

Their branches twisted above the road, creating a canopy so thick that even the weak morning light could barely penetrate it.

An abandoned wagon stood beside the path.

Its wheels were intact.

Several wooden crates remained inside.

Mira examined the surrounding ground.

“No signs of a struggle.”

Seren opened one of the crates.

“Apples.”

Bram immediately became interested.

“Fresh?”

“Relatively.”

“Excellent.”

Tovin inspected the wagon.

“Who abandons supplies in the middle of a wilderness?”

Lyra looked toward the trees.

“Someone who believes carrying them will slow their escape.”

They continued cautiously.

Less than a mile farther along the road, they discovered a village.

Small stone houses surrounded a central square. A wooden tower rose above the rooftops, its bell hanging motionless beneath a pointed roof.

Smoke emerged from several chimneys.

Yet the streets were empty.

Kaelen approached the nearest house.

“Hello?”

A curtain moved.

Then a door opened slightly.

An elderly man looked outside.

His expression changed when he saw the companions.

“You shouldn't be here.”

Kaelen lowered his hands.

“We're travelers.”

“Then travel somewhere else.”

The man began closing the door.

Lyra stepped forward.

“We're searching for the Sanctuary of the Falling Sun.”

The door stopped.

The man's face became pale.

“Why?”

“A friend of ours is there.”

The man looked toward the mountains.

“Then your friend is already lost.”

He closed the door.

Bram frowned.

“Friendly place.”

Another voice emerged from behind them.

“Forgive my father.”

A woman stood beside a neighboring house. She wore a heavy woolen cloak, and a young boy clung to her hand.

“He hasn't slept properly in days.”

Kaelen introduced the companions.

The woman identified herself as Maren.

She invited them into her home, where a small fire burned beneath a stone hearth.

Her son immediately became fascinated by Flicker.

The little creature climbed onto a chair and allowed the boy to stroke his fur.

Maren watched them.

“His name is Ewan.”

Bram smiled.

“Flicker likes him.”

The boy looked up.

“Can he make the sun come back?”

The room became silent.

Lyra knelt beside him.

“Why do you ask that?”

Ewan pointed toward the window.

“Because it forgot us.”

Maren closed her eyes.

“For six days, the sun has barely appeared above the mountains. Every morning becomes darker than the last.”

Tovin approached the window.

“Have you noticed anything else?”

“Travelers disappearing. Strange sounds beneath the roads. Lights moving through the forest at night.”

She lowered her voice.

“And the shadows.”

Kaelen turned.

“What shadows?”

Maren looked toward the hearth.

“Three nights ago, my husband went outside to collect firewood. Something followed him back.”

Ewan moved closer to his mother.

“It looked like Father.”

Maren placed an arm around him.

“But it wasn't.”

The companions exchanged uneasy glances.

“Where is your husband now?” Mira asked.

“Missing.”

Maren stared into the fire.

“Several villagers have disappeared. We no longer leave our homes after the bells ring.”

Lyra felt something cold move through the village.

She approached the window.

Across the square, a figure stood beneath the bell tower.

Its shape resembled a man.

But its shadow stretched in the wrong direction.

“Kaelen.”

He joined her.

The figure turned toward the house.

Its face was hidden beneath a dark hood.

Then it disappeared.

Maren whispered something that sounded like a prayer.

Kaelen looked toward the mountains.

Whatever Auren was fighting had already begun spreading beyond the sanctuary.

They could not afford to wait.

But they could not simply abandon the village either.

The Things That Wear Our Faces

The companions gathered the villagers inside the largest building, an old meeting hall constructed around a central fireplace.

There were thirty-seven people remaining.

Most were elderly residents, parents and children. Several younger villagers carried farming tools that had been hastily converted into weapons.

Maren's father stood near the entrance.

He introduced himself reluctantly as Orlan.

“You cannot fight these things,” he told Kaelen.

“We've fought creatures like them before.”

“No.”

Orlan shook his head.

“You haven't.”

He pointed toward the darkened windows.

“They know things.”

Tovin looked up.

“What things?”

“Names. Memories. Things only the people they resemble should know.”

The elderly man sat heavily upon a bench.

“My wife died twelve years ago.”

His voice trembled.

“Yesterday, she knocked upon my door.”

Nobody spoke.

“She called me by the name she used when we were young. She told me she had been waiting for me.”

Orlan looked toward his daughter.

“I nearly opened the door.”

Lyra approached him.

“What stopped you?”

“Maren.”

The old man covered his face.

“I wanted it to be her.”

Lyra sat beside him.

“Of course you did.”

Outside, the bell began ringing.

Every villager froze.

Maren stood.

“Nobody is supposed to ring it.”

The sound continued.

Slow.

Deliberate.

Kaelen drew his knife.

Mira raised her new shield.

Seren moved toward the windows.

A voice emerged from the square.

“Maren!”

The woman turned pale.

Ewan looked toward the door.

“Father?”

Maren caught his arm.

The voice called again.

“Maren, open the door!”

Several villagers began crying.

More voices joined the first.

A missing daughter.

A dead brother.

A childhood friend.

A mother whose funeral had taken place years earlier.

The square filled with familiar voices.

Bram gripped his hammer.

“That's a particularly cruel trick.”

Lyra closed her eyes.

She could sense the creatures outside.

They possessed fragments of stolen memories, but no true understanding of the people they imitated.

They knew words.

Faces.

Expressions.

But they did not know love.

“Don't answer them,” she told the villagers.

A knock struck the door.

Then another.

“Maren!”

Ewan began to cry.

The voice softened.

“It's all right, son. Father is home.”

Maren held him tightly.

Flicker jumped from Bram's shoulder and approached the door.

His tail began glowing.

The voices outside stopped.

For several seconds, silence filled the hall.

Then something struck the door with tremendous force.

Mira braced herself against it.

“Now would be a good time for a plan!”

Tovin examined the building.

An ancient symbol had been carved into the stone above the fireplace.

He hurried toward it.

“This village was built upon a Waykeeper's road!”

Kaelen retrieved the Waystone.

The symbol responded immediately.

Golden light spread through the fireplace.

Outside, the creatures screamed.

Tovin looked toward the surrounding walls.

“There must be more markings!”

The companions searched the building.

Seren discovered one beneath a wooden bench.

Bram found another carved into the base of a support pillar.

Lyra located a fourth near the rear entrance.

Flicker raced between them, awakening each symbol with his golden light.

The building trembled.

A protective barrier spread across its walls.

The creatures outside shrieked.

One attempted to force its way through a window.

Its human appearance dissolved, revealing a hollow figure composed of shadow and violet mist.

The barrier struck it.

The creature disappeared.

Orlan stared.

“By the heavens.”

Tovin raised his staff.

“The original protections still function.”

Kaelen looked toward the square.

“Then we restore the rest of them.”

For the next hour, the companions worked their way through the village.

Ancient markings had been concealed beneath doorsteps, forgotten beneath layers of plaster and covered by generations of ordinary construction.

Flicker found them.

Tovin restored them.

Mira and Bram defended the others whenever the shadow creatures approached.

Seren climbed the bell tower and discovered the largest ward carved beneath its wooden platform.

When Kaelen raised the Waystone toward it, golden light erupted across the village.

The shadows fled into the surrounding forest.

For the first time in six days, the clouds above the valley separated.

A narrow beam of sunlight reached the village square.

Ewan ran outside.

“The sun!”

Maren followed him.

The villagers emerged slowly, staring upward.

Some laughed.

Others wept.

Orlan approached Kaelen.

“You have given us back our morning.”

Kaelen looked toward the mountains.

“Only temporarily. We need to stop whatever is causing this.”

Orlan nodded.

“Then you need the old road.”

Tovin unfolded the maps.

“Which one?”

The elderly man pointed toward the western hills.

“My grandfather used to tell stories about a road that appeared only when sunlight touched the ancient stones.”

Kaelen looked toward the golden markings beneath the bell tower.

“The road that remembers the sun.”

Orlan smiled.

“So you know the story.”

“Part of it.”

The old man retrieved a wooden walking stick.

“Then allow me to show you the rest.”

The Road of Golden Stones

Orlan led them beyond the village to a hillside overlooking the valley.

An ancient stone pillar stood among the trees.

Its surface was covered with moss, and a circular opening occupied its center.

“The old road begins here.”

Tovin examined the pillar.

“Remarkable.”

Seren looked toward the dense forest beyond it.

“I don't see a road.”

“That's because it isn't morning yet.”

Bram looked at the sky.

“It has been morning for several hours.”

Orlan smiled.

“Not for this road.”

He pointed toward the opening in the pillar.

“During the first light of day, the sun would shine through that opening and reveal the stones.”

Kaelen studied the dark clouds.

“Then we'll need another source of light.”

Flicker chirped.

Everyone looked at him.

Bram sighed.

“You're becoming rather important, aren't you?”

The little creature climbed onto the pillar.

His golden tail illuminated the circular opening.

A beam of light traveled through it.

The forest changed.

Stone markers appeared between the trees, each illuminated by a golden symbol.

The markings extended up the mountainside.

Tovin stared.

“Extraordinary.”

Orlan removed his hat.

“My grandfather would have loved to see this.”

Kaelen shook his hand.

“Thank you.”

The old man looked toward the sanctuary.

“Bring your friend home.”

Kaelen nodded.

“We'll try.”

The companions followed the golden stones into the forest.

Behind them, Orlan remained beside the ancient pillar until they disappeared from view.

Auren's Last Stand

At the Sanctuary of the Falling Sun, Auren knelt beside a shattered pillar.

Blood stained the sleeve of his robe.

His lantern rested upon the ground, its flame burning weakly.

Beyond the sanctuary walls, shadows gathered across the mountainside.

They had attacked repeatedly throughout the night.

Each time, he had driven them back.

Each time, the effort had cost him more strength.

He looked toward the sanctuary's central altar.

Three golden seals remained illuminated.

Two others had already failed.

He knew what would happen when the final seals disappeared.

The sanctuary would become another doorway for Vaelrith's corruption.

And the knowledge concealed beneath it would be lost.

Auren closed his eyes.

For centuries, he had carried the memory of the Shattering.

He remembered the screams.

The collapsing roads.

The faces of the Waykeepers who had died attempting to stop their former brother.

And he remembered Vaelrith before the darkness.

That was the memory he found hardest to bear.

They had once been friends.

More than friends.

Brothers in purpose.

They had traveled between worlds together, discovering civilizations, restoring ancient passages and studying the mysteries of the roads.

Vaelrith had laughed easily in those days.

He had possessed an extraordinary curiosity and a genuine love for the people they encountered.

When a village needed help, he was often the first to offer it.

When travelers became lost, he refused to abandon the search.

But then the roads began failing.

And Vaelrith's compassion became fear.

His fear became obsession.

His obsession became something Auren had failed to recognize until it was too late.

A voice emerged from the darkness.

“You remember.”

Auren opened his eyes.

Vaelrith stood beyond the broken pillars.

His form was more solid than before.

Black robes moved around him despite the absence of wind.

Auren struggled to his feet.

“I remember everything.”

Vaelrith approached.

“Then you remember what we could have accomplished.”

“I remember what we destroyed.”

The shadow smiled.

“You always did prefer dwelling upon failures.”

Auren raised his lantern.

“You were my brother.”

For a moment, Vaelrith's expression changed.

Then the darkness returned.

“And you betrayed me.”

“I tried to stop you.”

“Precisely.”

Auren looked toward the altar.

“You cannot enter the chamber.”

Vaelrith followed his gaze.

“Not yet.”

He smiled.

“But your strength is failing.”

Auren tightened his grip upon the lantern.

“Then come and discover how much remains.”

Vaelrith raised one hand.

The shadows advanced.

And the last Waykeeper stood against them.

The Sanctuary of the Falling Sun

The companions reached the final ridge shortly before midday.

Below them stood the sanctuary.

It had been constructed upon a circular platform overlooking an enormous valley. Seven stone towers surrounded its central structure, each connected by bridges engraved with ancient markings.

Three towers had collapsed.

A fourth burned with violet fire.

Dark creatures moved between the ruins.

At the center of the sanctuary, a golden light flickered.

Lyra stopped.

“Auren.”

Kaelen raised the Waystone.

The artifact responded.

For the first time since the previous evening, he felt the presence of the Waykeeper.

Weak.

But alive.

“We need to reach him.”

Seren examined the bridges.

“The main entrance is surrounded.”

Bram pointed toward a partially collapsed wall.

“What about there?”

Mira nodded.

“It'll do.”

Tovin studied the sanctuary.

“The protective seals are failing.”

“How long?” Kaelen asked.

“Not long enough.”

They descended.

The first creatures noticed them halfway down the ridge.

They resembled wolves, although their bodies were composed of shifting shadows. Violet flames burned within their eyes.

Seren drew her blade.

“Apparently, we've been expected.”

Mira stepped forward.

Her new shield caught the faint sunlight.

The dragon emblem began to glow.

The nearest creature hesitated.

Bram smiled.

“I like that shield.”

“So do I.”

The creature charged.

Mira intercepted it.

Her shield released a burst of silver light, throwing the shadow backward.

Tovin stared.

“Dragon-forged metal.”

Mira struck another creature.

“Study it later!”

“Everyone keeps saying that!”

The companions fought their way toward the broken wall.

Flicker raced ahead, illuminating the ancient markings beneath their feet.

Kaelen followed the golden trail.

Each restored marking weakened the shadows surrounding the sanctuary.

But the darkness continued gathering.

Something larger moved between the towers.

Something that had noticed their arrival.

The Guardian of the Hollow Sun

They entered the sanctuary through a collapsed archway.

Auren stood beside the central altar.

His lantern illuminated the surrounding courtyard, but the golden light barely extended beyond his feet.

Kaelen rushed toward him.

“Auren!”

The Waykeeper turned.

For the first time since their journey began, Kaelen saw genuine relief upon his face.

“You found the road.”

“Orlan helped us.”

Auren smiled weakly.

“The village still remembers.”

Mira approached.

“You're wounded.”

“A temporary inconvenience.”

Bram looked at the blood covering his robes.

“That's a considerable inconvenience.”

Auren attempted to laugh.

Instead, he stumbled.

Kaelen caught him.

Tovin examined the failing seals.

“What happened here?”

Auren looked toward the northern tower.

“Vaelrith awakened something that should have remained buried.”

A terrible sound emerged from beyond the courtyard.

Stone cracked.

The remaining tower shook.

A creature stepped into view.

It stood taller than the surrounding pillars.

Its body resembled an ancient armored giant, but its chest contained a hollow sphere where a brilliant golden flame should have burned.

Instead, darkness rotated within it.

Its enormous arms were covered with shattered inscriptions.

Auren lowered his head.

“The Solar Sentinel.”

Tovin stared.

“A Waykeeper construct?”

“One of the greatest ever created.”

The creature turned toward them.

Its empty chest began drawing light from the sanctuary.

Auren raised his lantern.

“It once protected the central roads.”

Kaelen looked toward the giant.

“Can we restore it?”

Auren remained silent.

The creature stepped forward.

The courtyard trembled.

“Can we?” Kaelen repeated.

Auren looked at him.

“I do not know.”

That answer frightened Kaelen more than anything else.

The Truth Between Brothers

The Solar Sentinel raised one enormous hand.

Dark energy gathered around its fingers.

Mira shouted for everyone to move.

The attack struck the courtyard, shattering the remaining stone benches.

Bram dragged Auren behind a pillar.

Seren raced toward the giant's legs.

Tovin examined the markings upon its armor.

“The original inscriptions are still there!”

Kaelen raised the Waystone.

Golden threads appeared beneath the creature's corrupted surface.

But unlike the guardians they had encountered before, these threads were deeply fractured.

Something within the construct had been deliberately removed.

Auren struggled to stand.

“The heart.”

Tovin turned.

“What?”

“Its original heart was taken during the Shattering.”

The Waykeeper pointed toward the hollow sphere.

“Without it, the Sentinel cannot remember its purpose.”

Lyra looked toward the creature.

“Then Vaelrith gave it another one.”

“Yes.”

The giant struck again.

Mira barely intercepted the blow.

Her shield flashed silver.

The impact threw her across the courtyard.

Kaelen ran toward her.

She struggled to her feet.

“I'm all right.”

The creature raised its hand again.

Auren stepped forward.

His lantern burned brighter.

The Sentinel stopped.

For a moment, its head turned toward him.

Auren whispered an ancient phrase.

Golden light appeared within several of its markings.

Then the darkness returned.

A voice echoed from the giant's hollow chest.

“Still trying to repair what cannot be repaired?”

Vaelrith.

His shadow appeared above the creature.

Auren looked upward.

“Some things can be repaired.”

Vaelrith laughed.

“Then repair the worlds you abandoned.”

Kaelen stepped beside the Waykeeper.

“What is he talking about?”

Auren lowered his lantern.

For several moments, he did not answer.

Then he looked toward the companions.

“The Shattering was not simply an accident.”

Tovin approached.

“We know. Thalassa told us.”

Auren's expression darkened.

“Did she tell you who closed the central gateway?”

Kaelen shook his head.

Auren looked toward the mountains.

“I did.”

The courtyard became silent.

Even Vaelrith seemed to wait.

Auren continued.

“When Vaelrith attempted to bind the roads, the corruption began spreading through the entire network. We could not stop it.”

He looked at his lantern.

“So I closed the gateway.”

Lyra remembered Thalassa's vision.

The falling dragons.

The disappearing roads.

“The travelers who were still inside…”

Auren closed his eyes.

“Yes.”

Kaelen stared at him.

“How many?”

“I do not know.”

The Waykeeper's voice broke.

“Entire passages vanished. Families were separated. Cities became isolated from the worlds that sustained them.”

Vaelrith smiled.

“Tell them the rest.”

Auren looked toward Kaelen.

“The road to your world was among those I closed.”

Nobody moved.

Seren slowly lowered her blade.

Tovin stared at the Waykeeper.

Bram's expression became unreadable.

Kaelen felt the Waystone grow heavy within his hand.

“You knew?”

Auren nodded.

“From the moment I recognized you.”

“And you didn't tell us?”

“I feared that knowing the truth would cause you to abandon the journey.”

Kaelen took a step backward.

“You let us believe that restoring the roads would simply take us home.”

“I believed it might.”

“But you knew there was more to it.”

“Yes.”

Anger rose within Kaelen.

After everything they had endured, after every risk they had taken, he had believed Auren was the one person who understood what they were trying to accomplish.

Now he discovered that the Waykeeper had withheld the truth from the beginning.

Vaelrith watched with satisfaction.

“Your beloved guide has been using you.”

Auren bowed his head.

“I have made mistakes.”

“Mistakes?”

Vaelrith's laughter echoed across the sanctuary.

“You condemned countless travelers to exile, then spent centuries pretending your actions were noble.”

Auren looked toward him.

“I have never pretended they were noble.”

His voice became stronger.

“I chose between terrible possibilities. And I have lived with that choice every day since.”

Kaelen stared at him.

“Why didn't you trust us?”

Auren looked directly into his eyes.

“Because I was afraid.”

The answer was so simple that Kaelen found himself unable to respond.

The ancient Waykeeper.

The mysterious guardian of forgotten roads.

The man who had always seemed to possess answers.

Afraid.

Auren continued.

“I feared losing the last opportunity to repair what I had broken. I feared you would hate me. And I feared that if you knew how dangerous the final gateway truly was, you would refuse to open it.”

Lyra approached.

“Then you made our choice for us.”

Auren nodded.

“Yes.”

He lowered his lantern.

“And for that, I am deeply sorry.”

The Battle for the Sanctuary

Vaelrith raised his hand.

“Touching.”

The Solar Sentinel roared.

Darkness erupted from its hollow chest.

Auren lifted his lantern.

A golden barrier surrounded the companions just before the attack reached them.

The force drove him to one knee.

“Whatever your judgment of me,” he said through clenched teeth, “I ask that you survive long enough to make it.”

Kaelen looked toward the giant.

There would be time for anger later.

If they survived.

“Tovin!”

The Spellweaver examined the construct.

“Its joints are connected to the original sanctuary seals!”

“Can we separate them?”

“Possibly!”

Seren looked upward.

“That's becoming my least favorite word.”

Mira raised her shield.

“Tell us what you need.”

Tovin pointed toward the remaining towers.

“The Sentinel is drawing power from the sanctuary itself. We must restore the three surviving seals.”

Bram lifted his hammer.

“Then let's get to work.”

The companions separated.

Mira and Bram remained in the courtyard, drawing the Sentinel away from Auren.

Seren climbed toward the western tower.

Tovin hurried toward the eastern seal.

Lyra followed Flicker toward the northern ruins.

Kaelen remained beside the Waykeeper.

Auren looked at him.

“You should help them.”

“I am.”

Kaelen supported him as another wave of darkness struck the barrier.

Auren smiled faintly.

“You have every reason to leave me here.”

Kaelen looked toward the others.

“That's not how we do things.”

For a moment, the Waykeeper's expression became peaceful.

Then he raised his lantern again.

Seren reached the western tower as its foundations began collapsing.

The seal rested upon a circular platform overlooking the valley.

Violet chains surrounded it.

She climbed across the damaged stonework, avoiding falling debris.

Below her, the Solar Sentinel struck the courtyard.

The entire tower shifted.

“Wonderful.”

She reached the platform and examined the chains.

They were not physical.

Her blade passed through them.

“Tovin!” she shouted.

The Spellweaver was too far away to hear.

Seren looked toward the ancient inscription beneath the seal.

A figure carrying a lantern stood beside an open road.

She remembered the gate beneath Queen Isolde's palace.

The ancient protections responded to purpose.

Not command.

She placed her hand against the inscription.

“I don't know how this works.”

Nothing happened.

“But I'm trying to protect the people down there.”

The chains flickered.

Seren closed her eyes.

“Not because anyone ordered me to. Because they're my friends.”

Golden light appeared beneath her fingers.

The chains dissolved.

The western seal awakened.

Below, the Sentinel staggered.

Seren smiled.

“Apparently, sincerity is a form of magic.”

At the eastern tower, Tovin encountered a different problem.

The seal had been broken into several pieces.

He knelt beside them.

The fragments contained portions of an intricate circular pattern.

He began arranging them.

One piece fit.

Then another.

The sanctuary shook.

A fragment slipped from the platform.

Tovin caught it just before it disappeared into the valley.

He looked toward the courtyard.

Mira and Bram were struggling to contain the giant.

He worked faster.

Then he stopped.

The original pattern was incomplete.

One piece was missing.

He searched the platform.

Nothing.

He examined the surrounding inscriptions.

The missing section represented a flame.

The sanctuary's power.

Tovin looked at his staff.

Its crystal contained magic he had accumulated throughout their journey.

He had carefully preserved it.

Studied it.

Learned to control it.

Now he placed the staff across the missing section.

Golden energy flowed from its crystal into the seal.

The staff began to crack.

Tovin hesitated.

Then he pressed it farther into the opening.

“Knowledge exists to serve life.”

The crystal shattered.

Golden light filled the eastern tower.

The seal awakened.

Tovin looked at the broken remains of his staff.

He sighed.

“I was rather fond of that.”

Then he ran toward the courtyard.

Lyra and Flicker reached the northern seal beneath a collapsed staircase.

Darkness surrounded it.

Voices emerged from the shadows.

They whispered her name.

They offered visions of home.

Of safety.

Of people she missed.

Lyra closed her eyes.

She recognized the deception.

But that did not make it painless.

Flicker moved toward the seal.

The shadows gathered around him.

His golden light flickered.

Lyra knelt beside the creature.

“You've done enough, little one.”

Flicker looked at her.

She placed both hands against the ancient stone.

The darkness whispered again.

You could go home.

Lyra opened her eyes.

“Not like this.”

The shadows recoiled.

You will lose everything.

“Perhaps.”

She looked toward the courtyard.

“But I won't abandon them.”

Flicker pressed his paws against the seal.

Golden light spread beneath them.

The darkness shattered.

The northern seal awakened.

All three surviving towers began glowing.

The sanctuary filled with light.

And the Solar Sentinel screamed.

The Final Lantern

The Sentinel collapsed onto one knee.

Its enormous hands struck the courtyard.

Golden inscriptions appeared across its armor.

For a moment, the darkness within its chest weakened.

Auren looked toward it.

“Now.”

Kaelen raised the Waystone.

Its blue light connected with the restored seals.

The Sentinel raised its head.

A faint voice emerged from within its hollow chest.

“Purpose… forgotten.”

Lyra approached.

“You were created to protect the roads.”

The creature trembled.

“Protect…”

Golden light spread across its armor.

Then Vaelrith appeared above it.

“NO.”

The shadow drove both hands into the hollow sphere.

Darkness surged through the Sentinel.

Its golden inscriptions shattered.

Auren staggered.

The restored seals began failing again.

Tovin stared.

“He's forcing the corruption directly into it!”

Vaelrith turned toward Kaelen.

“You have done exactly what I required.”

Kaelen tightened his grip upon the Waystone.

“What?”

“The sanctuary is awake. The ancient road beneath it is open.”

Vaelrith smiled.

“And now I shall claim what remains.”

Auren looked toward the central altar.

His expression changed.

“He intends to enter the chamber.”

Kaelen followed his gaze.

Golden light surrounded the altar.

Beneath it, an ancient doorway had begun opening.

Vaelrith descended toward it.

Auren raised his lantern.

The shadow stopped.

“You cannot prevent me forever.”

Auren looked at the lantern.

Its flame burned weakly.

“No.”

He turned toward Kaelen.

“But I can prevent you today.”

The Waykeeper walked toward the altar.

Kaelen followed.

“What are you doing?”

Auren removed a silver chain from around his neck.

Attached to it was a small golden key.

“The chamber beneath the sanctuary contains the final records of the Waykeepers.”

He placed the key in Kaelen's hand.

“You must recover them.”

Kaelen looked toward the approaching darkness.

“We'll recover them together.”

Auren smiled sadly.

“I am afraid that road is not mine to travel.”

Mira approached.

“What does that mean?”

Tovin looked at the lantern.

His face became pale.

“Auren, no.”

The Waykeeper turned toward him.

“You understand.”

Tovin shook his head.

“There must be another way.”

“What remains of the sanctuary's original power cannot contain the Sentinel.”

Auren lifted his lantern.

“But this can.”

Kaelen stared at the flame.

“What happens when you use it?”

Auren remained silent.

Lyra closed her eyes.

She could feel the truth.

The lantern was not merely an artifact.

Its flame was connected to Auren's life.

Every year he had survived beyond an ordinary lifespan.

Every road he had traveled.

Every sanctuary he had protected.

All were sustained by that ancient light.

If he released it completely, nothing would remain to sustain him.

Kaelen shook his head.

“No.”

Auren placed a hand upon his shoulder.

“I have spent centuries trying to undo one terrible decision.”

“Then keep trying!”

“I am.”

The Waykeeper looked toward Vaelrith.

“This time, I will not decide the fate of others without their consent.”

He turned toward the companions.

“This choice concerns only my own life.”

Kaelen's eyes filled with tears.

“We can fight him.”

“You will.”

Auren smiled.

“But not here. Not yet.”

The Sentinel began rising.

Vaelrith's darkness spread across the courtyard.

Auren looked at each companion.

“Mira, never allow strength to become cruelty.”

The Guardian lowered her head.

“Seren, remember that freedom carries responsibility.”

Seren wiped her eyes.

“Tovin, seek wisdom as diligently as you seek knowledge.”

The Spellweaver held the remains of his staff.

“Bram, continue protecting those who cannot protect themselves.”

Bram swallowed.

“Lyra, never allow the darkness of another's memories to extinguish your own light.”

The Seer began to cry.

Auren knelt beside Flicker.

The creature approached him.

“And you, little keeper…”

He stroked Flicker's head.

“Thank you for finding them.”

Flicker released a quiet, mournful sound.

Auren stood.

Finally, he looked toward Kaelen.

“Pathfinder.”

Kaelen could barely speak.

“Please.”

Auren placed both hands upon his shoulders.

“You were never meant to carry the entire world.”

The Waykeeper smiled.

“Only to help others find their way through it.”

He stepped backward.

“Go.”

When the Light Became the Sun

Auren walked toward the Solar Sentinel.

Vaelrith watched him approach.

“What are you doing?”

Auren raised his lantern.

“Something I should have done long ago.”

The shadow laughed.

“You cannot destroy me.”

“Perhaps not.”

Auren looked toward the darkened sky.

“But I can remind this place what it was built to protect.”

He opened the lantern.

Golden light erupted.

The entire sanctuary trembled.

Vaelrith recoiled.

“No!”

The light traveled across the courtyard, illuminating every ancient inscription.

The collapsed towers began glowing.

The broken bridges filled with golden energy.

The Solar Sentinel raised its enormous hands.

Auren approached its hollow chest.

For the first time in centuries, the construct seemed to recognize him.

“Waykeeper.”

Auren smiled.

“Yes, old friend.”

He raised the lantern.

“Remember.”

The flame left its enclosure.

It rose into the Sentinel's chest.

Golden fire replaced the darkness.

The construct roared.

Vaelrith screamed as the light tore through his shadow.

The sky above the sanctuary began to clear.

Auren's body became surrounded by golden light.

His face changed.

For a moment, Kaelen saw him as a younger man.

A traveler standing beneath unfamiliar stars.

A friend laughing beside another Waykeeper.

A guardian carrying his first lantern.

Then the vision faded.

Auren turned toward the companions.

His eyes met Kaelen's.

And he smiled.

The light became unbearable.

Mira pulled Kaelen toward the chamber entrance.

He resisted.

“AUREN!”

Bram caught his arm.

“Kaelen!”

The sanctuary shook.

The Waykeeper raised one hand in farewell.

Then the golden light consumed him.

A tremendous wave traveled across the mountains.

The shadows disappeared.

The clouds broke apart.

Sunlight flooded the valley.

The Solar Sentinel stood upright.

Its chest burned with a brilliant golden flame.

Vaelrith's presence vanished.

And where Auren had stood, only an empty lantern remained.

The Silence Afterward

Nobody spoke.

The companions emerged from the chamber entrance into a courtyard illuminated by sunlight.

The darkness was gone.

The sanctuary seals burned steadily.

Birds began singing somewhere beyond the ruined walls.

It seemed impossible that the world could become so peaceful so quickly.

Kaelen approached the empty lantern.

He knelt.

Its metal was warm.

But the flame was gone.

He lifted it carefully.

“Auren?”

There was no answer.

He waited.

Part of him expected the Waykeeper to appear from behind a pillar, offer some mysterious explanation and continue their journey as though nothing extraordinary had happened.

But the courtyard remained silent.

Mira knelt beside him.

Kaelen lowered his head.

“I was angry with him.”

She placed a hand upon his shoulder.

“I know.”

“The last thing I said to him before the battle…”

His voice broke.

“I questioned whether we could trust him.”

Mira looked toward the golden towers.

“He knew you cared.”

Kaelen shook his head.

“I never told him I forgave him.”

For several moments, Mira remained silent.

Then she answered.

“Perhaps you can still honor him by living what he taught you.”

Kaelen held the lantern against his chest.

Behind them, Bram sat upon a broken stone.

Flicker climbed into his lap.

The creature's golden tail barely glowed.

Bram stroked his fur.

“He was a good man.”

Tovin stood beside him.

“A complicated man.”

Bram nodded.

“Most good men are.”

Seren looked toward the mountains.

She had no clever remark.

No joke to soften the silence.

She simply stood beside her friends.

And together, they mourned.

The Waykeeper's Chamber

They remained in the courtyard until late afternoon.

Eventually, the Solar Sentinel approached.

Its enormous body no longer radiated darkness.

Golden inscriptions covered its armor.

It lowered itself onto one knee before the companions.

“Waykeeper's purpose restored.”

Kaelen looked upward.

“Do you remember him?”

The Sentinel's golden eyes brightened.

“Auren.”

Kaelen swallowed.

“Yes.”

The construct placed one enormous hand against its chest.

“Light freely given.”

It bowed its head.

“Light shall be remembered.”

Then it pointed toward the central altar.

“Pathfinder. Your road continues.”

Kaelen looked at the golden key in his hand.

He was not ready.

He suspected he might never feel ready.

But the others gathered beside him.

Mira carried her shield.

Seren rested a hand upon her blade.

Bram lifted Flicker onto his shoulder.

Lyra wiped her eyes.

Tovin held his broken staff.

They descended together.

The chamber beneath the sanctuary was small compared with the magnificent halls they had encountered elsewhere.

Its walls contained shelves filled with ancient journals.

At its center stood a wooden table.

Upon it rested a sealed letter.

Kaelen recognized the handwriting immediately.

His name had been written across the front.

He opened it.

To the Pathfinder, should my road end before yours.

Kaelen took a trembling breath.

Then he began reading aloud.

If you are reading this, I have failed to accompany you as far as I intended.

There are truths within these journals that I should have shared with you long ago. I allowed fear to persuade me that withholding them would protect you. In doing so, I became guilty of the very mistake I have spent centuries condemning.

Please learn from my failure.

Vaelrith believes that the roads must answer to a single will. He believes that uncertainty is the enemy of peace and that freedom is too dangerous to entrust to ordinary people.

He is wrong.

The roads were never beautiful because they could be controlled. They were beautiful because they allowed people to discover one another.

The third shard rests within the Vault of the First Dawn. The map beside this letter will guide you there.

When you recover it, the Waystone will reveal the location of the central gateway.

But remember this above all else: the gateway can open more than one road. Vaelrith will attempt to persuade you that returning home requires surrendering control to him.

It does not.

There is another way.

I have spent centuries searching for it. I believe the answer lies not in the power of the shards, but in the covenant that originally bound them together.

Trust one another.

Speak the truth, even when it is painful.

Protect those who cannot repay you.

And never allow fear to convince you that another person's freedom is an acceptable price for your own.

You have already become more than I could have hoped.

I am proud of you.

May your roads remain open, your lanterns remain bright, and your hearts remember the way home.

Auren

Kaelen lowered the letter.

Nobody spoke for a long time.

Tovin approached the shelves.

He carefully removed several journals.

“These contain centuries of knowledge.”

Lyra looked toward the letter.

“And a lifetime of regrets.”

Kaelen folded it.

He placed it inside his coat, close to his heart.

Then he examined the map.

A mountain range occupied its northern edge.

Beyond it lay an enormous valley marked with the symbol of a rising sun.

The Vault of the First Dawn.

At last, they knew where the third shard rested.

But the man who had guided them toward it would not be there when they found it.

The Seventh Traveler

Before leaving the sanctuary, the companions constructed a small memorial overlooking the valley.

Bram selected a smooth stone.

Tovin carved the ancient symbol of the Waykeepers into its surface.

Seren gathered wildflowers from the mountainside.

Mira placed a silver ribbon beneath the inscription.

Lyra stood beside the memorial, remembering the warmth of Auren's presence.

Kaelen placed the empty lantern upon the stone.

For a moment, he considered leaving it there.

Then Flicker approached.

The creature sniffed the lantern.

His golden tail illuminated its empty interior.

A tiny spark appeared.

Kaelen stared.

The spark grew into a small flame.

Tovin stepped closer.

“How?”

Lyra smiled through her tears.

“Light remembers light.”

The flame remained small.

Gentle.

It possessed none of the extraordinary power Auren had released during his final battle.

But it burned.

Kaelen lifted the lantern.

He looked toward the memorial.

“We'll carry it with us.”

Bram nodded.

“Seems appropriate.”

The companions stood together as the sun descended toward the western mountains.

Kaelen remembered their earliest days in Aetherfall.

How frightened they had been.

How little they had understood.

How Auren had appeared when the roads seemed impossible to navigate.

The Waykeeper had not been perfect.

He had made mistakes.

He had withheld truths.

He had carried guilt for centuries.

Yet when the moment came to choose between preserving his own life and protecting others, he had chosen to give what remained of himself.

Kaelen bowed his head.

“Thank you, Auren.”

The wind moved gently across the memorial.

Flicker chirped.

And the little flame inside the lantern continued burning.

Beyond the Sanctuary

They departed the following morning.

The Solar Sentinel stood upon the sanctuary's highest remaining platform, watching over the valley.

Far below, sunlight reached the village they had helped.

Children played in the square.

Merchants reopened their stalls.

Orlan stood beside the ancient pillar, watching the mountains.

He did not know everything that had happened.

But when he saw the golden light rising above the sanctuary, he removed his hat.

Somewhere within his heart, he understood that someone had paid dearly for the return of morning.

The companions followed the northern road.

For several miles, they walked without speaking.

Kaelen carried Auren's lantern beside the Waystone.

Tovin eventually approached him.

“I've been reading one of the journals.”

Kaelen looked toward him.

“Anything useful?”

“Quite a lot.”

The Spellweaver hesitated.

“There is something concerning the third shard.”

“What?”

Tovin opened the journal.

“The Vault of the First Dawn was designed to conceal the shard from anyone seeking to control the roads.”

“That sounds encouraging.”

“Yes, except…”

Kaelen waited.

“The vault does not open in response to power. It opens in response to sacrifice.”

Kaelen stopped.

The others turned.

Bram frowned.

“We've had enough of that.”

Tovin closed the journal.

“I agree.”

Lyra looked toward the distant mountains.

“Perhaps sacrifice doesn't always mean death.”

Mira nodded.

“Perhaps it means surrendering something we believe we cannot live without.”

Kaelen looked down at the Waystone.

Then at Auren's lantern.

He remembered Thalassa's warning.

The final gateway would test what they were willing to leave behind.

The companions continued walking.

Ahead of them, the mountains opened into a vast wilderness where the oldest roads in Aetherfall lay buried beneath centuries of forgotten history.

Beyond those roads waited the third shard.

Beyond the shard waited Vaelrith.

And beyond Vaelrith, perhaps, waited home.

But for the first time since their journey began, Kaelen understood that returning home could not be their only purpose.

Too many people depended upon what happened next.

Too many had already given everything to preserve the possibility of freedom.

He would not allow their sacrifices to become meaningless.

He raised Auren's lantern.

Its little flame burned steadily against the morning wind.

Six companions continued along the ancient road.

Yet none of them felt that they were traveling without their seventh.

CHAPTER 21

The Third Shard

On the fourth morning after Auren's death, Kaelen woke to the sound of someone turning pages.

Tovin sat beside the remains of their campfire, surrounded by journals, maps and several pieces of parchment covered in his increasingly untidy handwriting.

His broken staff rested beside him.

He had not attempted to repair it.

Kaelen pulled his blanket around his shoulders and sat up.

“Did you sleep?”

Tovin glanced toward him.

“Eventually.”

“When?”

“I'm still investigating that.”

Kaelen smiled.

Beyond their campsite, the northern wilderness stretched beneath a pale morning sky. Mountains rose from a landscape of deep valleys, enormous forests and rivers that seemed to disappear into the earth.

They had entered a region older than any kingdom they had visited.

There were no villages.

No merchants.

No travelers.

Only the occasional remains of a stone road disappearing beneath centuries of vegetation.

Kaelen retrieved Auren's lantern.

The little flame continued burning.

He had discovered that it required neither oil nor anything resembling ordinary fuel. It remained illuminated through rain, wind and darkness, although its light never extended farther than a few feet.

Somehow, that seemed appropriate.

Auren had never illuminated the entire road.

Only enough of it to help them take the next step.

Tovin closed one of the journals.

“I think I've discovered why the third shard was hidden separately from the others.”

Kaelen moved closer.

“Go on.”

“The first shard remembers where a road begins. The second remembers where it ends.”

“And the third?”

Tovin turned the journal toward him.

A drawing occupied the center of the page.

Three circles surrounded an image of an open gateway.

Beneath them, Auren had written a single sentence.

No road is complete until someone chooses to walk it.

Tovin tapped the inscription.

“The third shard governs passage.”

Kaelen studied the drawing.

“Meaning?”

“The first two shards can identify a road and restore its destination. But without the third, the connection remains incomplete.”

He turned another page.

“Once all three are united, the Waystone becomes capable of opening passages between worlds.”

Kaelen looked down at the artifact.

“Home.”

“Potentially.”

The Spellweaver hesitated.

“Unfortunately, there is something else.”

“Of course there is.”

Tovin pointed toward a series of smaller markings surrounding the gateway.

“The completed Waystone will awaken every surviving road connected to the original network.”

Kaelen stared at him.

“Every road?”

“According to Auren's research.”

Tovin lowered his voice.

“Imagine thousands of doors opening simultaneously. Some may lead to peaceful kingdoms. Others may lead to places that have remained sealed for very good reasons.”

Kaelen remembered the creatures they had encountered throughout Aetherfall.

The Thornbound.

The shadow imitators.

The corrupted guardians.

And the enormous darkness that had consumed entire roads during the Shattering.

“Then recovering the third shard might be more dangerous than we thought.”

Tovin nodded.

“Considerably.”

Behind them, Bram emerged from beneath his blanket.

“Good morning.”

He looked at their expressions.

“Something terrible?”

Kaelen nodded.

“Potentially.”

Bram sat beside the fire.

“Excellent. I was concerned we might have an ordinary day.”

The Forest of Unfinished Journeys

By midday, the companions reached a forest unlike anything they had encountered before.

The trees were enormous.

Their trunks stretched hundreds of feet into the sky, disappearing beneath a canopy of silver leaves. Golden markings covered their bark, and narrow streams of luminous water flowed between their roots.

The air smelled of rain, earth and something strangely familiar.

Seren stopped beside a tree.

“Does anyone else hear that?”

The companions listened.

At first, Kaelen heard only the wind.

Then came another sound.

Footsteps.

Hundreds of them.

Perhaps thousands.

Yet the forest around them remained empty.

Lyra closed her eyes.

“Memories.”

Tovin examined the nearest tree.

“These markings resemble those upon the ancient roads.”

He touched the bark.

A faint image appeared.

A family walked beneath the trees, carrying baskets filled with fruit. A little girl ran ahead, laughing as her father attempted to catch her.

The image disappeared.

Bram stared.

“Well.”

Another image appeared farther along the path.

A merchant leading a caravan.

Then a group of soldiers.

Then two elderly travelers walking hand in hand.

Every tree seemed to remember someone.

Kaelen approached a particularly large trunk.

Its bark contained an image of a man standing beneath an open gateway.

The man carried a lantern.

Kaelen immediately recognized him.

“Auren.”

The companions gathered beside him.

The memory showed a much younger Waykeeper walking through the forest alongside several others.

Among them was Vaelrith.

He was smiling.

Kaelen watched as the two men stopped beside a stream. Vaelrith removed his boots and stepped into the water, apparently challenging Auren to follow.

Auren shook his head.

Vaelrith laughed.

Then the memory faded.

For a moment, nobody spoke.

Seren finally broke the silence.

“It's strange seeing him like that.”

“Vaelrith?” Mira asked.

She nodded.

“He looks ordinary.”

Lyra watched the place where the image had disappeared.

“Perhaps he was.”

Kaelen considered that.

It would have been easier to believe Vaelrith had always been a monster.

That darkness had existed within him from the beginning.

But the memories they had discovered suggested something far more troubling.

He had once cared about others.

He had once possessed friends.

He had once carried a lantern rather than a shadow.

Somewhere along his journey, he had allowed fear to transform everything he believed.

Kaelen wondered how many terrible choices began with someone convincing themselves that they were necessary.

He looked toward the road ahead.

And wondered how many such choices still waited for them.

The Woman at the Crossroads

They encountered the stranger shortly before sunset.

She sat beside a stone marker where three ancient paths met.

Her cloak was gray, her hair white, and a wooden walking stick rested across her knees.

A small cooking pot hung above a fire.

Bram immediately noticed the smell.

“Is that stew?”

The woman looked up.

“Depends who's asking.”

“A hungry traveler.”

“Then yes.”

Bram smiled.

“I like her already.”

The woman gestured toward several fallen logs surrounding the fire.

“Sit.”

Kaelen remained cautious.

“We didn't expect to find anyone here.”

“Most people don't.”

She examined the companions one by one.

Her gaze eventually settled upon Auren's lantern.

Her expression changed.

“Where did you get that?”

Kaelen looked down.

“It belonged to a friend.”

The woman stood.

She approached slowly.

“May I?”

Kaelen handed her the lantern.

She held it carefully, studying the little flame.

For several moments, she said nothing.

Then she closed her eyes.

“Oh, Auren.”

Lyra moved closer.

“You knew him?”

The woman nodded.

“Long before any of you were born.”

She returned the lantern.

“My name is Elowen.”

Tovin looked toward her.

“Were you a Waykeeper?”

Elowen smiled.

“No. Something considerably less impressive.”

She sat beside the fire.

“I maintained the roads.”

Bram frowned.

“Maintained them?”

“Repaired markers. Cleared pathways. Helped travelers. Recorded damaged passages.”

She shrugged.

“While the Waykeepers discussed the mysteries of existence, someone had to make sure people didn't trip over broken stones.”

Seren laughed.

“I definitely like her.”

Elowen distributed bowls of stew.

The companions ate while she described the ancient forest.

Before the Shattering, it had served as a meeting place for travelers from dozens of worlds. The trees had absorbed fragments of their memories, preserving journeys that might otherwise have been forgotten.

“Every traveler left something behind,” she explained.

“Not deliberately. A laugh. A conversation. A moment of fear. A moment of happiness.”

She looked toward the surrounding trees.

“The forest remembers them all.”

Kaelen studied her.

“How have you survived here?”

Elowen smiled faintly.

“The old roads behave differently around time. I've learned not to count my years too carefully.”

Tovin nearly dropped his spoon.

“You have experienced temporal displacement?”

“Frequently.”

“Could you describe—”

Seren interrupted.

“Eat your stew.”

Elowen laughed.

“You remind me of Auren's younger days.”

Tovin looked delighted.

“Really?”

“He also asked too many questions.”

Seren smiled.

“Definitely accurate.”

Later, when the others had finished eating, Kaelen told Elowen what had happened at the Sanctuary of the Falling Sun.

She listened without interruption.

When he described Auren's final sacrifice, she lowered her head.

For a long time, she stared into the fire.

“I wondered whether he would ever forgive himself.”

Kaelen looked toward her.

“Did he?”

Elowen considered the question.

“Perhaps, in the end, he stopped believing that forgiveness had to be earned through suffering.”

She looked at the lantern.

“Perhaps he finally understood that what mattered was what he chose to do with the life he still possessed.”

Kaelen felt the familiar ache return.

“I wish I could speak to him again.”

Elowen nodded.

“Most of us have someone we wish we could speak to again.”

She reached into her cloak and removed a small wooden token.

A rising sun had been carved into its surface.

“The Vault of the First Dawn lies beyond the forest.”

Tovin leaned forward.

“You know its location?”

“I know the road.”

She handed the token to Kaelen.

“But before you reach it, you must cross the Valley of Echoes.”

Bram sighed.

“That doesn't sound particularly pleasant.”

“It isn't.”

Elowen looked at each companion.

“The valley remembers more than journeys.”

Her expression became serious.

“It remembers possibilities.”

Lyra frowned.

“What does that mean?”

Elowen looked toward the darkening forest.

“It shows travelers the lives they might have lived if they had chosen different roads.”

The fire crackled.

“Some people enter the valley and never leave.”

The Valley of Echoes

Elowen accompanied them to the edge of the forest the following morning.

Beyond the trees lay a vast valley filled with pale mist.

Ancient stone arches rose from the ground at irregular intervals. Some stood upright. Others had collapsed beneath the weight of centuries.

The road disappeared between them.

Elowen stopped beside the first arch.

“I cannot accompany you farther.”

Kaelen looked toward her.

“Why?”

She smiled sadly.

“There are things within that valley I have spent a very long time learning to leave behind.”

She pointed toward the wooden token.

“Keep it close. It remembers the true road.”

Tovin examined the mist.

“Are the visions dangerous?”

“Only if you mistake them for something they are not.”

“And what are they?”

“Possibilities.”

Elowen turned toward Kaelen.

“Not promises.”

She embraced Lyra, shook Bram's hand and offered each companion a final word of encouragement.

Then she stepped back.

“Remember, travelers. A life you might have lived is not necessarily better than the one you have.”

Kaelen thanked her.

The companions entered the valley.

Within moments, the forest disappeared behind them.

The mist thickened.

Their footsteps became strangely distant.

Then Kaelen heard a familiar voice.

“Kaelen?”

He stopped.

His heart seemed to forget how to beat.

He knew that voice.

He had heard it countless times before arriving in Aetherfall.

He turned.

And the valley vanished.

The Life Beyond the Door

Kaelen stood beneath a familiar sky.

There were no floating islands.

No ancient gateways.

No glowing forests.

No distant mountains surrounded by magical storms.

He was home.

The buildings surrounding him were ordinary. Vehicles moved along familiar streets. People hurried past carrying groceries, talking with friends and worrying about things that suddenly seemed wonderfully insignificant.

For several moments, he simply stood there.

Breathing.

A familiar figure approached him.

“Where have you been?”

Kaelen could not answer.

He looked around.

Everything was exactly as he remembered it.

The ordinary world he had once taken for granted.

The world he had spent months trying to reach.

He felt tears gather in his eyes.

“I'm home.”

The figure smiled.

“Of course you are.”

Kaelen followed.

Every step carried him farther from the mist.

He entered a familiar building.

He smelled familiar food.

He heard familiar laughter.

For a moment, Aetherfall seemed like something he had dreamed.

Then he noticed something.

Auren's lantern was gone.

So was the Waystone.

He looked down at his hands.

There were no scars.

No bruises.

No reminders of the battles he had survived.

The familiar figure watched him.

“You look worried.”

Kaelen shook his head.

“I was traveling with some friends.”

“Friends?”

“Mira. Seren. Tovin. Bram. Lyra.”

The figure looked confused.

“And Flicker.”

Nobody answered.

Kaelen looked toward the window.

The ordinary world continued beyond it.

He could remain here.

He could sit down.

Eat.

Rest.

Sleep without worrying about what waited beyond the next road.

But somewhere beneath the familiar sounds, he heard something else.

A faint cry.

He closed his eyes.

Mira.

Bram.

Lyra.

His companions were still somewhere within the valley.

He turned toward the door.

“Where are you going?”

Kaelen looked back.

“I have to find them.”

“Why?”

The question seemed genuinely confused.

“You're home.”

Kaelen looked around the room.

Everything he wanted was here.

Except the people who had helped him reach it.

He placed his hand upon the door.

“Not yet.”

The familiar world trembled.

The walls disappeared.

The sunlight faded.

Kaelen stood once more within the mist.

Auren's lantern rested in his hand.

Its little flame continued burning.

The Guardian's Peace

Mira found herself standing beside a quiet river.

Daniel sat upon a wooden bench beneath a tree.

He looked exactly as she remembered him.

For a moment, she could not move.

Then she ran toward him.

He stood and opened his arms.

She embraced him.

The world seemed to disappear around them.

There were no battles.

No responsibilities.

No frightened travelers depending upon her shield.

Only Daniel.

And the terrible longing she had carried throughout their journey.

“You're safe,” he whispered.

Mira closed her eyes.

“I missed you.”

“I know.”

They sat beside the river.

He spoke about ordinary things.

The weather.

Places they remembered.

Small moments she had feared she might forget.

Mira listened, scarcely daring to breathe.

Then Daniel looked toward the shield resting beside her.

“You don't need that anymore.”

She followed his gaze.

The silver dragon emblem reflected the sunlight.

“Perhaps not.”

“Stay here.”

She looked at him.

“You've done enough.”

For a moment, she wanted to believe him.

She was tired.

Her arm still ached from the battle beneath Thalassa's mountain.

Her heart ached from Auren's death.

She had protected others for so long that the thought of someone protecting her seemed almost impossible to resist.

Daniel took her hand.

“Let someone else carry the burden.”

Mira looked toward the river.

Its surface reflected a different image.

Six companions walking through the wilderness.

A frightened child hiding from shadows.

Queen Isolde kneeling beside a wounded dragon.

Auren standing alone beneath a darkened sky.

She understood.

This place was offering her peace at the cost of everything she had become.

She looked toward Daniel.

“I wish this were real.”

He smiled.

“It can be.”

Mira shook her head.

“No.”

She lifted her shield.

“Because the Daniel I remember would never ask me to abandon people who needed me.”

The figure's expression changed.

The river darkened.

Mira stood.

“I will always carry your memory.”

She touched the shield.

“But I still have a life to live.”

The vision dissolved.

She returned to the valley with tears upon her face.

Kaelen was waiting.

He said nothing.

He simply embraced her.

The Roads They Might Have Taken

One by one, the companions confronted the lives the valley offered them.

Seren discovered a world without obligations.

She traveled wherever she wished. No one depended upon her. No one expected her to return.

She possessed complete freedom.

Yet as the years passed within the vision, she found herself sitting alone beside unfamiliar roads.

She had become extraordinarily skilled at leaving.

But she had forgotten how to belong.

When the vision offered her another road, she turned away.

“I already have somewhere to go.”

The mist released her.

Tovin stood within an enormous library.

Its shelves extended beyond sight.

Every question he had ever asked possessed an answer.

Every mystery had been recorded.

Every ancient mechanism could be understood.

His staff was restored.

His power seemed limitless.

For hours—or perhaps years—he wandered through the endless collection.

Then he discovered a book containing the complete history of Aetherfall.

He opened it.

The final pages described the deaths of his companions.

He searched for a way to change what had happened.

The library provided none.

Knowledge surrounded him.

Yet there was nobody left with whom to share it.

Tovin closed the book.

“What good is understanding everything if I abandon everyone?”

The shelves began disappearing.

He smiled sadly.

“Besides, some questions are worth discovering together.”

He returned to the valley carrying his broken staff.

Bram found himself beside a familiar forge.

The fire burned brightly.

Tools rested upon the walls.

A comfortable chair waited near the hearth.

He could spend his remaining days making useful things, enjoying good food and sleeping beneath a roof that did not threaten to collapse.

There were no monsters.

No ancient prophecies.

No impossible bridges.

He sat beside the fire.

For a moment, he considered remaining.

Then he noticed the empty space beside his chair.

“Flicker?”

There was no response.

He searched the forge.

The little creature was nowhere to be found.

Neither were his companions.

Bram returned to the chair.

The room seemed considerably less comfortable.

He sighed.

“Apparently, I've grown attached to those troublesome people.”

He lifted his hammer.

“And someone needs to make sure they eat.”

The forge disappeared.

Lyra encountered a different vision.

She stood within a world where she could hear no one's pain.

No memories reached her.

No sorrow entered her thoughts.

She possessed complete silence.

At first, the relief was overwhelming.

For the first time since becoming the Seer, she could walk among strangers without sensing the grief they carried.

She could sleep without dreams.

She could live without feeling the wounds of others.

Then she saw a child sitting alone beside a road.

The child was crying.

Lyra approached.

“What's wrong?”

The child looked at her.

But Lyra could not sense anything.

She could not understand the fear behind the tears.

She could only offer her hand.

And suddenly, she understood.

Her gift had never been the source of her compassion.

It had merely given her another way to express it.

She looked toward the mist.

“I don't want to stop caring simply because caring hurts.”

The silence vanished.

The valley returned.

When the six companions finally gathered beneath an ancient archway, nobody immediately spoke.

Each had encountered something deeply personal.

Each had been offered a different kind of escape.

Bram looked around.

“Everyone accounted for?”

Seren nodded.

“Tovin?”

“Present.”

“Mira?”

“Here.”

“Lyra?”

She smiled.

“Here.”

“Kaelen?”

He raised Auren's lantern.

“Here.”

Bram frowned.

“Where's Flicker?”

The companions froze.

A faint golden light appeared farther along the road.

Then came a familiar chirp.

Flicker emerged from the mist carrying something in his mouth.

Bram knelt.

“What have you got?”

The little creature dropped a silver leaf into his hand.

Then he climbed onto Bram's shoulder.

Lyra looked toward the mist.

“I wonder what the valley showed him.”

Bram stroked Flicker's head.

“Probably an endless supply of pastries.”

Seren laughed.

“And he still came back?”

Bram smiled.

“That's loyalty.”

The Vault of the First Dawn

The valley ended beneath an enormous mountain.

Its eastern face contained a circular doorway surrounded by seven stone pillars. Above it, an ancient carving depicted the sun rising over a network of roads.

No guards waited outside.

No corrupted creatures.

No visible locks.

Only an inscription.

Tovin brushed away the dust.

“*Enter not with what you possess, but with what you are willing to surrender.*”

Bram folded his arms.

“I preferred the stew.”

Kaelen placed Elowen's wooden token against the doorway.

Golden light spread across the stone.

The entrance opened.

Beyond it lay a chamber illuminated by a soft amber glow.

At its center stood a pedestal.

Above the pedestal floated a crystal shard.

Unlike the first two, this shard contained no single color.

Blue, silver and gold moved within it, changing continuously like sunlight upon water.

The Waystone responded.

Kaelen felt its power reach toward the crystal.

The third shard.

After everything they had endured, it was finally within reach.

He stepped forward.

The chamber trembled.

A figure appeared beside the pedestal.

It resembled a woman wearing ancient Waykeeper robes. Her face was calm, and her eyes contained a gentle golden light.

“Travelers.”

Kaelen stopped.

“Who are you?”

“I am the Keeper of the First Dawn.”

Tovin bowed his head.

“Are you a guardian?”

“A memory.”

She looked toward the Waystone.

“You carry two fragments of the original key.”

Kaelen nodded.

“We seek the third.”

“Why?”

“To restore the roads.”

The Keeper remained motionless.

“And?”

Kaelen hesitated.

“To return home.”

The woman nodded.

“An honest answer.”

She looked toward the others.

“Do you understand what completing the key will awaken?”

Tovin stepped forward.

“The surviving network.”

“Yes.”

The Keeper raised her hand.

Images appeared around the chamber.

Thousands of gateways.

Ancient cities.

Forests.

Oceans.

Mountains.

Worlds beneath unfamiliar stars.

Some gateways glowed.

Others remained dark.

“Many roads have waited centuries for travelers to return.”

The images changed.

Dark creatures moved behind several sealed passages.

“Others have waited for something else.”

Mira tightened her grip upon her shield.

“Can we choose which roads to open?”

“With the completed key, you may.”

Kaelen looked toward the shard.

“Then why was it hidden?”

The Keeper's expression became solemn.

“Because possession of a key is not proof that one deserves to use it.”

She extended her hand.

“The third shard cannot be taken.”

Kaelen frowned.

“Then how do we receive it?”

“It must be entrusted.”

The chamber darkened.

Six smaller pedestals emerged from the floor.

One before each companion.

The Keeper looked toward them.

“Each of you carries something that has become precious during your journey.”

Kaelen looked down at Auren's lantern.

His heart sank.

The Keeper continued.

“Place upon the pedestal what you believe you cannot afford to lose.”

What We Cannot Carry Forever

Mira approached her pedestal first.

She looked at the dragon-forged shield Queen Isolde had given her.

It represented protection.

Friendship.

The kingdom they had helped restore.

Without it, she would be considerably more vulnerable.

She placed it upon the stone.

“I am more than what protects me.”

Golden light appeared beneath the shield.

Seren approached next.

She removed her blade.

It had accompanied her through forests, mountains, ancient cities and countless battles.

She placed it upon the pedestal.

“My freedom does not depend upon my ability to fight.”

The second pedestal illuminated.

Tovin looked at his broken staff.

Even damaged, it remained a symbol of his identity.

His knowledge.

His accomplishments.

His understanding of magic.

He placed it upon the stone.

“I will continue learning, even if I must begin again.”

The third pedestal awakened.

Bram lifted his hammer.

He studied its worn handle.

The weapon had become almost an extension of his body.

He placed it upon the pedestal.

“My strength is not measured by what I carry.”

The fourth illuminated.

Lyra removed a small journal from her satchel.

Within it, she had recorded memories throughout their journey.

Names.

Stories.

Words spoken by people who might otherwise have been forgotten.

She held it tightly.

Then she placed it upon the stone.

“What I have loved will remain part of me, even if I cannot preserve every detail.”

The fifth pedestal awakened.

Kaelen stood before the final one.

Auren's lantern rested in his hand.

He stared at its little flame.

“No.”

The Keeper watched him.

Kaelen looked toward the shard.

“Anything else.”

She remained silent.

He tightened his grip upon the lantern.

“It belonged to someone who gave his life for us.”

“I know.”

“Then you understand why I cannot surrender it.”

The Keeper approached.

“Does the lantern contain your friend?”

Kaelen lowered his head.

“No.”

“Does its flame contain everything he taught you?”

“No.”

“Then what are you afraid of losing?”

Kaelen struggled to answer.

He remembered Auren's final smile.

The golden light.

The empty courtyard.

The letter.

He remembered lifting the lantern from the stone and discovering that its flame had returned.

He had carried it ever since.

Somewhere along the road, he had begun treating it as though keeping the lantern meant keeping Auren.

He closed his eyes.

“I don't want him to disappear.”

Mira approached.

“He won't.”

Kaelen looked at her.

She touched his shoulder.

“Not while we remember him.”

Bram nodded.

“Not while we live by what he taught us.”

Lyra smiled gently.

“Not while we carry his light in our own hearts.”

Kaelen looked toward the lantern.

For several moments, he remained motionless.

Then he placed it upon the pedestal.

“Thank you, Auren.”

The sixth pedestal illuminated.

The chamber filled with golden light.

The Keeper looked at the companions.

“You have demonstrated a willingness to surrender what you value.”

She raised her hand.

“But you have misunderstood the final test.”

Tovin frowned.

“We have?”

The Keeper smiled.

“Sacrifice is not measured by how much pain it causes.”

She looked toward the six pedestals.

“Nor does wisdom require you to destroy what is precious merely to prove that you can live without it.”

The companions exchanged confused glances.

“The purpose of this chamber is not to take your possessions.”

She turned toward Kaelen.

“It is to discover whether your possessions have taken you.”

Golden light surrounded the pedestals.

One by one, the objects rose.

Mira's shield returned to her hands.

Seren received her blade.

Bram caught his hammer.

Lyra's journal floated toward her.

Tovin's broken staff remained suspended for several moments.

Its shattered crystal dissolved.

A new crystal formed within its frame.

Clear.

Brilliant.

Filled with golden light.

The staff returned to him.

Tovin stared at it.

“I…”

For once, he could find no words.

Finally, Auren's lantern floated toward Kaelen.

He accepted it with trembling hands.

The Keeper smiled.

“Carry these things with gratitude.”

She looked toward the third shard.

“But never allow them to become chains.”

The Key Made Whole

The third shard descended from its pedestal.

Kaelen raised the Waystone.

The crystal moved toward it.

The chamber began trembling.

Blue light erupted from the first shard.

Silver light emerged from the second.

Golden light surrounded the third.

The three fragments drew together.

For a moment, Kaelen saw countless images.

Every road they had traveled.

Every guardian they had restored.

Every kingdom they had helped.

The Tidewarden.

Queen Isolde.

Thalassa.

The Sanctuary of the Falling Sun.

Auren.

Then the images expanded.

He saw roads extending beyond Aetherfall.

Roads reaching toward worlds beneath unfamiliar stars.

Roads disappearing into places where time seemed to move differently.

And among them, one road shone with a light he recognized.

Home.

Kaelen gasped.

Mira caught his arm.

“Kaelen?”

He stared into the light.

“I can see it.”

The others gathered around him.

“Our world.”

For several moments, nobody moved.

They had dreamed of this moment.

Discussed it.

Feared it might never arrive.

Now the road existed before them.

Not as a memory.

Not as a possibility.

As something real.

Seren laughed through her tears.

“We actually found it.”

Bram lowered his head.

“After all this time.”

Tovin stared at the completed Waystone.

“Extraordinary.”

Lyra closed her eyes.

She could feel the road.

Its warmth.

Its familiarity.

Its promise.

Kaelen looked toward the Keeper.

“How do we open it?”

The woman's expression became grave.

“You must reach the central gateway.”

The images changed.

An enormous city appeared beneath a darkened sky.

At its center stood a circular tower surrounded by shattered roads.

Kaelen recognized it from Thalassa's memories.

The city where the Shattering had begun.

The Keeper spoke.

“Vaelrith has returned to the ruins of the ancient capital.”

Darkness moved across the image.

“His power grows with every road he corrupts.”

Kaelen tightened his grip upon the completed Waystone.

“Then we stop him.”

The Keeper looked toward the artifact.

“Be careful, Pathfinder.”

Her voice became softer.

“The completed key has awakened something that has slept for centuries.”

A distant sound traveled through the chamber.

Like thousands of locks opening simultaneously.

Tovin turned toward the doorway.

“What was that?”

The Keeper closed her eyes.

“The roads remember.”

The Awakening

Across Aetherfall, ancient gateways began to illuminate.

In forgotten forests, stone arches filled with golden light.

Beneath abandoned cities, dormant mechanisms awakened.

Within mountain sanctuaries, guardians opened their eyes for the first time in centuries.

Queen Isolde stood upon her palace balcony as the dragon fountain erupted with blue light.

Thalassa raised her enormous head.

She looked toward the northern wilderness.

They have found it.

At the Sanctuary of the Falling Sun, the Solar Sentinel stood motionless beneath a brilliant sky.

Its golden heart pulsed.

Ancient markings illuminated the surrounding towers.

Far below, Orlan watched the village bell tower begin to glow.

Ewan ran into the square.

“Mother! Look!”

Maren emerged from her home.

Golden light traveled along the road.

For the first time in generations, forgotten pathways became visible beyond the surrounding hills.

Across the Sea Without Stars, Captain Rhydan stood aboard the *Lantern's Wake*.

The compass began spinning.

Nessa hurried toward him.

“Captain?”

Rhydan looked toward the horizon.

A constellation appeared above the sea.

Then another.

Then another.

Stars that had vanished centuries earlier returned to the night sky.

He removed his hat.

“Well done, travelers.”

But not every awakened road carried light.

In the ruins of the ancient capital, Vaelrith stood before the central gateway.

Its enormous circular frame had remained dark since the Shattering.

Now golden markings appeared across its surface.

Vaelrith smiled.

“Finally.”

Behind him, the darkness began moving.

Thousands of shadow creatures gathered among the ruined streets.

Corrupted guardians emerged from forgotten chambers.

Ancient soldiers rose from beneath the broken roads, their armor filled with violet fire.

Vaelrith extended his hand toward the gateway.

For a moment, golden light reached toward him.

Then recoiled.

His expression hardened.

“Still refusing me?”

He lowered his hand.

“No matter.”

He turned toward the gathering creatures.

“The Pathfinder carries what we require.”

Beyond the city, enormous shapes moved beneath the earth.

The mountains trembled.

Black clouds spread across the sky.

Vaelrith raised both arms.

“Let the forgotten roads awaken.”

The darkness surged.

“And let the worlds remember their master.”

The Warning of the First Dawn

Inside the vault, the Keeper staggered.

Her golden form flickered.

Tovin approached.

“What is happening?”

She looked toward the chamber walls.

“The awakening has reached the ancient capital.”

Kaelen felt the Waystone pulse violently.

Images appeared around him.

Dark armies.

Broken cities.

Guardians falling beneath waves of shadow.

He saw roads turning violet.

One after another.

“Vaelrith.”

The Keeper nodded.

“He has prepared for this moment.”

Mira raised her shield.

“Can we stop the awakening?”

“No.”

“Can we close the roads?”

“Not from here.”

Kaelen looked toward the completed Waystone.

The artifact contained more power than anything he had ever held.

Yet for the first time, he was afraid to use it.

The Keeper approached.

“Listen carefully.”

Her voice weakened.

“Vaelrith will attempt to separate you.”

She looked toward the six companions.

“He knows what you desire. He knows what you fear. And he understands that the road home may become the most powerful temptation you have ever faced.”

Kaelen remembered the Valley of Echoes.

The familiar streets.

The ordinary world.

The overwhelming desire to remain.

The Keeper continued.

“He cannot command the completed key unless its bearer willingly surrenders it.”

Tovin frowned.

“Then he cannot simply take it?”

“He can possess the stone.”

She looked toward Kaelen.

“But possession alone will not grant him its authority.”

Kaelen understood.

Vaelrith would not merely attempt to defeat him.

He would attempt to persuade him.

To offer something so precious that surrendering the Waystone might seem reasonable.

The Keeper's form began disappearing.

“Seek the Last Sanctuary.”

Lyra stepped forward.

“Where?”

An image appeared above the pedestal.

A city surrounded by enormous white walls.

Thousands of travelers gathered beneath its towers.

“The surviving guardians will gather there.”

The Keeper looked toward the companions.

“You cannot face what is coming alone.”

Kaelen nodded.

“We won't.”

The woman smiled.

“Then perhaps the roads still have a future.”

Her form dissolved into golden light.

The chamber became silent.

A Promise Before the Storm

The companions emerged from the vault beneath a changing sky.

Golden pathways extended across the mountains.

Some reached toward distant valleys.

Others climbed into the clouds.

The ancient network was awakening.

It was magnificent.

And terrifying.

Kaelen stood upon the mountainside, holding the completed Waystone.

He could feel roads extending in every direction.

Thousands of destinations.

Thousands of possibilities.

Among them, the road home continued shining.

He could sense it so clearly that he almost believed he could reach out and touch it.

Mira approached.

“You can still see it?”

He nodded.

“It's there.”

She looked toward the horizon.

“After everything we've been through.”

Kaelen smiled.

“We found it.”

Seren joined them.

“So what's stopping us?”

Tovin looked toward the dark clouds gathering in the distance.

“Several thousand unpleasant things, apparently.”

Bram sighed.

“I knew it.”

Lyra approached the edge of the mountainside.

She watched the golden roads spreading across Aetherfall.

“People are going to need help.”

Kaelen looked toward his companions.

He knew what they wanted.

He wanted it too.

To return home.

To see familiar places.

To live without constantly wondering whether the next sunrise would bring another battle.

They had earned that possibility.

But they had also discovered something they could no longer ignore.

Aetherfall was not simply the strange world in which they had become lost.

It was a world filled with people they loved.

People who had welcomed them.

Fed them.

Trusted them.

Fought beside them.

Some had died protecting them.

He thought of Auren's letter.

Never allow fear to convince you that another person's freedom is an acceptable price for your own.

Kaelen raised the Waystone.

The road home shone within it.

Then he turned toward the darkness gathering above the ancient capital.

“We finish what we started.”

Mira nodded.

Seren smiled.

Tovin lifted his restored staff.

Bram rested his hammer across his shoulder.

Lyra looked toward the distant sanctuary.

Flicker chirped.

Kaelen raised Auren's lantern.

Its flame burned brighter than before.

Together, they began descending the mountain.

Behind them, the Vault of the First Dawn closed its ancient doors.

Ahead of them, thousands of roads awakened beneath a darkening sky.

They had finally found the way home.

Now they would have to save the world that stood between them and it.

And far beyond the mountains, beneath the ruins of the first great city, an army began to march.

CHAPTER 22

The Gathering Darkness

The first refugee they encountered was a little girl carrying a broken birdcage.

She stood alone beside the ancient road, her dress covered in mud and her bare feet bleeding from the sharp stones scattered across the mountainside.

There was no bird inside the cage.

Only a handful of feathers.

Kaelen stopped so suddenly that Tovin nearly walked into him.

Mira hurried toward the child.

“Hello, sweetheart.”

The girl stepped backward.

Mira lowered her shield and knelt.

“We're not going to hurt you.”

The child looked at the six companions, then at the golden creature resting upon Bram's shoulder.

Flicker chirped softly.

For the first time, the girl showed something other than fear.

“Is he yours?”

Bram approached carefully.

“Sometimes I think we're his.”

Flicker climbed down his arm and approached the child. She reached toward him with trembling fingers.

“His name is Flicker,” Bram explained.

The girl stroked his fur.

“Mine is Anwen.”

Mira smiled.

“That's a beautiful name. Where are your parents, Anwen?”

The child's expression changed.

She pointed toward the valley.

“Mother told me to run.”

Kaelen looked beyond the surrounding hills.

Smoke rose from several distant settlements.

“What happened?”

“The people made of ashes came.”

Tovin exchanged a glance with Lyra.

Anwen continued.

“They came through the old gate. Father tried to stop them.”

She looked down at the birdcage.

“I opened the door so Pip could fly away.”

Mira gently placed her hand upon the child's shoulder.

“You did a brave thing.”

Anwen began crying.

“Will he find me again?”

Mira pulled her close.

“I hope so.”

Kaelen turned toward the valley.

Only two days had passed since they recovered the third shard.

Two days since the ancient roads awakened.

Two days since they discovered that the way home was finally within reach.

And already, innocent people were paying the price.

He looked down at the completed Waystone.

Its beautiful light suddenly seemed much heavier than before.

The Village of Broken Doors

Anwen led them toward a settlement called Willowmere.

It had once been a prosperous farming community built around a shallow river. Its houses stood among orchards, vegetable gardens and fields surrounded by low stone walls.

Now several buildings were burning.

The wooden bridge across the river had collapsed, and an ancient gateway at the center of the village pulsed with violet energy.

Bodies of livestock lay beside overturned wagons.

Doors hung open.

The streets were almost deserted.

Seren moved ahead of the companions, examining the ground.

“Something came through here recently.”

Bram tightened his grip upon his hammer.

“Something large?”

“Several somethings.”

Anwen pointed toward a house near the river.

“That's where we live.”

Mira took her hand.

“Stay close to me.”

They approached the building.

Its front door had been broken from its hinges. Furniture lay scattered across the entrance, and deep scratches marked the wooden floor.

“Mother?”

Anwen's voice was barely audible.

Nobody answered.

Kaelen searched the adjoining rooms while Seren examined the rear garden.

Lyra remained near the entrance.

She closed her eyes.

Fear lingered within the house.

Desperate voices.

The sound of breaking wood.

A woman urging her daughter toward the garden.

But beneath those memories, Lyra sensed something else.

Hope.

Faint, but present.

She opened her eyes.

“Someone survived.”

Anwen looked toward her.

“My mother?”

“I don't know yet.”

Lyra followed the lingering impression toward a small storage building behind the house.

Bram lifted a fallen beam blocking its entrance.

Mira called inside.

“Is anyone there?”

For several seconds, silence answered.

Then came a weak voice.

“Please…”

Bram pulled the door open.

A woman lay beneath a pile of overturned shelves. Blood stained her clothing, and her left leg had been trapped beneath a heavy wooden cabinet.

Anwen screamed.

“MOTHER!”

Mira caught the child before she rushed inside.

Bram and Kaelen lifted the cabinet while Tovin carefully moved the injured woman away from the debris.

Her eyes opened.

“Anwen?”

The little girl threw herself into her mother's arms.

For a moment, the ruined village disappeared around them.

There was only a mother holding her child.

Only the relief of discovering that someone believed lost was still alive.

Kaelen stepped outside.

He could hear other cries now.

Survivors calling from beneath damaged buildings.

People searching for relatives.

A man shouting for help near the river.

He looked toward the ancient gateway.

Its violet light intensified.

The ground trembled.

Seren appeared beside him.

“Whatever attacked this place is coming back.”

Kaelen drew his knife.

“Then we make sure it doesn't reach the survivors.”

The Ashborn

The first creature emerged from the gateway with a sound like dry branches breaking beneath heavy boots.

It resembled a soldier.

Ancient armor covered its body, although the metal had been burned black. Its helmet concealed a face composed entirely of ash and violet flame.

A second creature followed.

Then a third.

Each carried a weapon fashioned from dark metal.

They moved without speaking.

Without hesitation.

Without any apparent awareness of the burning village surrounding them.

Tovin stared at the gateway.

“These aren't ordinary shadows.”

Lyra shook her head.

“No. Something is holding them together.”

The nearest soldier turned toward a wounded villager crawling beside the road.

Mira intercepted it.

Her shield struck its chest.

Silver light erupted across the armor, scattering ash into the air.

The creature staggered but did not fall.

Bram swung his hammer into its side.

The armor collapsed.

A cloud of ash rose from the remains.

For a moment, he believed the creature destroyed.

Then the ash began gathering.

Fragments of armor moved across the ground.

The soldier slowly reassembled itself.

Bram stared.

“Oh, that's irritating.”

Seren drove her blade through another creature's shoulder.

The wound immediately filled with violet fire.

“Tovin!”

The Spellweaver raised his restored staff.

Golden light illuminated the soldiers.

Within each creature's chest, a small black crystal became visible.

“Those crystals are sustaining them!”

Kaelen examined the nearest soldier.

A violet thread extended from its chest toward the gateway.

“They're connected to the road.”

Tovin nodded.

“Then we need to sever that connection.”

Another group emerged.

Then another.

The companions retreated toward the village square.

Mira positioned herself between the advancing soldiers and the wounded survivors.

“Bram, with me!”

The Warden joined her.

“Always.”

Seren climbed onto a damaged wagon, using its elevated position to strike the crystals exposed beneath the soldiers' armor.

The first crystal shattered.

The creature collapsed.

This time, the ashes remained motionless.

“Found their weakness!”

Tovin directed a burst of golden energy toward another soldier.

Its crystal cracked.

Bram finished it with a heavy blow.

Kaelen raised the Waystone.

The artifact revealed dozens of connections extending through the gateway.

Beyond them, he sensed hundreds more.

Perhaps thousands.

He lowered the stone.

“This isn't an invasion of one village.”

Lyra looked toward him.

“What do you see?”

Kaelen stared at the gateway.

“An army.”

The Cost of an Open Road

While the others defended the square, Kaelen and Tovin approached the gateway.

Its original stone frame remained intact.

The corruption had spread across its inscriptions, replacing their golden light with violet fire.

Tovin examined the markings.

“Vaelrith has redirected the passage.”

“Can we restore it?”

“Yes, but that won't prevent more soldiers from entering.”

Kaelen raised the Waystone.

Its light reached toward the gateway.

Suddenly, he could see beyond it.

A ruined city beneath a black sky.

Thousands of soldiers standing in orderly formations.

Enormous creatures moving among shattered towers.

Darkness flowing through ancient roads like water through a broken dam.

Kaelen pulled the Waystone away.

“We need to close it.”

Tovin nodded.

“Try listening to the road rather than commanding it.”

Kaelen closed his eyes.

He remembered Thalassa's words.

The Waystone was never intended to command the roads.

It was intended to listen.

He allowed his thoughts to reach toward the passage.

Beneath the corruption, he sensed something ancient.

A road once traveled by farmers, merchants and families.

A road that remembered children carrying flowers to neighboring villages.

A road that had been built to bring people together.

Now it was being used to destroy them.

Kaelen whispered.

“Rest.”

The Waystone warmed within his hands.

Golden light spread across the gateway.

The violet energy resisted.

For several seconds, the two forces struggled.

Then the ancient inscriptions awakened.

The gateway closed.

The remaining Ashborn soldiers stopped moving.

Their crystals darkened.

One by one, their bodies collapsed into lifeless piles of armor and ash.

Silence returned to Willowmere.

Tovin stared at the sealed passage.

“You closed an ancient road.”

Kaelen lowered the Waystone.

“I think it wanted to close.”

The Spellweaver smiled.

“An important distinction.”

But Kaelen was not smiling.

He looked toward the ruined houses.

The burning fields.

The injured villagers.

“Would any of this have happened if we hadn't recovered the shard?”

Tovin's expression changed.

“Kaelen…”

“We awakened the roads.”

“Yes.”

“And Vaelrith used them.”

Tovin remained silent for a moment.

Then he placed his hand upon Kaelen's shoulder.

“You are responsible for what you choose to do with the Waystone.”

He looked toward the fallen soldiers.

“Vaelrith is responsible for what he chooses to do with the roads.”

Kaelen stared at the destruction.

Knowing that did not make the sight any easier to bear.

The Names of the Missing

They remained in Willowmere until the following morning.

There were forty-three survivors.

Some had escaped into the surrounding orchards. Others had hidden beneath houses or inside storage buildings.

Anwen's mother, whose name was Sella, survived her injuries.

Her father did not.

Bram found him near the collapsed bridge, beside several villagers who had attempted to defend the settlement.

When Mira told Sella, the woman closed her eyes.

Anwen sat beside her.

For a long time, neither spoke.

Then the child placed the broken birdcage upon the ground.

“Father made this.”

Sella pulled her daughter close.

“I know.”

Kaelen stood nearby, unable to find anything useful to say.

He had fought dragons, ancient guardians and creatures born from darkness.

Yet standing before a grieving family, he felt utterly powerless.

Lyra approached him.

“You don't have to find words.”

Kaelen looked toward her.

“I wish I could change what happened.”

“So do I.”

She watched Sella embrace her daughter.

“But we can help them with what happens next.”

That afternoon, the companions gathered the survivors beneath the remains of the village meeting hall.

Tovin examined their maps.

“The Last Sanctuary lies southwest of here. If the restored roads remain stable, we should reach it within several days.”

A farmer named Harlan looked toward the surrounding houses.

“Are we supposed to abandon everything?”

Mira answered gently.

“Only until it's safe to return.”

The man shook his head.

“My family has lived here for generations.”

Bram looked toward the burned fields.

“Then we'll do everything we can to make sure there's something worth returning to.”

Harlan stared at him.

“You promise?”

Bram hesitated.

He could not promise that their village would survive.

He could not promise that every road would remain open.

He could not even promise that he would survive the approaching war.

Finally, he answered.

“I promise we won't forget you.”

The farmer nodded slowly.

For now, that was enough.

Before they departed, the villagers buried their dead.

Lyra recorded each name in her journal.

Not simply the names of soldiers or leaders.

Every person.

A baker.

A farmer.

A young carpenter.

A grandmother who had taught generations of children to read.

Anwen's father.

Kaelen watched her writing.

“Why are you recording them?”

Lyra looked up.

“Because when people speak about this war, they'll talk about kingdoms and armies.”

She returned to the page.

“Someone should remember the people.”

Kaelen knelt beside her.

“May I help?”

She handed him the pen.

Together, they recorded the names.

And when the final grave had been covered, the survivors gathered their belongings and began the journey toward the Last Sanctuary.

The Gathering of the Displaced

The road southwest carried them through a landscape undergoing a terrible transformation.

Ancient pathways had awakened throughout the countryside.

Some offered safe passage.

Others flickered with unstable energy.

Several had become corrupted.

Kaelen learned to recognize the difference through the completed Waystone, although every encounter required concentration.

The artifact no longer simply pointed toward a destination.

It revealed connections.

Thousands of them.

At times, the experience became overwhelming.

He could sense travelers moving along distant roads, gateways opening and closing, guardians awakening and entire passages collapsing beneath the weight of corruption.

He began understanding why the ancient Waykeepers had worked together.

No single person could watch over every road.

No single person should.

By the third day, their group had grown considerably.

They encountered a caravan of merchants whose destination had disappeared.

A group of shepherds driven from the mountains.

Families carrying children, blankets and whatever possessions they had managed to save.

Several wounded soldiers joined them near an abandoned watchtower.

Their commander introduced herself as Lieutenant Cassia.

Her armor bore the emblem of the eastern kingdom.

Mira recognized it immediately.

“Queen Isolde?”

Cassia nodded.

“She ordered several companies north when the roads awakened.”

“What happened?”

The lieutenant looked toward her exhausted soldiers.

“We encountered an army near the ruins of Harrowgate.”

“How large?”

Cassia shook her head.

“Larger than anything I've seen.”

She removed her helmet.

“They don't require food. They don't require sleep. And when their soldiers fall, they rise again unless their crystals are destroyed.”

Bram sighed.

“We've met them.”

Cassia looked toward the growing procession of refugees.

“Where are you taking these people?”

“The Last Sanctuary.”

For the first time, the lieutenant smiled.

“Then our roads have joined.”

She turned toward her soldiers.

“Form a protective line around the travelers.”

The soldiers obeyed.

Mira approached her.

“You're wounded.”

Cassia looked at the bandage around her arm.

“So are half my soldiers.”

“You need rest.”

“We'll rest when the children are behind walls.”

Mira studied her for a moment.

Then she nodded.

She understood that answer.

The Broken Bridge of Harrowgate

The following afternoon, the travelers reached a deep gorge.

An ancient bridge had once connected the two sides.

Now its central span was missing.

Golden fragments of stone floated above the chasm, held in place by remnants of ancient magic.

Below, a river thundered between enormous cliffs.

Tovin examined the bridge.

“The awakening has partially restored it.”

Seren looked at the floating stones.

“Partially is doing a lot of work in that sentence.”

Kaelen raised the Waystone.

The remaining sections responded.

Several stones moved toward one another.

But the bridge refused to become complete.

“Something is missing.”

Tovin studied the inscriptions.

“The eastern anchor.”

He pointed toward a ruined structure on the opposite side.

“The bridge cannot stabilize without it.”

Bram looked across the gorge.

“Of course the thing we need is on the other side.”

Seren examined the floating stones.

“I can reach it.”

Mira shook her head.

“Absolutely not.”

Seren smiled.

“I'm the Windrunner.”

“And gravity remains unimpressed.”

The two women stared at one another.

Finally, Seren removed her pack.

“If we don't restore the bridge, these people will have to travel through the southern valley.”

Cassia approached.

“That's where the Ashborn are gathering.”

Mira looked toward the refugees.

More than a hundred people now waited behind them.

Children.

Injured travelers.

Elderly villagers.

People who could not survive another prolonged journey through dangerous territory.

She turned back toward Seren.

“Be careful.”

Seren smiled.

“Always.”

Bram coughed.

Mira raised an eyebrow.

Seren sighed.

“Occasionally.”

She stepped onto the first floating stone.

The bridge moved beneath her feet.

Each fragment responded to her presence, shifting slightly as she transferred her weight.

Kaelen maintained the Waystone's connection while Tovin reinforced the ancient magic with his staff.

Seren crossed slowly.

Halfway across, the wind intensified.

Several stones began rotating.

She crouched, waiting for them to stabilize.

Then a shadow passed overhead.

Lyra looked upward.

“Seren!”

A creature descended from the clouds.

Its body resembled an enormous bird constructed from broken armor and ash. Violet flames burned between its skeletal wings.

Another followed.

Then a third.

Cassia shouted to her soldiers.

“Protect the travelers!”

Mira raised her shield.

The first creature swept toward the bridge.

Seren threw herself onto a floating stone as its claws passed above her.

The impact sent the stone spinning.

She caught its edge.

“Little help!”

Kaelen struggled to maintain the connection.

Tovin directed a burst of golden light toward the creature.

It recoiled, releasing a terrible metallic scream.

Bram watched helplessly from the cliff.

“Seren!”

She pulled herself onto the stone.

The eastern anchor lay only a short distance away.

But the creatures were circling.

She stood.

Then she ran.

The floating stones shifted beneath her feet.

One disappeared entirely.

She leaped toward the next.

The second creature descended.

Seren twisted beneath its claws and struck the black crystal embedded in its chest.

The creature disintegrated.

Ash scattered into the gorge.

She reached the opposite cliff and rolled across the ground.

Bram released a tremendous breath.

“I am going to have a very serious conversation with that woman.”

Mira smiled despite herself.

“Get in line.”

Seren hurried toward the ruined anchor.

Its central mechanism had been damaged, but the original inscriptions remained visible.

She brushed away the debris.

“Found it!”

Tovin shouted across the gorge.

“Place your hand upon the central marking!”

She obeyed.

Kaelen raised the Waystone.

Golden light traveled through the floating stones.

The eastern anchor awakened.

One by one, the fragments moved into position.

The bridge reassembled itself.

Its ancient stones locked together.

Golden railings emerged along its sides.

Within moments, a complete passage stretched across the gorge.

The refugees began cheering.

Seren stood upon the opposite cliff, breathing heavily.

“You're welcome!”

Then she looked toward the northern sky.

Her smile disappeared.

Beyond the mountains, a vast cloud of ash was approaching.

Within it, hundreds of violet lights moved.

She turned toward the others.

“Everybody across!”

The Flight Through the Mountains

The refugees crossed the bridge as quickly as their injuries allowed.

Cassia's soldiers carried those unable to walk.

Bram lifted two children onto his shoulders.

Mira helped Sella across while Anwen held Flicker close.

Tovin maintained the bridge's stability.

Kaelen remained near the western entrance, watching the approaching darkness.

The Ashborn army was moving through the valley.

Hundreds of soldiers marched beneath the cloud.

Behind them came enormous creatures carrying weapons fashioned from ancient machinery.

Kaelen could feel the corrupted roads beneath their feet.

Vaelrith was using the network to move his forces across Aetherfall.

Every restored passage had become a potential route of invasion.

“Kaelen!”

Tovin stood halfway across the bridge.

“Everyone is clear!”

Kaelen turned.

The last soldiers reached the eastern cliff.

He followed them.

Behind him, the first Ashborn reached the western entrance.

Their black crystals illuminated simultaneously.

The army began crossing.

Kaelen raised the Waystone.

He reached toward the bridge.

Its ancient memory filled his thoughts.

Thousands of travelers.

Generations of families.

Children who had crossed it for the first time.

Merchants returning home.

Soldiers marching toward forgotten wars.

He hesitated.

Destroying the bridge would erase another piece of Aetherfall's history.

But allowing the army to cross would endanger everyone behind him.

Tovin approached.

“You don't have to destroy it.”

Kaelen looked toward him.

“The road can be put to sleep.”

Kaelen closed his eyes.

He listened.

Then he withdrew the energy sustaining the restored passage.

The golden railings disappeared.

The stones separated.

The Ashborn halted as the central span dissolved into light.

Several attempted to continue.

Their bodies fell into the gorge.

The remaining army gathered upon the western cliff.

For the moment, they could advance no farther.

Bram watched them.

“Well, that's a considerable improvement.”

Kaelen lowered the Waystone.

The artifact felt unusually warm.

He looked toward the refugees.

“Keep moving.”

A Kingdom Answers

That evening, the travelers established camp beneath a rocky overhang.

They had little food remaining.

The wounded required treatment.

Several children were too exhausted to continue walking.

Cassia examined the surrounding mountains.

“We cannot remain here long.”

Mira nodded.

“I know.”

Bram divided their remaining provisions.

The portions were small.

Even Flicker received less than usual.

Anwen sat beside the little creature, offering him a piece of bread from her own meal.

Bram watched her.

“You should eat that.”

She shook her head.

“He's hungry.”

Flicker sniffed the bread.

Then he pushed it back toward her.

Anwen smiled.

Bram looked away.

Something had become lodged in his throat.

He suspected it was not the bread.

Near midnight, a tremendous sound echoed across the mountains.

The soldiers immediately rose.

Mira grabbed her shield.

Seren drew her blade.

Kaelen reached for the Waystone.

Then a familiar voice entered their minds.

Little travelers.

Lyra looked upward.

“Thalassa!”

An enormous blue shape descended beneath the moonlight.

The dragon landed upon a broad ledge above the camp.

Her wings folded against her body.

Upon her back sat Queen Isolde.

Behind her, several smaller flying creatures carried baskets suspended beneath their harnesses.

Bram stared.

“Please tell me those contain food.”

Isolde climbed down.

“Among other things.”

Bram spread his arms.

“Your Majesty, you are the finest monarch in recorded history.”

Seren laughed.

The queen embraced Mira, then approached Kaelen.

“We saw the roads awaken.”

Kaelen nodded.

“We found the third shard.”

Isolde looked toward the refugees.

“And Vaelrith found his army.”

Her expression became grave.

“Reports are arriving from every kingdom. Entire settlements have been attacked.”

Thalassa lowered her head.

The corruption spreads faster than I feared.

Kaelen looked toward the dragon.

“Can we stop it?”

Not by defending one road at a time.

She turned toward the southwest.

The guardians must unite.

Isolde nodded.

“I have sent messengers to every surviving council. Those willing to fight are gathering at the Last Sanctuary.”

Cassia approached and bowed.

“Your Majesty.”

Isolde looked at the wounded lieutenant.

“Cassia. I feared your company had been lost.”

“We encountered the Pathfinder.”

The queen smiled.

“That seems to improve one's chances.”

Kaelen looked toward the sleeping children.

“We need to get these people somewhere safe.”

Isolde gestured toward the supplies.

“Then we begin there.”

Throughout the night, the queen and her attendants distributed food, blankets and medicine.

Thalassa remained beside the camp.

Her enormous body sheltered the travelers from the mountain wind.

Anwen approached her cautiously.

“Are you a real dragon?”

Thalassa lowered her head.

I certainly hope so.

The child stared.

“You can talk!”

Occasionally.

Anwen looked toward Flicker.

“He doesn't talk.”

The dragon studied the little creature.

He communicates quite effectively.

Flicker chirped.

Thalassa laughed.

Anwen touched the dragon's scales.

“Are you going to fight the bad people?”

The dragon became still.

I am going to protect the good people.

The child considered that.

Then she nodded.

“That's better.”

Thalassa looked toward Lyra.

Children sometimes possess a wisdom that escapes their elders.

Lyra smiled.

“Frequently.”

The Council Beneath the Stars

Later that evening, Kaelen sat with Isolde, Tovin and the others beside a small fire.

Thalassa rested nearby.

The queen unfolded a map across a flat stone.

Several regions had been marked with black ink.

“Harrowgate has fallen.”

She pointed toward another settlement.

“The northern watchtowers are surrounded.”

Another mark.

“The western trade routes are no longer safe.”

Tovin examined the map.

“Vaelrith isn't simply attacking settlements.”

Isolde looked toward him.

“What do you see?”

The Spellweaver traced the marked locations.

“He's isolating them.”

Kaelen followed his movements.

“Preventing people from reaching one another.”

Tovin nodded.

“He controls the roads between the settlements, then offers protection to those who surrender.”

Isolde's expression hardened.

“Several councils have already received such offers.”

Mira looked at her.

“What are his terms?”

“Recognize his authority over the ancient roads. Surrender all independent guardians. Accept his appointed governors.”

Bram frowned.

“And in exchange?”

“Safety.”

Seren laughed bitterly.

“There's that word again.”

Kaelen looked toward the map.

“Have any accepted?”

Isolde remained silent.

Then she nodded.

“Three kingdoms.”

The companions exchanged troubled glances.

“They're frightened,” the queen continued. “Their armies are exhausted. Their people are starving. Vaelrith promises that the attacks will stop if they submit.”

Lyra looked toward the darkened mountains.

“And perhaps they will.”

Everyone turned toward her.

She continued.

“At first.”

Thalassa opened one enormous eye.

That is how chains are most easily accepted. When they are presented as shelter.

Kaelen remembered the Tidewarden.

The stolen memories.

The corrupted covenant.

Queen Isolde's crown.

Thalassa's imprisonment.

Everything they had encountered seemed to lead toward this moment.

Vaelrith did not simply wish to conquer Aetherfall.

He wished to convince its people that surrendering their freedom was the only way to survive.

Kaelen looked at the completed Waystone.

“He wants the central gateway.”

Isolde nodded.

“And when he possesses it?”

Tovin answered.

“He could extend his control beyond Aetherfall.”

The queen looked toward Kaelen.

“Even to your world?”

He stared into the fire.

“Yes.”

For a long time, nobody spoke.

Then Isolde folded the map.

“Then this is no longer a war for one kingdom.”

The Voice Within the Stone

Kaelen woke shortly before dawn.

The Waystone was glowing.

He sat up.

The others remained asleep.

Auren's lantern burned beside him.

He reached toward the artifact.

Immediately, the camp disappeared.

Kaelen stood within a vast chamber surrounded by enormous windows.

Beyond them stretched countless worlds.

Mountains.

Oceans.

Cities.

Forests.

And among them, the familiar landscape of his home.

Vaelrith stood beside one of the windows.

He wore the silver and black robes Kaelen had seen within Thalassa's memories.

There was no darkness surrounding him.

No violet flame.

He appeared almost ordinary.

“Pathfinder.”

Kaelen stepped backward.

“This isn't real.”

Vaelrith smiled.

“Real enough for a conversation.”

Kaelen looked toward the surrounding windows.

“What do you want?”

“To congratulate you.”

Vaelrith gestured toward the completed Waystone.

“You have accomplished something the surviving Waykeepers believed impossible.”

Kaelen remained silent.

“You restored the guardians. Recovered the shards. Awakened the ancient network.”

Vaelrith turned toward him.

“You should be proud.”

Kaelen remembered Willowmere.

The broken houses.

Anwen's father.

“People are dying because of what you're doing.”

Vaelrith's expression became solemn.

“People were dying long before you arrived.”

He approached another window.

Beyond it, Kaelen saw the ruined village.

“Do you believe suffering began with me?”

“No.”

“Do you believe the kingdoms of Aetherfall were peaceful before the Shattering?”

Kaelen did not answer.

“They fought over resources. Roads. Territory. Ancient knowledge. The Waykeepers spent centuries repairing the damage caused by ordinary people's decisions.”

Vaelrith turned.

“And what did freedom accomplish?”

Kaelen tightened his grip upon the Waystone.

“It allowed people to choose something better.”

Vaelrith shook his head.

“Occasionally.”

He gestured toward another window.

Kaelen saw the Valley of Echoes.

The familiar streets.

The world he longed to return to.

“You want to go home.”

Kaelen stared at the image.

Vaelrith continued.

“I can open that road.”

“You need the Waystone.”

“Yes.”

“And you expect me to give it to you.”

“I expect you to consider what you have already sacrificed.”

The window changed.

Auren stood within the Sanctuary of the Falling Sun.

Golden light surrounded him.

Kaelen looked away.

Vaelrith spoke gently.

“How many more must die before you accept that this struggle cannot be won?”

Kaelen closed his eyes.

The image changed again.

Mira fell beneath an enormous shadow.

Bram lay motionless beside a shattered bridge.

Tovin's staff broke.

Seren disappeared into darkness.

Lyra cried out.

Flicker's golden light faded.

Kaelen shouted.

“STOP!”

The images vanished.

Vaelrith stood before him.

“I offer you a choice.”

Kaelen breathed heavily.

“Surrender the Waystone. Return home with your companions. Leave Aetherfall to someone capable of maintaining order.”

Kaelen stared at him.

“And everyone here?”

“They will survive.”

“Under your rule.”

“Under my protection.”

Kaelen looked toward the window containing his home.

For a moment, he imagined accepting.

No more battles.

No more graves.

No more watching friends suffer.

He could return home with everyone alive.

Was that not what he had wanted from the beginning?

Then he remembered Auren's letter.

Never allow fear to convince you that another person's freedom is an acceptable price for your own.

Kaelen turned toward Vaelrith.

“You're offering me the same thing you've offered every frightened kingdom.”

Vaelrith smiled.

“Peace.”

“No.”

Kaelen raised the Waystone.

“Permission to stop caring.”

The shadow's expression hardened.

“You will regret refusing me.”

“Perhaps.”

Kaelen looked toward the familiar world beyond the window.

“But I would regret accepting even more.”

Vaelrith's robes began dissolving into darkness.

“Then you will watch everything you love disappear.”

Kaelen held the Waystone tightly.

“You've already shown me what happens when someone lets fear decide everything.”

Golden light surrounded him.

“I won't become you.”

The chamber shattered.

Kaelen woke beside the campfire.

His heart raced.

Sweat covered his forehead.

Auren's lantern burned steadily.

Mira sat beside him.

“Kaelen?”

He looked toward her.

“He spoke to me.”

She immediately understood.

“Vaelrith?”

Kaelen nodded.

“He offered to send us home.”

Mira remained silent.

“All of us,” he continued. “Alive.”

She looked toward the sleeping companions.

“What did you tell him?”

“No.”

Mira placed her hand over his.

“Good.”

Kaelen looked at her.

“What if he's right?”

“About what?”

“What if refusing him costs someone their life?”

Mira considered the question.

Then she answered.

“None of us asked you to purchase our safety with someone else's freedom.”

Kaelen lowered his head.

She tightened her grip.

“You don't get to make that choice for us.”

He remembered Auren's confession.

The terrible burden of deciding another person's fate without their consent.

Mira smiled faintly.

“We're still here because we choose to be.”

Kaelen looked toward the others.

For the first time that morning, his breathing became steady.

“Thank you.”

She leaned against his shoulder.

Together, they watched the sun rise.

The Beacons of Aetherfall

By midday, the travelers reached the highest ridge overlooking the southern plains.

Thalassa flew above them, watching for enemy movements.

The landscape stretched toward the horizon.

Ancient roads glowed across the valleys.

Several settlements burned in the distance.

But there were other lights.

Golden beacons.

One appeared upon a mountain to the west.

Another illuminated a tower beside a distant river.

Then another.

And another.

Tovin retrieved Auren's journal.

“The old warning system.”

Isolde nodded.

“The guardians are answering.”

A golden beacon rose from the Sanctuary of the Falling Sun.

The Solar Sentinel had awakened its ancient signal.

Another appeared beyond the eastern mountains.

Thalassa released a triumphant roar.

The dragon towers.

Kaelen watched the lights spreading across the landscape.

For every darkened road, another seemed to awaken.

For every kingdom surrendering to fear, another was preparing to resist.

The people of Aetherfall were beginning to answer Vaelrith.

Not with a single voice.

With thousands.

Bram stood beside him.

“Looks like we're not alone after all.”

Kaelen smiled.

“No.”

He looked toward the growing procession behind them.

Soldiers.

Farmers.

Merchants.

Children.

People who had lost their homes but refused to surrender their future.

“Not anymore.”

The Last Road Before Sanctuary

As evening approached, the companions descended into a broad valley.

An ancient road stretched across its center.

Unlike the other roads they had encountered, this one remained perfectly intact.

White stones reflected the setting sun.

Golden lanterns illuminated its edges.

The surrounding fields were filled with travelers.

Thousands of them.

Refugees moved toward the southwest in long processions. Soldiers escorted wagons carrying supplies. Healers established temporary shelters beneath colorful tents.

Merchants distributed food without demanding payment.

Children carried water to exhausted travelers.

Kaelen stared at the scene.

After days of destruction, it seemed almost impossible.

A mounted rider approached.

His armor bore the symbol of an open road beneath a rising sun.

“Travelers!”

Isolde stepped forward.

The rider immediately dismounted.

“Your Majesty.”

She smiled.

“Where is Commander Halden?”

“At the sanctuary. He's coordinating the defenses.”

The rider looked toward Kaelen.

Then toward the Waystone.

His eyes widened.

“The Pathfinder?”

Kaelen nodded.

The man bowed.

“We have been waiting for you.”

Kaelen looked toward the enormous procession.

“How many people are here?”

“More arrive every hour.”

The rider pointed toward the distant hills.

“The sanctuary has opened its gates to everyone.”

Bram looked toward the travelers.

“Everyone?”

“Every kingdom. Every race. Every traveler.”

The rider smiled.

“Even those whose rulers have surrendered to Vaelrith.”

Lyra looked toward Kaelen.

For the first time since the awakening, she felt something stronger than fear spreading through the roads.

Hope.

The Shadow of the Coming War

They reached the final ridge shortly before sunset.

And there, beyond the valley, stood the Last Sanctuary.

Its enormous white walls stretched across the landscape.

Seven towers rose above its rooftops, each crowned with a golden beacon.

Ancient bridges connected the surrounding hills.

Thousands of tents occupied the fields outside the walls.

Banners from dozens of kingdoms moved in the evening wind.

Thalassa circled above the city.

The people below cheered as her enormous shadow passed across them.

Kaelen stopped.

He had imagined a fortress.

A military stronghold.

Perhaps a surviving Waykeeper sanctuary.

What stood before him was something much greater.

An entire civilization gathering beneath one protection.

Mira approached.

“Beautiful, isn't it?”

Kaelen nodded.

Bram looked toward the distant cooking fires.

“I suspect there may be actual kitchens.”

Seren smiled.

“Try to contain yourself.”

Tovin examined the ancient towers with undisguised fascination.

Lyra watched the people entering the gates.

Anwen stood beside her mother.

Flicker rested in the child's arms.

“Is that where we're going?”

Mira knelt beside her.

“Yes.”

“Will we be safe?”

Mira looked toward the enormous walls.

Then toward the gathering darkness beyond the northern mountains.

She could not promise that the war would never reach them.

She could not promise that everyone would survive.

But she could promise something else.

“You won't have to face it alone.”

Anwen smiled.

The companions began descending toward the sanctuary.

Behind them, the beacons of Aetherfall continued burning.

Ahead, thousands of people waited for the Pathfinder and his companions.

And far to the north, beyond the broken bridge of Harrowgate, Vaelrith's army gathered beneath a sky filled with ash.

The darkness had encountered resistance.

It had discovered that the people of Aetherfall would not surrender as easily as their ancient master believed.

And now it was preparing to destroy the last place where freedom still stood united.

The Gathering of Ash

Within the ruins of the ancient capital, Vaelrith stood upon a balcony overlooking the remains of the city.

Below him, the Ashborn gathered.

Their numbers extended beyond the ruined streets.

Thousands of soldiers.

Corrupted guardians.

Winged creatures constructed from ancient armor.

Enormous beasts dragged themselves from chambers that had remained sealed since the Shattering.

Beside Vaelrith stood a figure wearing dark armor.

Unlike the Ashborn, this creature possessed a face.

Pale.

Scarred.

Almost human.

Its eyes burned with violet light.

“Master.”

Vaelrith watched the distant beacons.

“The kingdoms are gathering.”

The armored figure bowed.

“Shall we extinguish them?”

Vaelrith smiled.

“Not individually.”

He turned toward the central gateway.

Its ancient frame continued glowing with the power awakened by the completed Waystone.

“The Pathfinder has given them hope.”

The armored figure remained motionless.

Vaelrith looked toward the southern horizon.

“Let them gather.”

He raised one hand.

The Ashborn army became silent.

“Let them bring their guardians, their soldiers and their precious children beneath the walls of their sanctuary.”

Darkness gathered around his fingers.

“Let them believe they have found safety.”

The ancient city trembled.

Beneath its streets, something enormous began awakening.

Something older than the Solar Sentinel.

Older than the dragons.

Something the first Waykeepers had imprisoned before the roads were ever opened.

Vaelrith closed his eyes.

“Then we shall show them what becomes of those who refuse my protection.”

The armored figure bowed.

“As you command.”

Across the ruined city, the Ashborn began marching.

The earth shook beneath their passage.

The sky darkened.

And the last free kingdoms of Aetherfall prepared for a war unlike anything their world had ever known.

CHAPTER 23

The Last Sanctuary

The gates of the Last Sanctuary had not closed in eleven days.

Commander Halden had been advised to close them on at least seventeen separate occasions. His military officers argued that the growing number of refugees made the city increasingly difficult to defend. His quartermasters warned that food supplies were disappearing faster than they could be replenished.

Even several representatives of the surviving kingdoms had suggested that admission should be restricted to citizens whose governments had formally joined the resistance.

Halden had refused every request.

He stood upon the western wall, watching another procession emerge from the hills beneath the evening sun.

Among them were wounded soldiers, exhausted farmers and children who had traveled farther in the previous week than most had traveled in their entire lives.

Above them flew a dragon.

Halden removed his helmet.

“Well,” he murmured. “That should improve morale.”

A young officer approached.

“Commander, the eastern delegation is requesting another meeting.”

“Tell them I'm occupied.”

“They insist that the matter concerns the survival of the sanctuary.”

Halden pointed toward the approaching refugees.

“So does that.”

The officer followed his gaze.

“Is that Queen Isolde's dragon?”

“Unless someone has acquired another enormous blue dragon without informing me.”

The officer smiled.

Then he noticed the golden light traveling among the approaching companions.

“Commander…”

Halden leaned against the stone railing.

The light was unmistakable.

After centuries of broken roads, forgotten guardians and stories that had gradually become legends, someone was approaching the sanctuary carrying the completed Waystone.

The Pathfinder had arrived.

Halden retrieved his helmet.

“Open the inner gates. Prepare accommodations for the wounded. Inform the council that Queen Isolde has returned.”

The officer bowed.

“And the Pathfinder?”

Halden looked toward the thousands of people gathered below.

“Tell him welcome home.”

A City Built Upon a Promise

Kaelen had never seen anything quite like the Last Sanctuary.

Its outer walls were constructed from enormous blocks of white stone, fitted together so precisely that he could scarcely distinguish the individual seams. Ancient golden inscriptions traveled along the battlements, occasionally illuminating as the Waystone responded to their presence.

Seven towers rose above the city.

Each possessed a different architectural style, as though seven civilizations had contributed their knowledge to the construction of a single place.

Beyond the gates, broad streets curved around gardens, fountains and buildings that appeared far older than the surrounding kingdoms.

But it was the people who captured Kaelen's attention.

Everywhere he looked, someone was helping someone else.

A blacksmith repaired damaged wagon wheels without requesting payment. Several women distributed bowls of soup beside a public fountain. Children carried blankets toward a building that had been converted into a hospital.

A merchant stood outside his shop, handing shoes to travelers whose feet had been injured during their journeys.

There were arguments, certainly.

People complained about the crowded streets. Soldiers struggled to maintain order. Exhausted parents attempted to quiet frightened children.

The sanctuary was not perfect.

That somehow made it more extraordinary.

These were ordinary people attempting to accomplish something extraordinary under circumstances that offered them every excuse to do otherwise.

Bram inhaled deeply.

“Bread.”

Seren looked toward him.

“We've entered the greatest surviving sanctuary in Aetherfall, and that's your first observation?”

“Fresh bread.”

“Of course.”

Tovin stopped beneath an enormous archway.

Its surface contained hundreds of ancient inscriptions.

“Do you realize how old this structure must be?”

Mira continued walking.

“Very?”

“That's hardly an adequate description.”

“Extremely?”

Tovin sighed.

“I'm surrounded by people who refuse to appreciate architectural history.”

Flicker chirped.

Bram nodded.

“He agrees with you.”

The little creature immediately turned toward a nearby bakery.

“Or perhaps not.”

For the first time in days, the companions laughed without immediately looking over their shoulders.

Kaelen allowed himself to enjoy the moment.

Then he noticed the names carved into the walls beside the main gate.

Thousands of them.

Some appeared ancient. Others had been added recently.

He approached the nearest inscription.

“What are these?”

An elderly woman arranging flowers beneath the wall looked up.

“The names of those who built the sanctuary.”

Kaelen examined the seemingly endless rows.

“There must be thousands.”

“More than that.”

She smiled.

“Every generation adds its own.”

“Kings?”

“Some.”

“Waykeepers?”

“A few.”

She pointed toward several names near the bottom.

“Those were carpenters. That one was a gardener. Those three were children who helped carry water during the construction of the eastern tower.”

Kaelen looked toward the immense walls.

“Everyone was remembered?”

“That was the promise.”

The woman returned to her flowers.

“No person who helped build a place of refuge would be considered too insignificant to name.”

Kaelen thought of Lyra's journal.

The names of the people lost in Willowmere.

He wondered whether, someday, those names might find a place upon these walls as well.

The Commander of the Seven Towers

Commander Halden met them in the central courtyard.

He was a broad-shouldered man with gray hair, a weathered face and the unmistakable appearance of someone who had spent more time outdoors than inside royal chambers.

His armor was practical rather than decorative.

A deep scar crossed his left cheek.

He bowed before Queen Isolde.

“Your Majesty.”

“Commander.”

She embraced him.

“You look exhausted.”

“I've been assured that exhaustion builds character.”

“Then you must possess an extraordinary amount of character.”

“An unfortunate abundance.”

Halden turned toward the companions.

His gaze settled upon Kaelen.

“The Pathfinder.”

Kaelen extended his hand.

“Kaelen.”

The commander accepted it.

“Good. I prefer names.”

He greeted each companion in turn.

When he reached Bram, he noticed Flicker.

“And this is?”

“Our commanding officer.”

Flicker chirped.

Halden smiled.

“Then I should probably salute.”

He did.

Bram looked delighted.

The commander led them toward the central hall while Isolde explained the events at Willowmere and Harrowgate.

Halden listened carefully.

When she finished, he looked toward Kaelen.

“You closed the bridge?”

Kaelen nodded.

“Temporarily.”

“Excellent. That may have bought us several days.”

“Several days until what?”

Halden stopped.

He looked toward the northern towers.

“Until the largest army Aetherfall has seen since the Shattering arrives at our doorstep.”

The companions became silent.

Halden continued walking.

“I would offer you a more encouraging welcome, but I suspect you've had enough people withholding unpleasant truths.”

Kaelen glanced at Auren's lantern.

“Yes.”

“Then you'll appreciate our council.”

Seren raised an eyebrow.

“Why?”

“Because they argue about unpleasant truths for approximately fourteen hours a day.”

Bram sighed.

“Sounds dreadful.”

“An accurate assessment.”

Somewhere to Belong

Before attending the council, Mira accompanied Sella and Anwen to the sanctuary's residential quarter.

Several large buildings had been converted into temporary homes for displaced families.

Their rooms were modest.

Two beds.

A small table.

A basin.

A window overlooking a garden.

Yet after everything they had endured, the little room seemed almost luxurious.

Sella sat upon one of the beds.

Her injured leg had been treated by the sanctuary's healers.

For the first time since leaving Willowmere, she allowed herself to rest.

Anwen placed her broken birdcage upon the windowsill.

Mira watched her.

“Would you like someone to repair that?”

The child shook her head.

“Not yet.”

She looked toward the garden.

“Father made it.”

Mira nodded.

She understood.

Some broken things were not ready to be repaired.

Anwen turned toward Flicker, who had accompanied them.

“Can he stay?”

Bram appeared in the doorway.

The little creature looked between him and the child.

Bram folded his arms.

“Well, that's a difficult question.”

Flicker jumped onto Anwen's bed.

The child laughed.

Bram sighed dramatically.

“Apparently, I've been dismissed.”

Mira smiled.

“Just for a little while.”

Bram knelt beside Anwen.

“He likes having his ears scratched. And don't let him convince you that he hasn't eaten.”

Anwen nodded solemnly.

“He's very persuasive.”

Flicker chirped.

“See?”

Sella laughed.

It was the first time Mira had heard her laugh since Willowmere.

Bram stood.

“We'll come back for him later.”

Anwen embraced the little creature.

“Thank you.”

As Mira and Bram left the building, they heard the child talking softly to Flicker.

Bram stopped outside.

He looked toward the window.

“Do you think they'll be all right?”

Mira followed his gaze.

“I think they'll have a chance.”

Bram nodded.

After a moment, he said, “That's worth fighting for.”

Mira smiled.

“Yes, it is.”

The Council of the Remaining Kingdoms

The council chamber occupied the center of the sanctuary.

Seven enormous pillars surrounded a circular table. Banners representing the surviving kingdoms hung from the upper balconies.

Representatives had gathered from across Aetherfall.

Some wore elaborate robes.

Others wore military armor.

Several appeared to have arrived directly from the roads, their clothing still covered in dust.

Kaelen recognized Maelor among them.

The First Warden stood as the companions entered.

“Pathfinder.”

Kaelen approached him.

“I didn't expect to see you here.”

Maelor smiled faintly.

“The roads have become considerably more interesting since our last conversation.”

“How are the islands?”

“Some have fallen. Others remain protected.”

He looked toward the completed Waystone.

“But the new covenant survives.”

Maelor removed a rolled parchment from his robes.

“More than four thousand travelers have signed it.”

Lyra accepted the document.

Names covered its surface.

Fishermen.

Merchants.

Roadwardens.

Children.

People who had once been denied any voice concerning the roads upon which their lives depended.

Maelor looked toward Kaelen.

“We are still learning what it means to serve rather than rule.”

Kaelen smiled.

“So are we.”

The First Warden bowed his head.

“Then perhaps we shall learn together.”

Commander Halden called the council to order.

Queen Isolde occupied a seat beside the eastern representatives.

Kaelen and his companions were invited to stand near the center of the chamber.

Halden unfolded an enormous map.

“The situation is deteriorating.”

Several black markers indicated settlements already occupied by the Ashborn.

Others marked corrupted gateways.

Red lines identified roads that had become unusable.

“The enemy has advanced through the northern territories. Harrowgate remains temporarily inaccessible, but our scouts report movement along the western passages.”

A representative wearing green robes rose.

“How many soldiers?”

Halden looked at him.

“We don't know.”

“An estimate?”

“Too many.”

The representative sat down.

Another councilor spoke.

“Our kingdom has received an offer from Vaelrith.”

The chamber became silent.

“He promises to withdraw his forces if we recognize his authority.”

Isolde leaned forward.

“And you believe him?”

The councilor looked uncomfortable.

“I believe our people are frightened.”

“So are mine.”

“Then surely you understand.”

Isolde rose.

“I understand exactly what it means to surrender authority to someone who claims that obedience will keep your people safe.”

She touched the faint scar upon her forehead where the corrupted crown had once rested.

“I also understand what happens afterward.”

The councilor lowered his gaze.

Maelor stood.

“The old covenant allowed roadwardens to take memories from travelers in the name of protecting the roads.”

He looked around the chamber.

“I defended that practice.”

Several representatives exchanged surprised glances.

“I believed our survival justified it. I was wrong.”

He placed the new covenant upon the table.

“We cannot build a lasting peace by surrendering the very things that make peace worth having.”

A military representative struck the table.

“Fine words! But words will not stop an army!”

“No,” Mira answered.

Everyone turned toward her.

“But knowing what you're fighting for might keep you from becoming the army you're trying to stop.”

The representative stared at her.

Then slowly sat down.

Halden looked toward Kaelen.

“Perhaps we should hear from the Pathfinder.”

Kaelen stepped forward.

He had faced enormous creatures.

He had crossed impossible bridges.

He had spoken with ancient guardians.

Yet standing before the representatives of entire kingdoms made him unexpectedly nervous.

He placed the Waystone upon the table.

Its golden light illuminated the chamber.

“The roads have awakened.”

The representatives leaned forward.

“Vaelrith wants to control them. If he gains access to the central gateway, he may be able to extend that control beyond Aetherfall.”

A woman near the eastern pillar spoke.

“Can you prevent him?”

Kaelen hesitated.

“I don't know.”

Several councilors began whispering.

He continued.

“But I know that I cannot do it alone.”

He looked toward the surrounding representatives.

“Neither can Queen Isolde. Neither can Commander Halden. Neither can any single guardian or kingdom.”

He touched the Waystone.

“This artifact can help us restore the roads. It can help us reach people who have been isolated. But it cannot decide what kind of world we should build.”

The chamber became quiet.

“That decision belongs to all of you.”

Kaelen looked toward Maelor.

“And to the people outside these walls.”

For a moment, nobody spoke.

Then Halden nodded.

“Well said.”

The commander placed another marker upon the map.

“Now let us determine how to keep those people alive.”

The Seven Defenses

The council remained assembled long after sunset.

Tovin discovered that the sanctuary's seven towers were not merely defensive structures.

Each contained an ancient mechanism connected to the original network of roads.

Together, they formed a protective barrier capable of shielding the entire city.

Unfortunately, only four remained fully functional.

The western tower had suffered damage during an earthquake.

The northern tower contained a fractured crystal.

The seventh tower had remained sealed for more than two centuries.

Tovin stared at the architectural drawings.

“Why was it sealed?”

Halden shrugged.

“Something concerning an ancient malfunction.”

“What kind of malfunction?”

“The kind that killed three engineers.”

Tovin slowly lowered the parchment.

“Ah.”

Seren smiled.

“Still interested?”

“Immensely.”

“Of course.”

Halden pointed toward the remaining towers.

“If all seven become operational, the sanctuary may withstand a prolonged siege.”

“And if they don't?” Mira asked.

The commander looked toward the city.

“Then our walls become ordinary walls.”

Bram studied the map.

“How many people are inside?”

“Approximately eighteen thousand.”

The companions became silent.

Halden continued.

“Another six thousand are camped outside. More arrive every day.”

Kaelen stared at the seven towers.

Twenty-four thousand lives.

Possibly more by morning.

Tovin rolled up the drawings.

“Then we should begin immediately.”

The Captain Returns

The following morning, a commotion erupted near the southern gate.

Bram had been assisting the sanctuary's cooks when Seren hurried into the kitchen.

“You need to see this.”

“Unless it's breakfast, I'm occupied.”

“It's a ship.”

Bram looked at her.

“We're nowhere near the sea.”

“I noticed.”

They joined the others near the southern courtyard.

Above the city, an ancient elevated road shimmered into existence.

And upon it sailed the *Lantern's Wake*.

Its sails were fully extended.

Golden energy surrounded its hull.

The ship descended slowly along a passage of light before settling beside an enormous stone platform.

Captain Rhydan stood upon its deck.

He removed his hat.

“Permission to come ashore?”

Halden stared at the ship.

Then at the ancient road.

Then back at the ship.

“Apparently.”

Rhydan laughed.

Nessa lowered the gangplank.

Edrin hurried down carrying a crate.

Behind him, sailors began unloading supplies.

Food.

Medicine.

Tools.

Weapons.

Blankets.

Enough provisions to feed thousands of people for several days.

Kaelen approached the captain.

“How did you get here?”

Rhydan looked toward the glowing road.

“Followed the stars.”

Tovin stared at him.

“Stars?”

“The compass started pointing inland.”

“And you followed it?”

Rhydan shrugged.

“Seemed rude not to.”

Nessa joined them.

“We discovered an ancient passage above the southern cliffs. The ship responded when we entered it.”

Tovin looked toward the *Lantern's Wake* with an expression bordering upon reverence.

“A functioning aerial maritime passage.”

Rhydan smiled.

“It's a road for boats.”

Tovin closed his eyes.

“I suppose that's one way to describe it.”

Bram examined the supplies.

“Captain, I could kiss you.”

Rhydan stepped backward.

“Let's remain professional.”

Seren burst into laughter.

For several hours, the courtyard became a place of celebration.

The arrival of the *Lantern's Wake* proved that the restored roads could provide more than opportunities for invasion.

They could also bring help.

And across the sanctuary, hope began spreading faster than fear.

The Forge of the Free

Bram discovered the sanctuary's great forge shortly after midday.

Its central furnace burned with a brilliant golden flame. Dozens of blacksmiths worked beneath an enormous vaulted ceiling, producing armor, repairing tools and manufacturing equipment for the approaching battle.

An elderly smith approached him.

“Looking for something?”

Bram examined the furnace.

“Work.”

The man looked at his hammer.

“You know how to use that?”

“Occasionally against metal.”

The smith smiled.

“Name's Garrick.”

“Bram.”

They shook hands.

Within an hour, Bram was working beside the sanctuary's craftsmen.

He repaired damaged armor.

Strengthened shield rims.

Helped manufacture fittings for the ancient tower mechanisms.

For the first time in weeks, his hammer was being used to create rather than destroy.

He had forgotten how much he missed that feeling.

A young apprentice approached carrying a damaged breastplate.

“Are you really one of the Pathfinder's companions?”

Bram examined the armor.

“Apparently.”

“Have you fought dragons?”

“Mostly helped one.”

“Monsters?”

“Far too many.”

The boy watched him work.

“Were you ever afraid?”

Bram stopped.

He looked toward the apprentice.

“Frequently.”

The boy seemed surprised.

“But you're a Warden.”

Bram nodded.

“Being a Warden doesn't mean you're never afraid.”

He returned the repaired breastplate.

“It means you don't allow your fear to decide who deserves your help.”

The apprentice considered that.

Then he smiled.

“Thank you.”

Bram watched him return to the other smiths.

He thought of Auren.

Continue protecting those who cannot protect themselves.

He lifted his hammer.

There were many ways to honor those words.

And not all of them required a battlefield.

The Hospital of Quiet Courage

Lyra spent the afternoon among the sanctuary's wounded.

The hospital occupied an enormous building that had once served as a library. Its shelves had been removed to accommodate beds, and its reading chambers had become treatment rooms.

Healers moved continuously between patients.

Some possessed magical abilities.

Others relied upon herbs, bandages and generations of practical knowledge.

Lyra helped wherever she could.

She listened to frightened soldiers.

Comforted children.

Sat beside people who had lost family members during the attacks.

Her gift allowed her to sense memories that patients struggled to express.

But she was careful not to enter those memories without permission.

The events surrounding Thalassa had taught her something important.

Knowing another person's pain did not grant her ownership of it.

Near the eastern windows, she encountered a soldier whose hands trembled uncontrollably.

He stared at the ceiling.

“I should have stayed.”

Lyra sat beside him.

“Where?”

“Harrowgate.”

His eyes filled with tears.

“My company was surrounded. The lieutenant ordered us to retreat.”

He swallowed.

“I ran.”

Lyra waited.

“My friends didn't.”

She looked toward his injured shoulder.

“You followed an order intended to save your life.”

“I abandoned them.”

“Did you?”

He turned toward her.

“What else would you call it?”

Lyra thought of Thalassa and Aerion.

Of the terrible guilt that had become a chain around the dragon's memories.

“Sometimes surviving feels like betrayal.”

The soldier closed his eyes.

She continued.

“But your friends' lives were more than the moments in which they died.”

He looked toward her.

“Tell me about them.”

For several minutes, he remained silent.

Then he began speaking.

About a soldier who cheated at cards.

Another who sang terribly.

A friend who carried letters from his children inside his armor.

Lyra listened.

As the afternoon passed, the soldier's hands gradually stopped trembling.

His grief remained.

But it no longer stood alone.

The Seventh Tower

Tovin and Seren reached the sealed tower shortly before evening.

Its entrance had been covered by enormous iron doors.

Ancient warning symbols surrounded the frame.

Seren examined them.

“Those look encouraging.”

Tovin brushed dust from an inscription.

“Something about unstable temporal resonance.”

“Which means?”

“Time may behave unpredictably.”

“Wonderful.”

He continued reading.

“And physical space may become temporarily inconsistent.”

Seren stared at him.

“Would you like to explain why we're entering this place?”

“Because eighteen thousand people are depending upon its protective mechanisms.”

“Fair enough.”

Tovin raised his restored staff.

Golden light reached toward the door.

The ancient locks responded.

One after another, they opened.

The doors slowly separated.

Beyond them stood a circular staircase.

Its steps extended upward.

And downward.

Simultaneously.

Seren leaned through the entrance.

“No.”

Tovin smiled.

“Fascinating.”

“No.”

“Observe the spatial—”

“Tovin.”

“Yes?”

“If we become trapped inside an impossible staircase, I reserve the right to complain.”

“Entirely reasonable.”

They entered.

The doors closed behind them.

The first chamber appeared ordinary.

The second contained furniture suspended upside down.

The third contained windows overlooking the sanctuary from several different centuries.

Through one, Seren saw the city under construction.

Through another, the towers stood abandoned beneath a winter sky.

A third revealed the present-day courtyard.

Tovin approached the windows.

“Extraordinary.”

Seren grabbed his coat.

“Keep moving.”

They reached a landing where an ancient engineer stood beside a damaged mechanism.

He appeared completely unaware of their presence.

Tovin watched him.

“A temporal echo.”

The engineer repeatedly adjusted a crystal.

Each time, the mechanism released a burst of energy.

Each time, the scene restarted.

Seren studied the man's movements.

“He's been doing that for two hundred years?”

“Possibly.”

“Someone should tell him to try something different.”

Tovin stopped.

Then smiled.

“Actually…”

He approached the mechanism.

The engineer's memory repeated.

Tovin examined the crystal arrangement.

“That's the problem.”

“What?”

“The mechanism is attempting to synchronize with the other six towers, but it cannot determine the correct moment in time.”

Seren frowned.

“So it's stuck?”

“Precisely.”

Tovin looked toward the rotating crystals.

“We need to provide it with a stable reference.”

Seren glanced toward his staff.

“Can that do it?”

“Perhaps.”

She groaned.

“There's that word again.”

Tovin inserted the staff's golden crystal into the mechanism's central opening.

The tower trembled.

Every window illuminated.

The temporal echo stopped.

The ancient engineer turned toward them.

For the first time, he appeared to recognize their presence.

“Travelers?”

Tovin stared.

“Can you hear us?”

The engineer looked toward the mechanism.

“Did we repair it?”

Tovin examined the golden light.

“I believe so.”

The engineer smiled.

“Good.”

His form began disappearing.

“Someone should tell my wife I'll be late.”

Seren's expression softened.

“What's your name?”

“Edric.”

She nodded.

“We'll remember you.”

The engineer disappeared.

The tower became still.

Outside, its enormous beacon awakened.

Golden light rose into the evening sky.

Tovin retrieved his staff.

Seren looked toward the now ordinary staircase.

“Let's leave before it changes its mind.”

For once, Tovin did not argue.

The Hall of Forgotten Guardians

Beneath the sanctuary, Kaelen and Maelor discovered a chamber containing statues of the ancient guardians.

Dragons.

Stone constructs.

Forest protectors.

Creatures resembling enormous birds.

Figures carrying lanterns.

Among them stood a statue of a man wearing familiar robes.

Auren.

Kaelen approached slowly.

The inscription beneath the statue had been damaged.

Only several words remained.

Keeper of the Western Roads.

Maelor stood beside him.

“He helped establish this sanctuary.”

Kaelen looked toward the statue.

“I didn't know.”

“Few people remember.”

Maelor brushed dust from its base.

“History has a habit of remembering the accomplishments of people while forgetting their humanity.”

Kaelen placed Auren's lantern beside the statue.

Its little flame illuminated the stone face.

“He wasn't perfect.”

Maelor smiled sadly.

“Neither are we.”

Kaelen remembered the Waykeeper's confession.

His anger.

His regret.

The sacrifice that had followed.

“I wish he'd trusted us sooner.”

Maelor nodded.

“I imagine he wished the same.”

For a while, they stood together.

Then the Waystone began glowing.

Golden light traveled across the chamber floor.

The statues responded.

One after another, their eyes illuminated.

Maelor stepped backward.

“What have you done?”

“Nothing.”

The light gathered around an enormous circular inscription.

Kaelen approached.

A map appeared above the floor.

Not a map of Aetherfall.

A map of the sanctuary itself.

Seven towers surrounded a central symbol.

Tovin's recently restored tower shone brightly.

Two others remained damaged.

But beneath the sanctuary, another structure became visible.

A vast network of chambers.

At its center rested an enormous crystal.

Maelor stared.

“The Heart of Refuge.”

Kaelen turned toward him.

“You know what that is?”

“Only from legends.”

The First Warden knelt beside the inscription.

“It was supposedly created to protect travelers when the ancient roads became unstable.”

Kaelen studied the crystal's image.

“Can it protect the city?”

“Perhaps.”

Maelor pointed toward the surrounding symbols.

“But the Heart of Refuge was never designed to respond to a single Waykeeper.”

Kaelen remembered the original covenant.

“What does it respond to?”

Maelor looked toward him.

“Everyone.”

The Heart of Refuge

The companions gathered beneath the sanctuary that evening.

Tovin examined the ancient map.

“The seven towers distribute energy from the central crystal.”

He pointed toward the surrounding chambers.

“But the crystal itself requires something different.”

Halden folded his arms.

“Different how?”

Tovin studied the inscriptions.

“It appears to draw strength from the people within the sanctuary.”

Bram frowned.

“Draw strength?”

“Not physically.”

Lyra approached the central symbol.

She placed her hand upon it.

Immediately, she sensed thousands of people.

Children sleeping beside their parents.

Healers tending the wounded.

Soldiers preparing equipment.

Cooks working through the evening.

Blacksmiths repairing armor.

Families grieving.

Friends laughing.

Strangers sharing food.

She opened her eyes.

“It responds to their willingness to protect one another.”

Maelor nodded.

“The original covenant.”

Kaelen looked toward the map.

“Then how do we awaken it?”

Lyra closed her eyes again.

A phrase emerged from the ancient markings.

“By renewing the promise.”

Halden looked toward her.

“What promise?”

She read the inscription aloud.

Let no traveler stand without shelter.

Let no stranger be denied compassion.

Let no guardian claim ownership of those entrusted to their care.

Let the strong remember the weak.

Let the roads remain open to those who seek peace.

And when darkness comes, let no one stand alone.

The chamber became silent.

Bram lowered his head.

“That's a good promise.”

Kaelen looked toward the ancient crystal.

He remembered Willowmere.

The village beneath the Sanctuary of the Falling Sun.

The Tidewarden.

Queen Isolde.

Thalassa.

Everything they had encountered had revealed some part of that promise.

Perhaps the journey had never been about collecting enough power to defeat Vaelrith.

Perhaps it had been about learning what that power was supposed to protect.

Halden looked toward the companions.

“Then tomorrow, we renew it.”

The Night Before the Promise

That evening, the six companions gathered in a small courtyard overlooking the western gardens.

For the first time in several days, they had been given an opportunity to rest.

Bram arrived carrying a tray of fresh bread, roasted vegetables and several small pastries.

Seren stared at him.

“Where did you get all that?”

“Diplomatic negotiations.”

“You befriended the cooks.”

“Successful diplomatic negotiations.”

Tovin placed several journals upon the table.

Mira looked at them.

“No.”

He blinked.

“What?”

“No studying.”

“But I've discovered—”

“Tomorrow.”

Tovin reluctantly moved the journals aside.

Lyra arrived carrying Flicker.

Anwen had finally fallen asleep, and the little creature appeared equally exhausted.

He curled into a small golden ball beside Bram.

For a while, the companions simply ate.

They discussed the sanctuary.

The people they had met.

The extraordinary arrival of the *Lantern's Wake*.

The strange events within the seventh tower.

Then Seren leaned backward.

“Does anyone remember what we were doing before all of this?”

Bram laughed.

“Sleeping considerably more often.”

“Eating better,” Mira added.

Tovin looked offended.

“I was conducting important research.”

“You still are,” Seren replied.

“Yes, but considerably more dangerous research.”

Kaelen smiled.

Then the conversation became quieter.

Mira looked toward him.

“When we finally get home…”

She hesitated.

“Do you think we'll still see one another?”

Kaelen looked around the table.

It was a question none of them had seriously discussed.

Their entire journey had been directed toward returning home.

Yet somewhere along the way, they had become a family.

What would happen when the journey ended?

Would ordinary responsibilities separate them?

Would the memories gradually become distant?

Would they eventually become people who exchanged occasional messages and promised to meet someday?

Bram looked at the others.

“Well, I'm certainly not allowing Tovin to go unsupervised.”

Tovin raised an eyebrow.

“I require no supervision.”

Seren laughed.

“That's exactly why you do.”

Lyra stroked Flicker's fur.

“I hope we remember.”

Mira smiled.

“We will.”

Kaelen looked toward Auren's lantern.

“I don't think any of us will return as the same people who left.”

Seren considered that.

“Probably for the best.”

Bram raised his cup.

“To getting home.”

Tovin raised his.

“To unanswered questions.”

Mira smiled.

“To the people we protect.”

Lyra lifted hers.

“To those we remember.”

Seren raised her cup.

“To the roads we haven't traveled.”

Kaelen looked at his friends.

“To finding one another again.”

Their cups touched.

Flicker woke long enough to steal a piece of pastry.

And for a little while, beneath the stars of Aetherfall, the approaching war seemed very far away.

The Promise of Thousands

At sunrise, the sanctuary's bells began ringing.

People gathered throughout the city.

The central courtyard filled.

The surrounding streets became crowded.

Soldiers stood beside merchants.

Healers beside blacksmiths.

Representatives of rival kingdoms stood beneath the same banners.

Refugees gathered near the fountains.

Anwen sat upon Bram's shoulders, holding Flicker in her arms.

Sella stood beside Mira.

Queen Isolde approached the central platform.

Commander Halden joined her.

Maelor carried the new covenant.

Kaelen stood beside the completed Waystone.

The seven towers rose around them.

All seven had been restored during the night.

Tovin and the sanctuary's engineers had repaired the remaining mechanisms, although the Spellweaver looked as though he might fall asleep standing upright.

Seren nudged him.

“Stay awake.”

“I'm observing.”

“Your eyes were closed.”

“Internally observing.”

She laughed.

Halden stepped forward.

His voice carried across the courtyard through the ancient mechanisms.

“Travelers of Aetherfall.”

The crowd became silent.

“Many of you have lost your homes. Some have lost your kingdoms. Others have lost people whose absence cannot be repaired.”

He looked toward the refugees.

“We cannot promise that the days ahead will be easy.”

The commander removed his helmet.

“But we can promise that no person within these walls will be considered less deserving of protection because of where they were born.”

Queen Isolde stepped forward.

“No crown grants one person ownership of another.”

Maelor raised the covenant.

“No guardian may command a road without the consent of those who travel it.”

Kaelen looked toward the thousands gathered before him.

He lifted the Waystone.

Golden light spread across the courtyard.

Lyra began reciting the ancient promise.

“Let no traveler stand without shelter.”

The crowd repeated her words.

“Let no stranger be denied compassion.”

Thousands of voices answered.

“Let no guardian claim ownership of those entrusted to their care.”

The towers began glowing.

“Let the strong remember the weak.”

Golden light traveled beneath the streets.

“Let the roads remain open to those who seek peace.”

The Heart of Refuge awakened beneath the sanctuary.

The earth trembled gently.

Lyra looked toward the people.

“And when darkness comes…”

She paused.

The entire city seemed to hold its breath.

“Let no one stand alone.”

Thousands of voices repeated the final words.

Golden light erupted from the seven towers.

It rose into the sky, forming enormous arcs above the city.

The arcs connected.

A protective dome spread across the sanctuary.

Its surface shimmered like sunlight upon water.

The people stared upward.

Then cheers erupted.

Children laughed.

Soldiers raised their shields.

The bells rang.

Thalassa flew above the city, circling the newly awakened barrier.

Her voice entered the minds of the companions.

The old promise lives again.

Kaelen watched the golden light.

For the first time since recovering the third shard, he understood that the Waystone was not the most powerful thing in Aetherfall.

The people were.

The Messenger at the Northern Gate

The celebrations lasted less than an hour.

A wounded scout arrived through the northern gate.

His horse collapsed shortly after entering the courtyard.

Soldiers hurried toward him.

Halden descended from the central platform.

“What happened?”

The scout struggled to breathe.

“The western passage…”

Halden knelt beside him.

“Speak slowly.”

The scout looked toward the mountains.

“They found another road.”

Kaelen approached.

“The Ashborn?”

The scout nodded.

“Thousands.”

Halden's expression hardened.

“How far?”

“They'll reach the outer valley before nightfall.”

The surrounding soldiers became silent.

The scout caught Halden's arm.

“Commander…”

“Yes?”

“There's something with them.”

“What?”

The man's eyes filled with terror.

“I thought it was a mountain.”

Halden stared at him.

The scout continued.

“Then it moved.”

The General Without a Kingdom

Far beyond the sanctuary, the Ashborn army emerged from the western mountains.

Its soldiers marched beneath banners constructed from black metal and torn fabric.

Corrupted guardians moved among their ranks.

Ashwing creatures circled overhead.

At the front of the army rode Vaelrith's armored commander.

His name was General Malachar.

Centuries earlier, he had commanded the armies of a kingdom destroyed during the Shattering.

He had watched its roads collapse.

Its cities become isolated.

Its people disappear beneath a darkness nobody understood.

When Vaelrith offered him the power to prevent such destruction from ever happening again, Malachar accepted.

He surrendered his kingdom.

His memories.

And eventually, much of his humanity.

Only fragments of the man he had once been remained.

Now he stood at the head of an army that required no rest, no food and no reason to question its orders.

A perfect army, Vaelrith had called it.

Malachar looked toward the golden light illuminating the southern horizon.

The Last Sanctuary.

An ancient place of refuge.

A place that had once sheltered his own people.

Something stirred within his forgotten memories.

A woman standing beside a fountain.

A little boy running beneath white walls.

A promise spoken beneath seven towers.

He closed his eyes.

The memories disappeared.

A voice emerged from the darkness surrounding him.

General.

Malachar bowed his head.

“Master.”

The sanctuary has awakened.

“Yes.”

Then awaken our answer.

Malachar turned toward the enormous shape moving behind the army.

Ancient chains dragged across the ground.

The creature's body was covered in black stone.

Its shoulders rose above the surrounding trees.

Violet fire burned within cracks across its chest.

An enormous crown of broken pillars surrounded its head.

It had been imprisoned before the first roads were opened.

Before the ancient kingdoms.

Before even the dragons had become guardians of Aetherfall.

Its name had survived only in fragments of forbidden histories.

The Worldbreaker.

Malachar raised his sword.

The chains shattered.

The creature lifted its head.

Its roar shook the mountains.

And the Army of Ash continued toward the Last Sanctuary.

The Last Evening of Peace

The sanctuary changed within minutes.

Celebrations ended.

Soldiers returned to their positions.

The outer camps were evacuated.

Wagons carried food and medicine into protected chambers beneath the city.

Healers prepared additional beds.

Blacksmiths worked without interruption.

Commander Halden stood above the northern gate, issuing instructions.

Queen Isolde organized the eastern companies.

Maelor and the surviving roadwardens maintained the ancient towers.

Tovin joined the engineers beneath the sanctuary.

Seren assisted the scouts.

Bram returned to the forge.

Lyra helped move frightened families into shelter.

Mira remained beside the northern defenses.

Kaelen stood upon the highest tower.

The completed Waystone illuminated the surrounding landscape.

He could feel the approaching army through the corrupted roads.

Thousands of connections.

Thousands of dark crystals.

And beneath them, something enormous.

Something whose presence made the ancient roads tremble.

Thalassa landed beside the tower.

Her enormous wings folded.

You feel it.

Kaelen nodded.

“What is it?”

The dragon looked toward the mountains.

Something that should never have been awakened.

“Can we defeat it?”

Thalassa remained silent.

Kaelen looked toward her.

The dragon's eyes reflected the darkening horizon.

I have lived for many centuries, Pathfinder.

She lowered her head.

And I have never seen one of its kind defeated.

Kaelen tightened his grip upon the Waystone.

Below them, the sanctuary's seven towers burned with golden light.

Thousands of people waited beneath their protection.

He thought of Anwen.

Sella.

Orlan.

Maren and Ewan.

Captain Rhydan.

Queen Isolde.

Maelor.

Auren.

He thought of the world waiting beyond the central gateway.

Home.

Then he looked toward the sanctuary.

Another home.

One he had never expected to find.

Mira approached the tower.

She stood beside him.

“Are you ready?”

Kaelen watched the northern horizon.

“No.”

She smiled faintly.

“Neither am I.”

He looked at her.

“That's encouraging.”

“I thought so.”

Bram arrived carrying his hammer.

Seren followed.

Tovin emerged from the staircase with his staff.

Lyra joined them, holding Flicker.

The six companions stood together beneath the golden beacon.

Beyond the mountains, a vast cloud of ash began rising.

The ground trembled.

A distant roar traveled across the valley.

Birds fled from the surrounding forests.

The sanctuary bells rang.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

Commander Halden's voice echoed across the city.

“To your stations!”

Kaelen lifted Auren's lantern.

Its little flame burned steadily.

He remembered the promise spoken that morning.

When darkness comes, let no one stand alone.

He looked toward his companions.

Then toward the thousands of people preparing to defend the sanctuary.

They were afraid.

They were exhausted.

They were facing an enemy whose strength exceeded anything they had encountered.

But they were together.

And as the last sunlight disappeared behind the western mountains, the seven towers of the Last Sanctuary continued burning.

Seven lights against the darkness.

Seven promises against an army.

Seven reminders that even in a shattered world, there were things worth protecting.

Far across the valley, the first Ashborn soldiers emerged from the gathering mist.

Behind them came General Malachar.

Behind him came the Worldbreaker.

And the greatest battle in the surviving history of Aetherfall was about to begin.

CHAPTER 24

The Army of Ash

The first arrow struck the northern wall shortly after midnight.

It carried no flame, yet the stone blackened wherever its metal touched. A thin vein of violet light spread outward from the point of impact before the sanctuary's protective barrier extinguished it.

Commander Halden examined the damaged stone.

“Testing our defenses.”

Beside him, Mira looked across the valley.

Thousands of violet lights moved beneath the darkness. They appeared between the trees, along the ancient roads and across the surrounding hills.

The Ashborn had arrived.

There were no campfires among their ranks. No conversations. No soldiers complaining about the cold or sharpening their weapons while exchanging stories about home.

There was only movement.

An endless procession of armored figures advancing beneath a sky from which the stars had begun to disappear.

Mira tightened the straps upon her shield.

“How many?”

Halden shook his head.

“I stopped counting.”

A tremendous roar emerged from beyond the mountains.

The northern wall trembled beneath their feet.

Several soldiers stepped backward.

Halden remained motionless.

“Whatever happens tonight,” he told them, “remember what stands behind these walls.”

He turned toward the city.

“Not treasure. Not territory. People.”

Mira looked toward the residential quarter where Anwen and Sella had been taken into shelter.

She remembered the little girl's question.

Will we be safe?

Mira had promised that she would not have to face the darkness alone.

Now the time had come to honor that promise.

The Silence Before the Storm

Kaelen stood within the chamber beneath the central tower, holding the completed Waystone above the Heart of Refuge.

Golden currents moved between the two artifacts.

Through their connection, he could sense every tower surrounding the sanctuary. Each possessed its own rhythm, its own ancient identity.

Together, they formed something resembling a living heartbeat.

Tovin moved between the surrounding mechanisms, adjusting crystals and examining inscriptions.

“Western tower stable. Southern tower stable. Eastern tower…”

He paused.

“Acceptable.”

Seren leaned against a nearby pillar.

“That's not the word I was hoping to hear.”

“Would you prefer that I lie?”

“Only convincingly.”

Bram entered carrying his hammer and a newly forged breastplate.

Behind him came several engineers transporting replacement crystals.

“The forge is ready,” he announced. “Garrick says they'll keep producing equipment as long as the furnace remains operational.”

Tovin nodded.

“Excellent.”

Bram examined the Heart of Refuge.

“Can this thing actually stop that army?”

The Spellweaver looked toward Kaelen.

“The barrier can withstand considerable force.”

Bram waited.

“And?”

“And we have no reliable method of determining what considerable force means when applied to a creature the size of a mountain.”

Bram sighed.

“I preferred it when our problems were small enough to hit.”

Lyra entered the chamber carrying Flicker.

Her expression immediately silenced the others.

“What is it?” Kaelen asked.

She placed Flicker upon the floor.

“I can feel them.”

“The Ashborn?”

She nodded.

“But they aren't empty.”

Tovin lowered his staff.

“What do you mean?”

Lyra struggled to describe the sensation.

“There's something inside them. Beneath the corruption. Fragments of people.”

She closed her eyes.

“Memories. Fear. Grief.”

Kaelen remembered the black crystals within the soldiers at Willowmere.

“Are they prisoners?”

“I don't know.”

Lyra opened her eyes.

“But I don't think every creature outside these walls chose to become what it is.”

For several moments, nobody spoke.

The implications were terrible.

They had believed they were fighting an army of animated armor.

Now they faced the possibility that Vaelrith had transformed the suffering of countless people into weapons.

Bram looked down at his hammer.

“Then destroying him becomes considerably more important.”

Kaelen nodded.

“Yes.”

Above them, the sanctuary bells began ringing.

The first assault had begun.

The Northern Wall

The Ashborn advanced without warning.

Their front ranks emerged from the darkness carrying enormous shields constructed from blackened metal. Behind them came archers whose arrows burned with violet energy.

The first volley struck the sanctuary's barrier.

Golden light spread across the sky.

Thousands of sparks descended harmlessly beyond the walls.

The defenders cheered.

Halden did not.

“Hold your positions!”

A second volley followed.

Then a third.

The barrier continued absorbing the attacks.

Mira watched the Ashborn gathering beneath the northern gate.

“They're not trying to break through.”

Halden nodded.

“They're measuring how much punishment the barrier can withstand.”

Beyond the soldiers, enormous siege constructs emerged from the mist.

Their bodies resembled ancient machinery dragged from forgotten ruins. Broken wheels, metal plates and enormous crystals had been assembled into towering creatures that moved upon multiple articulated limbs.

Violet light gathered within their centers.

Halden raised his sword.

“Brace!”

The first construct released a concentrated burst of energy.

It struck the barrier with a thunderous impact.

The entire wall shook.

Several defenders fell.

Golden light rippled across the sanctuary.

Far below, within the central chamber, Tovin watched three crystals illuminate simultaneously.

“Oh, that is unpleasant.”

Kaelen felt the impact through the Waystone.

It was like a sudden pressure against his chest.

He steadied himself.

“Can the towers handle it?”

“For now.”

Another blast struck.

The eastern mechanism began vibrating.

Tovin hurried toward it.

“Bram!”

The Warden immediately joined him.

“Hold this assembly in place!”

Bram wrapped both arms around the ancient mechanism.

It shook violently.

“Anything else?”

“Try not to let it explode.”

Bram stared at him.

“Your instructions are becoming increasingly unreasonable!”

Wings Above the Sanctuary

Thalassa descended upon the northern battlefield like a storm given living form.

Her enormous wings swept aside clouds of ash. Blue fire erupted from her mouth, striking the advancing siege constructs.

The first machine collapsed.

The second attempted to turn toward her.

Thalassa seized it with her claws and hurled it against the surrounding rocks.

The defenders erupted in cheers.

Queen Isolde watched from the eastern battlements.

“That's my dragon.”

A nearby officer smiled.

“Does she know that, Your Majesty?”

Isolde laughed.

“She would strongly disagree with the description.”

Above the battlefield, dozens of Ashwing creatures emerged from the darkness.

Their skeletal wings spread across the sky.

Violet flames burned within their chests.

Thalassa turned toward them.

Come, then.

The creatures descended.

She met them above the sanctuary.

Blue fire illuminated the clouds.

Several Ashwings disintegrated immediately, their ashes scattering upon the wind.

Others surrounded the dragon.

Their claws struck her scales.

Thalassa twisted through the air, destroying one with her tail before seizing another between her jaws.

But for every creature she defeated, another emerged from the darkness.

Then a familiar ship rose above the southern tower.

The *Lantern's Wake*.

Its sails glowed with golden energy as it traveled along an ancient aerial passage.

Captain Rhydan stood beside the helm.

Nessa directed the crew while Edrin helped position the ship's defensive equipment.

Rhydan looked toward the enormous dragon surrounded by enemies.

“Well, gentlemen and ladies.”

He adjusted his hat.

“Let's make ourselves useful.”

The ship swept beneath Thalassa.

Golden bolts struck the surrounding Ashwings.

Several creatures fell.

Thalassa looked toward the vessel.

You are a long way from the sea, Captain.

Rhydan grinned.

“Getting rather accustomed to it!”

The dragon released a triumphant roar.

Together, the ancient guardian and the flying ship turned toward the approaching creatures.

For the first time that night, the Ashborn lost control of the sky.

Beneath the Streets

Anwen sat beside her mother within one of the sanctuary's underground shelters.

Hundreds of people surrounded them.

Some prayed quietly.

Others attempted to comfort frightened children.

Every impact against the protective barrier caused dust to fall from the ceiling.

Anwen held her broken birdcage upon her lap.

“Mother?”

Sella looked toward her.

“Yes?”

“Are the bad people outside?”

Sella nodded.

“Some of them.”

“Is Bram fighting them?”

“I expect so.”

“And Mira?”

“Yes.”

Anwen looked toward the shelter entrance.

“What about Flicker?”

Before Sella could answer, a golden light appeared between several blankets.

Flicker emerged carrying a small piece of bread.

Anwen laughed.

“Flicker!”

The little creature climbed into her lap.

Sella smiled.

“Apparently, he's been given a different assignment.”

Flicker settled beside the broken birdcage.

Another tremendous impact shook the shelter.

Several children began crying.

Anwen looked down at the little creature.

“Are you afraid?”

Flicker chirped.

She stroked his head.

“Me too.”

A younger boy sat nearby, clutching a wooden toy.

Anwen moved closer to him.

“Would you like to meet my friend?”

The boy nodded.

She placed Flicker between them.

For a little while, the children forgot the sounds of battle.

And somewhere beneath the sanctuary, the Heart of Refuge burned a little brighter.

The Arrival of the Worldbreaker

Shortly before dawn, the Ashborn stopped advancing.

Their siege constructs became motionless.

The remaining Ashwings withdrew into the clouds.

Even the corrupted roads appeared to grow quiet.

Halden stood upon the northern wall.

“What are they doing?”

Mira looked toward the mountains.

Then she heard it.

A deep, rhythmic sound.

Not thunder.

Footsteps.

The trees along the northern ridge began disappearing.

Enormous trunks snapped beneath an unseen weight.

The hillside trembled.

Rocks rolled into the valley.

Then the Worldbreaker emerged.

Its body rose above the surrounding forest.

Black stone covered its enormous limbs. Ancient chains hung from its shoulders, dragging broken pillars and fragments of forgotten structures behind it.

Violet fire burned within deep fractures across its chest.

Its head resembled a crown fashioned from the ruins of a destroyed city.

Every movement shook the earth.

Soldiers upon the battlements stared in silence.

One lowered his weapon.

Another whispered a prayer.

Halden watched the creature advance.

“Now would be an excellent time for reinforcements.”

Thalassa descended beside the northern tower.

Her expression was unlike anything Mira had previously seen.

The dragon was afraid.

Worldbreaker.

Kaelen's voice reached her through the Waystone.

“What do we know about it?”

Thalassa watched the enormous creature.

Before the first roads were opened, creatures such as this wandered between unstable worlds. They consumed the energy that held those worlds together.

Tovin listened through the sanctuary's communication mechanism.

“Consumed?”

They were not simply destroyers of cities. They were destroyers of connections.

Kaelen understood.

“The protective barrier.”

It will feed upon it.

Tovin stared at the Heart of Refuge.

“Oh, no.”

The Worldbreaker reached the edge of the sanctuary's defenses.

It lifted one enormous hand.

Then it placed its palm against the golden barrier.

The sky erupted.

The Breaking of the First Tower

Golden energy surged toward the creature.

The Worldbreaker's violet fractures became brighter.

The sanctuary's barrier began bending inward.

Tovin watched the central mechanisms.

“Disconnect the northern tower!”

An engineer stared at him.

“That will weaken the barrier!”

“It's consuming the energy!”

Kaelen raised the Waystone.

He reached toward the northern connection.

The Worldbreaker resisted.

For the first time, the artifact felt as though something were pulling against it from the opposite direction.

He concentrated.

The golden current weakened.

Then the creature struck the barrier with its enormous fist.

The northern tower shattered.

Its uppermost chamber exploded into fragments of white stone.

The beacon vanished.

The protective dome flickered.

A terrible silence followed.

Then thousands of Ashborn began advancing toward the damaged section.

Halden raised his sword.

“DEFEND THE WALL!”

The sanctuary's archers released their first volley.

Golden arrows descended upon the approaching army.

Mira moved toward the damaged battlements.

Cassia joined her.

“Lieutenant.”

“Guardian.”

They looked toward the advancing soldiers.

Mira raised her shield.

“Ready?”

Cassia smiled grimly.

“Not particularly.”

“Good. Neither am I.”

Together, they took their positions.

Within the central chamber, Tovin examined the damaged network.

“The remaining towers are compensating.”

Kaelen looked toward him.

“How long?”

“Not long enough.”

Bram released the mechanism he had been holding.

“Then we need to stop that enormous thing.”

Tovin nodded.

“Preferably before it touches another tower.”

Seren examined the ancient map.

“There must be something keeping it connected to Vaelrith.”

Lyra approached the image of the Worldbreaker.

Its enormous body appeared above the floor.

She studied the violet currents surrounding it.

“There.”

A black crystal pulsed within its chest.

Unlike the smaller crystals carried by the Ashborn, this one appeared connected to several enormous chains embedded throughout the creature's body.

Tovin examined the image.

“A binding crystal.”

Kaelen looked toward him.

“Vaelrith is controlling it?”

“Possibly.”

Lyra shook her head.

“Not completely.”

She closed her eyes.

“I can feel its anger.”

Bram frowned.

“Understandable.”

“It's been imprisoned for thousands of years.”

She opened her eyes.

“And someone has awakened it only to place it in another prison.”

Kaelen looked toward the creature's image.

“Can we break the binding?”

Tovin studied the crystal.

“Yes.”

Bram rested his hammer across his shoulder.

“Finally, a straightforward answer.”

The Spellweaver continued.

“Unfortunately, someone will need to reach its chest.”

Bram slowly lowered his hammer.

“I withdraw my enthusiasm.”

The Breach

The northern gate fell shortly after sunrise.

Its ancient doors had survived centuries of storms, earthquakes and forgotten wars.

They could not withstand the Worldbreaker's assault.

When the creature struck the damaged wall, the gate collapsed beneath an avalanche of stone.

The Ashborn surged through the opening.

Mira stood at the front of the defenders.

Her dragon-forged shield illuminated as the first soldiers reached her.

She struck one across its chest, exposing its crystal.

Cassia destroyed it.

Another attacked from the left.

Mira turned, blocking its weapon before driving it backward.

Around her, defenders fought desperately to prevent the enemy from reaching the residential streets.

Halden directed reinforcements toward the breach.

“Second company! With me!”

The soldiers advanced.

Bram emerged from a nearby passage carrying his hammer.

Behind him came Garrick and several blacksmiths armed with freshly forged weapons.

Mira stared.

“Bram?”

He smiled.

“Thought you might need something hit.”

An enormous Ashborn construct forced its way through the damaged gate.

Its armor was thicker than that of the ordinary soldiers.

Bram charged.

His hammer struck one of its supporting limbs.

The construct collapsed sideways.

Garrick drove a metal spike into its exposed crystal.

The creature disintegrated.

Bram looked toward the elderly blacksmith.

“Not bad.”

Garrick smiled.

“Been breaking things longer than you've been alive.”

They turned toward the next construct.

For several hours, the defenders held the northern streets.

But the Ashborn continued coming.

And the Worldbreaker continued feeding.

The General's Challenge

General Malachar entered the sanctuary beneath a cloud of ash.

His dark armor remained untouched by the surrounding battle.

Soldiers attempted to approach him.

He raised his sword.

Violet energy swept across the street, scattering their weapons.

Mira recognized him immediately.

The armored commander from Lyra's visions.

She stepped forward.

“That's far enough.”

Malachar looked at her.

“Guardian.”

He examined her shield.

“Thalassa's work.”

Mira tightened her grip.

“You recognize it?”

“I remember the dragon kingdoms.”

His gaze traveled toward the sanctuary's white buildings.

“And this place.”

For a moment, something changed within his expression.

Then the violet light returned to his eyes.

“Surrender the Pathfinder.”

Mira laughed.

“That's not going to happen.”

“Your resistance is meaningless.”

“People keep telling us that.”

Malachar raised his sword.

“Then perhaps you should listen.”

He attacked.

The impact against Mira's shield drove her backward.

Her boots scraped across the stone.

She recovered and struck toward his chest.

Malachar turned aside the blow.

His movements were precise.

Controlled.

Unlike the Ashborn soldiers, he fought with the experience of someone who had spent a lifetime mastering his weapon.

Cassia attempted to intervene.

Malachar struck her weapon aside.

Mira stepped between them.

“Cassia, get the wounded out!”

The lieutenant hesitated.

“Go!”

Cassia obeyed.

Malachar watched her retreat.

“You protect people who cannot protect themselves.”

Mira raised her shield.

“That's generally the idea.”

“An admirable weakness.”

She shook her head.

“You've confused weakness with something you no longer understand.”

The general attacked again.

Mira blocked the blow.

But this time, a fracture appeared across her shield.

The Road Through the Sky

Kaelen, Seren and Tovin stood upon the deck of the *Lantern's Wake*.

Captain Rhydan listened as they explained their plan.

When they finished, he looked toward the Worldbreaker.

Then toward Kaelen.

“You want me to sail toward that?”

Kaelen nodded.

“Close enough for Seren to reach the binding crystal.”

Rhydan examined the creature's enormous chest.

“And what happens if it notices us?”

Seren smiled.

“We'll improvise.”

The captain stared at her.

“You people are a terrible influence.”

Nessa laughed.

“He's going to do it.”

“Of course I'm going to do it!”

Rhydan turned toward the crew.

“Prepare to change course!”

The ship rose above the damaged northern tower.

Thalassa joined them.

Her scales bore several wounds, and one wing had been torn by the Ashwings.

Kaelen looked toward her.

“Can you still fly?”

The dragon gave him an offended look.

Apparently.

He smiled.

“We need your help.”

Thalassa listened.

Then she turned toward the Worldbreaker.

I will draw its attention.

Tovin examined the creature's binding crystal.

“The connection is protected by several layers of ancient magic.”

Seren tightened the straps upon her equipment.

“Can you remove them?”

“With Kaelen's help.”

“And then?”

“You destroy the crystal.”

She nodded.

“Simple.”

Tovin stared.

“Nothing about this is simple.”

Seren smiled.

“That's why I said it.”

The ship turned north.

Ahead of them, the Worldbreaker raised its enormous arms toward the sanctuary's remaining towers.

Thalassa released a roar.

Blue fire struck the creature's shoulder.

The Worldbreaker turned.

Its attention shifted toward the dragon.

Rhydan seized the opportunity.

“Full sail!”

The *Lantern's Wake* accelerated.

The Forgotten Soldier

Lyra found Mira kneeling beside a damaged fountain.

Her shield had cracked.

Blood ran from a wound above her eyebrow.

Malachar stood several feet away.

His sword burned with violet fire.

Lyra approached slowly.

“General.”

He turned toward her.

“Seer.”

She looked into his eyes.

“Your name is Malachar.”

He remained motionless.

“You once commanded the armies of a kingdom called Elarion.”

His expression changed.

Only slightly.

But Lyra noticed.

“You brought survivors here during the Shattering.”

Malachar raised his sword.

“Silence.”

She continued.

“You had a wife.”

The violet light within his armor intensified.

“A son.”

“Enough!”

Lyra stopped.

She could feel the memories buried beneath centuries of corruption.

They were not gone.

They had been imprisoned.

Just as Thalassa's memories had been.

Just as the Tidewarden's memories had been.

Mira struggled to her feet.

“Lyra…”

The Seer looked toward Malachar.

“Your son loved the fountains.”

The general staggered.

An image appeared within his mind.

A little boy running beneath the white towers.

Water splashing around his feet.

Laughter.

A woman's voice calling him home.

Malachar pressed one hand against his helmet.

“Stop.”

Lyra stepped closer.

“Vaelrith promised to protect your kingdom.”

The general's breathing became uneven.

“He promised that nobody would ever suffer again.”

Lyra nodded.

“And what did he take from you?”

Malachar looked toward the surrounding streets.

Wounded soldiers.

Frightened families.

Children being carried toward shelter.

The sanctuary.

The place that had once welcomed his own people.

For a moment, the violet light disappeared from his eyes.

“What have I done?”

Mira lowered her damaged shield.

Malachar looked at her.

His expression contained centuries of grief.

Then a voice emerged from his armor.

General.

The violet light returned.

Malachar screamed.

Black chains appeared across his chest.

Lyra stepped backward.

“Vaelrith!”

The general raised his sword against his own will.

You belong to me.

Malachar struggled.

“No.”

The chains tightened.

You surrendered yourself willingly.

Malachar looked toward Lyra.

His voice became barely audible.

“I remember.”

He turned toward the corrupted soldiers advancing behind him.

Then he looked toward Mira.

“Protect them.”

The Guardian nodded.

Malachar lifted his sword.

And drove its blade through the black crystal embedded within his own armor.

Golden light erupted from the wound.

The chains shattered.

Across the northern streets, hundreds of Ashborn soldiers stopped moving.

Their crystals darkened.

Malachar collapsed.

Lyra hurried toward him.

His armor began disintegrating.

Beneath it, she saw the face of an elderly man.

He looked toward the sanctuary's towers.

“My son…”

Lyra took his hand.

“What was his name?”

Malachar smiled faintly.

“Alaric.”

She nodded.

“I'll remember him.”

The general closed his eyes.

For the first time in centuries, he was free.

The Heart of the Worldbreaker

The *Lantern's Wake* reached the creature shortly before midday.

The Worldbreaker swung one enormous arm toward Thalassa.

The dragon avoided the blow, but the resulting shockwave sent the ship sideways.

Rhydan fought to maintain control.

“Hold on!”

Kaelen grabbed the railing.

Tovin nearly lost his staff.

Seren climbed onto the forward platform.

The creature's chest loomed before them.

Its binding crystal was larger than she had imagined.

Violet energy traveled through enormous chains embedded within the surrounding stone.

Kaelen raised the Waystone.

Golden light reached toward the binding.

Immediately, the Worldbreaker turned.

Its enormous eyes focused upon him.

And Kaelen heard something.

Not words.

Pain.

A vast, ancient suffering that seemed to extend beyond the history of Aetherfall.

He saw fragments of distant worlds.

Mountains collapsing.

Ancient guardians surrounding the creature.

Chains being forged.

Centuries passing beneath darkness.

Then Vaelrith standing before its prison.

Offering freedom.

Replacing one set of chains with another.

Kaelen nearly dropped the Waystone.

“Tovin!”

The Spellweaver approached.

“What is it?”

“We can't simply destroy the crystal.”

Seren turned toward him.

“Why not?”

“It's connected to the creature's heart.”

Tovin examined the binding.

His expression became grave.

“If we shatter it while the connection remains intact…”

“We might kill it,” Kaelen finished.

The Worldbreaker roared.

Its enormous hand reached toward the ship.

Rhydan turned sharply.

The fingers passed beneath the hull.

Seren looked toward Kaelen.

“That thing is destroying the sanctuary!”

“I know.”

“People are dying!”

“I know!”

Kaelen looked toward the creature.

He remembered the Tidewarden.

Thalassa.

Malachar.

How many times had they encountered suffering disguised as monstrosity?

How many times had someone else's chains been mistaken for their true nature?

He raised the Waystone again.

“We break the chains first.”

Tovin studied the golden currents.

“That will require time.”

Seren looked toward the creature's approaching hand.

“We appear to be experiencing a shortage.”

Thalassa descended between the ship and the Worldbreaker.

Blue fire erupted across its shoulder.

Then I shall provide some.

The dragon seized the creature's arm.

The Worldbreaker struck her.

Thalassa roared in pain.

Kaelen shouted.

“Thalassa!”

Continue!

Tovin raised his staff.

Golden energy surrounded the binding crystal.

One of the enormous chains became visible beneath the corruption.

Seren looked toward the creature.

Then toward the distance separating it from the ship.

Rhydan followed her gaze.

“Oh, don't even think about it.”

She smiled.

“Too late.”

The Windrunner jumped.

The Windrunner's Leap

Seren struck the Worldbreaker's chest with enough force to drive the breath from her lungs.

Her fingers caught an ancient chain.

Below her stretched a terrifying distance.

She climbed.

The creature moved beneath her.

Each movement threatened to tear her from the stone.

Golden light illuminated the first binding point.

Tovin's voice reached her through the Waystone.

“Now!”

Seren struck the exposed connection.

The chain shattered.

The Worldbreaker roared.

A section of violet fire disappeared from its shoulder.

“Again!” Kaelen shouted.

Another binding point illuminated.

Seren climbed toward it.

The creature's enormous hand moved across its chest.

She flattened herself against the stone.

Its fingers passed inches above her.

Then she continued climbing.

The second chain shattered.

Then the third.

Each destroyed connection weakened Vaelrith's control.

But the creature's movements became increasingly unpredictable.

The *Lantern's Wake* struggled to remain nearby.

Thalassa circled overhead, drawing its attention whenever possible.

Kaelen maintained the Waystone's connection.

Tovin's staff burned with golden light.

Seren reached the final binding point.

She lifted her blade.

Then the Worldbreaker struck the sanctuary's outer wall.

The impact threw her from its chest.

“SEREN!”

Kaelen watched her fall.

Thalassa descended immediately.

But the creature's enormous arm blocked her path.

Seren disappeared beneath the ship.

For one terrible moment, nobody could see her.

Then a voice came from below.

“Would someone mind helping me?”

Rhydan leaned over the railing.

Seren hung from one of the ship's trailing ropes.

Her face was pale.

Her expression was furious.

Nessa and Edrin hurried to pull her aboard.

She collapsed upon the deck.

Kaelen knelt beside her.

“Are you hurt?”

“Everywhere.”

He helped her sit upright.

She looked toward the Worldbreaker.

“Did I get it?”

Tovin examined the creature.

The final chain hung loose.

Its violet energy flickered.

“You did.”

Seren closed her eyes.

“Excellent.”

She remained motionless.

“I would now like to retire.”

The Choice of an Ancient Creature

The Worldbreaker staggered.

Its binding crystal cracked.

The remaining chains fell from its body.

Violet fire poured from the fractures across its chest.

Kaelen raised the Waystone.

“Now, Tovin!”

The Spellweaver directed golden energy toward the crystal.

Its corrupted surface shattered.

A tremendous roar shook the valley.

The Worldbreaker fell to one knee.

The Ashborn stopped advancing.

Across the battlefield, corrupted roads flickered.

The enormous creature lifted its head.

Its eyes were no longer violet.

They were amber.

Ancient.

Exhausted.

Kaelen felt its presence reach toward him.

For a moment, he experienced the creature's memories.

Not simply destruction.

A world unlike Aetherfall.

Vast oceans beneath unfamiliar stars.

Others of its kind walking across enormous plains.

Then separation.

Capture.

Imprisonment.

It had been taken from its world long before the ancient roads became stable.

Its hunger for their energy had been the desperate instinct of a creature attempting to return somewhere it belonged.

Kaelen lowered the Waystone.

“You want to go home.”

The creature became still.

Tovin stared at him.

“What?”

Kaelen looked toward the enormous figure.

“It's lost.”

The Worldbreaker reached toward the Waystone.

Not aggressively.

Almost cautiously.

Kaelen could feel an ancient road responding.

A passage that had remained sealed for thousands of years.

He understood what the creature wanted.

But the central gateway remained beyond their reach.

He could not yet open its road home.

He looked toward the Worldbreaker.

“We'll help you.”

The creature watched him.

Kaelen continued.

“But we need you to stop destroying this place.”

For several moments, nothing happened.

Then the Worldbreaker turned away from the sanctuary.

It looked toward the approaching Ashborn army.

Thousands of violet lights moved across the valley.

The creature released a low rumble.

Thalassa landed beside it.

The dragon looked toward Kaelen.

I believe it understands.

The Worldbreaker rose.

And for the first time since the battle began, it moved against Vaelrith's army.

The Turning of the Battle

Commander Halden watched from the damaged northern wall.

The Worldbreaker swept aside several corrupted siege constructs.

Thalassa descended upon the remaining Ashwings.

The *Lantern's Wake* circled above the battlefield.

For a moment, the defenders simply stared.

Then Halden raised his sword.

“Now!”

The sanctuary's soldiers advanced toward the breach.

Mira joined them despite her injuries.

Bram emerged from the forge carrying a replacement shield.

He handed it to her.

“It's not dragon-forged.”

She accepted it.

“It'll do.”

He examined her damaged armor.

“You look terrible.”

“Thank you.”

“Anytime.”

Together, they moved toward the remaining Ashborn.

Maelor and the roadwardens redirected energy through the surviving towers.

The Heart of Refuge stabilized.

Golden light returned above the city.

The Ashborn soldiers began losing their connection to the corrupted roads.

Some collapsed.

Others staggered as the violet fire within their crystals weakened.

The defenders pushed them beyond the broken gate.

And then, from the southern horizon, came another light.

An enormous golden figure approached along an ancient road.

The Solar Sentinel.

Behind it marched soldiers from the mountain kingdoms.

Additional guardians appeared upon the surrounding hills.

Forest protectors.

Stone constructs.

Winged creatures carrying the banners of distant settlements.

The beacons of Aetherfall had been answered.

Halden stared at the approaching reinforcements.

A smile slowly spread across his face.

“Well.”

He raised his sword.

“Better late than never.”

The Price of Victory

By sunset, the Ashborn had withdrawn.

The remaining corrupted roads leading toward the sanctuary had been closed.

The Worldbreaker disappeared into the northern mountains, where it settled beneath an enormous cliff.

Thalassa watched over it.

The sanctuary's bells rang.

Not in celebration.

In remembrance.

The northern tower lay in ruins.

Hundreds of buildings had been damaged.

The streets were filled with exhausted defenders and wounded civilians.

The hospital could scarcely accommodate everyone requiring treatment.

Kaelen walked through the northern quarter.

He passed a damaged bakery.

An overturned fountain.

A house whose roof had collapsed.

People emerged from shelters and began searching for relatives.

Some found them.

Others did not.

Victory had arrived.

But it had not erased the cost.

Near the ruined gate, Kaelen found Commander Halden sitting upon a broken section of wall.

His helmet rested beside him.

A bandage covered his left shoulder.

Kaelen sat down.

For several minutes, neither spoke.

Finally, Halden looked toward the damaged city.

“We held.”

Kaelen nodded.

“Yes.”

The commander watched several soldiers carrying a wounded companion toward the hospital.

“People will call this a great victory.”

Kaelen remained silent.

Halden continued.

“They'll write songs. Paint pictures. Tell stories about dragons and ancient guardians.”

He lowered his head.

“I hope someone remembers the soldiers who were afraid.”

Kaelen looked toward him.

“The ones who wanted to run,” Halden continued. “The ones who had families waiting beneath these streets.”

He watched the setting sun.

“The ones who stayed anyway.”

Kaelen thought of Lyra's journal.

“We will.”

Halden nodded.

“Good.”

He retrieved his helmet.

“Now, if you'll excuse me, there are approximately a thousand things requiring my attention.”

Kaelen smiled faintly.

“Only a thousand?”

“I'm being optimistic.”

The Boy Who Loved Fountains

Lyra stood beside the damaged fountain where Malachar had fallen.

His armor had disappeared.

Only a small silver pendant remained.

Within it was the image of a woman and a young boy.

She opened her journal.

Carefully, she recorded his name.

General Malachar of Elarion.

Then beneath it:

Alaric, who loved the fountains.

Mira approached carrying her damaged dragon-forged shield.

“Are you all right?”

Lyra looked toward the pendant.

“I keep thinking about what he might have become if someone had reached him sooner.”

Mira sat beside her.

“So do I.”

Lyra closed the journal.

“He did terrible things.”

“Yes.”

“And he saved people at the end.”

“Yes.”

She looked toward Mira.

“How do we remember someone like that?”

Mira considered the question.

“Truthfully.”

Lyra nodded.

Not as a hero without wrongdoing.

Not as a monster without humanity.

But as someone who had made terrible choices and, in his final moments, had chosen differently.

She placed the pendant beside the fountain.

A small golden flower emerged between the damaged stones.

Neither woman spoke.

They remained there until the evening bells stopped ringing.

The Little Bird

Bram returned to the underground shelter shortly after sunset.

His armor was covered in ash.

His hands ached.

Every muscle in his body seemed determined to complain.

Anwen saw him immediately.

“BRAM!”

She ran toward him.

He knelt and caught her.

Flicker jumped onto his shoulder.

“Well,” Bram said, “apparently someone missed me.”

Anwen hugged him tightly.

“Did you win?”

Bram looked toward Sella.

Then toward the other families emerging from the shelter.

“We're still here.”

The child smiled.

“That's winning.”

Bram considered that.

“Yes.”

He stood.

“I suppose it is.”

Together, they walked toward the residential quarter.

The evening sky was beginning to clear.

Several stars appeared above the sanctuary.

Anwen hurried toward her room.

Then she stopped.

A small sound came from the garden.

A chirp.

She turned toward the window.

A little brown bird sat upon the broken birdcage.

Anwen stared.

“Pip?”

The bird tilted its head.

She approached slowly.

It fluttered toward her hand.

Anwen began crying.

Sella covered her mouth.

Bram stood silently beside them.

The child looked toward her mother.

“He found us.”

Sella embraced her.

“Yes, sweetheart.”

Bram watched the little bird settle upon Anwen's shoulder.

He thought of the ruined village.

The child's father.

The broken cage.

Not everything lost could be recovered.

Not every wound could be healed.

But sometimes, something small returned.

Something that reminded people there was still a future waiting for them.

Bram looked toward Flicker.

“Don't even think about eating him.”

Flicker chirped indignantly.

Anwen laughed.

And somewhere within the damaged sanctuary, a little piece of ordinary happiness returned.

The Road to the Ancient Capital

The companions gathered within the central chamber the following morning.

Tovin had spent most of the night examining the Waystone.

His discoveries were troubling.

“The Ashborn have withdrawn from several regions.”

Kaelen studied the map.

“That's good.”

“Not necessarily.”

Tovin pointed toward the ancient capital.

“Vaelrith is recalling his forces.”

Golden and violet lines moved across the map.

The corrupted roads were converging upon a single location.

The central gateway.

Lyra approached.

“He's preparing something.”

Tovin nodded.

“The battle weakened his control over the outer network. But he's concentrating everything that remains.”

Kaelen looked toward the ancient city.

“Then we need to reach him before he's ready.”

Queen Isolde entered with Commander Halden and Maelor.

Thalassa's voice reached them through the ancient mechanisms.

The Worldbreaker will remain beneath my protection until its road can be opened.

Kaelen smiled.

“Thank you.”

Halden examined the map.

“I can provide soldiers.”

Kaelen shook his head.

“The sanctuary needs them.”

The commander considered this.

Then nodded.

Isolde looked toward the six companions.

“You've already done more for Aetherfall than anyone could reasonably ask.”

Mira adjusted the straps upon her replacement shield.

“We're not finished.”

Seren smiled.

“Apparently, we have difficulty recognizing reasonable stopping points.”

Tovin retrieved his staff.

“An unfortunate but consistent characteristic.”

Bram lifted Flicker onto his shoulder.

“Besides, I would eventually like to get home.”

Lyra looked toward the completed Waystone.

“The central gateway is waiting.”

Kaelen picked up Auren's lantern.

Its flame remained steady.

He looked toward the map.

The ancient capital lay beyond a region of broken roads, ruined kingdoms and corrupted passages.

Somewhere within its shattered walls stood the throne from which Vaelrith intended to command every surviving road.

The sanctuary had survived.

The Army of Ash had been defeated.

But the war was not over.

Kaelen looked toward his companions.

“Let's finish this.”

The Throne Awakens

Far away, within the ruins of the ancient capital, Vaelrith stood before an enormous circular chamber.

The walls contained the names of the original Waykeepers.

Most had been scratched away.

At its center stood a throne constructed from fragments of ancient gateways.

Black chains extended from its foundation into the surrounding streets.

Violet energy traveled through them.

The throne had remained dormant since the Shattering.

Now it was awakening.

Vaelrith felt the loss of Malachar.

The destruction of his army's outer connections.

The release of the Worldbreaker.

His expression remained calm.

But the shadows surrounding him moved violently.

“Remarkable.”

He approached the throne.

“Even now, they believe freedom is worth preserving.”

An image of the Last Sanctuary appeared before him.

Its damaged walls.

Its surviving towers.

Its people rebuilding their homes.

He watched them.

Then he closed his hand.

The image shattered.

“Very well.”

He ascended the steps.

The throne responded.

Ancient chains tightened throughout the ruined city.

Corrupted gateways opened.

Darkness poured from passages that had remained sealed for centuries.

Vaelrith sat.

For a moment, every surviving road in Aetherfall trembled.

The central gateway illuminated.

Beyond it appeared countless worlds.

Among them was the world from which the six companions had come.

Vaelrith smiled.

“Come home, Pathfinder.”

Violet fire spread across the throne.

“Come and discover what your freedom will cost.”

Beyond the Seven Towers

The companions departed the sanctuary at sunrise.

Thousands of people gathered beside the southern road.

There were no elaborate ceremonies.

No speeches.

Only embraces, handshakes and quiet words of gratitude.

Captain Rhydan presented Kaelen with a small brass compass.

“Doesn't always point north anymore.”

Kaelen examined it.

“Where does it point?”

Rhydan smiled.

“Usually somewhere interesting.”

Maelor gave Lyra a copy of the new covenant.

Garrick presented Bram with several replacement tools.

Commander Halden offered Seren a newly forged blade.

Queen Isolde embraced Mira.

Tovin received a collection of ancient manuscripts from the sanctuary's engineers.

He looked happier than anyone had seen him in days.

Finally, Anwen approached.

Pip rested upon her shoulder.

She carried a small wooden carving.

It depicted six figures standing beneath a lantern.

She handed it to Kaelen.

“I made it with Mother.”

Kaelen accepted it carefully.

“It's beautiful.”

Anwen smiled.

“So you remember us when you go home.”

Kaelen knelt beside her.

“We won't forget.”

She hugged him.

Then she turned toward Bram.

“And Flicker can visit whenever he wants.”

Bram nodded.

“I suspect he'll insist.”

Flicker chirped.

The companions began walking.

Behind them stood the Last Sanctuary.

Its northern tower was broken.

Its walls were damaged.

Its people were grieving.

Yet already, craftsmen were rebuilding.

Gardeners were clearing debris.

Children were returning to the courtyards.

The remaining towers continued burning.

And beneath the city, the Heart of Refuge remained alive.

Kaelen looked back one final time.

He understood now that the sanctuary had never truly been its walls.

It was the people who refused to abandon one another when those walls fell.

He turned toward the road.

Auren's lantern illuminated the stones before him.

Mira walked at his side.

Seren moved ahead.

Tovin studied the ancient markings.

Bram carried his hammer.

Lyra held her journal.

Flicker watched the unfamiliar landscape from Bram's shoulder.

Six travelers.

One extraordinary little companion.

One final journey.

Beyond the distant mountains, the ancient capital waited beneath a violet sky.

The road home was closer than ever.

And so was Vaelrith.

CHAPTER 25

The Shattered Throne

On the seventh day of their journey toward the ancient capital, the companions discovered a road that led to its own destruction.

It began innocently enough.

White stones emerged from beneath the surrounding grass, forming a pathway that wound between two enormous hills. Ancient lanterns stood at regular intervals, their golden flames untouched by the morning wind.

According to Auren's journal, the road had once carried thousands of travelers toward the capital.

Now it carried none.

Kaelen stopped beside the first lantern.

Something was wrong.

The completed Waystone pulsed within his hand, revealing a connection that seemed to twist back upon itself.

Tovin approached.

“What do you see?”

Kaelen studied the artifact.

“The road is remembering something.”

“Roads frequently do.”

“No. This is different.”

He stepped forward.

The landscape changed.

For a moment, the surrounding hills disappeared.

Buildings rose from the earth. Trees became gardens. The empty pathway filled with merchants, travelers and children chasing one another beneath colorful banners.

An enormous city appeared upon the horizon.

Its towers reached toward the clouds, connected by bridges of golden light. Ships traveled along elevated passages. Gateways shimmered beneath enormous arches.

It was magnificent.

Then the sky fractured.

A sound unlike anything Kaelen had ever heard traveled across the landscape.

The bridges collapsed.

The gateways erupted.

People began screaming.

The city disappeared beneath a wave of darkness.

And suddenly, Kaelen was standing beside the lantern again.

Mira caught his arm.

“Kaelen?”

He struggled to breathe.

“I saw it.”

Lyra approached slowly.

“The Shattering?”

He nodded.

Tovin examined the ancient road.

“The completed Waystone must be awakening memories that were previously inaccessible.”

Kaelen looked toward the distant hills.

He had seen destruction throughout Aetherfall.

He had witnessed ruined villages, corrupted guardians and kingdoms brought to the edge of collapse.

But until now, the Shattering had remained something that belonged to history.

An event described in journals.

A tragedy remembered by survivors.

Now he had heard the screams.

He had watched an entire civilization disappear.

And somewhere beyond the hills stood the man responsible.

The City That Remembered

They reached the outskirts of the ancient capital shortly before sunset.

Auren's journal identified it as Elyndor, the First City of the Roads.

Once, travelers from hundreds of worlds had passed through its gateways.

Its libraries had contained knowledge gathered across civilizations. Its markets had offered goods from lands beneath unfamiliar stars. Its gardens had been planted with trees that could not grow anywhere else in Aetherfall.

It had been the greatest achievement of the original Waykeepers.

Now it was a graveyard.

Enormous towers leaned against one another like wounded giants. Bridges hung suspended above empty streets, their central spans missing. Statues lay broken beneath centuries of dust.

Violet light traveled through cracks in the ground.

The city seemed to breathe.

Slowly.

Painfully.

Bram stopped beside the remains of a fountain.

A stone figure of a child stood at its center, holding a lantern.

The lantern had been broken away.

“Hard to imagine people living here.”

Lyra approached the fountain.

“They did.”

She touched its weathered surface.

Immediately, faint images appeared around them.

Children splashing in the water.

An elderly man feeding birds.

A woman sitting beneath a tree, reading a letter.

The images disappeared.

Lyra lowered her hand.

“They were ordinary people.”

Seren looked toward the ruined towers.

“Ordinary people living somewhere extraordinary.”

Kaelen thought of the Last Sanctuary.

Its crowded streets.

Its bakeries.

Its fountains.

Its children.

The similarities made the ruins considerably more difficult to look upon.

He retrieved Auren's lantern.

Its little flame illuminated the surrounding stones.

“Stay together.”

The companions entered Elyndor.

The Streets of Yesterday

As they traveled deeper into the city, the memories became increasingly vivid.

Entire buildings occasionally appeared around them before dissolving into ruins.

A merchant called from a doorway that no longer existed.

A group of musicians performed beneath an archway whose stones had collapsed centuries earlier.

A woman hurried past Mira carrying flowers.

Mira stepped aside instinctively.

The woman disappeared.

Seren watched the empty street.

“I don't like this.”

Tovin examined the golden markings beneath their feet.

“The city appears to be trapped between its final memories and its present condition.”

“Can we trust anything we see?”

“Probably not.”

“Wonderful.”

Bram pointed toward a nearby building.

“What about that bakery?”

Tovin looked at him.

“Especially not the bakery.”

Bram sighed.

“Cruel place.”

They continued toward the central district.

At an intersection surrounded by enormous pillars, Kaelen noticed a figure standing beneath a broken archway.

The man wore ancient Waykeeper robes.

A lantern rested in his hand.

Kaelen stopped.

“Auren?”

The figure turned.

It was him.

Younger than Kaelen remembered.

His face contained none of the exhaustion that had characterized their friend during the final weeks of his life.

A second figure emerged from the surrounding ruins.

Vaelrith.

The two men appeared to be arguing.

The companions gathered around the memory.

“You cannot continue this experiment,” Auren said.

Vaelrith looked toward an enormous tower in the distance.

“We are closer than ever.”

“Closer to what?”

“To ending the instability.”

Auren shook his head.

“The roads were never intended to be controlled by a single source.”

“Which is precisely why they continue failing.”

Vaelrith turned toward him.

“Every kingdom modifies its own passages. Every guardian follows a different interpretation of the covenant. Every council believes its authority exceeds that of its neighbors.”

He gestured toward the city.

“We built something magnificent, Auren. And we are allowing disagreement to destroy it.”

Auren stepped closer.

“Disagreement is not destruction.”

“It becomes destruction when thousands suffer because nobody possesses the authority to act.”

The memory flickered.

Auren lowered his voice.

“You're proposing that every road answer to one person.”

Vaelrith nodded.

“One authority. One purpose. One protector.”

“And who decides what that purpose should be?”

Vaelrith remained silent.

Auren stared at him.

“Of course.”

The memory dissolved.

Kaelen looked toward the place where his friend had stood.

For the first time, he wondered whether the Shattering had begun not with an act of hatred, but with an argument between two men who believed they were protecting the same world.

The House of the First Waykeepers

They discovered the entrance beneath a fallen statue.

Its enormous stone doors bore seven symbols surrounding an open gateway.

Tovin brushed away the dust.

“The original Waykeeper council chamber.”

Kaelen raised the completed Waystone.

The doors responded immediately.

Golden light spread across their inscriptions.

With a deep rumble, they opened.

Inside, the chamber remained remarkably intact.

Seven chairs surrounded a circular table.

Ancient books rested upon shelves along the walls. Maps covered enormous panels of polished stone.

At the center of the table stood a model of the ancient network.

Thousands of tiny golden roads connected hundreds of worlds.

Tovin approached it with something approaching reverence.

“This is incredible.”

Seren looked around.

“Anything likely to attack us?”

“Not everything ancient is dangerous.”

A stone figure moved behind him.

Tovin froze.

Bram raised his hammer.

The figure stepped into the light.

It resembled an elderly man carved from pale marble. Golden inscriptions covered its robes, and its eyes illuminated as it examined the companions.

“Travelers.”

Kaelen lowered the Waystone slightly.

“We seek the central gateway.”

The figure looked toward the artifact.

“The key has been restored.”

“Yes.”

“Then the council must be assembled.”

Tovin exchanged a glance with Kaelen.

“The council no longer exists.”

The guardian remained motionless.

“Clarify.”

Tovin hesitated.

“The city was destroyed. The original Waykeepers are gone.”

The figure looked toward the seven empty chairs.

For several moments, its eyes flickered.

“How much time has passed?”

Kaelen answered gently.

“Centuries.”

The guardian lowered its head.

“I was instructed to preserve this chamber until their return.”

Lyra approached.

“I'm sorry.”

The guardian looked toward the surrounding shelves.

“Then I have waited a very long time.”

Bram lowered his hammer.

“What's your name?”

“I was designated Archivist Seven.”

Bram frowned.

“That sounds more like a cupboard.”

The guardian tilted its head.

“Clarify.”

Seren smiled.

“He means you deserve a better name.”

The figure considered this.

“Master Auren occasionally addressed me as Archivist.”

Kaelen smiled.

“Archivist it is, then.”

The guardian bowed.

“How may I serve the travelers?”

Kaelen looked toward the ancient model.

“Tell us what happened here.”

The Final Record

The Archivist placed its hand upon the circular table.

The chamber darkened.

Golden images appeared above the ancient model.

Seven Waykeepers occupied the surrounding chairs.

Among them were Auren and Vaelrith.

The Archivist spoke.

“The council assembled to determine a response to increasing instability within the road network.”

Images of damaged gateways appeared.

“Several kingdoms had experienced catastrophic failures. Travelers became trapped between destinations. Some roads disappeared entirely.”

Tovin examined the images.

“What caused the instability?”

“Multiple factors. Improper construction. Conflicting magical systems. Natural disturbances between worlds.”

The Archivist paused.

“And unauthorized experiments.”

Vaelrith's image rose from his chair.

He addressed the council.

“We cannot repair the network while allowing every kingdom to interfere with it.”

One of the other Waykeepers objected.

“The covenant prohibits centralized control.”

Vaelrith placed an artifact upon the table.

It resembled a crown constructed from fragments of ancient gateways.

“The covenant was written before we understood the full dangers of the roads.”

The image changed.

An enormous throne appeared beneath the central tower.

Tovin stepped closer.

“The Shattered Throne.”

The Archivist nodded.

“Originally designated the Concordance Engine.”

Kaelen looked toward him.

“What was it designed to do?”

“Coordinate unstable passages. Distribute energy. Allow guardians to communicate across the entire network.”

The image of the throne became brighter.

“Vaelrith modified its design.”

Black lines appeared between the throne and the surrounding gateways.

“Rather than coordinating the roads, the modified engine would compel them to obey a single authority.”

Mira folded her arms.

“His.”

“Correct.”

The memory continued.

The council rejected Vaelrith's proposal.

Six votes against.

One in favor.

Vaelrith stood motionless beside the table.

Then he gathered his documents and departed.

The Archivist looked toward the companions.

“Three nights later, he activated the engine without authorization.”

The images changed.

Vaelrith sat upon the throne.

Thousands of golden roads appeared around him.

For several moments, the network seemed to stabilize.

Then something changed.

The roads resisted.

Guardians attempted to disconnect themselves.

Entire worlds rejected the authority imposed upon their passages.

The engine demanded additional energy.

Vaelrith supplied it.

Again.

And again.

Until the network began collapsing.

Kaelen watched in horror.

The roads fractured.

Gateways exploded.

Entire islands separated from the surrounding world.

Auren and the remaining Waykeepers rushed toward the central tower.

They attempted to deactivate the engine.

But the throne refused to release its connection.

The Archivist's voice became quieter.

“Master Auren initiated the emergency division of the original Waystone.”

Three fragments appeared above the table.

“The first retained the memory of origin. The second retained the memory of destination. The third retained the authority of passage.”

Tovin stared.

“Dividing the Waystone prevented Vaelrith from gaining complete control.”

“Correct.”

The image showed Auren carrying the three fragments away from the throne.

Behind him, the city collapsed.

The other Waykeepers remained within the central chamber, attempting to contain the destruction.

One by one, their images disappeared.

Kaelen lowered his head.

“Did Auren know what would happen?”

The Archivist remained silent for several seconds.

“Master Auren understood that dividing the key would permanently damage many surviving connections.”

The images faded.

“He also understood that allowing the engine to continue would destroy considerably more.”

Mira looked toward Kaelen.

Auren had carried the guilt of that decision for centuries.

He had believed himself responsible for the broken roads.

Yet the truth was more complicated.

He had not created the catastrophe.

He had prevented it from becoming something even worse.

Kaelen placed Auren's lantern upon the table.

“I wish he could have heard that.”

The Archivist looked toward the flame.

“Master Auren was informed.”

Kaelen looked up.

“He knew?”

“Yes.”

The guardian lowered its head.

“Knowing that a decision was necessary does not always prevent someone from grieving its consequences.”

The chamber became silent.

Kaelen looked at the little lantern.

He understood.

The Last Instruction

Before they departed, the Archivist retrieved a small metal cylinder from a hidden compartment beneath the council table.

It bore Auren's personal seal.

“This was deposited following the emergency division of the Waystone.”

Kaelen accepted it.

Inside was a narrow sheet of parchment.

Auren's handwriting covered its surface.

He read aloud.

To whoever restores the key:

If you have reached this chamber, then the roads have survived longer than I feared.

You will discover many accounts of what happened here. Some will describe Vaelrith as a monster. Others will describe him as a visionary betrayed by frightened men.

Neither account will tell you everything.

He was my friend.

He was brilliant, impatient, compassionate and increasingly unwilling to accept that compassion cannot be imposed through force.

I believed I could persuade him to stop.

When persuasion failed, I believed I could contain the consequences.

I was wrong about many things.

But I remain certain of one.

The roads must never belong to a single traveler.

Not to Vaelrith.

Not to me.

And not to you.

Kaelen stopped reading.

The others remained silent.

He continued.

When you stand before the throne, remember that destroying the man who occupies it will not necessarily destroy the temptation that created it.

You will possess the power to command what others cannot.

You may even believe that your intentions are better.

Perhaps they are.

But the world does not need a kinder master.

It needs to remain free.

Kaelen folded the parchment.

For a long time, nobody spoke.

Finally, Bram broke the silence.

“He always did have a way of making things sound simple.”

Tovin nodded.

“While making them considerably more difficult.”

Kaelen returned the parchment to its cylinder.

Auren's final instruction was clear.

They had come to defeat Vaelrith.

But they must also refuse the power that had corrupted him.

The Market of Shadows

Beyond the council chamber, the city became increasingly hostile.

The golden memories faded.

Violet light replaced them.

The streets narrowed beneath enormous structures that seemed to shift whenever the companions looked away.

Seren stopped beside a ruined marketplace.

“Something's following us.”

Bram glanced behind him.

“Something specific?”

“Several somethings.”

Figures emerged from the surrounding buildings.

They resembled ordinary citizens.

A merchant.

A soldier.

A woman carrying a basket.

A child holding a wooden horse.

But their faces were indistinct, and black crystals pulsed beneath their clothing.

Lyra stepped forward.

“Wait.”

The figures surrounded them.

A woman reached toward Mira.

“Please.”

Mira lowered her shield slightly.

“Can you hear us?”

The woman's mouth opened.

“Please…”

Then her expression changed.

Her fingers became long, black claws.

Mira barely raised her shield in time.

The creature struck.

Around them, the other figures transformed.

Armor emerged from beneath their clothing. Violet flames filled their eyes. Their bodies became twisted reflections of the people whose memories they carried.

The companions formed a defensive circle.

Bram struck the nearest creature, scattering its armor.

Seren moved between two others, severing the dark connections sustaining them.

Tovin raised his staff.

Golden light illuminated the marketplace.

Lyra cried out.

“Don't destroy the memories!”

Tovin looked toward her.

“What?”

“The crystals are holding them!”

Kaelen raised the Waystone.

He could see the difference now.

Within each corrupted figure, a golden thread remained trapped beneath the violet energy.

A memory.

Perhaps the final memory of someone who had died during the Shattering.

He directed the artifact toward the nearest creature.

Its movements slowed.

The golden thread separated from the corruption.

A woman appeared.

For a moment, she stood before them wearing ordinary clothing.

She looked around the marketplace.

Then smiled.

“I'm going home.”

Her image dissolved into light.

The corrupted armor collapsed.

Kaelen stared.

“Tovin!”

The Spellweaver understood immediately.

Together, they directed golden energy through the marketplace.

Lyra identified the imprisoned memories.

Mira and Bram protected them while Seren intercepted the remaining creatures.

One by one, the shadows released their prisoners.

The merchant disappeared.

The soldier lowered his weapon.

The child looked toward the wooden horse in his hands.

Then he vanished beneath a gentle golden light.

Silence returned to the marketplace.

Hundreds of tiny lights rose above the surrounding buildings.

They drifted toward the evening sky.

Lyra watched them.

“Centuries.”

Mira approached.

“What?”

“They've been waiting here for centuries.”

Kaelen looked toward the central tower.

Vaelrith had transformed the memories of his own city into weapons.

People he had once claimed to protect.

He tightened his grip upon the Waystone.

They could not allow him to continue.

The Bridge of the Seven

The central tower stood upon an island separated from the surrounding city by an enormous chasm.

Seven bridges had once connected it to Elyndor.

Six had collapsed.

The seventh remained suspended above the darkness.

Its stones were black.

Its lanterns burned violet.

Tovin examined the structure.

“This road is completely corrupted.”

Seren looked toward the tower.

“Any alternatives?”

“Several.”

She smiled.

“Excellent.”

“They all involve falling.”

Her smile disappeared.

Kaelen approached the bridge.

The Waystone reacted violently.

He could feel the throne pulling upon its energy.

Every step toward the tower would bring the artifact closer to Vaelrith's control.

Auren's lantern flickered.

Bram noticed.

“That's new.”

Kaelen looked at the flame.

It had survived storms, darkness and battles without faltering.

Now it struggled to remain illuminated.

Lyra approached.

“The throne is affecting it.”

Kaelen nodded.

“Then we don't rely upon the lantern alone.”

He turned toward his companions.

“We cross together.”

They stepped onto the bridge.

Immediately, the city disappeared.

Darkness surrounded them.

A voice emerged from somewhere ahead.

“Six travelers.”

Vaelrith.

“Six lives. Six reasons to return home.”

The bridge began changing.

Doorways appeared along its edges.

Beyond each stood familiar landscapes.

Kaelen recognized his own world.

Mira heard Daniel's voice.

Tovin saw a library filled with knowledge.

Bram smelled bread baking within a familiar kitchen.

Seren saw an endless road beneath a clear sky.

Lyra heard silence.

Flicker released a frightened chirp.

Kaelen remembered the Valley of Echoes.

“Don't look at them.”

Vaelrith laughed.

“Why not?”

The doorways became brighter.

“You have endured so much. Surely you deserve to rest.”

Mira tightened her grip upon her shield.

“We'll rest when we're finished.”

“Finished?”

The voice seemed amused.

“Do you imagine that defeating me will end suffering?”

The bridge trembled.

“Another war will come. Another kingdom will fall. Another frightened ruler will make another terrible decision.”

Kaelen continued walking.

“Probably.”

“Then what have you accomplished?”

He looked toward his companions.

“We've helped the people we could.”

Vaelrith became silent.

Kaelen continued.

“And we'll keep doing that.”

The doorways began disappearing.

Golden light emerged beneath their feet.

The bridge responded to their presence.

Tovin watched its inscriptions.

“It's restoring itself.”

Vaelrith's voice returned.

“Fools.”

The final doorway vanished.

The central tower appeared before them.

Its enormous entrance opened.

And the companions crossed the threshold together.

The Chamber of the Shattered Throne

The throne chamber was larger than any structure they had encountered throughout Aetherfall.

Its ceiling disappeared into darkness.

Enormous chains extended from the surrounding walls toward a raised platform at its center.

Upon that platform stood the Shattered Throne.

It was constructed from fragments of ancient gateways, broken pillars and blackened crystals.

Violet energy flowed through its foundation.

Behind it, an enormous circular gateway illuminated the chamber.

Beyond the gateway appeared countless worlds.

Kaelen could see oceans, mountains, forests and cities.

He could see home.

And upon the throne sat Vaelrith.

He wore silver and black robes.

His face appeared almost unchanged from the memories they had witnessed.

Only his eyes revealed what centuries of corruption had made of him.

They burned with violet light.

“Welcome.”

Kaelen stopped at the foot of the platform.

Vaelrith looked toward the companions.

“The Guardian. The Windrunner. The Spellweaver. The Warden. The Seer.”

His gaze settled upon Flicker.

“And the little keeper.”

Flicker's golden light intensified.

Vaelrith smiled.

“I believed your kind had disappeared.”

Bram lifted the little creature protectively.

“Disappointing, isn't it?”

Vaelrith ignored him.

He turned toward Kaelen.

“And finally, the Pathfinder.”

Kaelen raised the Waystone.

“Release the roads.”

Vaelrith leaned forward.

“After everything you have seen, that is still your request?”

“Yes.”

“Have you learned nothing?”

Kaelen remembered the ruined village of Willowmere.

The Tidewarden.

Malachar.

The Last Sanctuary.

“I've learned quite a lot.”

Vaelrith rose.

The throne's chains moved with him.

“Then you understand that freedom has consequences.”

“Of course.”

“People make terrible choices.”

“Yes.”

“They destroy one another.”

“Sometimes.”

“They cannot be trusted with the power they possess.”

Kaelen looked toward the throne.

“Neither can you.”

The chamber became silent.

Vaelrith descended the steps.

“You believe yourself different from me?”

Kaelen shook his head.

“I think that's what frightens me.”

Vaelrith stopped.

For the first time, he appeared genuinely surprised.

Kaelen continued.

“I've wanted to make decisions for my companions. I've wanted to protect them without asking what they wanted. I've believed that if I could control enough things, nobody would get hurt.”

He looked toward Auren's lantern.

“But someone taught me that protecting people doesn't mean owning their choices.”

Vaelrith's expression hardened.

“Auren.”

Kaelen nodded.

“He was your friend.”

“Once.”

“He never stopped caring about you.”

Violet energy gathered around Vaelrith's hands.

“Do not speak to me of Auren.”

Kaelen removed the metal cylinder from his satchel.

“He left something.”

Vaelrith stared at it.

For a moment, the throne's chains became motionless.

Kaelen read the final passage.

The world does not need a kinder master.

It needs to remain free.

Vaelrith closed his eyes.

Then he laughed.

A quiet, bitter sound.

“Even in death, he continues lecturing me.”

Kaelen folded the parchment.

“He wanted you to understand.”

Vaelrith opened his eyes.

“Then he died disappointed.”

The throne erupted.

The Battle of the Broken Roads

Violet energy swept across the chamber.

Mira raised her shield.

The impact drove the companions backward.

Bram caught Lyra before she fell.

Tovin struck his staff against the floor.

Golden light formed a protective circle around them.

Vaelrith raised both hands.

The enormous chains surrounding the throne lifted.

Fragments of ancient gateways tore themselves from the walls.

They assembled into towering guardians.

Their bodies were constructed from broken stone, metal and violet crystals.

Seren drew her blade.

“Of course he has enormous friends.”

Bram raised his hammer.

“They're becoming something of a tradition.”

The first guardian charged.

Mira intercepted it.

Her replacement shield absorbed the initial blow, but the impact forced her to one knee.

Bram struck the creature's supporting leg.

Seren climbed its damaged armor and drove her blade into the crystal sustaining it.

The guardian collapsed.

Another immediately took its place.

Tovin directed golden energy toward the surrounding chains.

Several broke.

But the throne restored them.

“Kaelen!”

The Pathfinder raised the Waystone.

“I see it!”

Every guardian was connected to the throne.

Every chain extended into the ancient network.

Destroying the creatures would accomplish little while Vaelrith retained control.

Kaelen reached toward the nearest connection.

The throne resisted.

Vaelrith smiled.

“You are attempting to command the roads.”

Kaelen concentrated.

“No.”

Golden light spread from the Waystone.

“I'm asking them to remember.”

For a moment, the nearest chain weakened.

Then Vaelrith raised his hand.

The connection turned violet again.

“You cannot defeat me with sentiment.”

Kaelen struggled to maintain the light.

“It's not sentiment.”

The Waystone pulsed.

“It's their choice.”

The chain shattered.

Vaelrith staggered.

The companions stared.

Tovin looked toward the throne.

“It's vulnerable!”

Vaelrith's expression changed.

The surrounding darkness intensified.

“Enough.”

He extended both arms.

The chamber began collapsing.

The Weight of the Throne

Lyra felt the suffering before she understood its source.

Thousands of voices surrounded her.

Travelers trapped within corrupted roads.

Guardians forced to obey.

Memories imprisoned inside ancient mechanisms.

She fell to her knees.

Mira hurried toward her.

“Lyra!”

The Seer pressed both hands against her head.

“There are so many.”

Mira knelt beside her.

“Look at me.”

Lyra struggled to focus.

“I can hear them.”

“I know.”

“They're afraid.”

Mira placed her hand upon Lyra's shoulder.

“Then help them find something else to hear.”

Lyra looked toward her.

The Guardian smiled faintly.

“Your voice.”

Lyra closed her eyes.

She reached toward the imprisoned memories.

Not to command them.

Not to absorb their suffering.

Simply to remind them that someone was listening.

Across the chamber, golden threads began emerging from the throne.

Vaelrith turned.

“What are you doing?”

Lyra opened her eyes.

“Remembering them.”

The threads became brighter.

Tovin directed his staff toward the nearest chain.

“Bram!”

The Warden understood.

His hammer struck the weakened connection.

The chain shattered.

Seren moved toward another.

Mira protected Lyra while she continued reaching toward the trapped memories.

Flicker leaped from Bram's shoulder.

His golden light spread across the floor.

Ancient inscriptions awakened beneath his feet.

Vaelrith stared at him.

“The first light.”

Flicker chirped.

Golden flames traveled through the chamber.

For the first time since the companions entered, the throne's violet light began retreating.

Kaelen raised the Waystone.

He could feel the roads responding.

Not individually.

Together.

Thousands of connections rejecting the authority imposed upon them.

Vaelrith shouted.

“They belong to me!”

Kaelen stepped forward.

“No.”

Another chain shattered.

“They never did.”

The Offer of the Throne

The throne suddenly became silent.

Its violet energy disappeared.

The guardians collapsed.

The surrounding chains fell motionless.

Vaelrith stood beside the platform, breathing heavily.

Kaelen approached cautiously.

“It's over.”

Vaelrith looked toward him.

Then smiled.

“Is it?”

The throne illuminated.

This time, its light was golden.

The completed Waystone responded.

Kaelen felt an enormous connection open before him.

Thousands of roads.

Hundreds of worlds.

Every surviving guardian.

Every gateway.

All waiting.

Vaelrith stepped aside.

“Sit.”

Kaelen stared.

“What?”

“Take my place.”

Mira moved closer.

“Kaelen, don't.”

Vaelrith gestured toward the throne.

“You have proven that the roads respond to you.”

He looked toward the completed Waystone.

“You possess the authority I could never obtain.”

The throne's golden light intensified.

Kaelen felt its power.

He could close every corrupted passage.

Prevent dangerous creatures from crossing between worlds.

Protect every settlement in Aetherfall.

He could make certain that another Willowmere never happened.

He could ensure that his companions returned home safely.

Perhaps he could accomplish everything Vaelrith had failed to achieve.

The thought was terrifying.

Because for a moment, it seemed reasonable.

Vaelrith watched him.

“Imagine what you could accomplish.”

Kaelen stared at the throne.

He imagined the Last Sanctuary rebuilt.

The fallen kingdoms restored.

Children growing up without fear.

Guardians protected.

Roads maintained.

No more desperate choices.

No more sacrifices.

No more graves.

Vaelrith approached.

“You need not rule as I did.”

His voice became gentle.

“You could be merciful.”

Kaelen remembered Auren's final words.

The world does not need a kinder master.

He looked toward his companions.

Mira stood beside her damaged shield.

Seren held her blade.

Tovin leaned upon his staff.

Bram carried his hammer.

Lyra held her journal.

Flicker watched him.

They had followed him across Aetherfall.

Not because they were required to.

Because they had chosen to.

Kaelen turned toward Vaelrith.

“No.”

The throne's light flickered.

Vaelrith frowned.

“You would abandon the opportunity to prevent suffering?”

“I would abandon the opportunity to decide everyone else's future.”

“You could save them!”

“Not by taking away what makes their lives their own.”

Vaelrith's expression twisted.

“Then you are no wiser than Auren.”

Kaelen smiled sadly.

“I can live with that.”

He raised the Waystone.

The throne's golden light shattered.

The Last Waykeeper

Vaelrith screamed.

The darkness surrounding him erupted into the chamber.

His robes dissolved.

Violet fire emerged from his hands, his chest and his eyes.

The remaining chains rose around him.

His body became surrounded by fragments of the throne.

An enormous figure took shape.

A crown of broken gateways formed above his head.

His arms extended into the surrounding darkness.

His voice shook the chamber.

“I WILL NOT WATCH THIS WORLD DESTROY ITSELF AGAIN!”

Kaelen raised the Waystone.

“Then help us!”

The enormous figure hesitated.

Kaelen stepped forward.

“You know the roads. You know the dangers. You could help rebuild everything that was lost.”

Vaelrith stared at him.

For one brief moment, Kaelen saw the man from the forest.

The young Waykeeper laughing beside a stream.

The friend Auren had remembered.

Then the darkness returned.

“I will not serve those who refuse to obey.”

The enormous figure attacked.

Mira raised her shield.

The impact shattered it.

Bram caught her as she fell backward.

Tovin released a burst of golden energy.

Seren moved toward the throne's exposed foundation.

Lyra cried out as the imprisoned memories surged around her.

Kaelen held the Waystone against the overwhelming darkness.

Flicker climbed onto the platform.

His little body became surrounded by brilliant golden light.

Vaelrith turned toward him.

“NO!”

The creature's flame reached toward the throne.

Ancient markings awakened.

The surrounding chains became visible.

Tovin stared.

“The original connections!”

Kaelen understood.

The throne was still connected to the roads through seven ancient anchors.

Destroying them would separate Vaelrith from the network.

But the central gateway would remain.

They could end his authority without destroying every surviving passage.

“Together!” Kaelen shouted.

Mira rose.

Bram supported her.

Seren reached the first anchor.

Tovin directed his staff toward the second.

Lyra illuminated the third.

Flicker awakened the fourth.

Kaelen raised the Waystone.

The remaining anchors appeared.

The companions struck.

Golden light erupted throughout the chamber.

One anchor shattered.

Then another.

Then another.

Vaelrith staggered.

The enormous fragments surrounding him began falling.

His crown broke apart.

The final anchor illuminated beneath the throne.

Kaelen approached.

Vaelrith reached toward him.

“Without me, the roads will fail!”

Kaelen looked into his eyes.

“Then we'll help repair them.”

He brought the Waystone against the final connection.

The anchor shattered.

The Shattered Throne collapsed.

The Fall of Elyndor

For several seconds, there was silence.

Then the entire tower began shaking.

Tovin looked toward the surrounding walls.

“Oh, that is extremely bad.”

Seren stared at him.

“More specific!”

“The throne was connected to the tower's structural mechanisms!”

Bram sighed.

“Of course it was.”

Enormous stones fell from the ceiling.

The surrounding bridges began collapsing.

Kaelen looked toward the central gateway.

Its circular frame remained illuminated.

Beyond it, thousands of worlds appeared and disappeared.

Vaelrith lay beside the remains of the throne.

His robes were torn.

The violet light had disappeared from his eyes.

For the first time, he looked old.

Very old.

Kaelen hurried toward him.

“Come on!”

Vaelrith stared.

“What are you doing?”

“Getting you out.”

The former Waykeeper laughed weakly.

“After everything?”

Kaelen reached toward him.

“Yes.”

Vaelrith looked at the offered hand.

For a moment, he appeared unable to understand it.

Then he turned toward the collapsing throne.

“I built this.”

Kaelen shook his head.

“You can still leave it.”

Vaelrith looked toward the central gateway.

The countless worlds reflected in his eyes.

He had spent centuries attempting to control them.

Now they moved beyond his reach.

Free.

Unpredictable.

Alive.

He closed his eyes.

“I don't know how.”

Kaelen knelt beside him.

“Then learn.”

The tower shook again.

Mira shouted from the gateway.

“KAELEN!”

He looked toward her.

Tovin was attempting to stabilize the passage.

Seren and Bram supported a damaged pillar.

Lyra held Flicker close.

Kaelen turned back toward Vaelrith.

“Please.”

The old Waykeeper looked at him.

Then, slowly, he accepted his hand.

Kaelen pulled him upright.

Together, they moved toward the gateway.

Beyond the Final Door

Tovin stood before the enormous circular frame.

Golden energy traveled through his staff.

“The gateway is becoming unstable!”

Kaelen supported Vaelrith.

“Can you open the road home?”

Tovin looked toward the shifting images.

“I can't identify a stable destination!”

The surrounding worlds moved faster.

Mountains disappeared.

Oceans became forests.

Cities dissolved into unfamiliar skies.

Lyra approached the gateway.

Her eyes widened.

“Something's wrong.”

Kaelen looked toward her.

“What?”

She stared into the passage.

“The roads aren't leading anywhere.”

Tovin examined the inscriptions.

Then his face became pale.

“The throne's destruction has disconnected the central gateway from ordinary time.”

Seren looked toward the collapsing ceiling.

“Can we fix it somewhere else?”

“Possibly!”

“Good enough!”

Bram lifted a fallen beam away from the entrance.

“Everybody through!”

Kaelen raised the completed Waystone.

Its three fragments illuminated.

The gateway opened.

Beyond it lay a landscape unlike anything they had ever encountered.

Countless roads extended across an endless expanse of stars.

Some appeared newly constructed.

Others were ancient ruins.

Some seemed to exist in several forms simultaneously.

An enormous golden doorway stood upon the distant horizon.

Kaelen felt the road home somewhere beyond it.

But he also felt something else.

A presence.

Older than the Waykeepers.

Older than Aetherfall.

Something that had watched the roads long before the first traveler crossed them.

Vaelrith stared into the passage.

His expression became one of absolute terror.

“No.”

Kaelen looked toward him.

“What is it?”

The old Waykeeper stepped backward.

“We were never supposed to reach that place.”

The tower trembled.

Another section of the ceiling collapsed.

Mira grabbed Kaelen's arm.

“We have to go!”

He looked toward Vaelrith.

Then toward the gateway.

There was no other road.

Kaelen lifted Auren's lantern.

Its flame returned to its familiar golden brilliance.

“Together.”

The companions entered the passage.

Behind them, the central tower collapsed.

The Shattered Throne disappeared beneath centuries of broken stone.

And the last monument to Vaelrith's ambition fell into the darkness.

The Place Between All Journeys

Kaelen opened his eyes.

He stood upon a narrow road suspended beneath an endless sky.

There was no sun.

No moon.

Only stars.

Thousands of roads extended around him, crossing one another at impossible angles.

Some carried travelers.

Others remained empty.

In the distance, he saw cities that had not yet been built.

Kingdoms that had disappeared centuries earlier.

Forests growing backward from ancient trees into tiny seeds.

He saw the Last Sanctuary beneath seven unbroken towers.

He saw Willowmere before its destruction.

He saw Auren walking beside Vaelrith.

Then the images disappeared.

Mira stood beside him.

Seren, Tovin, Bram and Lyra emerged from the surrounding light.

Flicker rested upon Bram's shoulder.

Vaelrith stood several feet away.

The old Waykeeper stared at the endless roads.

“We called it a legend.”

Tovin approached.

“What is this place?”

Vaelrith swallowed.

“The beginning of every passage.”

He looked toward the distant golden doorway.

“And the end.”

Kaelen raised the Waystone.

Its three fragments began separating slightly.

Golden energy reached toward the distant gateway.

A voice traveled across the endless expanse.

Not loud.

Yet every road seemed to tremble in response.

Travelers.

The companions became still.

You have broken the throne.

Kaelen tightened his grip upon Auren's lantern.

The voice continued.

You have restored the key.

The distant doorway began opening.

Now you must decide what shall become of the roads.

Beyond the doorway, Kaelen saw his home.

Clearer than ever before.

So close that he could almost hear the familiar sounds of the world he had left behind.

But between the companions and that doorway stood a final figure.

Its robes appeared woven from starlight.

Its face was hidden beneath a hood.

In one hand, it carried an ancient lantern.

In the other, a broken hourglass.

Vaelrith fell to his knees.

“The First Keeper.”

The figure raised its head.

Every journey has a beginning.

The roads surrounding them illuminated.

Every journey has an ending.

Kaelen looked toward his companions.

The figure extended its hand toward the completed Waystone.

But not every traveler is prepared to accept the difference.

The golden doorway opened farther.

Kaelen could see home.

He could see Aetherfall.

He could see the countless worlds connected by the ancient roads.

And somewhere within the Waystone, he sensed that their final decision would determine whether those worlds remained connected forever.

The throne had fallen.

Vaelrith had been defeated.

But the greatest choice of their entire journey still waited before them.

Beyond the reach of kings.

Beyond the authority of guardians.

Beyond the boundaries of time itself.

CHAPTER 26

The Gate Beyond Time

The First Keeper waited.

There was something deeply unsettling about standing before a figure whose shadow contained stars.

Kaelen had encountered ancient guardians, creatures capable of remembering civilizations that no longer existed, and beings whose power seemed impossible to comprehend.

But this was different.

The First Keeper did not appear powerful in the way Thalassa or the Worldbreaker had appeared powerful.

There was no threatening posture. No display of overwhelming strength.

Instead, the figure possessed the quiet certainty of something that had never needed to prove its authority.

Its lantern burned with a pale golden flame.

Within the broken hourglass, grains of sand traveled upward.

Bram leaned toward Tovin.

“Is that supposed to happen?”

Tovin stared at the hourglass.

“Absolutely not.”

“Thought so.”

The First Keeper turned toward them.

Welcome, travelers.

Flicker climbed from Bram's shoulder and approached the mysterious figure.

“Flicker!” Bram called.

The little creature ignored him.

He sat before the Keeper, tilted his head and released a cheerful chirp.

The First Keeper lowered its lantern.

For the first time, Kaelen saw something resembling a smile beneath the hood.

Little wanderer.

Flicker's tail illuminated.

You have traveled farther than any of your kind in a very long time.

The creature chirped again.

Bram folded his arms.

“Apparently, everyone knows him except us.”

The First Keeper extended its hand.

Flicker climbed into its palm.

Golden light surrounded them both.

You have cared for him well.

Bram's expression softened.

“He's cared for us, too.”

As was always intended.

The Keeper returned Flicker to the road.

The little creature hurried back toward his companions.

Then the ancient figure turned toward Vaelrith.

The former Waykeeper lowered his head.

“I did not believe you existed.”

Many have made that mistake.

Vaelrith looked toward the countless roads suspended beneath the stars.

“Then you witnessed everything.”

Yes.

“The Shattering?”

Yes.

“The centuries that followed?”

Yes.

Vaelrith's expression hardened.

“Then why did you do nothing?”

The question echoed across the endless expanse.

The First Keeper remained silent.

Vaelrith stepped forward.

“Thousands of worlds suffered. Entire civilizations disappeared. People begged for help, and you remained here!”

The Keeper lowered its lantern.

You believe that because I possessed the power to interfere, I possessed the right to decide.

Vaelrith stared.

That belief has brought you a very long way from the man you once were.

The old Waykeeper opened his mouth.

Then closed it.

For the first time since Kaelen had met him, Vaelrith appeared to have no answer.

Before the First Road

The First Keeper turned toward the distant golden doorway.

Walk with me.

The companions followed.

As they traveled, the surrounding stars began moving.

Entire constellations shifted into unfamiliar arrangements.

Roads appeared beneath their feet and disappeared behind them.

Kaelen saw worlds forming.

Oceans gathered beneath clouds of steam. Mountains rose from burning landscapes. Forests spread across barren plains.

Then came civilizations.

Small settlements became cities.

Cities became kingdoms.

Kingdoms reached toward the stars.

Tovin watched with an expression of wonder.

“Are these memories?”

Some.

“Visions?”

Some.

“Possible futures?”

Some.

Tovin looked delighted.

Seren shook her head.

“You're going to be impossible after this.”

He scarcely heard her.

The First Keeper stopped beside a road that appeared older than the surrounding stars.

It was narrow and unfinished.

A single lantern stood beside it.

Before Aetherfall, the worlds were separate. Each possessed its own history, its own inhabitants and its own mysteries.

An image appeared above the road.

A traveler stood upon a mountain beneath an unfamiliar sky.

She carried a lantern.

The first traveler did not seek conquest. She did not seek wealth or authority.

The woman approached a shimmering opening between two enormous stones.

She simply wondered what lay beyond.

The opening expanded.

Beyond it appeared another world.

The woman hesitated.

Then stepped through.

Golden light spread across the darkness.

A road appeared.

Kaelen watched as other travelers followed.

Merchants.

Scholars.

Explorers.

Families.

Some returned home carrying stories.

Others remained in the worlds they discovered.

Friendships formed between people who had never previously known that one another existed.

The earliest roads were not built by kings, the Keeper continued. *They were discovered by travelers.*

The images changed.

Ancient guardians appeared.

Dragons carried lanterns between distant settlements.

Small golden creatures resembling Flicker guided lost travelers through unstable passages.

Stone guardians maintained bridges.

Scholars recorded the behavior of the gateways.

Eventually, the first Waykeepers gathered.

They constructed Elyndor.

They established the original covenant.

They created the Waystone.

Tovin approached the image of the artifact.

“It was never intended to control the roads.”

Correct.

“Then what was its purpose?”

The First Keeper looked toward Kaelen.

To help travelers find their way.

Kaelen lowered his gaze toward the completed Waystone.

Such a simple purpose.

After everything they had endured, after all the battles and sacrifices surrounding the artifact, its original purpose seemed almost painfully ordinary.

It was a guide.

Not a weapon.

Not a crown.

Not an instrument of authority.

A means of helping someone reach a destination.

The First Keeper continued walking.

The Waykeepers gradually forgot the distinction between maintaining a road and owning it.

Vaelrith followed several steps behind.

His expression revealed that he understood exactly where the lesson was leading.

And when the roads became unstable, fear persuaded them that freedom was the problem.

Kaelen watched the ancient city appear.

He saw the council chamber.

The Concordance Engine.

The Shattering.

Then darkness.

The roads did not break because travelers were free.

The Keeper looked toward Vaelrith.

They broke because someone attempted to make freedom impossible.

The Little Keepers of the Light

They reached a vast meadow suspended beneath a sky filled with unfamiliar stars.

Golden flowers covered the surrounding hills.

Tiny lights moved through the grass.

Flicker suddenly became motionless.

His ears rose.

A sound emerged from somewhere nearby.

A chirp.

Then another.

Dozens of small creatures appeared.

Some possessed golden fur. Others were silver, pale blue or brilliant white. Their tails illuminated the meadow as they hurried between the flowers.

Flicker leaped from Bram's shoulder.

He ran toward them.

Bram stared.

“Well, I'll be.”

The little creatures gathered around Flicker.

They sniffed him.

Chirped.

Jumped over one another.

Within moments, Flicker disappeared beneath a collection of glowing tails and excited ears.

Lyra laughed.

“He's found his family.”

Bram smiled.

But something in his expression changed.

He watched Flicker running among the others.

“Yeah.”

His voice became quieter.

“He certainly has.”

The First Keeper approached.

They were among the earliest guardians of the roads. Small enough to travel unnoticed. Sensitive enough to recognize corruption before larger guardians could detect it.

Tovin knelt beside one of the creatures.

It climbed onto his boot.

“Extraordinary.”

They were called Lumari.

Lyra repeated the name softly.

“Lumari.”

The Keeper nodded.

Keepers of the first light.

Kaelen remembered Thalassa's words beneath the mountain.

So one of you survived.

The First Keeper continued.

During the Shattering, most of the Lumari withdrew from Aetherfall. Some remained behind to guide travelers who had become lost.

Bram looked toward Flicker.

“And him?”

The Keeper's lantern illuminated.

An image appeared within the meadow.

A tiny golden creature stood beside a damaged gateway.

Beyond it, darkness spread across a forest.

The creature hesitated.

Then it entered the passage.

The image changed.

Flicker wandered through unfamiliar landscapes.

He hid from corrupted guardians.

Searched ruined settlements.

Followed fading lanterns.

He traveled alone for a very long time.

Bram's smile disappeared.

The image changed again.

There were six travelers.

Flicker watched them from beneath a collection of roots.

He followed them.

Approached them.

Gradually trusted them.

The final image showed him sleeping beside Bram's belongings.

The First Keeper looked toward the Warden.

He was searching for someone to guide.

Bram swallowed.

“Found himself six idiots, then.”

Seren laughed.

“Very fortunate idiots.”

Flicker returned carrying a golden flower in his mouth.

He placed it beside Bram's boot.

The Warden knelt.

“Hello, little fellow.”

Flicker climbed into his arms.

Bram held him close.

For a moment, nobody spoke.

The meadow was beautiful.

The Lumari were safe.

And for the first time, Bram was confronted with a possibility he had been unwilling to consider.

Perhaps Flicker's journey home would not lead to the same place as theirs.

The Garden of Unfinished Lives

Beyond the meadow stood an enormous garden.

Its trees carried leaves of silver and gold. Beneath their branches stood doorways that opened onto moments from the companions' pasts.

The First Keeper stopped beside the entrance.

The Gate Beyond Time cannot be opened by strength alone.

Kaelen examined the surrounding doorways.

“What does it require?”

Understanding.

Seren sighed.

“Somehow, I knew it wouldn't be a simple lock.”

The Keeper turned toward them.

You have traveled through worlds shaped by the choices of others. Before you determine the future of the roads, you must understand the choices that have shaped you.

One of the doorways illuminated.

Beyond it stood a familiar house.

Kaelen recognized it immediately.

His home.

He could see the windows.

The furniture.

The small details he had forgotten during their journey.

His chest tightened.

The First Keeper spoke.

Enter, if you wish.

Kaelen looked toward his companions.

Mira nodded.

“We'll be here.”

He stepped through.

The Pathfinder's Burden

Kaelen found himself standing in a room he had not seen since leaving his world.

Everything appeared exactly as he remembered.

A familiar chair stood beside the window.

A clock ticked upon the wall.

The ordinary sounds of life continued outside.

He approached the window.

People walked along the street.

Nobody appeared aware of Aetherfall.

Nobody knew about the Tidewarden, the dragon kingdoms or the Last Sanctuary.

Nobody knew that he had spent months wondering whether he would ever see this place again.

He sat down.

For the first time in what felt like years, he had nowhere to go.

No road to follow.

No enemy to confront.

No decision that might determine whether someone lived or died.

He closed his eyes.

The quiet was wonderful.

Then he heard a voice.

“You could stay.”

Kaelen opened his eyes.

Auren stood beside the doorway.

His robes were clean.

His lantern burned brightly.

There was no wound upon him.

No exhaustion.

Kaelen rose so quickly that the chair fell backward.

“Auren?”

The Waykeeper smiled.

“Hello, Pathfinder.”

Kaelen crossed the room.

For a moment, he simply stared.

Then he embraced him.

Auren returned the embrace.

Kaelen stepped backward.

“I thought…”

“I know.”

Kaelen struggled to find words.

“There were things I wanted to tell you.”

“Then tell me.”

He looked toward the floor.

“We found the third shard. We restored the roads. We saved the sanctuary.”

Auren smiled.

“I suspected you might.”

“We defeated Vaelrith.”

The Waykeeper's expression became thoughtful.

“Did you?”

Kaelen hesitated.

“We destroyed the throne.”

“Ah.”

“And we brought him with us.”

Auren nodded.

“Good.”

Kaelen looked toward him.

“After everything he did?”

Auren approached the window.

“Mercy does not mean pretending someone has done nothing wrong.”

He watched the people outside.

“It means refusing to believe that wrongdoing must be the final thing a person is capable of.”

Kaelen thought of Malachar.

He thought of the former Chancellor Veyran.

And now Vaelrith.

Auren turned toward him.

“You have carried a considerable burden.”

Kaelen nodded.

“Sometimes I think I should have done more.”

“More?”

“Willowmere. The sanctuary. The people we couldn't save.”

His voice became uneven.

“I keep remembering them.”

Auren placed a hand upon his shoulder.

“Remembering them is good.”

Kaelen looked up.

“But believing you should have possessed the power to prevent every tragedy is dangerous.”

He thought of Vaelrith.

Auren continued.

“You were never asked to save every person in every world.”

“Then what was I supposed to do?”

“What you could.”

Kaelen closed his eyes.

The answer seemed insufficient.

And yet it was the only answer that allowed him to remain human.

When he opened his eyes again, Auren stood beside the doorway.

“It's time.”

Kaelen shook his head.

“Not yet.”

Auren smiled sadly.

“Every traveler must eventually continue.”

“Will I see you again?”

The Waykeeper looked toward the familiar room.

“Every time you help someone find their way, I imagine a little of what we shared will continue.”

Kaelen swallowed.

“Thank you.”

Auren bowed his head.

“Thank you for carrying the lantern.”

The room began disappearing.

Kaelen reached toward him.

But Auren had already become golden light.

The Pathfinder returned to the garden.

His companions waited.

Mira looked at him.

“Are you all right?”

Kaelen wiped his eyes.

“Getting there.”

She took his hand.

And for a while, they stood together.

The Guardian's Promise

Mira's doorway opened onto a familiar field.

Daniel stood beneath an enormous tree.

He smiled when he saw her.

Mira stopped.

She had heard his voice before.

The Mourning Leviathan had used it against her. The corrupted roads had attempted to transform her memories into chains.

She knew better than to trust every image of someone she loved.

Yet something about this place felt different.

Daniel approached.

“You look tired.”

Mira laughed despite herself.

“You have no idea.”

He examined her damaged armor.

“Been getting into trouble?”

“Apparently.”

They sat beneath the tree.

For a while, they spoke about ordinary things.

Memories.

Conversations.

Small moments that had once seemed unimportant.

Eventually, Daniel looked toward her.

“You're still trying to protect everyone.”

Mira smiled faintly.

“Someone has to.”

“Everyone?”

She lowered her head.

“I know.”

He waited.

Mira looked across the field.

“There was a little girl named Anwen. She lost her father. I promised her that she wouldn't have to face everything alone.”

Daniel nodded.

“That sounds like you.”

“I couldn't promise she'd be safe.”

“No.”

“I couldn't promise she'd never lose anyone else.”

“No.”

Mira looked toward him.

“What good is a Guardian who can't guarantee those things?”

Daniel smiled.

“The kind people actually need.”

She frowned.

He continued.

“People don't always need someone who can stop every terrible thing from happening. Sometimes they need someone who will still be standing beside them afterward.”

Mira thought of the sanctuary's wounded.

The frightened children.

The families rebuilding their homes.

She had spent so much of her life believing that protection meant preventing pain.

Perhaps it also meant helping someone endure it.

Daniel stood.

Mira followed.

“Do I have to go?”

He nodded.

“There are people waiting for you.”

She embraced him.

When she returned to the garden, she carried no new weapon.

No magical shield.

No ancient artifact.

But the burden she had carried for so long felt lighter.

The Windrunner's Horizon

Seren expected her doorway to reveal a road.

It did.

An endless highway extended beneath a brilliant blue sky.

There were no mountains blocking the horizon.

No enemies.

No responsibilities.

No destination.

She laughed.

“Now this is more like it.”

She began walking.

Then running.

The wind moved through her hair.

For a while, she experienced the freedom she had always imagined.

Nothing required her to stop.

Nobody needed her help.

Nobody expected her to remain anywhere.

She could travel forever.

Then she noticed something.

There were no other travelers.

No familiar voices.

No arguments about directions.

No Tovin examining ancient inscriptions.

No Bram complaining about missed meals.

No Mira telling her to be careful.

No Kaelen waiting at the next intersection.

No Lyra quietly observing the world.

She slowed.

The road continued endlessly.

A small house appeared beside it.

Inside stood a table surrounded by six chairs.

Five were occupied.

Her companions laughed together.

Bram was telling a ridiculous story.

Tovin attempted to correct him.

Mira smiled.

Kaelen poured something into a cup.

Lyra held Flicker.

Seren stood outside the window.

Nobody had noticed her.

She looked toward the endless road.

Then toward the house.

For much of her life, she had believed freedom meant never being tied to anything.

But these people had never demanded that she remain with them.

She had stayed because she wanted to.

And somehow, that choice had made her freer than any empty road ever could.

Seren opened the door.

The image disappeared.

She returned to the garden.

Bram looked toward her.

“Find anything interesting?”

She smiled.

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“What?”

She embraced him.

Bram looked startled.

Then she embraced Mira.

Tovin stepped backward.

“Is something wrong?”

Seren grabbed him.

“Be quiet.”

Kaelen laughed.

For once, Seren had discovered somewhere she wanted to stay.

The Spellweaver's Library

Tovin entered his doorway and immediately forgot that he was supposed to return.

The library stretched farther than he could see.

Its shelves rose into the clouds.

Books floated between enormous reading platforms.

Ancient maps illuminated the walls.

Every civilization that had ever traveled the roads appeared to have contributed its knowledge.

He approached the nearest shelf.

A book opened before him.

The Construction of the First Gateways.

Another appeared.

The Nature of Temporal Passage.

A third.

An Illustrated History of the Lumari.

Tovin made a small, delighted sound.

“This is magnificent.”

He opened the first book.

Immediately, thousands of unanswered questions became clear.

The behavior of the ancient roads.

The purpose of the guardian crystals.

The instability within the seventh tower.

The origins of the Waystone.

He moved from one volume to another.

Hours seemed to pass.

Perhaps days.

There was no hunger.

No exhaustion.

Only discovery.

Then he reached a shelf containing six books.

Each bore the name of one companion.

He opened Kaelen's.

Inside were memories of their journey.

Conversations.

Mistakes.

Moments of courage.

He opened Mira's.

Then Seren's.

Then Bram's.

Then Lyra's.

Finally, he opened his own.

The first pages contained the knowledge he had accumulated throughout his life.

But as he continued reading, the contents changed.

There was Bram holding a mechanism together while Tovin repaired it.

Seren pulling him away from a collapsing passage.

Mira protecting him during battle.

Lyra listening while he struggled to explain a discovery.

Kaelen trusting him when nobody knew whether his plans would succeed.

He saw himself laughing.

He saw himself afraid.

He saw himself admitting that he did not know the answer.

The final pages remained blank.

A voice emerged from somewhere within the library.

Would you like to know how your story ends?

Tovin stared at the empty pages.

For a scholar, the offer was almost irresistible.

Every unanswered question.

Every future discovery.

Every decision.

He could know them all.

He closed the book.

“No.”

The library became silent.

He smiled.

“I believe I'd prefer to find out.”

When Tovin returned to the garden, Seren examined him.

“You didn't bring any books?”

He looked genuinely distressed.

“Please don't remind me.”

The Warden's Empty Chair

Bram's doorway led to a kitchen.

A fire burned within the hearth.

Fresh bread rested upon the table.

A large pot simmered nearby.

He inhaled deeply.

“Well.”

He looked toward the ceiling.

“Someone certainly understands me.”

He sat down.

The bread was warm.

The chair was comfortable.

There was no armor to repair.

No monster to fight.

No enormous mechanism requiring him to hold it together.

He ate.

Then he noticed a small empty basket beside the hearth.

A folded blanket rested inside.

Flicker's blanket.

Bram stopped chewing.

He looked toward the doorway.

“Little fellow?”

There was no answer.

He rose.

Searched beneath the table.

Behind the chairs.

Near the fireplace.

Nothing.

Then he remembered the meadow.

The Lumari.

Flicker's family.

Bram returned to the chair.

He stared at the empty basket.

He had known the little creature for only a fraction of his life.

Yet he could scarcely imagine waking without discovering Flicker had stolen something from his belongings.

He missed the chirping.

The glowing tail.

The ridiculous arguments over food.

He missed having someone who trusted him so completely.

The First Keeper appeared beside the hearth.

You love him.

Bram nodded.

“More than I expected.”

Would you ask him to leave his people?

Bram looked toward the empty basket.

“I don't know.”

The Keeper waited.

Bram rubbed his hands together.

“He belongs with them.”

Perhaps.

“He'd be safe.”

Perhaps.

Bram looked toward the ancient figure.

“You're not particularly helpful.”

The Keeper appeared amused.

Where do you believe he wishes to belong?

Bram thought about that.

Flicker had found his family.

But he had also found the companions.

Perhaps neither truth needed to erase the other.

Bram stood.

“I suppose I should ask him.”

The Keeper bowed.

An excellent beginning.

When Bram returned to the garden, Flicker immediately hurried toward him.

The Warden knelt.

“Whatever happens, little fellow, you're going to have a choice.”

Flicker climbed onto his shoulder.

Bram smiled.

“That includes choosing not to steal my breakfast.”

The creature chirped.

“Thought that might be asking too much.”

The Seer's Quiet Place

Lyra's doorway revealed nothing.

No landscape.

No buildings.

No familiar faces.

Only a peaceful white expanse.

She stepped inside.

Immediately, the voices disappeared.

For as long as she could remember, her gift had allowed her to sense things that others could not.

Memories.

Emotions.

Warnings.

Fragments of possible futures.

Sometimes the gift had been beautiful.

Sometimes unbearable.

Now there was silence.

Complete silence.

She sat down.

For the first time in months, nobody else's grief reached her.

Nobody else's fear entered her thoughts.

She could simply exist.

The relief was overwhelming.

Then the First Keeper appeared.

You may remain here.

Lyra looked up.

“Without the visions?”

Without the burden.

She considered the offer.

How wonderful it would be to enter a crowded room without sensing the pain hidden behind every expression.

To sleep without dreams that belonged to other people.

To touch an ancient object without witnessing its history.

She closed her eyes.

Then she remembered the soldier in the sanctuary's hospital.

The Tidewarden.

Thalassa.

Malachar.

Her gift had allowed her to recognize suffering that others could not see.

It had helped her reach people who might otherwise have remained lost.

She opened her eyes.

“Can I keep the gift without allowing it to consume me?”

You can learn.

Lyra smiled faintly.

“I think I'd like that.”

The Keeper extended its hand.

The silence changed.

A single voice emerged.

Then another.

But they no longer overwhelmed her.

She could choose whether to listen.

She could recognize another person's grief without believing that she was required to carry it forever.

The Keeper spoke.

Compassion is not measured by how much suffering you absorb.

Lyra nodded.

She had needed to hear those words.

When she returned to the garden, she opened her journal.

For the first time, she wrote something that concerned only herself.

I am allowed to rest.

She closed the book.

And smiled.

The Seventh Traveler

Only Vaelrith remained.

The former Waykeeper stood apart from the companions.

His doorway had not opened.

He looked toward the First Keeper.

“Have I not earned the same opportunity?”

The ancient figure raised its lantern.

You have been standing before your doorway since you arrived.

Vaelrith turned.

Behind him appeared Elyndor.

Not the ruined capital.

The city as it had existed before the Shattering.

Its towers were whole.

Its bridges illuminated.

People gathered beneath colorful banners.

He stared.

Then stepped through.

Vaelrith found himself within the original council chamber.

Auren sat beside the circular table.

The other Waykeepers occupied their familiar chairs.

Documents covered the polished surface.

Vaelrith recognized the date.

The final council meeting.

The evening before everything began falling apart.

Auren looked toward him.

“You're late.”

Vaelrith remained motionless.

One of the councilors smiled.

“Sit down. We have a great deal to discuss.”

He approached his chair.

The documents before him contained the original designs for the Concordance Engine.

He remembered every argument.

Every objection.

Every frustration.

He knew exactly how the meeting would end.

He also knew what would follow.

Auren looked toward him.

“Your proposal concerns us.”

Vaelrith stared at his old friend.

For centuries, he had imagined returning to this moment.

He had imagined convincing the council.

Forcing them to understand.

Making them recognize that his vision had been correct.

Now he possessed something he had not possessed then.

Knowledge of the consequences.

He looked toward the documents.

Then tore them in half.

The councilors stared.

Auren rose.

“Vaelrith?”

The former Waykeeper lowered his head.

“I was wrong.”

The words seemed almost impossible to speak.

He continued.

“I thought I could prevent every disaster if I possessed enough authority.”

Auren approached.

“And now?”

Vaelrith looked around the chamber.

“I destroyed everything.”

The other councilors disappeared.

The room became empty.

Only Auren remained.

Vaelrith looked toward him.

“Can it be undone?”

Auren's expression softened.

“No.”

The former Waykeeper closed his eyes.

“Then what is left?”

Auren placed a hand upon the table.

“Tomorrow.”

Vaelrith laughed bitterly.

“You think I deserve one?”

“I think you have one.”

Auren looked toward the doorway.

“What you do with it is your responsibility.”

The chamber began fading.

Vaelrith reached toward his friend.

“Auren.”

The Waykeeper stopped.

“I'm sorry.”

Auren bowed his head.

“I know.”

The room disappeared.

When Vaelrith returned, he looked older than before.

He approached Kaelen.

“I cannot repair what I have done.”

Kaelen nodded.

“Not all of it.”

Vaelrith looked toward the surrounding roads.

“But perhaps I can repair something.”

Kaelen extended his hand.

The former Waykeeper accepted it.

For the first time, they stood beside one another without weapons between them.

The Broken Hourglass

The First Keeper led them toward the golden doorway.

Its enormous frame extended beyond the surrounding stars.

Countless inscriptions covered its surface.

Tovin examined them.

“These describe the original laws of passage.”

Yes.

He pointed toward a damaged symbol.

“This one concerns time.”

The Keeper lifted the broken hourglass.

Every road requires three things.

The Waystone began illuminating.

An origin.

The first fragment separated slightly.

A destination.

The second fragment responded.

And the freedom to travel between them.

The third fragment became brighter.

Kaelen watched the three pieces.

The First Keeper continued.

But passage through space and passage through time are not the same.

Images appeared beyond the gateway.

The Last Sanctuary before the siege.

Willowmere before its destruction.

Elyndor before the Shattering.

Auren before his sacrifice.

Kaelen felt his chest tighten.

“We could go back?”

The Keeper remained silent.

Tovin approached the gateway.

“Could we prevent the Shattering?”

Vaelrith stared at the ancient capital.

“Could we save them?”

The First Keeper lowered its hourglass.

Time is not a collection of mistakes awaiting correction.

The images changed.

Kaelen saw the companions living ordinary lives in their original world.

He saw a version of Aetherfall in which they had never arrived.

Queen Isolde remained imprisoned beneath the crown.

Thalassa remained chained.

The Tidewarden continued losing her memories.

The sanctuary fell.

Then another possibility appeared.

Vaelrith never activated the throne.

Elyndor survived.

But centuries of subsequent lives unfolded differently.

Entire families disappeared.

People who had been born because their ancestors traveled along the broken roads never existed.

Anwen was gone.

Sella was gone.

Captain Rhydan's life had taken another direction.

The First Keeper spoke.

Changing yesterday does not simply remove its suffering. It changes everything that followed.

Lyra looked toward the images.

“Even the good things.”

Especially those things you cannot predict.

Vaelrith stared at the city he had destroyed.

He could save it.

Perhaps.

But doing so would erase centuries of lives that had grown from the world that survived.

He lowered his head.

“I have made that mistake before.”

Kaelen looked toward him.

Vaelrith continued.

“Believing I could decide which future deserved to exist.”

The former Waykeeper stepped away from the gateway.

The image of Elyndor disappeared.

For the first time, Vaelrith had chosen not to exercise a power that stood within his reach.

The Worlds Without Number

The gateway opened farther.

Kaelen saw landscapes beyond anything he had imagined.

A city constructed upon the backs of enormous creatures traveling across an ocean.

A civilization living beneath a violet sun.

Forests whose trees floated above the ground.

A world covered entirely in snow.

An enormous desert beneath three moons.

Then familiar places appeared.

The Last Sanctuary.

Queen Isolde's kingdom.

The Island of Seven Lights.

The waters of Letharis.

The northern mountains.

The Worldbreaker rested beneath its cliff.

Thalassa stood nearby.

Kaelen approached the gateway.

“Can we send it home?”

The First Keeper nodded.

Its road remains.

The completed Waystone illuminated.

An image appeared of a distant world beneath unfamiliar stars.

Enormous creatures wandered across vast plains.

The Worldbreaker's people.

Kaelen smiled.

“We promised.”

The Keeper extended its lantern.

Then honor your promise.

Kaelen raised the Waystone.

Golden energy traveled through the gateway.

A road opened beneath the northern mountains.

The Worldbreaker lifted its head.

Thalassa moved aside.

For a moment, the enormous creature stared toward the unfamiliar light.

Then it recognized the landscape beyond.

It rose.

Slowly.

Almost cautiously.

It approached the passage.

Thalassa's voice reached Kaelen.

You have found its home.

He smiled.

“Yes.”

The Worldbreaker looked toward the dragon.

Then toward the distant sanctuary.

It released a deep, gentle rumble.

And stepped through.

Beyond the passage, others of its kind turned toward it.

The creature stopped.

One approached.

Then another.

Kaelen watched the reunion until the gateway closed.

Bram wiped his eyes.

Seren noticed.

“Are you crying?”

“No.”

“Of course not.”

“Dust.”

She looked around the endless expanse of stars.

“Remarkably dusty place.”

Bram nodded.

“Terrible.”

Nobody challenged him.

The Road That Was Waiting

At last, the gateway revealed their own world.

The image became clear.

Kaelen recognized familiar buildings.

Mira recognized places she had dreamed about.

Bram laughed when he saw an ordinary road carrying ordinary vehicles.

Seren stared at the horizon.

Tovin watched people passing beneath streetlights.

Lyra closed her eyes.

Home.

After everything they had endured, it stood before them.

No corrupted guardian blocked the entrance.

No ancient puzzle required solving.

No army waited beyond the threshold.

They could simply walk through.

Kaelen approached.

The Waystone responded.

Golden light spread beneath his feet.

He looked toward the First Keeper.

“Is that it?”

The Keeper nodded.

Your road home has been restored.

Mira smiled.

Seren released a breath she seemed to have been holding for months.

Bram laughed.

Tovin looked almost speechless.

Lyra began crying.

Kaelen turned toward his companions.

“We made it.”

For several moments, they simply stood together.

Then Bram looked toward Flicker.

The little creature watched the gateway.

The meadow of the Lumari appeared beside it.

Two roads.

Two homes.

Bram knelt.

“Well, little fellow.”

His voice trembled.

“Looks like this is where you get to decide.”

Flicker looked toward the meadow.

Dozens of Lumari waited beneath the golden flowers.

Then he looked toward Bram.

The Warden smiled.

“You don't owe us anything.”

Flicker approached the meadow.

Bram swallowed.

The creature stopped.

He turned.

Then ran back toward the companions.

He climbed Bram's armor, settled upon his shoulder and released an enthusiastic chirp.

Bram laughed.

He held the little creature against his chest.

“Are you certain?”

Flicker attempted to steal something from his pocket.

Bram looked toward the others.

“Apparently.”

The First Keeper bowed.

The little keeper has chosen his travelers.

Lyra smiled.

“Can he visit his family?”

The Keeper looked toward the surrounding roads.

That depends upon what becomes of them.

The happiness faded slightly.

Kaelen turned toward the ancient figure.

“What do you mean?”

The Keeper raised its broken hourglass.

And the gateway began trembling.

The Fracture Beyond the Stars

A terrible sound emerged from the surrounding darkness.

The roads beneath their feet began shaking.

Stars disappeared.

Entire passages flickered.

Tovin turned toward the gateway.

“What's happening?”

The First Keeper remained motionless.

The throne has fallen.

Kaelen nodded.

“We destroyed it.”

And in doing so, you removed the structure that had been forcing the broken network to remain connected.

Tovin's expression changed.

“The throne was sustaining some of the damaged passages.”

Yes.

He looked toward the Waystone.

“Then the network is collapsing.”

It is attempting to return to its natural condition.

Kaelen watched several distant roads disappear.

“What happens to the people traveling along them?”

The Keeper extended its lantern.

Images appeared.

A merchant caravan suspended above an enormous chasm.

A group of refugees crossing an ancient bridge.

A ship traveling along an aerial passage.

Families attempting to reach distant settlements.

The roads beneath them flickered.

Kaelen stared.

“We have to help them.”

He raised the Waystone.

Golden light reached toward the damaged connections.

For a moment, they stabilized.

Then the artifact trembled violently.

Tovin approached.

“The Waystone cannot maintain every passage simultaneously.”

Kaelen concentrated.

“There has to be something we can do.”

The First Keeper looked toward him.

There is.

The three fragments began separating.

The original Waystone was created to guide travelers through a network of independent roads. But the Shattering changed the nature of that network.

An image of the throne appeared.

For centuries, the corrupted connections have depended upon a single controlling source.

The image shattered.

Without that source, they must either be released or sustained by another.

Kaelen lowered his head.

“The throne.”

Another throne could be created.

Vaelrith stepped backward.

“No.”

The Keeper turned toward him.

You understand.

Vaelrith nodded.

“Another master. Another prison.”

Kaelen looked toward the completed Waystone.

“Then we release them.”

The Keeper's lantern dimmed.

Doing so will close many passages.

Tovin stared.

“How many?”

No traveler can know.

The images changed.

Some worlds remained connected.

Others became isolated.

Entire regions of Aetherfall disappeared behind sealed gateways.

The First Keeper continued.

The roads may eventually reopen naturally. New travelers may discover new passages.

Kaelen looked toward his own world.

“And ours?”

The Keeper remained silent.

Kaelen understood.

If they released the network, their road home might disappear.

Perhaps permanently.

Mira approached.

“Could we cross first?”

The First Keeper nodded.

Yes.

Hope returned.

Then the Keeper continued.

But the Waystone must remain here until the final release is completed.

Kaelen looked toward the artifact.

“Someone has to stay?”

Yes.

The companions became silent.

Bram lowered Flicker from his shoulder.

Seren stared toward the distant roads.

Tovin examined the inscriptions surrounding the gateway.

Lyra closed her eyes.

Kaelen looked toward his home.

It was so close.

After everything.

After every battle.

Every loss.

Every promise.

They had finally reached it.

And now someone would have to remain behind.

The Keeper's Final Warning

Kaelen approached the First Keeper.

“How long would that person have to stay?”

Until the release is complete.

“And afterward?”

The Keeper looked toward the surrounding stars.

There may be no road remaining for them to travel.

Mira stepped forward.

“No.”

Kaelen turned toward her.

She shook her head.

“Don't even think about it.”

He looked toward the Waystone.

“Someone has to do it.”

“Then we find another way.”

Tovin immediately began examining the surrounding inscriptions.

“There may be an alternative mechanism.”

Seren joined him.

“Tell me what to look for.”

Bram approached the gateway.

“Perhaps we can hold it open from both sides.”

Lyra studied the distant connections.

Flicker's golden light became brighter.

For several minutes, the companions searched.

They examined every visible inscription.

Every ancient symbol.

Every connection surrounding the gateway.

But the roads continued disappearing.

The First Keeper watched silently.

Finally, Vaelrith stepped forward.

“I will remain.”

Everyone turned toward him.

The former Waykeeper looked at Kaelen.

“This began with me.”

Kaelen shook his head.

“Vaelrith…”

“Let me finish something correctly.”

He extended his hand toward the Waystone.

The artifact illuminated.

Then recoiled.

Vaelrith stared.

The First Keeper spoke.

The Waystone has accepted another bearer.

Kaelen looked down.

“Me.”

Yes.

Vaelrith lowered his hand.

For the first time, he appeared genuinely devastated by the loss of his former authority.

Not because he wished to possess it again.

But because he could no longer use it to spare someone else.

Kaelen looked toward his companions.

Mira's eyes filled with tears.

“No.”

He approached her.

“You know what Auren would say.”

She shook her head.

“I don't care what Auren would say.”

Kaelen smiled sadly.

“Fair enough.”

She grabbed his arm.

“We didn't come this far to leave you behind.”

The surrounding roads trembled.

Another passage disappeared.

Kaelen looked toward the images of the stranded travelers.

Then toward home.

He had once believed that the greatest challenge of their journey would be defeating Vaelrith.

He had been wrong.

Defeating an enemy was easier than surrendering something he wanted more than anything else.

He raised the Waystone.

Its three fragments illuminated.

The First Keeper extended its lantern.

The choice belongs to you, Pathfinder.

Kaelen looked toward Mira.

Seren.

Tovin.

Bram.

Lyra.

Flicker.

The people who had become his family.

Beyond them waited the world he had spent so long trying to reach.

Behind him, countless travelers stood upon roads that were disappearing.

He closed his eyes.

And remembered Auren's final instruction.

The world does not need a kinder master.

It needs to remain free.

When Kaelen opened his eyes, he knew what he intended to do.

But before he could speak, Mira stepped beside him.

Then Bram.

Then Seren.

Then Tovin.

Then Lyra.

Flicker climbed onto his shoulder.

Kaelen looked around.

“What are you doing?”

Mira took his hand.

“Remembering a promise.”

Bram placed his hammer upon the road.

Seren smiled through her tears.

Tovin raised his staff.

Lyra opened her journal.

Together, they spoke the words they had learned beneath the seven towers.

“When darkness comes…”

Kaelen stared at them.

Mira tightened her grip upon his hand.

“Let no one stand alone.”

The First Keeper lowered its lantern.

Something changed within the ancient gateway.

A symbol appeared that had not been visible before.

Tovin noticed it.

His eyes widened.

“Wait.”

He approached the inscription.

The surrounding roads continued trembling.

“Tovin?” Seren asked.

The Spellweaver read the ancient words.

Then read them again.

He turned toward the companions.

“There might be another way.”

Kaelen looked toward him.

“What kind of way?”

Tovin studied the completed Waystone.

His expression contained hope.

But also fear.

“The kind that may cost us considerably more than we expected.”

The First Keeper raised its head.

For the first time, its broken hourglass became still.

And beyond the golden doorway, the road home began to fade.

CHAPTER 27

The Price of Freedom

The road home was disappearing.

Kaelen watched familiar buildings dissolve beneath a curtain of golden mist. The streetlights became distant points of illumination, and the sounds of passing vehicles faded until nothing remained but the trembling of the ancient gateway.

“Tovin,” he said quietly. “Whatever you've discovered, now would be an excellent time to explain it.”

The Spellweaver knelt before the newly revealed inscription.

His fingers moved across the ancient lettering.

“Everything we've learned about the Waystone has concerned its bearer. One traveler carrying the key. One traveler opening the passages.”

He looked toward the First Keeper.

“But this inscription predates the creation of the Waystone.”

The ancient figure remained silent.

Tovin continued reading.

“Before there was a key, there were travelers. Before there were guardians, there were promises.”

Seren glanced toward the disappearing roads.

“Beautiful. Slightly concerned about the timing.”

Tovin stood.

“The original network did not depend upon a single bearer. Its strength came from the relationships between those who traveled it.”

Kaelen looked down at the Waystone.

“Can we restore that?”

“Possibly.”

Bram retrieved his hammer.

“I'm beginning to dislike that word.”

Tovin pointed toward six symbols surrounding the gateway.

“The Waystone has accepted Kaelen as its bearer, but that doesn't necessarily mean its power must remain concentrated within him.”

Lyra approached.

“We could share it.”

Tovin nodded.

“More than that. We could return its power to the roads themselves.”

The First Keeper raised its lantern.

You have discovered the forgotten covenant.

Kaelen turned toward the ancient figure.

“Will it save the travelers?”

It may.

“And will it allow us to return home?”

The Keeper's hourglass began moving again.

That depends upon what you are prepared to surrender.

The Forgotten Covenant

The six symbols surrounding the gateway illuminated.

Kaelen recognized them immediately.

The open road.

The shield.

The feather.

The flame.

The mountain.

The star.

Each represented something that had become part of their journey.

The Pathfinder.

The Guardian.

The Windrunner.

The Spellweaver.

The Warden.

The Seer.

A seventh symbol appeared beneath them.

A small lantern.

Flicker chirped.

Bram looked toward him.

“Apparently, you've been promoted.”

The First Keeper approached the inscriptions.

The earliest travelers understood that no road could survive through the efforts of one person alone.

Golden images appeared around them.

A traveler repairing a damaged bridge.

Another lighting a lantern.

A guardian protecting a family.

A stranger offering food to someone who had become lost.

Every act of kindness strengthened the connections between worlds.
Every promise honored gave the roads another reason to remain.

Tovin examined the images.

“The network was never simply a magical construction.”

No.

“It was a living agreement.”

Yes.

Kaelen thought of the Island of Seven Lights.

The new covenant.

Ordinary people signing their names before the roadwardens.

He remembered Auren's letter.

The answer had been waiting for them throughout their journey.

They had simply not understood it.

“What must we do?” he asked.

The First Keeper looked toward the Waystone.

Return what was borrowed.

The artifact began trembling.

The three fragments must be separated from the authority they have accumulated. Their power must be released into the original foundations of the roads.

Tovin's expression became grave.

“The Waystone would cease to exist.”

As you know it, yes.

Kaelen considered the artifact.

It had guided them through forests, mountains, ruined kingdoms and impossible landscapes.

It had opened doors.

Protected lives.

Helped them find one another.

Without it, he would never again possess the ability to travel between worlds whenever he wished.

The Keeper continued.

The roads that survive will belong to their travelers. No single bearer will possess the authority to command them.

Mira approached Kaelen.

“That's what we've been fighting for.”

He nodded.

But the First Keeper had not finished.

There is another cost.

The six symbols became brighter.

The power that awakened within each of you during your journey has become connected to the Waystone.

Tovin looked toward his staff.

Lyra touched her journal.

Seren examined the faint golden markings upon her blade.

Bram looked toward his hammer.

Mira lowered her shield.

Kaelen understood.

“Our abilities.”

They must be surrendered.

Silence followed.

The Keeper's voice remained gentle.

You cannot return the roads to their travelers while retaining the authority that sets you apart from them.

Seren stared at the feather symbol.

“So everything we've become…”

The Keeper turned toward her.

You misunderstand.

The ancient figure lowered its lantern.

What you have become cannot be taken from you.

It looked toward the six companions.

Only what was given to you.

The Things We Carry

For the first time since their arrival beyond the boundaries of time, the companions sat together.

The First Keeper had created a small circle of stable ground beneath the surrounding stars.

At its center burned a familiar golden flame.

Kaelen placed Auren's lantern beside it.

Nobody spoke immediately.

The roads continued trembling in the distance.

They had very little time.

Yet what they were being asked to surrender deserved more than a hurried decision.

Tovin removed his staff from its resting place.

He examined the repaired wood and the crystal that had replaced the one destroyed at the Sanctuary of the Falling Sun.

“I spent much of my life wishing I could understand things that others considered impossible.”

Seren sat beside him.

“And now?”

He smiled faintly.

“Now I understand just enough to appreciate how little I know.”

He turned the staff in his hands.

“I will miss this.”

Bram nodded.

“I'll miss watching you accidentally set things on fire.”

“Those incidents were rarely accidental.”

“That's considerably more concerning.”

Mira laughed.

The sound surprised them.

For a moment, they were no longer travelers standing at the edge of a collapsing network.

They were simply friends sitting around a fire.

Lyra opened her journal.

Its pages contained hundreds of entries.

Names.

Places.

Descriptions of creatures.

Conversations with people they might never see again.

She looked toward the First Keeper.

“Will I lose my memories?”

No.

“My ability to sense the roads?”

Yes.

She considered that.

The gift had frightened her.

It had exhausted her.

But it had also allowed her to recognize things that others could not.

She looked down at her journal.

“I suppose I'll have to listen the ordinary way.”

Mira smiled.

“You've always been good at that.”

Seren examined her blade.

The Windrunner's abilities had allowed her to cross distances no ordinary traveler could manage. She had leaped between collapsing bridges, climbed ancient guardians and outrun creatures that should have caught her.

“I'm going to have to walk everywhere again, aren't I?”

Bram grinned.

“Welcome to my world.”

She nudged him with her shoulder.

Then she became quiet.

“I don't regret any of it.”

Kaelen looked toward her.

“Neither do I.”

Mira rested her damaged shield beside the fire.

She remembered the first time she had raised it against a creature threatening her companions.

She had been terrified.

She had raised it anyway.

The shield had become stronger.

So had she.

But the courage had come first.

Bram placed his hammer beside hers.

“Never needed magic to be stubborn.”

Tovin nodded.

“An unfortunate natural talent.”

Bram smiled.

Then he looked toward Flicker.

“What about him?”

The First Keeper approached.

His light belongs to him. It was never borrowed from the Waystone.

Bram released a breath.

“Good.”

Flicker climbed into his lap.

The Warden stroked his head.

“Because I wasn't particularly interested in negotiating that.”

Kaelen looked toward his companions.

They had gained extraordinary abilities throughout their journey.

But their greatest accomplishments had rarely come from those abilities alone.

They had come from choices.

From trust.

From refusing to abandon one another.

He looked down at the Waystone.

Perhaps surrendering its power would not make them less than they had become.

Perhaps it would finally reveal how much of that strength had belonged to them all along.

The Man Who Had Everything

Vaelrith stood beyond the circle of light.

He watched the companions discussing what they would surrender.

He had once possessed abilities greater than any of theirs.

He had commanded ancient guardians.

Manipulated entire kingdoms.

Extended his life through the power of the corrupted network.

And for centuries, he had believed that surrendering such power would mean becoming nothing.

Now six people stood before him, willingly preparing to relinquish abilities that had saved their lives countless times.

He could not understand them.

Or perhaps, for the first time, he could.

Kaelen approached.

“You've been quiet.”

Vaelrith looked toward the distant gateway.

“I am discovering that silence is considerably less dangerous than many of the things I have said.”

Kaelen stood beside him.

For several moments, they watched the roads disappearing.

Finally, Vaelrith spoke.

“When I first became a Waykeeper, I carried a lantern much like that one.”

He gestured toward Auren's flame.

“I traveled between villages repairing damaged passages. Sometimes I spent weeks helping a single family return home.”

Kaelen listened.

“I enjoyed it.”

Vaelrith smiled bitterly.

“Then the council began trusting me with larger responsibilities. More difficult problems. Greater authority.”

He lowered his head.

“And eventually, I became offended whenever anyone suggested that there might be something I could not fix.”

Kaelen remembered the throne.

The offer Vaelrith had made.

He understood how easily the temptation could have taken hold.

Vaelrith looked toward him.

“You refused something I spent centuries attempting to possess.”

“It wasn't easy.”

“No.”

The former Waykeeper watched the companions.

“I imagine that is why it mattered.”

Another road disappeared.

Vaelrith closed his eyes.

“What will happen to me?”

Kaelen considered the question.

“I don't know.”

“I cannot return to the life I had.”

“No.”

“And there are people in Aetherfall who would gladly see me imprisoned.”

Kaelen nodded.

“They have reason to be angry.”

Vaelrith looked toward him.

“You would allow them to judge me?”

“Yes.”

The answer appeared to surprise him.

Kaelen continued.

“Saving your life doesn't mean deciding what everyone else must think about you.”

Vaelrith lowered his head.

“Of course.”

For a moment, the old man looked toward the endless stars.

Then he straightened.

“Whatever happens, I will not run from them.”

Kaelen extended his hand.

“Then help us finish this.”

Vaelrith accepted it.

The Travelers in the Darkness

The First Keeper raised its lantern.

The surrounding expanse became filled with images of endangered roads.

A family stood upon a bridge that had begun disappearing beneath their feet.

A merchant caravan remained trapped between two worlds.

An elderly woman waited beside a gateway that no longer recognized her destination.

A ship carrying refugees drifted through darkness.

There were hundreds of such images.

Perhaps thousands.

Kaelen felt overwhelmed.

“How do we reach all of them?”

The First Keeper turned toward the Waystone.

You cannot.

He stared.

Not alone.

Tovin approached the gateway.

“The forgotten covenant distributes the connection.”

He examined the six symbols.

“If each of us becomes a temporary foundation, the Waystone's power can move through us into the roads.”

Mira looked toward the images.

“And the people traveling them?”

“We guide them toward stable destinations.”

Seren studied the surrounding darkness.

“All of them?”

Tovin shook his head.

“We help as many as we can. The guardians and travelers on the other side must do the rest.”

Kaelen looked toward the First Keeper.

“Can they hear us?”

If you open the connection.

He raised the Waystone.

Its golden light spread across the endless expanse.

The surrounding roads illuminated.

And suddenly, voices reached them.

Thousands of voices.

Some frightened.

Some confused.

Some calling for help.

Kaelen nearly fell beneath the weight of them.

Lyra caught his arm.

“Don't try to hear everyone.”

He looked toward her.

“One voice at a time.”

He nodded.

Then he spoke.

“To anyone who can hear me…”

His voice traveled across the ancient network.

“My name is Kaelen.”

The images became clearer.

“We have destroyed the throne that controlled your roads. The passages are unstable, and some of them will close.”

He watched the frightened travelers.

“But you are not alone.”

Mira stepped beside him.

“Help the people nearest you.”

Bram joined her.

“If someone's fallen, pick them up.”

Seren approached.

“If you know a safe path, show it to someone else.”

Tovin raised his staff.

“If you understand how your local passage works, share that knowledge.”

Lyra opened her journal.

“And if someone is afraid, remind them that there is still hope.”

The First Keeper watched silently.

Across the network, people began responding.

A roadwarden lifted a lantern.

A merchant helped an elderly traveler stand.

A guardian opened a shelter.

A sailor threw a rope toward a damaged vessel.

Small acts.

Ordinary acts.

Yet each produced a golden light.

The lights began connecting.

Tovin stared.

“It's working.”

Kaelen smiled.

They had spent their journey searching for the power to restore the roads.

Perhaps the power had never belonged exclusively to them.

The Last Sanctuary Answers

Far away, beneath the surviving towers of the Last Sanctuary, the Heart of Refuge awakened.

Maelor stood within the central chamber.

The ancient mechanisms began moving.

An engineer hurried toward him.

“The connections are changing!”

Maelor approached the Heart.

Then he heard a familiar voice.

Help the people nearest you.

He recognized Mira immediately.

Queen Isolde entered the chamber with Commander Halden.

“What is happening?”

Maelor examined the surrounding inscriptions.

“The companions have reached the central gateway.”

Golden light spread through the surviving towers.

But instead of forming the familiar protective barrier, it traveled outward.

Toward distant settlements.

Toward damaged passages.

Toward places that had been disconnected for centuries.

Maelor understood.

“They're returning the roads to us.”

Halden looked toward him.

“Can we help?”

Maelor smiled.

“Yes.”

Within minutes, the sanctuary bells began ringing.

Roadwardens gathered beside the ancient mechanisms.

Engineers repaired damaged connections.

Soldiers helped guide arriving travelers toward shelters.

Garrick opened his forge.

Captain Rhydan prepared the *Lantern's Wake*.

Thalassa descended beside the southern tower.

Her enormous wings illuminated the courtyard.

The little travelers have done it.

Isolde looked toward her.

“Not yet.”

The dragon bowed her head.

Then we shall help them.

Across the sanctuary, people began carrying lanterns into the streets.

Among them was Anwen.

She held a small lantern made from repaired pieces of her birdcage.

Pip rested upon her shoulder.

Sella walked beside her.

“Where are we going, Mother?”

Sella looked toward the arriving travelers.

“To help someone find their way.”

Anwen smiled.

And together, they joined the gathering lights.

The Covenant of the Seven Lights

Upon the distant island where the roadwardens had signed their new covenant, the seven ancient lanterns awakened.

Elowen stood beside the meeting hall.

She heard Kaelen's voice traveling through the stones.

Around her, fishermen abandoned their boats.

Merchants left their stalls.

Children gathered beside their parents.

The oldest roadwarden approached.

“What are your instructions?”

Elowen looked toward the new covenant hanging within the hall.

Then she smiled.

“We already have them.”

She opened the doors.

“Let the travelers decide what they need.”

The people gathered.

Some requested shelter.

Others needed transportation.

Several volunteered to guide strangers across the surrounding islands.

The ancient lanterns became brighter.

One by one, the seven roads stabilized.

Not because a single authority had commanded them.

Because the people who depended upon them had chosen to preserve them.

The Queen and the Dragon

In Isolde's kingdom, Captain Renn stood beside the harbor.

The ancient chains that had once prevented ships from leaving remained broken.

As the roads began trembling, frightened sailors gathered upon the docks.

Renn listened to the distant voices emerging from the harbor lanterns.

Then he looked toward the open sea.

“Prepare every available vessel.”

An officer approached.

“Where are we sailing?”

Renn watched several damaged passages appear above the water.

“Wherever someone needs us.”

The harbor filled with movement.

Fishermen volunteered their boats.

Merchants unloaded cargo to make room for passengers.

Soldiers carried supplies.

Nobody waited for a royal command.

They had learned that responsibility belonged to more than those who wore crowns.

Far above them, golden light spread through the ancient mountain.

The Hall of Forgotten Names illuminated.

The tablet bearing Prince Caedric's name burned brighter than all the others.

His promise had survived.

And now the kingdom was finally beginning to understand it.

The First Surrender

Beyond the stars, the six symbols surrounding the gateway became fully illuminated.

The First Keeper approached Kaelen.

The roads are ready.

He looked toward the Waystone.

“What happens now?”

Each traveler must surrender the authority that was entrusted to them.

The open-road symbol appeared beneath his feet.

Kaelen stepped forward.

Immediately, the Waystone became surrounded by golden light.

He felt every passage he had opened.

Every destination he had discovered.

Every moment when the artifact had answered his call.

The power was extraordinary.

And familiar.

He had become accustomed to feeling the roads beneath the world.

Soon, that sensation would disappear.

He looked toward his companions.

Then toward the countless travelers helping one another.

“I return what was entrusted to me.”

The first fragment of the Waystone separated.

Golden energy traveled into the surrounding roads.

Kaelen staggered.

For the first time since becoming the Pathfinder, he could no longer sense every possible direction.

The world became quieter.

Smaller.

Ordinary.

He looked toward the First Keeper.

“Is that all?”

The Keeper nodded.

You are still a traveler.

Kaelen smiled.

“That's enough.”

The Guardian's Gift

Mira approached the shield symbol.

Golden light surrounded her damaged armor.

She remembered every battle.

Every person she had protected.

Every moment when her strength had exceeded what should have been possible.

She placed her shield upon the ancient stone.

“I return the strength that was entrusted to me.”

Silver light emerged from the shield.

It traveled across the roads.

Within the distant images, protective barriers appeared around damaged passages.

Travelers found themselves sheltered from collapsing stone.

Guardians felt their strength returning.

Mira watched the light disappear.

Her shield became ordinary metal.

Heavy.

Scratched.

Broken.

She lifted it.

For a moment, its weight surprised her.

Bram approached.

“Need a hand?”

She smiled.

“Yes, actually.”

He helped her carry it.

The Guardian had surrendered her extraordinary strength.

But she had not surrendered her willingness to stand between danger and someone who needed protection.

That had never belonged to the Waystone.

The Windrunner's Gift

Seren approached the feather symbol.

Wind gathered around her.

She remembered the collapsing bridges.

The mountain paths.

Her leap onto the Worldbreaker's chest.

The impossible distances she had crossed.

She closed her eyes.

“I return the freedom that was entrusted to me.”

Golden currents emerged from her boots and blade.

They traveled toward the unstable roads.

Across distant worlds, passages became easier to cross.

Ships found favorable winds.

Travelers discovered hidden routes around damaged bridges.

Seren opened her eyes.

The currents surrounding her had disappeared.

She took several steps.

Then attempted a small leap.

She landed considerably closer than expected.

Bram laughed.

“Welcome back to gravity.”

Seren looked offended.

“I'm going to need time to adjust.”

Tovin smiled.

“We all are.”

She looked toward the surrounding roads.

Then toward her companions.

“I think I'll manage.”

The Spellweaver's Gift

Tovin stood before the flame symbol.

His staff illuminated.

Ancient inscriptions appeared across its surface.

For a moment, he could feel the enormous collection of knowledge he had gathered throughout Aetherfall.

Not merely the things he had learned.

The things he could accomplish.

He had repaired ancient mechanisms.

Restored guardians.

Manipulated forces that scholars in his own world could scarcely imagine.

He looked toward the First Keeper.

“Will I still understand what I've learned?”

Knowledge freely acquired remains yours.

Tovin smiled.

“Excellent.”

He raised his staff.

“I return the power that was entrusted to me.”

The crystal dissolved into golden light.

Energy spread throughout the surrounding passages.

Ancient mechanisms awakened.

Broken lanterns reignited.

Damaged gateways became stable.

Tovin lowered the staff.

It was now an ordinary piece of wood.

He examined it carefully.

Seren approached.

“Disappointed?”

“A little.”

He smiled.

“But I have several notebooks filled with observations.”

She groaned.

“Oh, no.”

“And approximately four hundred questions.”

“Of course you do.”

He looked toward the restored roads.

“I suppose discovery can begin again.”

The Warden's Gift

Bram approached the mountain symbol.

His hammer became surrounded by golden energy.

He remembered holding collapsing structures together.

Standing against enormous guardians.

Carrying wounded companions.

Protecting strangers who could offer him nothing in return.

He looked toward the weapon.

“Been a good hammer.”

Flicker chirped.

Bram nodded.

“Yes, you've been helpful too.”

He placed the hammer upon the stone.

“I return the strength that was entrusted to me.”

Golden light spread outward.

Bridges became stable.

Foundations strengthened.

Ancient pillars returned to their original positions.

Across the network, travelers found solid ground beneath their feet.

Bram retrieved his hammer.

It felt considerably heavier.

He lifted it experimentally.

“Well.”

He looked toward Tovin.

“Don't ask me to hold any enormous machinery together for a while.”

Tovin smiled.

“I'll make a note.”

Bram looked toward the surrounding roads.

Then he placed Flicker upon his shoulder.

“Still got the important things.”

The Seer's Gift

Lyra approached the star symbol.

The surrounding darkness filled with voices.

She heard the Tidewarden.

Thalassa.

Malachar.

Auren.

People whose names she had recorded.

People whose names she had never learned.

She closed her eyes.

For a moment, she felt reluctant.

Her gift had become part of how she understood the world.

Without it, she would no longer recognize the memories hidden within ancient stones.

She would no longer sense the emotions of distant guardians.

She would have to accept uncertainty.

Just like everyone else.

She opened her journal.

Its pages were filled with the lives she had encountered.

She smiled.

“I return the sight that was entrusted to me.”

Silver light emerged from her eyes.

It traveled into the surrounding passages.

Across the network, lost travelers recognized familiar landmarks.

Guardians remembered forgotten destinations.

People trapped within unstable roads discovered the direction of safety.

Then the voices disappeared.

Lyra stood beneath the stars.

Silence surrounded her.

Not the unnatural silence of the garden.

Ordinary silence.

She heard Bram breathing.

Seren adjusting her equipment.

Tovin turning a page.

Mira walking toward her.

Kaelen speaking her name.

She smiled.

There was still plenty worth listening to.

The Keeper of the First Light

Only the seventh symbol remained.

Flicker climbed from Bram's shoulder.

The little creature approached the lantern marking.

Golden light gathered around him.

Bram immediately stepped forward.

“Wait.”

The First Keeper looked toward him.

His gift is his own.

Bram nodded.

“But what is he doing?”

The Keeper lowered its lantern.

What his kind has always done.

Flicker placed one tiny paw upon the symbol.

His tail illuminated.

Across the surrounding darkness, thousands of small golden lights appeared.

The Lumari.

They emerged beside damaged roads.

Within abandoned gateways.

Along passages that had remained dark since the Shattering.

Their lights traveled toward one another.

The meadow beyond the stars became brighter.

Flicker chirped.

And the Lumari answered.

Bram stared.

The little creature they had discovered wandering alone had become the first of his kind to return light to Aetherfall.

Not through conquest.

Not through command.

Through example.

The First Keeper bowed.

The little wanderer has shown them that the roads are worth traveling again.

Flicker returned to Bram.

The Warden lifted him.

“Not bad for a breakfast thief.”

Flicker chirped proudly.

The Final Fragment

The first two fragments of the Waystone separated completely.

Only the third remained.

The authority of passage.

Kaelen held it within his palm.

It contained the final connection to their world.

The First Keeper approached.

This fragment must also be released.

Kaelen looked toward the gateway.

Home remained visible.

Faint.

Unstable.

“Can we cross before I release it?”

No.

Tovin examined the surrounding inscriptions.

His expression changed.

“The fragment is sustaining the passage.”

Kaelen nodded.

“If I surrender it, the road closes.”

The First Keeper remained silent.

Mira stepped beside him.

“Then we find another way.”

Tovin searched the inscriptions.

Seren examined the surrounding roads.

Bram looked toward Vaelrith.

Lyra watched the fading gateway.

Kaelen understood.

They had surrendered their extraordinary abilities.

They had restored thousands of roads.

But the final connection still depended upon the very authority they had promised to relinquish.

If they kept the fragment, they could return home.

Perhaps they could even preserve the passage forever.

But the Waystone would remain incomplete.

Its authority would continue existing.

Another traveler might discover it.

Another ruler might attempt to possess it.

Another throne might eventually rise.

Kaelen looked toward his companions.

“I can't keep it.”

Mira's eyes filled with tears.

“I know.”

Seren stared toward home.

“We've come such a long way.”

Bram nodded.

“An absurdly long way.”

Tovin lowered his head.

“There may be another solution.”

Kaelen looked at him.

“Is there?”

The Spellweaver remained silent.

Then shook his head.

“Not one I can find.”

Lyra approached.

“Whatever we decide, we decide together.”

Kaelen held the fragment.

For a long time, nobody spoke.

Beyond the gateway, the world they had left behind waited.

Familiar streets.

Familiar homes.

People they loved.

Ordinary lives they had once taken for granted.

Mira wiped her eyes.

“I wanted to see them again.”

Kaelen nodded.

“So did I.”

Bram looked toward Flicker.

“Well, little fellow. Looks like we might be staying somewhere unexpected.”

Seren laughed through her tears.

“Wouldn't be the first time.”

Tovin closed his notebook.

Lyra took Kaelen's hand.

And one by one, the companions stood beside him.

Not because they had stopped wanting to return home.

Because they understood that wanting something did not make every means of obtaining it acceptable.

Kaelen looked toward the First Keeper.

“We release it.”

The ancient figure bowed.

Freely chosen.

Kaelen nodded.

“Freely chosen.”

The Last Light of the Waystone

Kaelen raised the final fragment.

Golden light spread across his hand.

He remembered the beginning of their journey.

The confusion.

The fear.

The unfamiliar world.

He remembered meeting Auren.

Discovering the first ancient road.

Learning that the shattered passages might lead them home.

He remembered every companion standing beside him.

Every argument.

Every shared meal.

Every victory.

Every loss.

He remembered Willowmere.

The Tidewarden.

Maelor.

Captain Rhydan.

Queen Isolde.

Thalassa.

Auren.

Anwen.

Thousands of people whose lives had become connected to theirs.

He looked toward the fading image of home.

Then closed his eyes.

“I return the authority that was entrusted to me.”

The final fragment dissolved.

Golden light erupted across the endless expanse.

The surrounding roads illuminated.

Ancient gateways awakened.

Corrupted connections disappeared.

The remaining passages separated from the authority that had controlled them for centuries.

Across Aetherfall, lanterns burned brighter.

Guardians raised their heads.

Travelers found their destinations.

The Heart of Refuge released a brilliant column of golden light into the sky.

The seven lanterns upon the distant island answered.

Thalassa roared.

The Lumari emerged along forgotten paths.

And for the first time since the Shattering, the roads belonged to those who traveled them.

Kaelen opened his eyes.

The Waystone was gone.

So was the gateway home.

After the Light

Silence.

The companions stood beneath the stars.

The endless roads remained.

Some had disappeared.

Others had become brighter than before.

The enormous golden doorway stood empty.

Kaelen stared through it.

There was nothing beyond.

No familiar streets.

No waiting homes.

No passage.

Mira approached.

She placed her hand upon his shoulder.

He lowered his head.

“I thought…”

His voice broke.

She embraced him.

Bram sat upon the road.

Flicker climbed into his lap.

Seren turned away.

Tovin stared at the empty gateway.

Lyra opened her journal.

For several moments, she could not write.

They had succeeded.

Aetherfall was free.

The roads had been restored.

Countless travelers had been saved.

And the six companions could not return home.

Vaelrith approached slowly.

He looked toward the empty doorway.

Then toward Kaelen.

“I am sorry.”

Kaelen nodded.

There was nothing else to say.

The former Waykeeper looked toward the surrounding roads.

“You have paid for something I broke.”

Mira turned toward him.

“Then make sure it matters.”

Vaelrith lowered his head.

“I will.”

The First Keeper stood beside the ancient doorway.

Its lantern remained illuminated.

Kaelen approached.

“Where do we go now?”

The Keeper looked toward him.

Wherever your next road leads.

Kaelen laughed bitterly.

“That's not particularly comforting.”

The Keeper bowed.

It was not intended to erase your grief.

Kaelen stared.

You have surrendered something precious. You are permitted to mourn it.

He looked toward his companions.

They had made the right choice.

That did not mean it felt good.

Perhaps that was something else they needed to understand.

Doing what was right did not guarantee an immediate reward.

Sometimes the reward belonged to someone else.

Sometimes the cost remained.

He returned to the circle of companions.

And together, they sat beneath the stars.

A Lantern in the Darkness

Bram was the first to notice it.

A small light.

Far beyond the empty doorway.

He pointed.

“What's that?”

Tovin looked up.

The light moved closer.

Then another appeared.

And another.

Kaelen stood.

The lights were not emerging from the ancient gateway.

They were approaching from the surrounding roads.

Thousands of them.

Lanterns.

Carried by travelers.

Some belonged to guardians.

Others to ordinary people.

He recognized the seven lights of the roadwardens.

The silver-blue flame of Thalassa.

The golden light of the Last Sanctuary.

The lanterns of distant villages.

The ships of Captain Rhydan.

The little lights of the Lumari.

They gathered around the empty doorway.

Tovin stared.

“The roads are responding.”

The First Keeper raised its head.

For the first time, it appeared surprised.

Interesting.

Kaelen turned toward it.

“What is happening?”

The Keeper examined the approaching lights.

You released the authority of passage.

“Yes.”

You did not destroy the freedom of passage.

Tovin's expression changed.

“Of course.”

Seren looked toward him.

“Please explain that in words that don't require a library.”

He approached the doorway.

“The Waystone opened roads through its authority.”

He pointed toward the gathering lanterns.

“But before the Waystone existed, travelers discovered roads without it.”

Kaelen remembered the first woman carrying her lantern across the mountains.

“The roads can still form.”

Tovin nodded.

“Without a key.”

The First Keeper looked toward the gathering lights.

The people of Aetherfall are remembering you.

Lyra approached.

“Remembering us?”

Images appeared within the lanterns.

Anwen carrying her repaired lantern.

Maelor standing beside the new covenant.

Rhydan upon the deck of his ship.

Isolde beside Thalassa.

Halden helping travelers enter the sanctuary.

Elowen lighting the seventh lantern.

Garrick working beside his forge.

Each carried a memory of the companions.

Each carried a wish.

That the six travelers who had helped them find their way might also find theirs.

The lights gathered.

Golden threads began connecting.

The empty doorway trembled.

Kaelen stared.

“Is that…”

Tovin smiled.

“A road.”

The Road They Could Not Build Alone

The passage began forming slowly.

Not through a single overwhelming source of power.

Through thousands of small connections.

A golden thread from the Last Sanctuary.

Another from the Island of Seven Lights.

Another from the dragon kingdoms.

Another from the distant sea.

The Lumari carried their lights into the surrounding darkness.

Flicker leaped from Bram's lap.

He approached the doorway.

His tail illuminated.

The threads became brighter.

Lyra began crying.

“They're helping us.”

Mira took Kaelen's hand.

He watched the road forming.

They had spent their journey helping people find their way.

Now those people were returning the kindness.

Not because they owed the companions anything.

Not because an artifact commanded them.

Because they had chosen to.

The First Keeper approached.

This road does not belong to the Waystone.

Kaelen looked toward the ancient figure.

It belongs to the travelers who have made it.

The Keeper's broken hourglass became whole.

The sand began falling normally.

Tovin stared.

“That's new.”

The Keeper looked toward the hourglass.

Some things can be repaired.

The passage became clearer.

Beyond it appeared a familiar sky.

Buildings.

Trees.

Roads.

Home.

Kaelen could scarcely breathe.

Mira covered her mouth.

Seren laughed.

Bram lifted Flicker.

Tovin stared in wonder.

Lyra closed her journal.

The First Keeper extended its lantern toward the passage.

You surrendered your authority to command the road.

The golden doorway opened.

You did not surrender your right to travel it.

The Seventh Traveler's Destination

Vaelrith stood apart from the celebration.

Kaelen noticed him.

He approached.

“Come with us.”

The former Waykeeper looked toward the open gateway.

“Your world?”

Kaelen nodded.

Vaelrith smiled faintly.

“No.”

He turned toward the roads leading into Aetherfall.

“There are people waiting for answers.”

Kaelen understood.

“Are you certain?”

“No.”

Vaelrith looked toward him.

“But I have spent centuries avoiding uncertainty. Perhaps it is time I learned to live with it.”

The First Keeper approached.

Your road remains open.

An image appeared of the Last Sanctuary.

Vaelrith watched its people rebuilding.

He saw damaged houses.

Broken towers.

Families carrying supplies.

He lowered his head.

“Will they forgive me?”

The Keeper remained silent.

Kaelen answered.

“That's their choice.”

Vaelrith nodded.

“Yes.”

He removed a small silver object from his robes.

It was an ancient Waykeeper emblem.

He offered it to Kaelen.

The Pathfinder shook his head.

“Keep it.”

Vaelrith stared.

Kaelen continued.

“Not as a symbol of authority.”

He smiled faintly.

“As a reminder of what you were supposed to do.”

Vaelrith closed his hand around the emblem.

For several moments, he struggled to speak.

Finally, he bowed.

“Thank you, Pathfinder.”

Kaelen extended his hand.

“Safe travels.”

Vaelrith accepted it.

Then he turned toward Aetherfall.

He walked without armor.

Without a throne.

Without an army.

An old man carrying the memory of terrible choices and the opportunity to make different ones.

The road accepted him.

And he disappeared into the golden light.

The Farewell of the First Keeper

The companions gathered before their restored passage.

The First Keeper stood beside them.

Your journey has changed many things.

Kaelen looked toward the surrounding roads.

“Will they remain safe?”

No road is without danger.

He smiled faintly.

“I thought you might say that.”

The Keeper continued.

But they are free. Their travelers may maintain them, neglect them, discover new ones or allow old ones to close.

Tovin looked toward the gateway.

“Could we ever return?”

The Keeper lowered its lantern.

Perhaps.

Seren laughed.

“Even the ancient beings use that word.”

The Keeper appeared amused.

You may discover another passage. Or another traveler may discover you.

Bram looked toward Flicker.

“Can he come?”

The First Keeper bowed.

He has chosen his road.

Flicker chirped.

Bram smiled.

“Good.”

Lyra approached the ancient figure.

“Will anyone remember what happened here?”

The Keeper looked toward her journal.

I believe someone already has.

She smiled.

Mira turned toward the surrounding lights.

“Tell them thank you.”

They know.

Kaelen retrieved Auren's lantern.

Its flame burned steadily.

He looked toward the First Keeper.

“What happens to this?”

The Keeper examined it.

It has completed its purpose.

Kaelen lowered his head.

He had carried it through battles.

Across broken roads.

Into the ancient capital.

Beyond the boundaries of time.

He was reluctant to leave it.

The Keeper continued.

But a lantern need not remain magical to be worth carrying.

Kaelen smiled.

He placed it carefully within his satchel.

“Then I'll take it home.”

The First Keeper bowed.

Safe travels, Pathfinder.

Kaelen looked toward his companions.

“Ready?”

Mira nodded.

Seren smiled.

Tovin adjusted his belongings.

Bram lifted Flicker.

Lyra held her journal close.

Together, they approached the doorway.

Behind them, the roads of Aetherfall illuminated beneath the endless stars.

Ahead waited the world they had believed lost forever.

Kaelen stopped at the threshold.

For a moment, he looked back.

He thought of the people they had met.

The promises they had made.

The friends they had lost.

He wished Auren could have been there.

Perhaps, in some small way, he was.

Kaelen touched the lantern within his satchel.

Then he stepped forward.

The Last Crossing

Light surrounded them.

The stars disappeared.

The ancient roads dissolved.

For a moment, Kaelen felt as though he were falling.

Then came sound.

Wind moving through trees.

Birdsong.

The distant rumble of an engine.

He opened his eyes.

Grass beneath his hands.

An ordinary blue sky.

Clouds.

A familiar sun.

He remained motionless.

Almost afraid to believe what he was seeing.

Mira sat several feet away.

Seren lay upon her back, laughing.

Tovin examined the ground as though ordinary soil had suddenly become the most extraordinary substance in existence.

Bram sat upright.

Flicker emerged from beneath his cloak.

The little creature looked around.

Then sneezed.

Bram laughed.

“Welcome home.”

Lyra stood.

She turned slowly.

The landscape was familiar.

Painfully familiar.

Kaelen rose.

His legs trembled.

Beyond the trees, a road carried passing vehicles.

No golden lanterns stood beside it.

No ancient inscriptions covered its surface.

No magical guardians protected its travelers.

It was simply a road.

And it was beautiful.

Mira approached him.

“Kaelen.”

He looked toward her.

“We're home.”

He nodded.

Then he began laughing.

She embraced him.

Seren joined them.

Then Tovin.

Bram approached carrying Flicker.

Lyra wrapped her arms around the others.

For several moments, they stood together beneath the ordinary sky.

Six companions.

One little keeper.

No Waystone.

No extraordinary powers.

No ancient authority.

Only the lives they had been given another opportunity to live.

Eventually, Seren stepped backward.

“Well.”

She wiped her eyes.

“Does anyone know where we actually are?”

Tovin examined the surrounding landscape.

“Not precisely.”

Bram groaned.

“After all that?”

Kaelen laughed.

He looked toward the road.

For the first time in a very long time, he could not sense where it would lead.

He would have to discover that the ordinary way.

And somehow, that seemed exactly right.

The Light That Remained

As the companions walked toward the road, Kaelen noticed something within his satchel.

Auren's lantern.

He removed it.

The magical flame had disappeared.

The glass was scratched.

The metal was worn.

It was an ordinary lantern now.

He smiled.

Then Flicker climbed onto his shoulder.

The little creature examined the lantern.

His tail illuminated.

A tiny golden spark appeared within the glass.

Kaelen stopped.

The spark became a flame.

Small.

Warm.

Steady.

Mira looked toward him.

“What is it?”

He watched the light.

“Nothing.”

He smiled.

“Just an old friend reminding us to keep going.”

He returned the lantern to his satchel.

The companions continued walking.

Behind them, hidden beneath the trees, a single golden flower emerged from the grass.

Its petals opened beneath the morning sun.

For a moment, a narrow line of light appeared between two ancient stones.

Then it vanished.

The roads had not ended.

They had simply become free.

And somewhere beyond the boundaries of their familiar world, beneath the stars of Aetherfall, thousands of lanterns continued burning.

Waiting for the next traveler.

The next story.

The next journey.

CHAPTER 28

The Shattered Way

The final chapter

An Ordinary Morning

The first thing Bram purchased upon returning to civilization was a hamburger.

The second was another hamburger.

The third was a hamburger he insisted belonged to Flicker, although the little creature received considerably less of it than he had apparently been promised.

They sat outside a small roadside restaurant beneath a faded red umbrella. Vehicles passed along the highway. Somewhere inside, a radio played music that none of them had heard in months.

Seren stared at the traffic.

“Anyone else finding this remarkably strange?”

Mira nodded.

“Everything.”

Tovin examined the paper wrapper surrounding his sandwich.

“Do you realize how much engineering is involved in producing something as simple as this?”

Bram took another bite.

“Don't ruin it.”

“I'm merely suggesting—”

“Don't.”

Tovin smiled and returned to his meal.

Lyra sat quietly beside them, watching people enter and leave the restaurant.

A father carried his sleeping daughter.

Two elderly women laughed beside a parked vehicle.

A young man hurried across the parking lot while speaking into his telephone.

Nobody carried a sword.

Nobody checked the surrounding shadows for corrupted guardians.

Nobody seemed concerned that the road might disappear beneath their feet.

It was wonderfully ordinary.

Kaelen watched the others.

Their clothing was torn. Their equipment was damaged. Their faces carried the exhaustion of a journey that nobody around them could possibly understand.

They had returned with remarkably little.

And yet, as he looked around the table, he realized that everything he considered essential had survived.

Flicker emerged from beneath Bram's cloak.

He sniffed the hamburger.

Then attempted to drag it away.

Bram caught the wrapper.

“Absolutely not.”

The little creature chirped indignantly.

Seren laughed.

“Some things transcend worlds.”

For several minutes, they ate without discussing what would happen next.

Eventually, Mira looked toward Kaelen.

“We should find our families.”

He nodded.

The words carried an unexpected weight.

For months, returning home had been their shared purpose.

Now that they had accomplished it, they faced something they had scarcely considered.

They would no longer need to travel together.

There were homes waiting.

Families.

Responsibilities.

Entire lives that had continued in their absence.

Kaelen looked around the table.

“Before we leave…”

The others turned toward him.

He struggled to find the right words.

“Thank you.”

Bram lowered his hamburger.

Seren smiled.

Tovin looked down.

Lyra closed her journal.

Mira reached across the table and took his hand.

Kaelen continued.

“I couldn't have done any of it without you.”

Bram cleared his throat.

“Obviously.”

Everyone laughed.

Then the Warden's expression softened.

“Neither could we.”

The traffic continued passing.

The radio continued playing.

And six extraordinary travelers sat beneath a faded umbrella, grateful for the simple privilege of being alive.

The Missing Days

Discovering how much time had passed proved considerably more complicated than expected.

Tovin had anticipated that their journey beyond the boundaries of time might produce unusual consequences.

He had not anticipated that a newspaper would nearly cause him to fall out of his chair.

“Eleven days.”

Seren looked toward him.

“What?”

He placed the newspaper upon the table.

“Eleven days have passed since we disappeared.”

Kaelen stared at the date.

“That isn't possible.”

Tovin laughed.

“I think we've exhausted that particular objection.”

Mira examined the newspaper.

Eleven days.

They had experienced months of travel.

Changing seasons.

Countless nights beneath unfamiliar stars.

They had watched civilizations tremble and kingdoms rise again.

Yet here, less than two weeks had passed.

Lyra opened her journal.

She turned through hundreds of handwritten pages.

“Then everything really happened.”

Tovin looked toward her.

“Of course it did.”

She smiled faintly.

“I know. I just needed to hear someone say it.”

Bram retrieved Flicker from beneath his cloak.

The creature's tail illuminated.

“Pretty convincing evidence, I'd say.”

Seren looked around.

“Speaking of which, we're going to have to figure out what to tell people about him.”

Bram considered this.

“Rare breed.”

“Of what?”

He looked toward Flicker.

“Something.”

Tovin adjusted his glasses.

“Technically, he represents an entirely undocumented species.”

Bram frowned.

“You're not documenting him.”

“I merely thought—”

“No laboratories.”

“Bram.”

“No experiments.”

“I wasn't suggesting—”

“No little cages with wheels.”

Tovin sighed.

“Very well.”

Flicker chirped.

Bram nodded approvingly.

“See? He agrees.”

Kaelen laughed, but his attention returned to the date.

Eleven days.

Their families would have been searching for them.

They would have worried.

Perhaps they had begun fearing the worst.

He stood.

“We've kept them waiting long enough.”

The First Reunion

Kaelen had imagined returning home so many times that the reality seemed strangely unfamiliar.

He stood before his front door.

The paint was exactly as he remembered.

A small scratch remained beside the handle.

The familiar tree in the garden moved gently in the wind.

He raised his hand.

Then stopped.

Throughout Aetherfall, he had entered ruined fortresses, ancient gateways and chambers occupied by creatures capable of destroying entire settlements.

Yet knocking upon this ordinary door frightened him more than he expected.

Mira stood beside him.

“Go on.”

He looked toward her.

“What do I say?”

She smiled.

“Hello would probably be a good start.”

He laughed nervously.

Then knocked.

Footsteps approached.

The door opened.

For a moment, there was silence.

Then came recognition.

Disbelief.

Tears.

Arms wrapped around him.

Questions followed.

Where had he been?

Was he injured?

Why had he disappeared?

What had happened to his clothing?

Kaelen attempted to answer.

He failed.

Eventually, he managed only a few words.

“I'm home.”

And for the moment, that was enough.

Mira watched from the garden.

She smiled.

Then quietly turned toward the road.

Her own reunion waited.

The Lives They Returned To

In the days that followed, the companions discovered that returning home required its own kind of courage.

There were questions they could not answer without sounding ridiculous.

There were experiences that could not be explained in ordinary conversation.

How did one describe the Mourning Leviathan to someone who had never seen an ocean beneath a starless sky?

How could anyone understand the Last Sanctuary without having stood beneath its seven towers?

How could Kaelen explain that an elderly man named Auren had become one of the most important people in his life?

Some people believed portions of their stories.

Others assumed exhaustion and trauma had affected their memories.

The companions learned not to argue.

They knew what had happened.

They had the scars.

They had the journals.

They had one another.

And Bram had a small glowing creature who possessed an alarming interest in refrigerators.

For the first several nights, Kaelen struggled to sleep.

He woke expecting to hear the distant sounds of a campfire.

He reached instinctively toward the place where the Waystone had once rested.

Sometimes he thought he heard Auren's voice.

Sometimes he dreamed of Willowmere.

Other nights, he dreamed of the Shattered Throne.

He would rise, walk toward the window and watch the streetlights.

They reminded him of the lanterns of Aetherfall.

Ordinary lights.

Keeping ordinary travelers safe.

One evening, he retrieved Auren's lantern from his belongings.

He cleaned its glass.

Straightened its damaged handle.

Removed the dust that had gathered beneath its metal frame.

Then he placed it beside the window.

He did not expect it to illuminate.

It did not.

Nevertheless, he smiled.

“Goodnight, old friend.”

Outside, a streetlight flickered.

And Kaelen finally slept.

The Guardian Without a Shield

Mira discovered that returning to ordinary life did not mean abandoning the Guardian.

Several weeks after their return, she was walking through town when she noticed an elderly woman struggling with several bags.

People passed without stopping.

Mira approached.

“Would you like some help?”

The woman looked surprised.

“Oh, that would be wonderful.”

Mira carried the bags to her vehicle.

They spoke briefly.

The woman mentioned that her husband had recently died and that shopping alone still felt unfamiliar.

Mira listened.

She did not attempt to solve the woman's grief.

She did not offer promises she could not keep.

She simply remained beside her until the conversation ended.

Before leaving, the woman took her hand.

“Thank you for stopping.”

Mira smiled.

“Of course.”

As she continued walking, she thought of Daniel.

She remembered his words beneath the tree in the Garden of Unfinished Lives.

Sometimes people needed someone who would still be standing beside them afterward.

Over the following months, Mira began volunteering with organizations that helped people facing difficult circumstances.

She listened to families.

Helped distribute supplies.

Supported people who had lost loved ones.

Some days were exhausting.

Others were filled with laughter.

She discovered that courage was required in hospital corridors, crowded shelters and quiet living rooms just as surely as it had been required upon the battlefields of Aetherfall.

Her shield rested at home.

Broken.

Scarred.

Ordinary.

She never repaired it.

She preferred to remember what it had survived.

And what she had survived with it.

The Windrunner's Return

Seren lasted approximately nine days before becoming restless.

On the tenth, she called Tovin.

“I need an adventure.”

He sighed.

“Define adventure.”

“Something involving movement.”

“Walking?”

“More movement.”

“Running?”

“More interesting.”

“Have you considered employment?”

She hung up.

The following morning, Seren appeared outside his home carrying a backpack and several maps.

Tovin opened the door.

“No.”

“You don't even know what I'm asking.”

“I have developed an instinct.”

She unfolded a map.

“There's a hiking trail about two hours from here.”

Tovin examined it.

“That's rather steep.”

“Exactly.”

“There are several difficult sections.”

“Wonderful.”

“And the weather forecast suggests—”

She grabbed his arm.

“Bring your notebooks.”

Eventually, all six companions joined them.

Bram complained about the distance.

Tovin examined unusual rock formations.

Lyra recorded the scenery.

Mira helped everyone maintain a reasonable pace.

Kaelen occasionally found himself searching for golden inscriptions upon the stones.

Flicker enjoyed the journey immensely.

At the summit, they stood overlooking an enormous valley.

Seren spread her arms.

The wind moved through her hair.

She could no longer command it.

She could no longer leap impossible distances or cross collapsing bridges with supernatural speed.

But she could still run.

Still explore.

Still discover places she had never seen.

And when she turned, her friends were there.

She smiled.

Freedom had not become smaller.

It had simply become something she could share.

The Spellweaver's Impossible Research

Tovin devoted considerable time to understanding what had happened to them.

His study became filled with notebooks, sketches, maps and diagrams.

He reconstructed the original road network from memory.

He documented the behavior of the guardian crystals.

He recorded everything he could remember about the Concordance Engine.

He attempted to describe the relationship between the three fragments of the Waystone.

Some evenings, he became frustrated.

The principles that had governed Aetherfall did not behave identically in their own world.

He could reproduce the shape of an ancient inscription.

But not its magic.

He could construct a model of a gateway.

But it remained a model.

For a while, he considered this failure.

Then one afternoon, he discovered a small note tucked between two pages of his journal.

Seren had written it during their journey.

You don't have to know everything to be useful.

He smiled.

The following day, he began a new notebook.

Across its cover, he wrote:

Questions Worth Keeping.

He filled it with observations.

Not conclusions.

Not declarations of certainty.

Questions.

He found himself enjoying the work more than before.

Knowledge was no longer something he needed to possess completely.

It was something he could pursue.

Occasionally, Bram visited.

He would sit beside the desk while Flicker investigated the shelves.

“Found another world yet?”

“Not today.”

“Any dragons?”

“No.”

“Anything explode?”

“Once.”

Bram nodded.

“Progress, then.”

And Tovin would laugh.

The Warden and the Little Wanderer

Bram's greatest challenge involved explaining Flicker.

His first attempt to introduce the creature to ordinary household life resulted in the disappearance of several pieces of fruit, a damaged lampshade and an incident involving a washing machine that neither Bram nor Flicker wished to discuss.

Eventually, they established a routine.

Flicker slept in a basket beside the fireplace.

He accompanied Bram on walks.

He developed a particular fondness for strawberries.

He disliked vacuum cleaners.

He regarded television as a suspicious form of magic.

And he considered every unopened cupboard a personal challenge.

Bram built him a small wooden house with a rounded doorway.

Above the entrance, he carved a lantern.

Inside, he placed the blanket Flicker had carried throughout their journey.

The little creature inspected it carefully.

Then climbed into Bram's chair and went to sleep.

Bram stared.

“Spent three days building that.”

Flicker opened one eye.

“Ungrateful little thing.”

The creature chirped.

Bram smiled.

He left the wooden house beside the fireplace anyway.

On quiet evenings, he would sit with Flicker and remember Aetherfall.

Sometimes he wondered whether the little creature missed his own kind.

He had never forgotten the meadow beyond the stars.

The dozens of golden creatures.

The excitement with which Flicker had greeted them.

One evening, Bram carried him into the garden.

The sky was clear.

Stars stretched above them.

“Your family's somewhere out there, little fellow.”

Flicker looked upward.

Bram stroked his head.

“If you ever find a road back, you don't have to worry about me.”

The creature turned.

Then climbed beneath Bram's chin.

The Warden laughed softly.

“All right.”

They remained beneath the stars until the night became cold.

Neither seemed particularly interested in being anywhere else.

The Seer's Book

Lyra began writing almost immediately.

She had promised herself that the people of Aetherfall would not be forgotten.

Her original journals contained fragments of conversations, sketches, descriptions and observations.

But she wanted something more.

She wanted to preserve their stories.

Not merely the battles.

Not merely the ancient guardians.

The people.

The fisherman whose daughter remembered her mother's love.

The servant who risked everything to help Queen Isolde.

The roadwardens who surrendered their authority.

The frightened child who carried a lantern through the streets of the Last Sanctuary.

The dragon who learned to remember joy without denying grief.

The old Waykeeper who gave his life so others could continue.

She wrote about all of them.

Some days, she could scarcely stop.

Other days, she stared at an empty page for hours.

When she reached Auren's final moments, she closed the notebook and walked outside.

She returned the following morning.

And continued.

Kaelen occasionally visited to help reconstruct events.

They argued about details.

Laughed over conversations they remembered differently.

Corrected names.

Examined sketches.

Sometimes they discovered that neither could remember precisely what someone had said.

Lyra refused to invent certainty where none existed.

“We remember what we can,” she told him.

Kaelen nodded.

“That's enough.”

Months later, she completed the final page.

She placed her pen upon the desk.

Outside, rain moved gently against the window.

She looked toward the collection of notebooks.

The people of Aetherfall were far away.

But their stories were here.

And as long as someone remembered them, their lives would continue to matter beyond the boundaries of their own world.

Beyond the Other Sky

While the six companions adjusted to life in their original world, Aetherfall began its own long journey toward recovery.

The Shattering had not been undone.

Its ruins remained.

Its losses remained.

Entire roads had disappeared.

Some settlements found themselves isolated from kingdoms they had depended upon for generations.

There were disagreements.

Difficult winters.

Shortages.

Arguments concerning how the surviving roads should be maintained.

Freedom had not transformed Aetherfall into a perfect world.

But its people were finally free to determine what kind of world they wished to build.

And that made all the difference.

The Last Sanctuary Reborn

One year after the Battle of the Last Sanctuary, seven towers once again stood above its walls.

They were not identical to the originals.

Some were constructed from pale stone.

Others from salvaged materials carried from distant settlements.

One contained a garden.

Another served as a school.

The tallest housed the rebuilt Heart of Refuge.

Commander Halden stood upon the northern wall, watching merchants enter through the newly restored gate.

He no longer wore the heavy armor he had carried throughout the siege.

His responsibilities had changed.

There were fewer battles.

More meetings.

Considerably more paperwork.

He found the latter deeply unpleasant.

Maelor approached carrying several documents.

Halden frowned.

“No.”

“You haven't read them.”

“I recognize paperwork.”

“These concern the new western passage.”

Halden sighed.

“Very well.”

Together, they examined the plans.

The new road would connect three previously isolated villages to the sanctuary.

Its construction required agreement from each settlement.

Travelers would be allowed to use it without surrendering memories, possessions or freedom.

Halden looked toward Maelor.

“Quite different from the old arrangements.”

The former First Warden nodded.

“Considerably more complicated.”

Halden smiled.

“Worth it?”

Maelor looked toward the crowded streets below.

Children ran between market stalls.

Families gathered beside fountains.

Travelers rested beneath colorful banners.

“Yes.”

Near the central courtyard stood a new monument.

Six figures surrounded a seventh, smaller figure.

The Pathfinder.

The Guardian.

The Windrunner.

The Spellweaver.

The Warden.

The Seer.

And a small creature with an illuminated tail.

The monument had been constructed by Garrick and several other artisans.

Beneath it, an inscription read:

They came seeking a road home.

They left us a road toward freedom.

Children frequently climbed upon the monument despite repeated requests from the city guards.

The figure of Flicker had become particularly popular.

Halden suspected Bram would have approved.

The Girl with the Lantern

Anwen had grown taller.

She still carried the small lantern constructed from pieces of her repaired birdcage.

Pip remained her constant companion.

On the anniversary of the sanctuary's liberation, she stood beside the monument.

Sella approached.

“Ready?”

Anwen nodded.

Together, they walked toward the eastern gate.

A group of travelers had arrived from a distant settlement.

Among them was a frightened boy who had become separated from his family during the journey.

He sat beside a collection of supplies.

Anwen approached.

“Hello.”

The boy looked up.

“Are you lost?”

He nodded.

She sat beside him.

“I know what that's like.”

He stared at her lantern.

“Does it do magic?”

Anwen considered the question.

“Sometimes.”

She held it closer.

“Mostly it helps people see.”

The boy smiled faintly.

Anwen remained beside him until the roadwardens located his family.

When they arrived, he ran toward them.

Sella watched from nearby.

Anwen returned.

“Did I do it right?”

Her mother smiled.

“You did.”

The girl looked toward the monument.

“I think Mira would have done the same thing.”

Sella took her hand.

“I think so, too.”

Together, they continued into the sanctuary.

The little lantern burned brightly.

The Queen Who Remembered

Queen Isolde never wore another enchanted crown.

The royal smiths constructed a simple silver circlet for ceremonial occasions, but she frequently left it within the palace.

She preferred walking among her people without it.

The Hall of Forgotten Names was restored.

Prince Caedric's tablet was repaired.

Its inscription was expanded.

He was condemned for keeping a promise.

May we never again mistake loyalty to what is right for betrayal of those in power.

The chamber became a place where citizens could record the names of people whose contributions might otherwise be forgotten.

Farmers.

Teachers.

Healers.

Sailors.

Children.

Ordinary people whose lives had helped sustain the kingdom.

Elara became one of Isolde's most trusted advisers.

Captain Renn continued commanding the harbor guard.

The ancient chains were never restored.

Instead, pieces of their metal were melted down and used to construct lanterns for arriving travelers.

And Thalassa remained.

Not beneath the mountain.

Not bound to a throne.

Not imprisoned within an ancient covenant.

She made her home upon the highest mountain overlooking the kingdom.

Some mornings, she descended toward the palace gardens.

Isolde would climb upon her back.

Together, they traveled above the surrounding islands.

On one such morning, the queen looked toward the distant horizon.

“Do you think we'll see them again?”

Thalassa's enormous wings moved through the clouds.

The little travelers?

Isolde nodded.

The dragon considered the question.

Roads are curious things.

The queen laughed.

“That's not an answer.”

It is the only one I possess.

They continued beneath the morning sun.

Far below, ships entered and departed the harbor freely.

Isolde watched them.

For the first time in many years, she felt that she was serving the kingdom she had once dreamed of ruling.

The Captain's New Horizon

Captain Rhydan never forgot the Sea Without Stars.

He returned to those waters several months after the Shattering's final release.

The *Lantern's Wake* carried supplies for several distant islands.

Nessa stood beside him upon the deck.

Edrin had become a considerably more capable sailor, although he continued asking questions at inconvenient moments.

As they entered the waters where the Mourning Leviathan had once appeared, Rhydan looked upward.

Stars filled the sky.

Every familiar constellation remained visible.

The compass behaved normally.

The ship's bell rang beneath the evening wind.

Rhydan closed his eyes.

He remembered his daughter.

For a long time, the memory had been inseparable from the darkness that had taken her.

Now he could remember other things.

Her laughter.

Her stubbornness.

The first time she had attempted to climb the rigging.

The pride upon her face when she finally succeeded.

He smiled.

Nessa approached.

“Captain?”

He opened his eyes.

“Just remembering.”

She nodded.

Together, they watched the stars.

Far beneath the ship, the ancient city of Letharis rested peacefully.

Its cathedral bells no longer rang.

Its imprisoned memories had been released.

And somewhere within the depths, an enormous creature moved through the quiet waters.

It carried no chains.

No stolen voices.

No memories that did not belong to it.

The Mourning Leviathan had become simply a creature of the sea.

Free to continue its own journey.

The Trial of Vaelrith

Vaelrith's return to the Last Sanctuary had not been welcomed.

When the guards recognized him, they immediately placed him under arrest.

He did not resist.

He surrendered his remaining belongings.

He answered their questions.

And when the people gathered to demand judgment, he stood before them without attempting to justify himself.

The hearing lasted many days.

Witnesses traveled from distant settlements.

Roadwardens described the corruption of their ancient covenants.

Survivors spoke of destroyed homes.

Families described memories that had been stolen.

Queen Isolde testified concerning the crown.

Maelor described his own participation in the corrupted system.

The former Chancellor Veyran gave evidence concerning the imprisonment of Thalassa.

Not everyone agreed upon what should happen.

Some demanded Vaelrith's death.

Others believed he should spend the remainder of his life imprisoned.

Several argued that his knowledge might help repair the damage he had caused.

Vaelrith listened to every account.

When he was finally permitted to speak, he stood before the assembled council.

“I cannot offer you an explanation that makes what I did acceptable.”

The chamber became quiet.

“I believed that my intentions justified my actions. When people resisted me, I considered their resistance evidence that they required greater control.”

He lowered his head.

“I was wrong.”

He looked toward the gathered witnesses.

“I cannot return the lives that were lost. I cannot restore the years that were stolen from you.”

His voice became unsteady.

“And I have no right to demand your forgiveness.”

For several moments, he remained silent.

“If you permit me to repair anything that remains within my understanding, I will do so. If you do not, I will accept your judgment.”

The council deliberated.

Its decision was not unanimous.

Vaelrith was sentenced to lifelong supervised service repairing the damaged roads, with restrictions preventing him from possessing authority over their operation.

He would answer to the communities affected by his actions.

He would never again occupy a position of rule.

His knowledge would be recorded and shared openly.

And the people he had harmed would retain the right to speak about what he had done.

Some considered the judgment insufficient.

Others believed it offered a meaningful opportunity for restitution.

Vaelrith accepted it.

He was assigned to a small group repairing an ancient passage near a northern village.

On his first morning, a young roadwarden handed him a lantern and several tools.

“Have you repaired one of these before?”

Vaelrith examined the damaged mechanism.

“Yes.”

“Good. Show me how.”

The former Waykeeper knelt beside the stones.

For the first time in centuries, nobody bowed before him.

Nobody feared his authority.

Nobody waited for him to command the road.

He was simply an old man helping repair something that had broken.

And although it could never erase what he had done, it was a beginning.

Auren's Hill

At the Sanctuary of the Falling Sun, the memorial overlooking the valley remained untouched.

The Solar Sentinel stood nearby.

Its golden heart illuminated the surrounding gardens.

Travelers frequently stopped upon the hillside.

Some knew Auren's story.

Others knew only that an old Waykeeper had once given everything to protect a road.

They left flowers.

Small stones.

Handwritten notes.

Lanterns.

One afternoon, Vaelrith arrived under the supervision of two roadwardens.

He approached the memorial slowly.

For several moments, he simply stood before it.

Then he knelt.

He placed his ancient Waykeeper emblem upon the stone.

“I thought you were weak.”

The wind moved through the grass.

“I thought your refusal to command others meant you lacked the courage to do what was necessary.”

He looked toward the valley.

“I understand now.”

His eyes filled with tears.

“You were stronger than I ever was.”

He remained there for a long time.

When he finally rose, he left the emblem behind.

The Solar Sentinel turned its enormous head toward him.

Golden light illuminated the memorial.

Vaelrith bowed.

Then returned to the road.

There was still work to do.

One Year Later

Kaelen stood beside a campfire beneath an ordinary sky.

Around him, familiar voices filled the evening.

Bram was attempting to cook dinner.

Tovin was offering unsolicited suggestions.

Seren was stealing pieces of food whenever Bram turned away.

Mira was laughing.

Lyra was writing.

Flicker was investigating everything.

They had agreed to meet on the anniversary of their return.

No responsibilities would interfere.

No excuses would be accepted.

For one weekend, they would travel together again.

Without magical equipment.

Without ancient guardians.

Without the threat of an approaching army.

Simply six friends sharing a road.

Bram looked toward Tovin.

“If you tell me how heat works one more time, you're cooking.”

Tovin raised his hands.

“I was only observing.”

“Observe somewhere else.”

Seren laughed.

Kaelen watched them.

He had missed this.

Not the danger.

Not the exhaustion.

Not the uncertainty of whether they would survive another night.

This.

The companionship.

The conversations.

The knowledge that nobody needed to pretend to be stronger than they were.

Mira approached carrying two cups.

She handed one to him.

“Thinking about Aetherfall?”

He nodded.

“Sometimes I wonder how they're doing.”

She sat beside him.

“So do I.”

“Do you think the roads survived?”

“I think people are doing their best.”

He smiled.

“That sounds familiar.”

Mira looked toward the fire.

“Do you ever regret giving up the Waystone?”

Kaelen considered the question.

He had thought about it many times.

There were moments when he missed sensing the roads.

Moments when he wished he could open a passage and visit the people they had left behind.

But he remembered the throne.

He remembered the imprisoned travelers.

He remembered the final fragment dissolving within his hand.

“No.”

He looked toward her.

“I miss what it allowed us to do. But I don't regret giving it back.”

Mira nodded.

“Neither do I.”

Across the fire, Bram shouted.

“WHO GAVE FLICKER ANOTHER MARSHMALLOW?”

Seren pointed toward Tovin.

Tovin looked horrified.

“I did no such thing!”

Flicker disappeared beneath a blanket.

Kaelen laughed.

For the first time in a long while, he felt completely at peace.

The Story Around the Fire

Later that evening, Lyra retrieved a large collection of bound pages from her backpack.

She placed them upon the table beside the fire.

The others gathered around.

“What is it?” Seren asked.

Lyra smiled.

“Our story.”

Kaelen examined the cover.

There was a drawing of an ancient road beneath a fractured sky.

Six travelers stood upon it.

A small golden creature sat between them.

Above the image were three words.

The Shattered Way.

Bram looked impressed.

“That's a proper book.”

Tovin began examining its thickness.

“How many pages?”

Seren pulled it away from him.

“Don't start.”

Lyra opened the manuscript.

“I tried to include everything important.”

Bram frowned.

“Everything?”

“Most things.”

“The incident with the bridge?”

“Yes.”

“The dragon?”

“Yes.”

“The time Tovin nearly burned his eyebrows off?”

Tovin sighed.

“Unnecessary.”

Lyra smiled.

“It's in there.”

Bram nodded approvingly.

“Excellent.”

Kaelen turned through the pages.

He recognized names.

Places.

Sketches of creatures.

Descriptions of battles.

Conversations he had nearly forgotten.

Then he reached the dedication.

For those who light the road for others, even when they cannot see where their own journey will lead.

And for Auren, who taught us that the road belongs to the traveler.

Kaelen stopped.

Mira placed a hand upon his shoulder.

He closed the book carefully.

“It's beautiful.”

Lyra smiled.

“It's ours.”

They spent the remainder of the evening reading passages aloud.

Sometimes they laughed.

Sometimes they corrected one another.

Sometimes they became quiet.

When they reached Auren's sacrifice, nobody interrupted.

The fire burned low.

The stars appeared.

And the six companions remembered.

The Flower That Should Not Exist

The following morning, Tovin awoke before the others.

He stepped beyond the campsite carrying a notebook.

The surrounding forest was quiet.

Mist gathered between the trees.

He followed a narrow trail toward a small clearing.

There, beside two enormous stones, he discovered something that stopped him completely.

A flower.

Its petals were golden.

Not yellow.

Golden.

Tiny points of light moved along its surface.

Tovin knelt.

He recognized it.

He had seen hundreds of identical flowers in the meadow beyond the stars.

His hands began trembling.

“Impossible.”

He stared at it.

Then laughed.

“Of course.”

He hurried back toward the campsite.

Within minutes, all six companions stood around the flower.

Bram carried Flicker.

The creature became unusually excited.

He leaped toward the ground and hurried between the stones.

His tail illuminated.

Kaelen approached.

The space between the stones appeared ordinary.

Trees.

Grass.

Morning mist.

Then the mist changed.

A faint golden line appeared.

Tovin stared.

“A passage.”

Seren's expression brightened.

“Seriously?”

“Possibly.”

Bram groaned.

“There it is again.”

Lyra approached the flower.

She touched one of its petals.

For a moment, she expected a vision.

Nothing came.

Her extraordinary gift had not returned.

Yet she smiled.

She did not need a vision to recognize what stood before them.

Mira looked toward Kaelen.

“Can we open it?”

He examined the stones.

Once, he would have raised the Waystone.

He would have sensed the road.

He would have known which direction to take.

Now he possessed none of those abilities.

He was simply a traveler standing before an unfamiliar possibility.

“I don't know.”

Tovin examined the surrounding ground.

“There are no inscriptions.”

Seren looked toward the clearing.

“No guardian.”

Bram lifted Flicker.

“No enormous thing trying to kill us.”

They considered that.

“Promising,” Bram added.

Kaelen retrieved Auren's lantern from his backpack.

Its glass reflected the morning light.

Flicker climbed onto his shoulder.

The little creature's tail illuminated.

A tiny golden flame appeared within the lantern.

The space between the stones shimmered.

And beyond it, for one extraordinary moment, they saw another sky.

A Letter Across the Worlds

The passage remained too narrow for anyone to cross.

Tovin examined it carefully.

“It hasn't fully formed.”

Seren looked disappointed.

“Can we help it?”

Kaelen shook his head.

“Not by forcing it.”

He placed Auren's lantern beside the stones.

The flame burned steadily.

They waited.

After several minutes, something appeared within the golden mist.

A folded piece of parchment.

It drifted through the opening.

Lyra caught it.

The passage flickered.

Then disappeared.

The companions gathered around her.

She unfolded the parchment.

At the top was a familiar symbol.

Seven towers surrounding an open road.

Beneath it were several lines written in careful handwriting.

She read aloud.

To our friends beyond the road,

We do not know whether this letter will reach you.

The sanctuary stands.

The seven towers have been rebuilt, and the roads continue opening in places where nobody expected them.

There are difficulties, of course. Commander Halden continues complaining about meetings. Maelor continues insisting that meetings are necessary. Garrick claims that none of us know how to properly maintain his work.

Some things have not changed.

Bram laughed.

Lyra continued.

Queen Isolde visits whenever she can. Thalassa has become rather fond of frightening visiting merchants by landing unexpectedly beside their ships.

Captain Rhydan has opened several new routes.

The little golden guardians have returned to our roads.

We think of you often.

Anwen has asked me to include something of her own.

Beneath the formal writing were several smaller, less even lines.

Dear Mira and everyone,

I still have my lantern.

I help people find their families now.

Pip says hello.

I hope Flicker is being good.

Bram looked toward the little creature.

“Define good.”

Lyra laughed through her tears.

She read the final lines.

We hope your road led you somewhere beautiful.

Thank you for helping us find ours.

Your friends at the Last Sanctuary.

Kaelen accepted the parchment.

He read it again.

Then passed it to Mira.

She held it against her chest.

For a long time, nobody spoke.

They had wondered whether their sacrifices had mattered.

Whether the roads had survived.

Whether the people they loved had found peace.

Now, in a quiet forest beneath an ordinary sky, they held their answer.

The Promise of Another Road

Tovin spent the remainder of the morning examining the clearing.

He made sketches.

Recorded measurements.

Documented the behavior of the lantern.

Eventually, he sat beside Kaelen.

“I believe the passage may open again.”

Kaelen looked toward the stones.

“Eventually?”

“Possibly.”

Seren groaned.

Bram laughed.

Kaelen smiled.

He was no longer troubled by the uncertainty.

If the road opened, they could visit their friends.

If it did not, they would continue living the lives they had returned to.

Neither possibility diminished what they had accomplished.

Lyra retrieved a blank sheet of paper.

“We should write back.”

They gathered around.

Each contributed something.

Mira wrote to Anwen.

Bram described Flicker's adventures.

Seren asked about the restored roads.

Tovin included several questions, most of which the others insisted he remove.

Kaelen wrote a message for Maelor and Halden.

Lyra recorded their gratitude.

At the bottom, all six signed their names.

Bram lifted Flicker.

The creature placed a tiny paw upon the parchment.

A faint golden mark appeared.

Bram smiled.

“Wouldn't be complete without you.”

They folded the letter.

Placed it beside the golden flower.

And left Auren's lantern burning nearby.

There was no guarantee that the message would reach its destination.

But they had learned long ago that hope did not require guarantees.

Sometimes it required only the willingness to light a lantern.

And wait.

Epilogue — The Lantern at the Crossroads

Years passed.

The six companions grew older.

Their lives changed.

New responsibilities arrived.

Some dreams were fulfilled.

Others were abandoned in favor of dreams they had never expected to possess.

They experienced joy.

They experienced grief.

They made mistakes.

They learned.

They continued.

But every year, they returned to the same forest.

They gathered beside the same stones.

They shared food.

Told stories.

Remembered friends.

And lit Auren's lantern.

Occasionally, letters appeared.

Some came from the Last Sanctuary.

Others from Queen Isolde.

One contained a drawing of a dragon that Thalassa apparently insisted looked nothing like her.

Another contained a recipe from Garrick that Bram attempted to reproduce with disastrous results.

Anwen eventually became a roadwarden.

She traveled between settlements carrying the lantern she had made as a child.

Her mother was immensely proud.

Maelor retired from the council and spent his remaining years teaching young roadwardens about the original covenant.

Captain Rhydan sailed until his hair became entirely white.

Elowen continued maintaining the seven lights.

Vaelrith spent the remainder of his life repairing passages under the supervision of the communities he had once attempted to control.

Some people eventually forgave him.

Others never did.

He learned to accept both.

And across Aetherfall, new roads continued appearing.

Not all were permanent.

Some opened only beneath certain stars.

Some appeared during storms.

Others waited for travelers who possessed no particular magic at all.

The Lumari returned to many of them.

Little golden lights wandering through the darkness.

Helping lost travelers find their way.

One evening, many years after their original journey, Kaelen stood beside the familiar stones.

The others were preparing dinner.

Their laughter traveled through the surrounding trees.

He held Auren's lantern.

Its metal had become worn.

Its glass carried scratches that no amount of cleaning could remove.

Yet the little flame continued burning.

He thought about the person he had been before Aetherfall.

A man who believed that finding the right road meant discovering the correct destination.

He understood differently now.

A road was not merely the distance between two places.

It was the people encountered along the way.

The hands extended when someone fell.

The promises kept when keeping them became difficult.

The kindness offered without expectation of repayment.

The courage to continue when the destination remained uncertain.

And sometimes, the willingness to surrender the very thing one had spent an entire journey seeking.

He looked toward the stars.

“Thank you, Auren.”

The wind moved gently through the trees.

A golden light appeared beside his feet.

Flicker emerged from the grass.

The little creature climbed onto his shoulder.

Despite the passing years, his curiosity remained unchanged.

Kaelen smiled.

“Looking for another adventure?”

Flicker chirped.

From the campsite, Bram shouted.

“IF HE'S GOT MY DINNER, I'M NOT SHARING AGAIN!”

Kaelen laughed.

He turned toward the fire.

Mira waved.

Seren called for him to hurry.

Tovin was explaining something nobody had asked about.

Lyra was smiling.

Bram was attempting to protect his dinner.

His friends were waiting.

Kaelen took one final look toward the stones.

Then he returned to them.

Far beyond the forest, beyond the familiar stars, beyond the boundaries of a world that believed itself alone, an ancient figure stood at a crossroads.

The First Keeper carried its lantern.

Its hourglass was whole.

Before it stretched countless roads.

Some were ancient.

Some were newly discovered.

Some led toward worlds whose inhabitants had never imagined that other worlds existed.

The Keeper watched a young traveler approach.

She carried a small lantern.

Her clothing was worn.

Her expression was uncertain.

She stopped before the crossroads.

“Which road should I take?”

The First Keeper looked toward the endless passages.

Where do you wish to go?

The traveler considered the question.

“I don't know.”

The Keeper appeared to smile.

Then perhaps you are ready to begin.

The young woman looked toward the surrounding darkness.

“Will I be safe?”

No road can promise that.

“Will I be alone?”

A small golden creature emerged from beneath a nearby stone.

Its tail illuminated.

It approached the traveler.

She knelt.

The creature chirped.

The First Keeper lowered its lantern.

Not necessarily.

The young woman smiled.

She lifted her lantern.

Then stepped onto the road.

Above her, the stars burned brightly.

Ahead waited unfamiliar kingdoms, extraordinary creatures, friendships she could not yet imagine and choices that would shape the person she would become.

Behind her, the First Keeper watched quietly.

Somewhere, six friends laughed around a campfire.

Somewhere, seven towers illuminated a sanctuary.

Somewhere, a dragon flew beneath the morning sun.

Somewhere, an old roadwarden repaired a broken lantern.

And somewhere, a traveler discovered that the world was considerably larger than she had ever believed.

The roads were not perfect.

They were not without darkness.

They would never be free from danger.

But they belonged to those who traveled them.

And as long as someone was willing to carry a light for another, the darkness would never possess the final word.

For every ending held the possibility of another beginning.

Every farewell carried the memory of a friendship.

Every broken road held the hope of being discovered again.

And every traveler, no matter how ordinary, possessed the freedom to take the next step.

The Waystone was gone.

The throne had fallen.

The travelers had returned home.

But the lanterns were still burning.

And the Way was shattered no more.

Illustrated gallery

Original six-hero campaign artwork and recovered manuscript illustrations.



















































THE SHATTERED WAY

When a mysterious machine in an ancient observatory tears open the fabric of their world, six unlikely companions are cast into Aetherfall — a realm of floating kingdoms, ancient powers, and a growing darkness that seeks to unmake all creation.

Kaelen, Mira, Seren, Tovin, Bram, and Lyra must uncover the truth behind the shattered skies, recover the seven lost anchors, and stand against Vaelrith, a forgotten force determined to turn time, memory, and reality into his domain.

From the Whispering Wood to the Iron Dominion, across cities in the clouds and into the heart of the Chronarium itself, their journey will test their skill, their faith, and their bonds. Along the way, a loyal companion, Flicker, reminds them that even in the deepest darkness, hope can still run on four legs.

A story of friendship, sacrifice, and the courage to restore a world that was never meant to be broken.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marcus Draper is a storyteller, game designer, and creator of original tabletop, card, and interactive fiction games at Deskatur.com. He lives in Decatur, Texas, with his wife, Tricia. Together they share a ministry named The Messengers, dedicated to sharing their faith in Jesus Christ. Marcus blends rich narrative, memorable characters, and immersive gameplay to inspire readers and players alike.