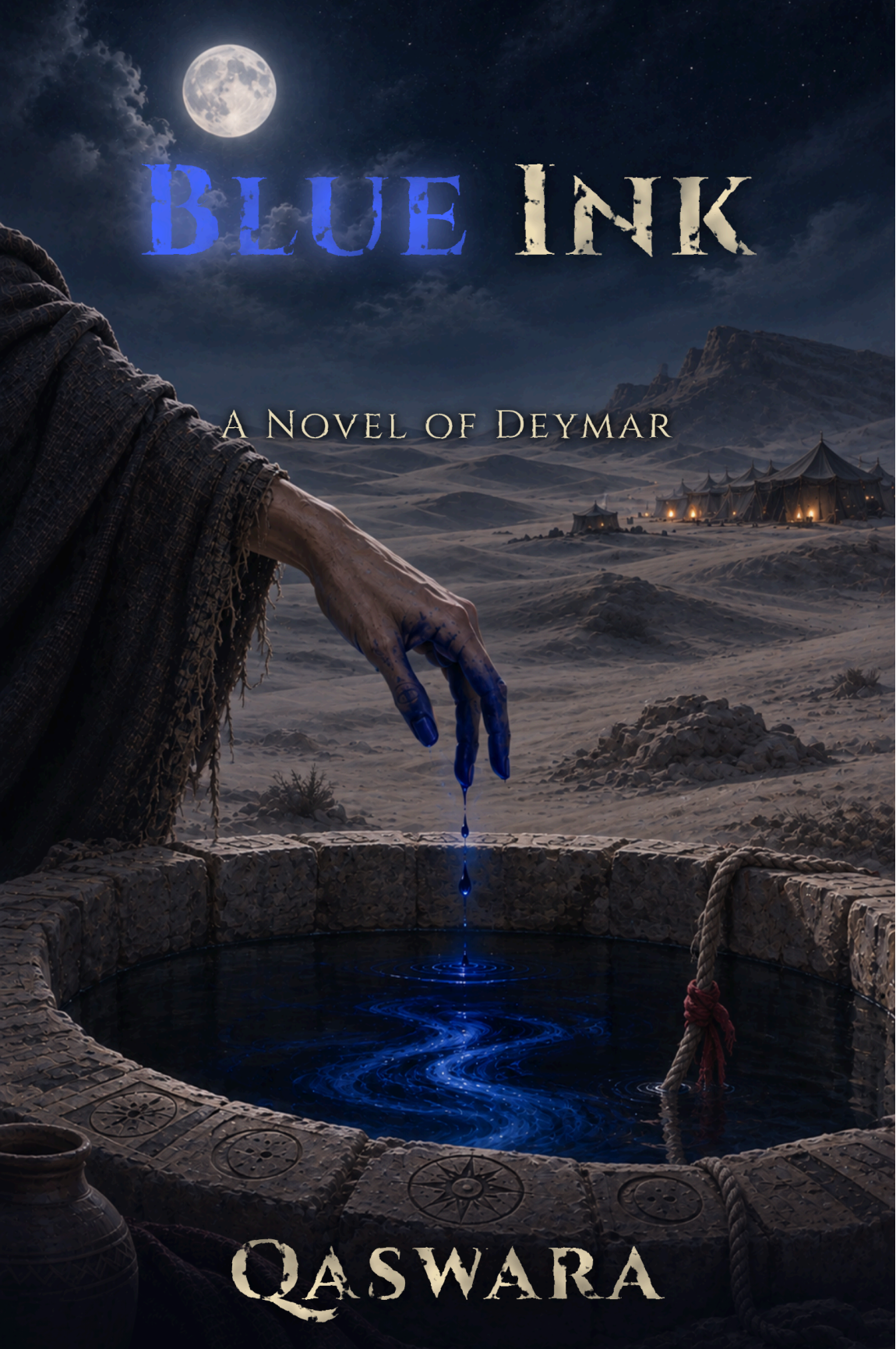

Blue Ink
A Novel of Deymar
Qaswara

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Translated from the Arabic original, *Hibr Azraq*.

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Part One: The Well

1. The Night of the Well

The rope was shorter than it should have been.

Qayla saw it before anyone else did. She stood at the lip of the Well of Oaths as the sun leaned toward evening, while the great leather bucket climbed slowly out of the dark and the four men hauled and counted under their breath. Then she saw the red knot, tied at the middle of the rope, pass before her eyes, and still the bucket had not come up. Last year the bucket had come up with the knot in the third man's hand. The year before, with the knot in the first man's.

The water was sinking, the rope was growing longer, and still the tribes came every year as though nothing had changed.

The men set the bucket on the stone. One of them bent and drank from his palm, then raised his head to her as if asking leave. The water was not clear. It tasted of the bottom, of old mud that no one had tasted in the years when the well was full. She nodded: drink. Then she turned and walked away before she could see in their eyes the same question that was in hers.

Around the well lay a plain of black gravel that ran to the horizon on every side but the south, where the sand began, white as salt, or perhaps it was salt; from far off, no one could tell. On this plain, once each year, the tents went up.

Qayla knew their order as she knew her own fingers. Twenty-one rings of tents, a ring for each tribe, all circling the well at the same distance, no tribe nearer than its sister. So custom had run since the forefathers first gathered here. The tents of the Sons of Qaydh were heavy black goat hair, with red-dyed goatskins over their doors. The tents of the Ravine folk were low and gray as gravel. The tents of the Border folk were patched, and in some there was nothing to see but the pole, the rope, and the sky.

This year the rings stood closer together. Custom did not allow it, but a third of the ground they once filled had gone empty, for the tribes had come with fewer than half their men. Some had died. Some had stayed behind to guard what water was left in their own land. Some had not come at all, and would not.

Qayla walked between the rings as the light faded. She wore the gray cloak; around her left wrist was a green cord wound three times, coarse and faded, and her bow was slung across her back. People fell silent when she passed and took up their talk again once she was gone. She was used to it. It was not fear. It was nearer to awkwardness, as if they did not know what to say to a woman who guarded their men.

"Qayla!"

She turned. It was Hufayr, the eldest of her knights, leading his camel toward her, his beard so caked with dust it had turned the color of the gravel.

"The Ravine folk want to pitch a seventh tent outside their ring."

"Why?"

"They say they have a guest."

"Who?"

Hufayr wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, looked around, and lowered his voice. "A man from the canals."

She did not need to ask which canals. There was only one set of canals in Deymar in those days that people spoke of in that voice.

"Did he come carrying a rope?"

"No."

"Then he doesn't enter the rings. He pitches his tent off the plain, with the camels."

"They'll be angry."

"Custom doesn't get angry."

Hufayr smiled, a small smile she saw only in his eyes, then turned his camel and went. She knew what the smile meant. The knights said that Qayla daughter of Nuqar never quoted the Covenant, only custom. They said she did it because in these years the Covenant had come to be used as a sword, while custom was still a rope. She had never said so. But she had never denied it.

When the sun went down the fires were lit, one in the middle of each ring, and the whole plain became a sky turned upside down.

Qayla took her place on the low rise north of the well, where the Knights of the Well had stood on this night for one thousand one hundred and eighty-seven years. She had thirty knights with her out of three hundred, and she had set them at the four quarters as those before her had set theirs. The rest were out on the roads, guarding the small wells that had not yet dried, and, more than that, guarding people from one another.

From here she could see everything. She saw the white tent of the Keepers, pitched alone near the carved stone and belonging to no ring, as custom also required. They came from Ilsum every year, three or four of them, to witness and say nothing, and then they went home. And she saw the tent of the Chief of the Tribes, the widest and tallest of all, in the ring of the Sons of Qaydh, light leaking from its many seams, and before it two men of the Sons of Qaydh sitting with their spears.

Inside it was a man who would decide tomorrow what would become of them all.

That was what everyone had been saying for three days. Tomorrow Dhamyan son of Khardash would stand at the stone and declare himself. Would the Chief of the Tribes join those who refused the canal water and called it stolen water? Or would he accept what seven tribes had already accepted, so that the water of Qalmir became the water of all Surdan? Or would he say some third thing no one expected?

No one expected a third thing. Dhamyan was a man of wells. His tribe owned the three Ravine Wells, and more besides. It was he who had said, three years ago on this same plain, with Qayla listening, "Whoever drinks the water of kings forgets his Lord." Half the people had cheered him, and the other half had kept quiet because they were thirsty.

Qayla had not cheered, and she had not kept quiet. She had been on watch.

The messenger came to her a little after midnight. A boy of the Sons of Qaydh, thin, with a white film over his left eye, panting as if he had run from the far end of the plain.

"The Chief of the Tribes asks for you."

She looked at the great tent. Light still came from its seams.

"Now?"

"Now."

She came down from the rise and signaled to Hufayr to take her place. She walked behind the boy among the low fires and the sleeping tents, and the air was thick with smoke and camels and sour milk. When she reached the tent door the two spearmen stood, then knew her and sat again. One of them lifted the flap.

Dhamyan was alone. He sat on the ground on an old red rug, a wooden board across his knees with a parchment on it, a lamp and an inkwell beside him. He was writing. He did not raise his head when she came in, only said, "Sit, daughter of Nuqar."

She sat where he pointed, at a distance, on the edge of the rug.

She had not seen him up close in years. He was sixty-four, or sixty-five, long in the face, white in the beard, gray in the brows, with blue veins on his hands. She remembered a man who filled any gathering with his voice, and tonight she found him silent. He wrote slowly, stopped at the end of each line, and moved his lips as though reading back what he had written.

Then he set the pen down.

"Do you know why I sent for you?"

"No."

"Not even a guess?"

"Knights don't guess."

He laughed, a short laugh with a cough in it. "Your father used to say the same. 'The house of Nuqar doesn't guess, Dhamyan. The house of Nuqar waits.' And he waited all his life, the Maker have mercy on him, until he died waiting."

She said nothing.

"Have I angered you?"

"No."

"You lie." He said it without harshness, then lifted the board onto his thigh and turned the parchment over so she could not see it. "I'll ask you a question, Qayla, and I want the answer as it is. Not the knights' answer."

"Ask."

"If I stand at the stone tomorrow and say something that angers everyone, everyone, the Sons of Qaydh before anyone, will your knights protect me?"

She looked at him a long time. Outside the tent she could hear a camel chewing its cud and the wind in the ropes, and nothing else.

"The knights protect the well," she said, "not men."

"That's the knights' answer."

"It's mine."

"No," he said, and leaned forward a little. "Your own answer. If you knew that what I say tomorrow is true, would you stand in front of me when the men of my tribe came for me with spears?"

"What are you going to say?"

He smiled, and did not answer.

They stayed like that a moment. Then she said, not knowing why she said it, "If it were true, I would stand."

"Even in front of your brother?"

She had not expected that. She felt heat climb into her face, and was glad the lamplight was dim.

"My brother has nothing to do with this."

"Your brother has everything to do with this." He said it quietly. "Your brother was the first to drink from the canals in front of people. Your brother says in every gathering that Dhamyan son of Khardash sells water to the children of Surdan for gold. And he's right."

She was silent.

"Have I surprised you?"

"I didn't think you'd say it."

"I don't say it. I write it." He tapped the parchment with his finger. "What is said goes on the wind, and what is written leaves its trace. That's what the Keepers say, isn't it? That everything leaves its trace?" Then he looked at his hand as if seeing it for the first time. "I hope they're right."

He reached for the inkwell and closed it. The ink in it was black, the ink of the folk of the Waste, made of gum and soot, with the smell of smoke at the bottom.

"Go now. And keep good watch tonight, daughter of Nuqar."

"Are you afraid of someone?"

"I am Chief of the Tribes," he said, "so I am afraid of everyone."

She went out. The boy with the white eye had fallen asleep by the door, his head on his knees. The two spearmen were watching the fire, and did not look at her.

She went back to the rise and took her place back from Hufayr. He asked her with his eyes, and she did not answer. So he went off to his quarter.

Then she sat on the cold stone with the bow across her thighs and kept her eyes on the great tent.

She did not understand what had happened. But she knew it was something. Dhamyan had not called her in to ask about the watch. He could have asked that through the boy. He had called her so that she would hear, and look at his face while he said: your brother is right. He wanted a witness. But to what?

And as she thought this, she felt something old stir in her, and she stopped it before it reached her chest.

She did not like to think of Faqid on this night. Nor of home. Nor of the road between two wells, with three small graves and one large one beside it, and she had not been there for the digging of any of them.

She looked at the sky instead.

The stars on these nights of the year were as many as sand, and the river of the sky ran from north to south like a white road. Her grandmother had called it the Rope Road, and said that when the forefathers made the Covenant they had seen it above them, and so they laid the first rope in its likeness, from the well to the stone. She said many things that no one could prove or disprove. Then she died, and left her granddaughter two things: this rope on her wrist, and an eye that sometimes saw what should not be seen.

Qayla did not like the eye, and did not use it.

She did not know how long passed. Two hours, or less. The fires sank to embers, the dogs went quiet, and the air grew cold, the kind of cold that makes the fingers slow.

Once in that time she saw Dhamyan. He was walking from the direction of the carved stone, alone, without a lamp, tall as he was, his cloak over his shoulders. He passed between the two guards, who stepped aside for him, and went in. She was a little surprised, because she had not seen him go out. Then she told herself: old men go out at night for things one does not ask about. She lifted her eyes to the white road in the sky, then lowered them.

Then she saw the flap rise.

Her eyes had been on the great tent the whole time, so she did not miss it. The flap rose, and the two spearmen were not in front of it. She

had not noticed when they left. And a man came out of the tent.

It was not Dhamyan. He was shorter, and thinner, and he did not walk the way the folk of the Waste walk. He wore a dark cloak whose color she could not make out, and he had covered his head and face. One of his shoulders rode a little higher than the other, like someone who had carried weight on one side for a long time. He came out, stood a moment, then let the flap fall behind him gently, the way you let it fall when you are afraid of waking someone.

Qayla stood up.

She had not decided to stand. She found herself on her feet with the bow in her hand and an arrow between her fingers, and she did not draw. For custom said: no weapon is raised around the well on this night. Not tribe against tribe, not knight against anyone. Whoever raised one had broken something a thousand years old.

The man walked between the tents. He did not hurry, and he did not look back. When he passed between the ring of the Sons of Qaydh and the ring of the Ravine folk, he went near the embers of a fire that had not yet died. He was carrying something in his left hand, and he lifted it a little, as if shielding what it held from the wind.

In the light of the embers Qayla saw his hand.

The fingers were blue.

Not the blue of cold, nor the blue of death. The blue of ink. That deep blue found in only one place in Deymar, which she had seen every year on the fingers of the silent men in white who came from Ilsum to witness. Keepers' ink. They said it was made from the indigo and salt of the Delta, that it clung to the fingers for days, and that no one but they wrote with it.

Then the light went, and the man with it, into the dark between the tents. To the south. Toward the carved stone, and the white tent stand-

ing alone beside it.

Qayla stood on the rise with the arrow between her fingers.

She could have shouted. One shout, and thirty knights would rise, and the Sons of Qaydh would rise, and the whole plain. She could have gone down and caught him; she was faster than he was, and she knew the ground.

But she did not.

She told herself afterward, on many nights, that she had not done it because to raise a voice on this night broke custom. She told herself she had not done it because the Keepers went in to the Chief of the Tribes every year, bringing him the Council's letters, and there was nothing strange in one of them leaving his tent. She told herself she had not done it because she had seen nothing she could say: a man came out of a tent. If she shouted every time a man came out of a tent, no one would ever sleep.

All of that was true. But it was not the reason.

The reason was smaller than that, and harder. The reason was that two hours earlier, Dhamyan had said, "If I say something tomorrow that angers everyone." That the Keepers had come from Ilsum, and the Keepers did not rule and did not fight, but they held the mother copy, and what was written in the mother copy could not be undone. That she did not know, on the rise in the dark, what war would begin if she shouted, nor what war she would prevent if she kept silent.

So she kept silent.

She came down from the rise and walked to the tent of the Chief of the Tribes. Not quickly. At the pace of someone checking the watch.

She did not find the two spearmen. She found the boy with the white eye asleep by the door, as she had left him. The flap was down.

The light inside had gone out.

She stood at the door. She said, barely aloud, “Chief of the Tribes.”

Nothing.

She said it again, a little louder.

Nothing. Only the breathing of the sleeping boy, and the wind in the tent ropes.

He’s asleep, she told herself. The man is sixty-four, he wrote until midnight, and tomorrow he stands before the twenty-one. He’s asleep.

She reached for the flap.

Then drew her hand back.

No one enters the tent of the Chief of the Tribes without leave. That too was custom. And on that night Qayla daughter of Nuqar had nothing but custom.

She went back to the rise, sat, and watched the white tent by the stone until the sky turned gray, then white, then yellow in the east.

No one came out of it. No one went in.

The sound came with the first sun.

It was not a scream. It was something worse: a man trying to speak and unable to, then calling one name, then calling it again as if he knew no other. Then another voice. Then voices.

She ran.

The boy with the white eye was outside the tent, on his knees, his hands over his face. One of the two spearmen, who had appeared from she did not know where, stood at the door holding the flap, looking in and not moving.

Qayla looked over his shoulder.

Dhamyan son of Khardash lay on his side on the red rug, as if he had fallen asleep sitting up and tipped over. The wooden board was beside him. The lamp was out. The inkwell was closed. And there was not much blood. That was what she saw first, and what she went on seeing in her sleep afterward: that there was not much blood. One thin red line at the neck, hardly visible, as if someone had drawn it with a pen.

The parchment was not on the board.

She noticed that, and did not say it.

Then the tent filled with men, and the whole plain filled with noise. She was pushed outside and stood among the others, and everything came into her ears at once: the women of the Sons of Qaydh wailing, men shouting the names of tribes, one saying "the canals," another "the Ravine folk," another "the guest, where is the guest who came from the canals?", a camel moaning, and the wind.

Then everything went quiet.

The silence had begun in the north, where the road comes in, and spread across the plain as water spreads into sand. Qayla turned.

Khardash son of Dhamyan was coming.

He came on a horse, not a camel, and that alone told people he had ridden all night. He had gone out the evening before to look over the Ravine Wells, and had said he would be back before the declaration. He was dust from head to foot, the horse was flecked with white foam, and behind him came five men who had not kept up.

He was off the horse before it stopped. He walked through the people, and the people parted for him. He looked at no one.

Then he stopped at the door of the tent.

He did not go in.

He stood there, the flap raised before him, looking at his father on the red rug. Not a hair of him moved. From where she stood, Qayla

could see his face from the side, and she saw something she never forgot: there was no grief in it. There was something else, closer to astonishment. As if the man had come to tell his father something, and had rehearsed it the whole road, and found him unable to hear.

Then he turned.

He looked at the faces. Face after face, like a man counting. His eyes stopped on Qayla.

Perhaps because she was the only one in the gray cloak. Perhaps because she was the only one who had not wept or cried out. Perhaps because the knights were the guards of this night, and the guard is the first to be asked.

He said, "Who went in to him?"

He did not say it loudly. But the whole plain heard.

Qayla opened her mouth.

The words were there. She knew them; she had arranged them in the long hours on the rise without knowing she was arranging them: I saw a man come out of the tent after midnight. His hand was blue. He went toward the stone.

And in the same moment she saw what came after the words. She saw the Sons of Qaydh walk to the white tent with their spears. She saw the silent Keepers come out of it, carrying no weapons, because a Keeper carries no weapon outside Ilsum. She saw their blood on the carved stone, on the Covenant itself. She saw Ilsum shut its gates, with the mother copy behind them, and no witness left for anyone. She saw war, not one war but every war, begin from her mouth.

And she saw something else, more hidden than all of it. She saw herself on the rise, the arrow between her fingers, watching a man walk into the dark, and not shouting.

She closed her mouth.

"I don't know," she said.

Khardash son of Dhamyan looked at her a moment longer than he should have. Then he turned his face from her to the people, and raised his hand.

And that morning, at the Well of Oaths, with the sun white as salt, the war began.

No one but Qayla daughter of Nuqar knew that it had begun twice: once when Khardash raised his hand, and once hours before, on a rise in the dark, when she kept silent.

2. Blood in the Tent

Khardash raised his hand, and no one spoke.

His hand was open, the palm to the sky, the fingers spread. The old ones on the plain knew what that meant before the young ones understood it. This was not the hand of a man asking for silence. This was the hand of a man about to swear.

An old man of the Ravine folk came out from among the people, short and hunchbacked, holding a staff of acacia wood. His name was known across the whole plain, and no one used it, because people called him "the Keeper of the Articles," as if that were a name that needed no other. It was he who read the Covenant at the stone every year, article by article, in a voice that neither rose nor fell. He stood before Khardash, lifted his staff a little, lowered it again, and said:

"No blood without judgment, and no vengeance after the Covenant."

That was the second article. Qayla knew it as everyone on the plain knew it, as children know it before they know their fathers' names. But she had never heard it in this voice. The old man said it as if he were pleading, not reading.

Khardash looked at him. Then he said, his hand still raised:

"And judgment belongs to whom?"

"To the Warden."

"There has been no Warden for a thousand years."

"Then to the stone." The old man pointed his staff at the carved stone, standing alone in the south, white in the sun, with the white tent beside it. "The elders gather at the stone and judge by what is on it."

"And the elders," said Khardash, and turned his eyes across the rings, "which of them has not drunk from the canals?"

Qayla heard the whispering start in the ring of the Ravine folk, and then go round.

His question was not a question. He knew the answer, and so did they all. Seven of the twenty-one tribes had drunk, and three more were said to drink by night and deny it by day. And the Ravine folk themselves, this old man's own people, had pitched a seventh tent for a man from the canals only yesterday.

"Khardash, my son," the old man said more quietly, "your father..."

"My father is on his rug." Khardash brought his hand down suddenly. "And I had not sworn yet. But I swear now, before you and before the stone, and let the ground carry the trace of my oath. I will drink no water and sit under no roof until I know who went in to my father. And whoever went in to him, his blood is mine, and his judgment is mine."

The plain was silent.

Then a single voice began in the ring of the Sons of Qaydh, a woman's voice, not wailing this time but something nearer to singing. Another followed it. Then men. Until the whole sound was one high voice going round the plain, and the black gravel threw it back.

Qayla looked at the old man with the staff and saw that he had bowed his head, and the staff in his hand seemed to have grown too heavy to lift.

After that everything moved quickly, the way water moves when it finds a channel.

The men of the Sons of Qaydh went to the ring of the Ravine folk, demanding the guest who had come from the canals. The Ravine folk stood up to meet them. No one had a weapon in his hand, for custom still held on this plain, though it had begun to crack. But hands had become fists, and chest pushed against chest, and one of the young men of the Sons of Qaydh shoved an old man of the Ravine folk so that he fell on the gravel, and a woman screamed.

Before the scream had ended, Qayla was there.

She did not run. Knights did not run on this plain. But she walked with long strides, Hufayr behind her and ten knights behind him, all in gray cloaks with cords on their wrists. She stepped in between the two rings and stood.

She said nothing. She did not need to.

People knew what it meant when the Knights of the Well stood between two tribes. It meant that whatever came next was no longer between two tribes, but between a tribe and custom itself. The young man who had shoved the old one stopped, looked at Qayla, then at the ground.

"The guest," she said after a moment, in an ordinary voice, "is in his tent off the plain, with the camels. That is what I ordered yesterday, and that is how it was." She looked at Hufayr.

"That's how it was," said Hufayr. "His tent stood in the north all night, with our knights around it. He came out only once, to piss, and went back in."

"So he didn't enter the plain."

"He didn't enter the plain."

The men of the Sons of Qaydh looked at one another. Then the eldest of them spoke, a broad-faced man with a gray mustache and one eye. "And how do we know your knights didn't sleep?"

"You don't," said Qayla. "Except that you know us."

"We used to know you."

She did not answer. There was some truth in what he said, and she knew it. But she did not move from where she stood, and after a moment the one-eyed man took a step back, and the others stepped back with him.

She felt no relief. She felt that something had been taken from the knights in that step, the way water is taken from a well by the bucket, and no one sees it until the rope runs short.

She went into the tent of the Chief of the Tribes an hour later, with Khardash, with the old man with the staff, and with a fourth man she had not expected.

He was taller than the other three, white-robed, his head shaved except for a small braid behind his left ear. And on his hands, on his fingers, was that blue.

"Taylam the Copyist," he said, and bowed his head. "Of the Council's mission to the well. I carry no weapon, and I do not judge. I witness."

Qayla looked at his hands.

She could not help it. The fingers were blue from the tips to the second knuckle, the nail of the right thumb was broken, and the blue in it was deeper. Then she raised her eyes to his face and found him looking at her, as though he had seen where she was looking.

"There are three of you," she said.

"There are three of us."

"And all of you..."

"All of us write, Captain of the Knights." He lifted his hands a little, as if showing her what she had seen. "The ink doesn't wash off. That's what they say of us in the Waste: you know a Keeper by his fingers."

She said nothing.

She knew it proved nothing. The man she had seen was shorter than Taylam, and thinner. But there were three Keepers here, and one of them she had not yet seen. And there were a thousand in Ilsum. And blue fingers are not a face.

Nothing in the tent had changed since dawn, except that they had lifted Dhamyan from the rug, laid him on a bed of palm fronds at the side of the tent, and covered him with a cloak.

Khardash stood before the bed a moment. He did not lift the cloak. Then he turned to the two men who had been at the door with the spears. They had been brought in and were kneeling in the middle of the tent, their hands on the ground.

"Where were you?"

The elder of them said, his voice shaking, "We were told to go."

"By whom?"

"The Chief of the Tribes. He called us from inside the tent. He said, 'Go and eat, you've been hungry long enough.' That was two hours before dawn, or less."

"You heard his voice?"

"His voice."

"And you saw him?"

"No. The flap was down. But it was his voice. We've known it thirty years."

"And before that," said the other, without raising his eyes, "he came back from the direction of the stone. Alone. He walked between us and went in. He said nothing."

"Came back from the stone?" said Khardash. "My father doesn't go out at night."

"He came back, son of the Chief. We saw him as we see you."

Khardash looked at the other man, who nodded.

And Qayla said, before she had decided to say it, "Two hours before dawn."

They looked at her.

"The Chief of the Tribes sent for me after midnight," she said, "and I sat with him a little. Then I went back to the rise." She stopped. Then she said, "And I saw him come back from the direction of the stone. But I didn't see the two men leave. I was watching the tent, and I didn't see them."

That was true. And it frightened her more than anything else that morning. She had been watching the great tent the whole time; she had taken her eyes off it only to look at the sky, once or twice. So how had the two men gone without her seeing? And how had anyone gone in, if anyone had gone in before the man with blue fingers, without her seeing? No one had entered the tent that night, as far as she had seen, but Dhamyan himself.

"What did he want with you?" Khardash asked.

"He asked whether the knights would protect him tomorrow, if he said something that angered people."

Khardash was silent. Then he said, "And what did you say?"

"I said the knights protect the well."

Something showed in his face, then went. "And what was he going to say?"

"He didn't tell me."

"And you didn't ask?"

"I asked. He didn't answer."

Khardash son of Dhamyan looked at her a long time, as he had looked at her that morning. And under his look Qayla felt that the words she had not said were still there, in her mouth, waiting. That every moment that passed made them harder to say, not easier. If she said them now, he would ask: and why didn't you say so this morning?

"He was writing," she said instead. "When I went in to him. He was writing on a parchment, on this board." She pointed at the wooden board, still on the rug where it had fallen. "And the parchment isn't here."

They all looked at the board.

Taylam the Copyist bent over it, and did not touch it. Then he said, "Did you see what he wrote?"

"He turned the parchment over so I wouldn't see."

"In what ink?"

She looked at him. "Black. Waste ink."

Taylam nodded, as if that meant something to him. Then he straightened.

"Chief of the Tribes," he said to Khardash, and it was the first time anyone had called him that, and something trembled in Khardash's face, "if you permit me, I will send to Ilsum now. The Council has seers. They touch what is in this tent, and they see what happened in it. The trace does not lie."

Before Khardash could answer, the old man with the staff said roughly, "The Keepers witness. They do not judge."

"And we will not judge. We will see, and say what we saw. Judgment belongs to the stone."

"And who guarantees that what your seer says is what he saw?"

It was the old man's question, and it was aimed at no one. But Qayla saw Taylam look at her. Why at her?

"The knights guarantee it," she said. And she heard her voice after she had spoken, as though it were another woman's. "Your seer comes, and touches what he touches, and a knight stands beside him. And whatever he says, he says before the stone, before the twenty-one."

Khardash looked at her, then at Taylam, then at the old man. Then he said, "Forty days."

No one understood.

"Forty days," he said again. "That's what I give you. You, daughter of Nuqar, and your knights, and you, Copyist, and your seer. Bring me the name of whoever went in to my father. And if you don't bring it to me in forty days, I take judgment into my own hand. And whoever drank from the canals will answer to me for what he took."

"That breaks the Covenant," said the old man.

"The Covenant," said Khardash, and pointed at the bed, "was broken in this tent last night. I didn't break it."

They went out. Qayla stood at the door of the tent, the sun high now and the heat rising from the gravel. The plain had changed in a few hours. The rings that had circled the well had become two. A large ring in the north, around the Sons of Qaydh, where everyone who had heard Khardash's oath and approved of it had gathered. And a smaller ring in the south, between the well and the stone, with the Ravine folk, and those with them, and those who had not decided. Between the two rings lay empty ground, and the well in the middle of it.

And the Knights of the Well on the empty ground.

Hufayr stood beside her. He said nothing for a while. Then he said, "Forty days."

"Forty days."

"We won't find him."

"Maybe."

"And if we do, Qayla? If he's from a tribe? Which tribe? We bring a man of some tribe to Khardash, and he kills him, and his tribe rises? Or we say no, and Khardash rises?"

"I don't know."

Hufayr looked at her sidelong. He had served with her father, and with the one who led the knights before her, and with the one before him. He had known her since she was learning to shoot at palm trunks in the oasis. And he knew, as no one else did, when she was lying.

"Did you see something last night?"

She did not look at him.

And in the north, on the road, new dust began to rise.

Faqid son of Nuqar had never once come to anything on time.

He had been like that since he was small. He came to supper when the food was cleared, to the hunt when the hunters were coming home, to funerals when the earth was being shoveled in. Their mother used to say he had been born three days late and had walked three days late all his life. Then their mother died on the road between two wells, and he came late to that too.

He came now on a white salt camel, twenty of his tribe behind him, and behind them, at a distance, six men on long-legged Qalmiri horses, in polished armor that flashed in the sun until the flash hurt the eye.

The whole plain stood and watched.

Faqid did not enter the plain. He knew custom, or he knew his sister. He halted his camel at the edge of the gravel, halted his men behind him, and raised his hand so that the six Qalmiris stopped farther back. Then he dismounted and walked forward alone.

Qayla watched him come. He was thinner than she remembered. And there was something in his face that had not been there before. She did not know what it was. Something in the mouth, in the way the lips closed. And there was no rope on his wrist.

He stopped before the large ring in the north. Khardash came out to him.

Neither of them spoke.

Then Faqid said, in a voice the near ones heard and the far ones did not, "The Maker have mercy on him."

"Don't speak of him."

"He was Chief of the Tribes. And he was..." Faqid stopped. Then he said, "We disagreed, but he was our chief."

"You disagreed," said Khardash. "You said of him in every gathering that he sold water to the children of Surdan."

"And he did."

A sound like wind passed through the ring.

"And you come now," Khardash said slowly, "on the morning he is found murdered, with the horses of Qalmir behind you."

"I came for the declaration. As every elder came. And those who came with me came to protect me on the road, because the road is no longer safe for anyone who has drunk from the canals. And you know why."

Khardash looked at the six Qalmiris, then at Faqid. And he said, "An hour ago I swore to drink no water until I know who went in to my father."

"I heard that on the road."

"Then know this, son of Nuqar: whoever drinks the canal water drinks the water of those who killed him."

"You don't know who killed him."

"I know who gains by his death."

Faqid did not answer. He looked around at the faces, as Khardash had done that morning. His eyes stopped on his sister.

Qayla knew that look. He had looked at her like that when they were small, when he broke something and wanted her not to tell. There was no pleading in it. There was something else: he knew she would not tell, and he wanted her to know that he knew.

But what had he broken this time?

In the evening they buried Dhamyan son of Khardash near the well, in the small graveyard where only the chiefs of the tribes are buried. His was the forty-first grave, and the three Keepers stood at a distance, their blue fingers folded behind their backs.

Faqid did not come to the burial. He went back to his camel before sunset, and his men and the six Qalmiris went with him, and he declared nothing. Some said he had fled. Others said he was afraid. And a man of the Ravine folk said, in a low voice, that he had seen Faqid among the camels talking with Taylam the Copyist, and that the talk had been long.

By night only half the tents were left on the plain. The other half had been struck in the dark, and their tribes had gone, each to its own land, to count its spears.

Qayla sat on the rise. It was not her watch. But she could not sleep.

Taylam the Copyist came, alone, and climbed the rise slowly, as if the climb tired him. He stood beside her. She did not look at him.

"I've sent to Ilsum," he said. "Our messenger rides tonight. He'll be there in eight days, if a salt storm doesn't take him. And our seer comes in eight more."

"Sixteen days out of forty."

"Sixteen days out of forty." He was quiet. Then he said, "Captain of the Knights."

"Yes."

"You saw something last night."

She did not move. She did not answer. But she felt her heart beating in her throat.

"I won't ask you what it was," said Taylam. "A Keeper doesn't ask. He sees, and he keeps. But I'll tell you what our teachers tell us on the first day we enter the Library: everything kept silent leaves its trace. And the trace is not erased. It only fades." He looked out at the plain, at the scattered embers, at the empty ground between the two rings. "And it fades very slowly."

Then he went down from the rise and walked into the dark toward the white tent by the stone.

Qayla watched his hands as he walked. They were behind his back, folded. And there was not light enough in the dark to see their color.

3. The Gloves

The book fell, and Warda reached out her hand.

She did not think. That was what she told herself afterward, and kept telling herself: I didn't think. She was sitting at her desk in the lower copying hall, with the light coming in through the tall narrow windows at a slant, green, as it came every morning in Ilsum, because before it reached the windows it passed over the water of the canals and the moss on their stones. She was copying a page from a book on the lineages of the mountain folk, slowly, line by line. A young student passed behind her with six books in his arms, more than he should have been carrying. And he stumbled.

The top book fell, and she reached out and caught it before it hit the floor.

It was her left hand. And she had taken off the left glove an hour before, because ink had soaked its tip, and laid it on the edge of the desk to dry.

She had caught the book with a bare hand.

It was not the way people who have never tried it imagine it. There was no darkness, no sound, no light. It was closer to remembering something that had never happened to you. As if memory, someone else's

memory, were being poured into her through the skin, the way water is poured into sand.

And she saw a woman.

An old woman, in a small room, she did not know where. The light of a single candle. And the old woman was copying this same book, at night, her fingers blue to the wrist, as if she had dipped them in ink all her life. And she was weeping. There was nothing of weeping in her face, and no sound, but the tears ran down her cheeks and fell on the desk while she wrote, and she did not wipe them. There was a bed in the room, and on the bed something covered. Warda did not want to know what it was.

Then she saw the book being closed. She saw the old woman lay her palm on it, flat, and press. And she heard, not with her ears, a single word. A name. Then nothing.

"Sorry, sorry, seer, I'm sorry..."

The young student was on his knees in front of her, gathering the other five books from the floor, red to the ears. Warda looked at him and for a moment did not know him. Then she did. Then she looked at her hand.

The book was still in it. She set it on the desk, gently, as if it were alive.

"It's all right," she said. Her voice was louder than she meant it to be. The student looked at her, and three copyists at the nearby desks looked at her. "It's all right. Take it."

The student took it and went, looking back.

Warda put on the glove, its tip still damp. Then she put her hands in her lap, under the desk, so that no one would see them shaking.

She had done this a thousand times, or more. Since she was six. And she had not grown used to it. No seer grew used to it; that was what Nawsam had told her when she was small and crying in his lap. "Whoever grows used to the trace, child, forgets that it is someone else's trace, and takes it for his own. And that is the beginning of madness."

At noon, when she came out of the Library into the sun, she stood on the steps of the great door a long moment.

Ilsum lay before her as it did every day. The white bridges, dozens of them, over canals of green water, joining island to island and quarter to quarter. The white towers, tall and slender, each with a single window at the top, because the Keepers say that knowledge needs only one window. The long boats in the canals, carrying books from the copyists' quarter to the binders' quarter, from the binders' quarter to the Library, from the Library to the harbor, where the ships of Almin waited to take them all over Deymar. And above all of it, in the air, the smell.

The smell of indigo.

It came from the south, from the Dyers' Quarter, where the great ink vats stood in the sun. Vats of salt stone, each the size of a house, the water in them dark blue, almost black, and men and women standing in them to the knee, stirring the water with long poles. That was where the Keepers' ink came from, the blue no one else wrote with, the blue that clung to the fingers for days. The smell was sharp and sour, with something of the sea in it and something of iron. The people of Ilsum said that whoever was born there could not smell it, as no one smells his own house.

Warda had not been born there. She smelled it every day.

She went down the steps. She meant to go to the baker she bought from every day, by the third bridge, in the narrow lane that bends left

past the house of the one-eyed binder.

And she stopped.

What was the lane called?

She knew it. She had known it for ten years. She walked it every day. In it was the house of the one-eyed binder, and a small fig tree that had grown out of a wall, and the baker who gave her an extra loaf on Market Day. And she could not find its name.

She stood on the first bridge, people passing around her, searching her head the way one searches a pocket one knows one has put something in. And the place was empty. Not the ordinary forgetting, when a name is on the tip of the tongue. A flat emptiness, smooth, as if the name had never been there.

Then she understood. She breathed slowly.

This was the price. She had taken the old woman and her weeping and her book and the name she spoke, and paid for them with the name of a lane. That is how the trace always takes. It does not take what you want to give it; it takes what it chooses. It could have been worse. It could have been her mother's face.

But she had lost her mother's face long ago.

She walked to the third bridge, went into the lane that had no name, passed the one-eyed binder and the fig tree, and bought her loaf. She did not ask the baker the name of the lane. She knew he would tell her, and that she would forget it again before she reached the end.

The student with the red ears came to her in the late afternoon, having found the way to her room in the Seers' Quarter. He stood at the door, panting, with something like fear in his eyes, as if he were afraid she would touch him.

"Nawsam the Scribe asks for you."

Nawsam's tower was the highest in Ilsum, and the oldest, and the narrowest. It had two hundred and seventeen steps. Warda had counted them the first time she climbed it, at six, on the back of a Library servant. Then she counted them every time after. The counting calmed her. Two hundred and seventeen. They never changed.

At the top, the one room, and the one window. Before the window stood Nawsam, watering a plant.

It was a small green plant in a pot of salt stone. Warda had never known its name, and had never asked. Nawsam watered it by hand from a small cup, drop by drop, as if he were counting each drop. He said salt killed every plant but this one, that he did not know why, and that he loved what he did not know the reason for.

"Come in, Warda."

She went in and stood where she always stood, by the third shelf. He did not turn. He finished the watering. Then he set the cup on the windowsill, wiped his hand on the hem of his robe, and turned.

He was seventy, or near it. Small, smaller than she was, white of hair and beard, his eyes a clear gray like canal water in winter. His hands were blue to the wrist, like the hands of the old woman she had seen that morning. And there was always a small smile on his face, as if he knew a joke he had not told yet.

He was not smiling now.

"Dhamyan son of Khardash is dead."

At first she did not understand. She knew the name, as everyone in Ilsum knew it. Chief of the Tribes. The man who owned the Ravine Wells. But it was a name in a book, a name in the Council's letters, not a man who could die.

"When?"

"Eight days ago. The night of the gathering, at the Well of Oaths. Taylam the Copyist's messenger reached us this morning; he rode three camels to death on the way." Nawsam paused. Then he said, "He was murdered in his tent."

"Who killed him?"

"That's what they're asking there." Nawsam walked to his desk and sat, slowly, as if his back hurt. "And they're asking it now with spears. His son Khardash has declared the league of the Loyal, and sworn to take judgment into his own hand after forty days if the killer isn't known. The tribes are splitting. And the Knights of the Well are in the middle and don't know which way to lean."

Warda looked at him and waited. She knew he had not called her up to give her news.

"They want a seer," said Nawsam. "The Captain of the Knights, Nuqar's daughter, asks that a seer come from the Council, touch what is in the tent, see what happened, and say what she saw at the stone, before all the tribes."

Warda felt something cold drop into her stomach.

"And I..."

"And you."

"I'm the youngest of the seers."

"And the strongest."

"I've never left Ilsum. Not since I came."

"I know."

"And I don't know the Waste. Or the tribes. Or..." She stopped. She did not know how to go on.

Nawsam looked at her with his gray eyes, a long time, as he used to look at her when she was small and asked him a question he knew would hurt her to have answered.

"And you don't like to touch a place where someone has died," he said. "I know that too, child. That's why it's you."

She did not understand.

"A seer who likes it," said Nawsam, "sees what she likes to see. You hate it, so you see what is there." And at last he smiled, his small smile. "Besides, you are from Surdan. You were born on its borders. You'll understand what people say there, and what they don't. No one learns that in the Library."

She said nothing. All she remembered of Surdan was the smell of a tent, and her mother's voice, and then the night she saw what she saw. And she knew he knew that.

Then Nawsam opened a drawer in his desk, took out something wrapped in white cloth, and held it out to her.

She unwrapped it. Inside were two gloves. New, of fine goatskin, gray, stitched with blue thread. She put them on, and they sat on her hands as if they were her own skin.

"The best binder in the quarter made them for you," he said. "Leather tanned in salt three times. No trace gets through them unless you want it to."

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me." He looked at the window, at the green plant in its pot of salt. Then he said, without looking at her, "Warda."

"Yes."

"You'll touch what's in the tent. You'll see what happened. And you'll say what you saw at the stone. That's what they ask, and that's what we promised them. But..."

She waited.

"But the trace isn't always clear. You know that. It comes in pieces, it comes mixed, and sometimes it brings what can't be understood." He

looked at her now. “What you see and understand, say at the stone. What you see and don’t understand, write to me first. Don’t tell people before you’ve written it to me. The people in the Waste are like dry kindling now, child. One word that isn’t understood will set all Surdan on fire.” He paused. “And one more thing. The knights are not to be believed.”

“Yes.”

“Promise me.”

She looked at him. His right hand lay on the desk, blue, veined, open. And she saw, without knowing why she saw it, that its fingers were trembling a little. A small tremor, like the tremor of water in a bowl when a boat passes in the canal.

“I promise.”

She did not go to her room after that. She went down the two hundred and seventeen steps, counting them, then walked the long passages deep inside the Library, where the green light does not reach, only the light of small oil lamps hung on the walls every ten paces. She went down a stair, then another. From the old guard at the iron door she took a small key, without his asking her anything, for seers go into the Salt Vault whenever they like. And she went in.

The vault was cold as it always was. A dry cold, without damp, though all the canals were above it and around it. The walls were white salt, the floor was salt, the shelves were wood soaked in salt for years. The air itself was salty and dried the lips. This was what had made it the oldest place in Ilsum, and the one that kept best. Salt keeps the trace, and water erases it, so no water comes in here.

She walked between the shelves to the corner she knew.

The mother copy was there, in its case of Waste glass. She did not go near it. She had touched it once, a year ago, with the Council's permission, to read the trace of the blood on its edges, and she had seen what she saw and written what she wrote, and then she had been ill for two weeks and had forgotten many things during them; she did not know which. She would not touch it again.

Instead she went to the shelf beside it, took down a small book bound in black leather, and opened it to a page she knew.

Blood of Brothers: The Ilsumi Account. At the foot of the page, beneath the last line, in blue ink, in a small slanting hand, was her own note. She read it. She did not need to read it; she knew it. But she read it.

There was a stranger with one of the seven Seals on his hand...

And I have seen the trace of the same hand in other records...

I don't write where, because Nawsam reads everything I write.

She looked at the last line a long time. She had written it a year ago, angry, without knowing why she was angry. Then she had regretted it. She had wanted to erase it, and had not. A Keeper does not erase. And it had stayed here, in a book in the Salt Vault, where no one comes but the seers and the members of the Council.

And Nawsam was a member of the Council.

Had he read it?

He had never said anything. Nothing in his face changed when he saw her. His small smile was the same, and his plant, and his two hundred and seventeen steps. But today he had said to her: write it to me first.

She closed the book and put it back.

And as she came out from between the shelves toward the door, she felt cold.

Not the cold of the vault. Something else. Something rising from the ground, from under her feet, as if beneath the salt there were cold water moving. She stopped. At the far end of the vault, in the north wall, was a small door she had never paid attention to. A door of black iron, smaller than the vault door, with a large lock on it that had no keyhole. She knew it was there, the way one knows many things in one's house and never looks at them. No one spoke of it. The old guard said it was a door to an old stair from the days before Ilsum, and that the stair had been blocked with stones for a thousand years.

The cold was coming from there.

Warda stood before it. She did not go closer. And she heard, or thought she heard, a sound. A very low sound, like humming, like what one hears with an ear pressed to an empty jar. It did not rise or fall. It went on.

Then it was gone.

She looked at her hands. They were in the new gloves, tanned in salt three times. She had touched nothing.

She walked to the door, shut it behind her, and gave the old guard his key.

At dawn, at the north gate of the city, where the last of the bridges ends and the dirt road to the valley begins, a man was waiting for her with two camels.

He was tall, thin, dark, fifty or older. And his eyes were white as milk.

"You're the seer." It was not a question.

"How did you know?"

"Everyone here walks as if they were in a library." He smiled, and white teeth showed in a dark face. "You walk as if you were in sand.

Hadran. I'm your guide. Keepers carry no weapons outside the city, so they hire me. I carry no weapon either, but nobody knows that."

She looked at him. Then at his eyes.

"You're..."

"Blind. For twenty years. A salt storm, on the road to a place no one should go." He held out his right hand, large and rough, and laid it on the neck of the nearer camel, and the camel grew calm. "But the hand sees. A great deal. Not like you seers; I don't see the past. But I see the ground. And the ground doesn't lie."

Then he held his hand out to her, as a man holds out his hand to be shaken.

Warda looked at the hand. She did not hold out hers. She shook no one's hand, and had shaken no one's hand since she was six.

After a moment Hadran lowered his hand. He did not seem hurt.

"That's all right," he said. "I knew a man like you once. Wouldn't shake hands, wouldn't let anyone touch him. Walked as if he were in sand." He turned his white-eyed face north, toward the road. "But that was a long time ago."

"Who was he?"

He did not answer. He took the first camel's lead rope, couched it, and signaled her to mount.

When they crossed the last bridge and Warda turned to look back, all of Ilsum was white and blue in the dawn light. The towers, the bridges, the canals. And Nawsam's tower in the middle, the highest, with its one window at the top. She saw no one in it. But she felt he was there, watching.

Then she turned her face to the road.

And as she swayed on the camel's back she thought about the lane with no name. About the old woman with blue fingers, and the covered thing on the bed, and the name she had spoken. About the low humming behind the iron door. About Nawsam's hand trembling on the desk.

And about the man who walked as if he were in sand.

She did not ask Hadran again.

4. The Stranger in Gloves

On the twenty-first day, forty knights left.

They did not leave by night, the way traitors leave in stories. They left in the forenoon, in front of everyone. They came to the rise one after another, and each of them stood before Qayla, untied the cord from his wrist, coiled it, and laid it on the stone at her feet. Then he mounted his camel and rode north, to where the tents of the Loyal stood on the gravel horizon like a row of black rocks.

None of them said anything, except the last. He was a boy of the Sons of Qaydh whose name she could not remember, for he had joined the knights only two years before. He stood before her, laid his cord on the stone, then raised his eyes to her and said:

"Standing in the middle gives water to no one, Captain."

She could have answered him. There was an answer in her mouth. But she looked at him and saw that he was too young to hear it, and that the hunger in his face was bigger than any answer. So she said nothing. And he mounted and went.

Afterward Hufayr gathered up the cords, forty of them, and put them in a leather sack. He did not ask her what to do with them. A cord that has been untied is not thrown away, and custom does not say what is done with it. So he put the sack in her tent, in the corner, and neither of them looked at it again.

The last twenty days had been the longest of her life.

In them she had opened everything that could be opened and asked everyone who could be asked. She sat with the boy with the white eye three times. Each time he wept, and then said the same thing: he had fallen asleep by the door after she went back to the rise, and had not woken until dawn, except once, when he heard the Chief of the Tribes say to the two men, "Go and eat." He had heard it with his own ears, half asleep, and slept again.

"His voice?"

"His voice, Captain. As I hear you now."

She sat with the guest who had come from the canals. He was a Qalmiri of forty, short, fat, soft-handed, wearing the clothes of the Waste and not knowing how to wear them. He said his name was long and the folk of the Waste could not pronounce it, and that his work was measuring water. He was afraid, and did not hide it. Since the night of the murder he had stayed in his tent off the plain, with the knights around him to protect him, not to guard him, and he knew it. And Qayla knew that if he left them for a single hour, they would find him on the gravel in the morning.

"Why did you come?" she asked him.

"I came to hear the declaration."

"Who sent you?"

He looked at her, then at Hufayr standing by the door, then at her again. "The palace."

"And why would the palace want to hear the declaration? It would hear it a few days later from its messengers."

The man was silent. Then he said, lower, "Because the Empress was waiting for an answer."

"An answer to what?"

"I don't know, Captain. The Maker is my witness, I don't know. They told me: go, hear what the Chief of the Tribes says, and come back as fast as you can. And they told me: if he says yes, come back on a camel. If he says no, come back on a horse."

"Yes to what?"

"I don't know."

She looked at him a long time. She saw no lie in his face. She saw a small man sent on a large errand and told nothing.

And that was all she had found in twenty days: a voice whose owner no one saw, a letter whose contents no one knew, and an Empress waiting for an answer to a question no one had heard.

And a man with blue fingers, whom she had told no one she had seen.

Then there were the three Keepers.

She had watched them for twenty days. It was not hard, for they left the white tent only to pray, and for a short walk at sunset around the carved stone, in single file, not speaking. Taylam the Copyist first, the tallest of them. Behind him a man past his prime, broad in the shoulders, short in the neck, with a slight limp. And behind them the third.

The third was a boy. Thin, twenty or a little more, walking lightly, like someone not used to gravel. And he was shorter than Taylam.

Every sunset Qayla stood on the rise and watched him walk around the stone. And compared.

Was it him?

He was the height of the man she had seen, or near it. He had his thinness. But the man she had seen that night walked another way, a way she did not know. Not the walk of a boy unused to gravel. The walk of a

man who lifts his feet higher than he needs to and sets them down carefully, as if he does not trust the ground under them, and does not want to be heard.

She was not sure.

That was what ate at her by night. If she were sure, it would be easier. If she knew it was him, she would go to Khardash and say so. If she knew it was not, she would know she had seen a stranger, a man no one knew, and she would say that too. But she was sure of nothing, except that she had seen a blue hand in the light of embers, for one moment, and then it was gone.

And with every day that passed, the moment grew smaller in her memory, and sharper.

The seer came at sunset on the twenty-first day, a few hours after the forty knights had gone.

Qayla saw the dust first, to the southeast, where the valley road comes in. Then she saw two camels. Then she saw that on the first was a tall man sitting upright, and on the second something small and gray, like a bundle of cloth.

She came down from the rise, walked to the edge of the plain, and stood waiting.

When the camels drew near, she knew the tall man. She stopped.

"Hadran."

"Daughter of Nuqar." The man halted his camel, and did not dismount. He turned his face toward her, his white eyes open. "You've grown."

"How can you tell?"

"Your voice has come down. When I saw you last, your voice was up here." He raised his hand above his head. "And now it's here." He laid

his hand on his chest. And he smiled.

Qayla did not smile. But something in her loosened, for the first time in twenty-one days. Hadran the Blind was not a man the Waste knew of. He was a man who knew the Waste. He had led caravans for forty years, twenty of them seeing and twenty not, and it was said that in the second twenty he had never once lost the way. He used to pass through the oasis where she grew up, once every year or two, and her father would sit with him until dawn. She did not know what they talked about. She was small, and they sent her to bed.

"Is Hufayr here?" Hadran asked.

"He's here."

"Then there's still some good in the world." He tilted his head toward the second camel. "And this is Warda. The seer. From the Council."

The seer got down from the camel.

She did it badly. The camel knelt, and she pitched forward and nearly fell, then caught hold of the saddle and came down onto her feet in a muddle, the dust of the road flying off her. Then she stood, shook out her robe, and raised her head.

And Qayla saw a girl.

She did not know what she had expected. An old man, perhaps, like Taylam or older. Or a stern woman past her prime, like the ones people describe when they speak of seers: those who see what cannot be seen, and shake no one's hand. But this was a girl. Twenty-five, or thereabouts. Thin, thinner than Qayla, and a head shorter. Her face was pale and round, her eyes black and wide like the eyes of a frightened gazelle. Her hair was pulled back under a gray kerchief. She wore the white robe

of the Keepers, which the road had turned gray. And on her hands were gloves.

Qayla looked at the gloves. Then at the girl's face.

"You're the seer?"

"Y... yes." The girl stopped, and shut her eyes a moment, like someone counting in her head. Then she opened them. "Warda. The seer. The Council sent me."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-six."

"And this is the first time you've been out of Ilsum."

It was not a question. Warda looked at her, and some color came into her pale face. "How..."

"You stand like someone who's never stood in the Waste." Qayla turned to Hadran. "They sent the youngest."

"They sent the strongest," said Hadran, not moving on his camel.

"Who says so?"

"The one who sent her."

Qayla looked at the girl again. Warda stood where she was, her gloved hands clasped in front of her, her eyes on the ground. Then she raised her eyes and looked straight at Qayla, and this time she did not stumble:

"I want to see the tent."

She did not take her to the tent.

She told her it was late, that the sun had set, that the elders must be present, and the old man with the staff, and a man of the Loyal sent by Khardash, and a man of the Unionists if one could be found, so that everyone could see that the seer touched nothing except in front of them all. She said this was what had been agreed on the day of the murder: the

seer comes, and touches what she touches, and a knight stands beside her. And whatever she says, she says before the stone. If she touched the tent tonight, alone, no one would believe her tomorrow.

All of this was true.

And Warda agreed. She nodded and said nothing. Then she went with Taylam the Copyist to the white tent; he had come out to meet her, and Qayla saw him bow to her as one bows to someone of higher rank. Then they went in.

Qayla stood where she was.

The reason was not what she had said. She had known it while she said it, and it shamed her to know it. The reason was something else, something she had not thought of until she saw the gloves.

If the seer touched the tent, she would see what had happened in it. And what had happened at its door.

She herself had stood at that tent. That night. After she saw the man come out. She had stood at the door and said: Chief of the Tribes. Twice. And reached for the flap. And drawn her hand back.

Did the trace of that remain? Would the seer see her, standing in the dark, her hand held out? Would she see in her face that she had seen something moments before, and come to check, and said nothing?

She did not know how seeing worked. No one in the Waste knew. Her grandmother had seen sometimes, and Qayla herself saw sometimes, small things, moments she did not want. But that was not learning. That was something like thirst; it came and went. The seers of Ilsum, it was said, read the ground the way a copyist reads a book.

So if this girl read the tent tomorrow, before the stone, before the twenty-one, and said: I saw the Captain of the Knights at the door...

She did not finish the thought.

And she understood, standing in the dark, that she had not put it off until tomorrow to protect the seeing from doubt. She had done it to give herself one more night. A night to decide what she would say, before it was said about her.

After supper, Warda came to the knights' fire.

Qayla had not invited her. She came alone and stood at the edge of the light, like someone who does not know whether she is allowed to sit. The knights looked at her, eight of them around the fire, then looked at Qayla. Qayla pointed to a place beside her, and Warda sat. Not close, not far. She drew her knees up to her chest and rested her gloved hands on them.

Hufayr gave her a bowl of milk, and she took it in both hands, and did not drink.

They were all quiet for a while. Then the knights got up one by one, for their watch or for sleep, until no one was left by the fire but Qayla and Warda, and Hadran the Blind on the other side, lying on his back with his white eyes open to the sky.

"Do you sleep in them?" Qayla asked, and pointed at the gloves.

"S... sometimes. When I sleep somewhere I don't know."

"Why?"

Warda looked at her. "Because everything is old. The ground, the mat, the blanket. Everything has had something happen on it."

"And you see all of that?"

"If I touch it."

"All of it?"

"No. Not all of it. What was strong. What left a deep trace." Warda was quiet, and turned the bowl in her hands. "Joy doesn't leave a deep

trace. Nor love. Nor prayer. Those leave a light trace, like wind on sand. But fear, and pain, and blood…" She did not finish.

"Those you see."

"Those I see."

Qayla looked into the fire. Then she said, "And you pay?"

Warda raised her eyes to her quickly. "How do you know?"

"My grandmother saw. A little. She said that every time she saw, she forgot something."

Warda looked at her a long time, and there was something in her black eyes that had not been there before. Then she said, "Yes. I pay. Everyone who draws on the trace pays. That's the law. No power without a price."

"And what do you pay?"

"Memory." She said it simply, the way one says one's name. "Yesterday, or a few days ago, I don't remember, I touched a book with a bare hand and saw what I saw. Then I forgot the name of the lane where I buy bread. Ten years I've walked it, and I forgot its name."

"Does it come back?"

"No."

Qayla said nothing. She looked at the girl's gloved hands.

Then she said, not knowing why she said it, "This is my bow." She lifted the bow from the ground and held it out to her. "It was my grandmother's, then my father's, then mine. What do you see in it?"

Warda did not reach out.

She looked at the bow, then at Qayla. Then she shook her head slowly.

"I don't read the trace of the living," she said. "Except with their leave."

"I've given you leave."

"No." It was the first time Qayla had heard her voice entirely steady. "You've given me the bow. You haven't given me leave. If you had, your hand wouldn't be shaking."

Qayla looked at her hand.

It was shaking.

She laid the bow on the ground between them. They were quiet a while.

Then Qayla said, looking at the fire and not at the girl, "If a man goes into a tent, and touches nothing, and spills only a little blood... does his trace remain?"

"It remains."

"Always?"

"Always. Everyone who passes through a place leaves something in it. Even if he touches nothing. The air keeps a little, and the ground keeps more. Cloth keeps more than the ground, because it drinks. And blood..." She stopped. "Blood keeps everything. Blood is the strongest trace."

"And if there wasn't much blood?"

"Even a drop."

"And if it was wiped away?"

"Water erases. Slowly. But there's no water in the tent." Warda looked at her. "No one enters a place without leaving a trace, Captain. No one. That's a law. Like the law that water goes down and not up."

Qayla said nothing.

And on the other side of the fire, without moving, Hadran said, "Except someone who knows how."

They both looked at him.

But he said no more. He lay on his back with his white eyes to the sky, as though he had said nothing.

When Warda got up to go back to the white tent, Hadran got up with her. He said he would walk her there, because the gravel was full of stones at night. They walked together, she a step ahead, he with his hand on her shoulder the way a blind man lays his hand. But Qayla, watching from a distance, felt that it was the other way round: he was leading her.

When Hadran came back alone, some time later, he did not come back to the fire. Qayla saw him walk to the tent of the Chief of the Tribes. Slowly, his right hand held a little in front of him, like someone feeling the air.

He stopped at the door. Where she had stood that night.

Then he knelt and laid his palm on the gravel. He did not move. The two knights Qayla had posted at the tent watched him and did not stop him. No one stopped Hadran the Blind.

Qayla got up and walked over to him.

By the time she reached him, he had lifted his hand from the ground and rested it on his knee. He did not turn to her. But he said:

"Someone stood here a long time."

She did not answer.

"That night. Stood here a long time, and didn't go in." He turned his face toward her, slowly, his white eyes seeming to look at what lay behind her. "The ground doesn't lie, daughter of Nuqar. But it only speaks to someone who asks."

Then he stood, brushed off his knees, walked to the knights' fire, and lay down where he had been.

Qayla did not move from where she was for a long time.

She did not sleep that night.

She sat on the rise with the bow across her thighs, as she had sat on the night of the murder. The plain beneath her was half of what it had been. Half the tents folded, half the fires unlit. The moon was in its last days, thin as a thread, rising late. The tent of the Chief of the Tribes was dark, the two knights beside it, its flap down for twenty-one days now.

At some point after midnight, she saw something move.

A small gray shadow, coming out of the white tent by the stone. Walking between the tents. Not hurrying, not looking back. Stopping at each ember, then going on.

Qayla knew it before it drew near. She knew it by its walk, the walk of someone unused to gravel. By its smallness. By the gray kerchief on its head.

She saw the shadow reach the tent of the Chief of the Tribes. She saw the two knights rise to their feet. She saw the shadow say something to them that she could not hear. She saw one of them look toward the rise, toward her, in the dark, as if asking.

She could have gone down. She could have signaled him to stop it. She could have said: tomorrow. Before the stone. Before everyone. As we agreed.

She did nothing.

She raised her hand, slowly, and lowered it. A sign every knight knew: let her.

The knight lifted the flap.

And the small gray shadow went into the tent of Dhamyan son of Khardash, alone, in the dark. The flap fell behind it.

And Qayla daughter of Nuqar sat on the rise with the bow across her thighs and her hands on it. It was the second time she had kept silent at that tent.

But this time she knew why. She wanted to know the truth. And she wanted, more than that, not to be the one who told it.

5. What Remained in the Cloth

The dark in the tent was thick, like something you could touch.

Warda stood behind the lowered flap and did not move. She waited for her eyes to adjust. They did not. The moon outside was thin, and the seams the light had leaked from on the night of the murder, as Taylam had told her, now let nothing in. The smell was the smell of a tent shut for twenty-one days in the Waste: goat hair, dust, old wool, and under all of it something else, faint and metallic, hardly there.

She took a small candle from her sleeve, and a flint and steel. She struck three times before it caught.

And the tent was there.

It was wider than she had thought from outside. Two poles in the middle, ropes running out to the sides, a roof of black hair rising and falling with the wind, slowly, as if the tent were breathing. On the right, a bed of palm fronds, empty. In the middle, on the ground, an old red rug, faded, patched at two corners. On it a wooden board, a lamp gone out, a closed inkwell. No one had moved them since that night; the Captain of the Knights had ordered that nothing be moved.

Warda set the candle on the ground, away from the rug. She knelt at its edge.

And she looked at it a long time.

She did not quite know why she had come.

She told herself, walking between the tents in the dark, that she had come because tomorrow would be hard. Before the stone, before the twenty-one, with Khardash son of Dhamyan watching her and all the tribes waiting for her to say a name. She had never done her seeing in front of people. She saw in the Library, in the vault, in her room, alone or with Nawsam. She knew that when she saw, her face changed, and sometimes she spoke without knowing it, and sometimes she wept. She did not want people to see that before she knew what she would see.

That was true.

But she knew there was another reason. A reason she had seen in the Captain's face when she said: tomorrow. Warda had seen many lying faces in her life. Not large lies. Small ones, the lie of someone who says one true thing to hide another true thing. It had been that kind of face.

And then there was Nawsam. *What you see and don't understand, write to me first.*

If tomorrow, before the people, she saw what she did not understand, she could not write it to him first.

She took off the left glove.

Slowly. Finger by finger. The leather tanned three times in salt clung to her fingers, as if it did not want to come off. She laid it on her knee. She looked at her hand in the candlelight. It was white and thin, and the sun had not touched it in twenty years. There was no ink on its fingertips.

Then she laid it on the rug.

The trace came first as it always comes from old cloth: much of it, faint, mixed, like a hundred people whispering in one place.

She saw feet. Many feet, bare and shod, walking on this rug year after year. She saw bowls of milk set down and taken up. She saw dates scattered. She saw children's hands playing with pebbles on the patched corner. All of it was faint, like wind on sand. Joy, and food, and sleep. Little of them remains.

Then something heavier.

A man. Thirty-four, long in the face, black in the beard. Sitting where Dhamyan had sat, in the same place, for the rug had kept his weight for years until the wool there had worn thinner. Before him a boy. Ten, or a little more. Standing. His hands at his sides. His face red.

The man was talking. Warda did not hear all of it, because the trace does not keep speech the way a book keeps it. It keeps only the words that hurt.

...a sword. You're a sword, Khardash. Not a mind.

And a sword is used, not consulted.

She saw the boy not cry. She saw him stand, and swallow, and look at the ground. She saw his hands close at his sides. And she saw, in the corner, at the edge of the tent, men sitting, listening. None of them said anything.

Then the boy was gone, and the man, and the gathering.

And Warda knew, on her knees in the dark with her hand on the rug, that she had seen a wound thirty years old. And that the man who carried it had now sworn at the stone to take judgment into his own hand.

Then she saw the night.

She knew it when it came. A near trace is clearer than a far one, as a footprint in sand is clearer when it is new. She saw Dhamyan son of

Khardash, an old man this time, white in the beard, sitting on the rug with the board on his thigh and the lamp beside him, lit.

He was writing.

She did not see what he wrote. She saw only his hand, and the pen, and the black ink. But she could hear. For Dhamyan was reading what he wrote, under his breath, moving his lips, as do old men who learned to read late. And the trace had kept some of it, because the man had read it with a heavy heart.

...water is shared, no well is to be held. And I have held...

...and I was the first to break...

...so if you stop the machines, I will declare that Surdan neither fights nor is ruled, and that the Ravine Wells...

He stopped. He set down the pen. He looked at what he had written. Then he took another parchment, smaller, that had been under the first, and began to write something else on it, in a smaller hand. She heard nothing of it. He did not read it aloud.

Then a woman came in.

Warda saw her and did not need to be told who she was. The gray cloak. The cord on the wrist. The face she had seen hours before at the edge of the plain, which had not been smiling. But in the trace it was a little younger, less tired. As if twenty-one days had added years to that face.

She saw the Captain of the Knights sit on the edge of the rug. She saw Dhamyan turn the parchment over. And she heard.

...if I stand at the stone tomorrow and say something that angers everyone...

...if it were true, I would stand...

...even in front of your brother?

That was all the trace held of their talk. Because the talk had been heavy for the one who spoke it, and for the one who heard. And when the Captain went out, Warda saw her stop at the flap a moment before lifting it, her hands at her sides, the way the boy had stood thirty years before.

Then she saw Dhamyan alone.

He wrote a little on the small parchment. Then he stopped. Then he did something she did not understand: he held the small parchment in both hands and tore it in two, slowly, carefully, the way one tears bread. He looked at the two halves. He laid one on the board, under the large parchment. And he held the other in his hand.

Warda wanted to see where he put it. She leaned with everything in her toward that moment.

But the trace cannot be bent. It comes as it comes. The moment passed, and all she saw was the old man's hand moving toward the patched corner of the rug, and then the picture went, as if a cloud had crossed a moon.

Then she saw him put out the lamp.

And sit in the dark. Not sleeping. Sitting, his hands on his knees, his head a little raised, as if listening to something outside. The trace here was very faint, because the man was calm. Strangely calm. Not the calm of someone waiting for death. The calm of someone who has decided something hard and found rest in deciding it.

Time passed. She did not know how much.

Then she heard the voice.

Go and eat, you've been hungry long enough.

Dhamyan's voice. Clear. A little raised, as a voice is when it is meant for someone outside the flap. It was strong in the trace, because those

who heard it outside had heard it with hungry hearts, and been glad of it.

Warda looked at Dhamyan.

His lips were not moving.

He was sitting in the dark as before, his hands on his knees, his head raised. His mouth was shut. And she saw, in the trace, that he had heard the voice too. She saw his head turn a little, slowly, toward where it came from. She saw his hands tighten on his knees.

The voice had come from inside the tent.

And there was no one in the tent but him.

He had not got up from the rug. Not before the voice, not after, not all night. She saw it the way one sees the weight of a stone on sand: the wool beneath him did not lighten once.

Warda felt cold climbing her arm from the rug. She wanted to lift her hand. She did not.

Then came the emptiness.

It was not darkness. She had known darkness in the trace before, when a moment had kept nothing, or kept something weak. Darkness in the trace is like darkness at night; you know there is something behind it. This was something else. It was smooth. Level. Wholly empty, as if time itself had been cut, and then joined again.

And she knew it.

She knew it because she had felt it days before, on the first bridge in Ilsum, when she looked for the name of the lane and did not find it. The same emptiness. The same smoothness. Not forgetting. Erasure.

And it was long. Longer than any moment.

Then it ended. And she saw Dhamyan son of Khardash on the rug, lying on his side, as if he had fallen asleep sitting up and tipped over.

One thin red line at the neck, hardly visible.

There was not much blood.

But blood is the strongest trace. She had told the Captain so hours before, by the fire, and she knew it as she knew her own name. She had not prepared herself for what that would mean here.

The blood came from under her hand, from the rug, from the wool that had drunk the few drops and not let them go. It came all at once. Not a picture. Something that entered her, from skin to bone. And she saw, not with her eyes but with something deeper, what Dhamyan had seen in his last moment.

He had seen nothing.

No face, no hand, no knife. He saw the dark. He felt a coldness at his neck, slight, as if a wind had passed. And in that moment he thought one thought. Not about death. Not about his son. Not about the Maker.

The water.

I haven't said it yet.

Then everything broke off.

Warda lifted her hand from the rug, or thought she did. She found herself on her side on the ground, off the edge of the rug, her face on the rough mat, the candle an arm's length away, almost out. She was breathing fast. Her left hand lay stretched out in front of her, bare, white, shaking.

She did not know how long she stayed like that.

Then she heard a voice. A voice in the trace, not in the tent. Or so she thought. A low voice, from outside, from behind the flap. A

woman's voice.

Chief of the Tribes.

Then again, a little louder.

Chief of the Tribes.

She knew the voice. She knew it because she had heard it hours before by the fire, saying: do you sleep in them? Saying: this is my bow.

It was strong in the trace, stronger than Dhamyan's own voice. Because the woman who spoke had spoken with a heart that knew something. Warda did not know what. But she felt it, the way one feels the heat of a fire one cannot see. Fear. And something else under it, heavier than fear.

Then the voice stopped.

And no one came in.

When she could sit up, she sat up. She took the glove from the ground and put it on, her fingers not obeying her. Then she held her hands to her chest and closed her eyes.

And she tried to count.

She always did that after seeing. She counted the steps of Nawsam's tower, from the first to the last, until her heart slowed. One, two, three. She knew that when she reached the last, she would be herself again.

One, two, three... a hundred... a hundred and fifty...

She stopped.

How many?

How many steps?

She knew. She had counted them a thousand times. Since she was six, on the back of the Library servant. The number was the one thing that had never changed, amid everything that did. She knew it began with two hundred. Two hundred and...

Nothing.

The same emptiness. The same smoothness.

She opened her eyes and looked at the candle, which had become a small wick dancing in a pool of wax. She did not cry. She thought she would, and she did not. She only sat and looked at the candle and said to herself, in a voice no one heard:

This is the price.

I took the last thing a dead man saw. And I paid with the stairs I used to climb home.

The flap rose.

She did not turn. She knew who it was by the steps, long ones, unhurried. By the cold wind that came in. By the silence.

The Captain of the Knights stood at the door. Then she came in. She looked at the candle, then at the rug, then at Warda on the mat. She said nothing.

Then she knelt, at a distance from her. Not close, not far. The way Warda had sat by the fire.

"Did you see?" she said at last.

"I saw."

"Who?"

Warda looked at her. The Captain's face in the last of the candlelight was hard, as it had been in the trace, as it had been at the edge of the plain. But the eyes were not hard. They were waiting. And Warda knew what they were waiting for. Not the name of the killer.

"There was no one there," said Warda.

Qayla did not understand. "What?"

"There was no one in the tent. But him." Her voice was steady, steadier than she had expected. "I saw him writing. I saw you come in,

and sit, and go out. I saw him alone after that. Then I heard his voice telling the two guards to go. And it wasn't him speaking. Then..." She stopped.

"Then?"

"Then nothing. Emptiness. As if someone... took that moment out of the ground. Then I saw him dead."

Qayla looked at her a long time.

"That's impossible," she said. "You told me so yourself. By the fire. No one enters a place without leaving a trace."

"I said that."

"Then how..."

"I don't know." Warda looked at her gloved hands. "I don't know. This is the first time. I've never seen it. I've never read of it. In everything the Library holds." Then she raised her eyes. "And that is what I don't understand."

What you see and don't understand, write to me first.

The candle went out.

They sat in the dark. Neither of them moved. Above them the roof of the tent rose and fell with the wind, slowly, as if it were breathing.

Then Warda said, in the dark, very low:

"And I heard you."

Qayla did not answer.

"After. After the emptiness. After he died. I heard you at the door. Saying: Chief of the Tribes. Twice. And you didn't come in."

Nothing came out of the dark. No voice, no breath. As if the Captain were no longer there.

"Your voice was strong in the trace," said Warda. "Stronger than his. And the trace only keeps a voice strong when its owner..." She did not

finish.

Time passed.

Then Qayla said, and the voice was close, closer than Warda had thought, “When its owner what?”

“Is afraid.”

“Yes.”

“Of what?”

Qayla did not answer.

Warda heard something move in the dark. Then she felt something laid across her knee. Something long, wooden, curved, strung tight.

The bow.

“Tomorrow,” said Qayla. “Not now. Tomorrow. Before the stone.” She paused. “If you want to know of what, read it.”

“Is this leave, then?”

“This is leave.”

Then Warda heard the flap rise and saw, for a moment, a strip of dark less dark than this one, with stars in it, and the shadow of a tall woman. Then the flap fell.

And she was alone, in a dead man’s tent, with the bow across her knees, two gloves on her hands, and in her head a stair whose steps she could not number.

6. My Brother

Warda read the bow at dawn, with Qayla sitting across from her, and neither of them said a word.

It was in Qayla's tent, with the first gray light coming in through the raised door. The seer laid the bow across her knees, took off her left glove, and set her palm on the grip, where the wood shone from all the hands that had held it. She closed her eyes.

Qayla did not know where to look. She looked at the girl's face first, then looked away, as if seeing something that should not be seen. Then she looked at the hand on the bow. Then at the ground.

Time passed. Warda's face changed as it went, the way the surface of water changes when the shadows of clouds pass over it. Now it eased, now it tightened. Once Qayla saw her lips move with a word she could not hear. Once she saw a tear run down the left cheek, slowly, and the girl did not wipe it.

Then Warda lifted her hand and opened her eyes.

She put on the glove. Then she laid the bow on the ground between them, as Qayla had laid it by the fire the night before.

"Your grandmother," she said, "used to sing to it. When she strung it."

Qayla had not expected that. "What song?"

"I don't know the words. The trace is faint. Singing doesn't stay long. And your father shot a man with it. Once. At night. And he was sorry."

Qayla said nothing. She had not known that.

"And you..." Warda raised her eyes to her. "You held it hard that night. Until it hurt. The arrow was between your fingers, and you didn't draw."

"What did you see?"

"What you saw." She said it slowly, like someone setting something heavy on the ground. "A man coming out of the tent. An ember. Blue fingers."

Qayla said nothing for a long time.

Then she said, "Now you know."

"Now I know."

"And what will you say at the stone?"

Warda looked at her. In her black eyes was something Qayla had seen the night before and not understood. Not fear. Something nearer to honest bewilderment, the bewilderment of someone who truly does not know what to do.

"I don't know," she said. "Blue fingers... all the Keepers have blue fingers."

"I know."

"Taylam, and his two companions, and the Council, and the copyists, and the students. A thousand in Ilsum. More."

"I know."

"And I saw no one in the tent. I saw emptiness. If I say at the stone that you saw a Keeper come out, they'll say: the Keepers killed him. And if I say I saw emptiness, they'll say: the seer is lying to protect her own."

"Yes."

"So what do I say?"

Qayla looked at the raised door, at the light that had turned white. Outside she could hear the plain waking. The camels, the women at the well, and far off the voice of the old man with the staff, calling the elders to the stone.

"Say what you understood," she said at last. "And what you didn't..." She stopped.

"What I didn't?"

She looked at the girl. "What did the one who sent you tell you?"

Warda's face changed. For one moment, then it came back. But Qayla saw it.

"He said: write it to him first."

The seer stood at the stone in the forenoon, before what was left of the tribes.

They were fewer than half of what they had been on the day of the murder. Six elders of the southern ring, with the Ravine folk and the old man with the staff. Four of the Loyal, sent by Khardash, who did not come himself. He had sworn to sit under no roof, and for twenty days he had been in the open, among his northern tents, sitting under the sky night and day. No one came from the Unionists.

Taylam the Copyist stood at Warda's right, his two companions behind him. Qayla stood at her left, with Hufayr and ten of the knights.

And Warda said what she had understood.

She said she had touched the rug in the tent and seen the Chief of the Tribes writing on his last night. She had seen the Captain of the Knights come in to him, and sit, and go out. She had seen him alone after that. She had seen him put out the lamp and sit in the dark. She had

heard a voice tell the two guards to go, and it was not his voice, though it was like it. Then she had seen nothing. Then she had seen him dead.

Her voice shook at first, then steadied. She stumbled on the first word of each sentence, then went on. She did not cry. She looked at no one.

She said nothing about blue fingers. Nor about the Captain's voice at the door. Nor about the parchment torn in two.

When she finished, everyone was silent.

Then one of the four Loyal spoke, a broad gray man with one eye, whom Qayla knew; he was the one who had said to her on the day of the murder, we used to know you. "A voice like his, and not his?"

"Yes."

"And you don't see who killed him?"

"No."

"And no trace?"

"No trace."

The man turned to the elders, then to the people, and said loudly, "Then this is not the work of a man."

A sound went through the people like wind in palm fronds.

"This is the work of someone who draws on the trace," said the one-eyed man. "Someone who takes a voice out of the ground and puts it on. Someone who erases his trace. And in all Deymar, who does that today?" He looked east, to where Qalmir lay beyond the Waste. "The new Inquisitors. The men of the machines. The Empress's men."

"I didn't say that," said Warda. "I didn't say..."

But no one was listening to her anymore.

When they came back from the stone, with the people scattering and the four Loyal riding north with the news, Qayla walked beside Warda and

did not speak.

Then she said, “You did well.”

Warda looked at her. “Well? They said: the Inquisitors. They’ll be saying it in every tent in the north before night.”

“They would have said it anyway. You didn’t say what you don’t know. That’s the best anyone can do here.” Qayla paused. “And I couldn’t do it.”

Warda did not answer.

Then, a few steps on, she said, “I’ll write to Nawsam tonight.”

Qayla stopped.

“With what?”

“With what I didn’t understand. I promised him.”

“The blue fingers?”

“The emptiness.” Warda was quiet. Then she said, lower, “And the fingers.”

Qayla looked at the girl a long time. At the gray kerchief, the pale face, the black eyes, the gloves stitched with blue thread. She wanted to say: don’t write. She wanted to say: if anyone in Ilsum knows what happened, the first to know it is the one who sent you and asked you to write to him first. But she did not know that. She did not know anything.

“Write,” she said. “But don’t send it. Not until we’ve talked.”

“Why?”

“Because you told me last night that you don’t read the trace of the living without their leave.” Qayla looked into her eyes. “And I’m telling you: don’t send my trace to Ilsum without my leave.”

Warda looked at her. Then she nodded.

The truce messenger came in the afternoon.

He was one of her knights, one of those who had stayed, and she had sent him three days before to the west, to the tents of the Unionists, carrying a single message: the Captain of the Knights of the Well asks to meet Faqid son of Nuqar at the Silt Well, without weapons, the knights standing surety.

The knight came back with the answer: yes. Tomorrow. At noon.

She told no one why she wanted to meet him. She told Hufayr that a truce needed someone to speak between the sides, and that Faqid would hear from her what he would hear from no one else. That was true. Hufayr said Khardash would not like it. That was true too. Neither of them spoke the other reason. For Hufayr had seen, as she had, Faqid's face on the day of the murder, when he looked at her through the crowd. The look of someone who has broken something.

The Silt Well lay halfway between the plain and the valley, in a hollow between two hills of gravel. Once it had been a great well, watering three tribes. Then it dried, two hundred years ago or more, and never came back. Nothing was left of it but the stones laid around its mouth, and a worn wooden pulley no one had taken, because custom says that what is left on a dead well is not taken. It was said a war had been fought over it long ago, before the Covenant, in which many died, and that its water had not come back because it did not want to return to ground that had drunk so much blood.

Qayla knew this was old women's talk. But she had chosen the place because it belonged to no one.

She arrived an hour before noon, with Hufayr alone. She had left Warda on the plain with Hadran, and had not told her where she was going.

She sat on the stones of the well, and waited.

Faqid came exactly at noon.

That alone was enough to tell her something. Her brother, who had come late to everything in his life, came now on time. Not before, not after. He came on his white camel with one man of his tribe, as agreed. There were no Qalmiris with him.

He dismounted and walked toward her. He stopped a few paces away.

She stood.

They looked at each other.

Close up, his face had what she had seen from afar on the day of the murder, and more. The thinness, the skin drawn tight over the bones, the sunken eyes. And in the mouth, in the way the lips closed, something she did not know. It had never been in her brother's face. As if someone else lived in his face, and used it.

On his right hand was a silver ring with a blue stone. A Qalmiri ring.

"Qayla."

"Faqid."

Then, because a brother is a brother, and because what lay between them was older than the Covenant and the war and everything, he walked up to her, put his hands on her shoulders, and looked into her face, as he used to when she was small and he wanted to see whether she had been crying.

Then he dropped his hands.

"You've grown thin," he said.

"So have you."

"I drink water," he said, and smiled, and there was nothing in the smile. "You don't know why you're growing thin."

They sat on the stones of the dead well, at opposite ends. Hufayr and the other man walked off, each to a hill, and stood looking at the horizon with their backs to the well.

They were silent a while.

Then Faqid said, "You didn't ask for me to talk about the truce."

"I asked for you to talk about the truce."

"You're lying." He said it without harshness, as Dhamyan had said it in the tent. And Qayla thought, hearing him: every man in this story tells me I'm lying, and all of them are right. "If you wanted a truce, you'd have sent to Qalmir. The truce isn't in my hands. I'm only the elder of one tribe, even if I have a voice in Qalmir."

"A loud voice."

"A voice." He looked at the worn pulley on the well. "The loud voices in Qalmir don't come from Surdan."

Then he was quiet.

"What do you want, Qayla?"

She looked at him. And she could not find the words she had arranged on the road. She had arranged questions: where were you on the night of the murder? Why did you come late and then leave before the burial? What did you say to Taylam the Copyist among the camels? Why did you look at me like that? They were all the questions of a knight investigating a murder. And sitting in front of him, she was not a knight.

"Mother," she said.

He looked at her quickly.

"We've never talked about her," said Qayla. "Since she died."

Faqid did not answer for a while. Then he turned his face from her to the horizon, to the east, to the road he had come by.

"What do you want to know?"

"How she died."

"Of thirst."

"I know she died of thirst." She heard her voice rising, and lowered it. "How? Where? Who was with her? What did she say? I was at the Well of Oaths, guarding the pilgrims, when the news reached me. By the time I got there you had buried her. And the three little ones with her. And no one told me anything. You told me nothing. Three years."

Faqid looked at her. Something moved in his face, then went.

"We were walking from the Cleft Well to the Flat Rock Well," he said slowly. "The Cleft Well had dried. The Flat Rock Well was two days off. We had water for one day. The whole tribe. Sixty souls. Because a man from the League told us the Flat Rock Well had water, and that it belonged to the Sons of Qaydh, and that they gave to whoever asked."

"And it had water."

"It had water." He was silent. "And the men of the Sons of Qaydh were on it. With spears. And they said: the water is for whoever pays."

"And you paid?"

"With what?" He looked at her, and there was something in his eyes she had never seen in them, hard and bright as flint. "We had nothing. The League had taken what we had the year before, the price of the water it sold us in the first drought. So we turned back. And we stood on the road between the two wells, between a dry well and a well with spears on it. And I sent you a messenger. And I sent another to the Sons of Qaydh, to Dhamyan himself. I don't know which arrived first."

Qayla said nothing.

"She died on the third night," said Faqid. "She had given her water to the little ones. No one told her to. She gave it and said nothing. We didn't know until she didn't get up." He looked at his hands. "And the little ones died after her. One each day. My son was the last."

"Your son..."

"My son." He said it in a voice with nothing in it. "He was four."

Qayla had not known. No one had told her. She knew three little ones had died, and she had not asked who they were. She had not asked. Because she could not.

"And the Sons of Qaydh's messenger came on the fifth day," said Faqid, "to say the Chief of the Tribes gave us leave to drink. After we had buried the four."

They were silent.

The sun had leaned a little, and the shadow of the worn pulley was stretching across the stones. Far off on the two hills, Hufayr and the other man stood as before, as if made of stone.

"And after that a man came to me from Qalmir," said Faqid, without her asking. "A year later. He said: we have water. From the ground. It runs in canals, like a river. No one owns it, and it isn't sold. It's for everyone who accepts. And he said: the Empress doesn't ask about the Covenant. She asks about the children. So I accepted."

"You accepted the machines' water."

"I accepted water." His voice was hard now. "I have no children left, Qayla. But the tribe has children. Sixteen then. Twenty now, because the women have started giving birth again. Because there's water. That's what I accepted."

"And the Covenant says..."

"The Covenant says: water is shared, no well is to be held." Faqid got up from the stones suddenly and stood over her. "That's the first article. The first article, Qayla. Before blood, before binding, before the machines. Water is shared. And Dhamyan son of Khardash held the three Ravine Wells for thirteen years, and people died on the roads, and the

Loyal who hold up the Covenant in my face today drank from those wells and said nothing. And you…" He stopped.

"And I?"

"And you were on watch."

She said nothing. She had nothing to say.

Then something happened she had not expected.

A voice came from the western hill, where Faqid's man had been standing. Then she saw the man coming down the hill fast, dragging something behind him. A boy. Ten or a little more, thin, barefoot, in a torn shirt. The man had him by the arm, and the boy was not fighting.

"Elder," said the man, panting. "I found him behind the hill. He'd been following us from the tents. And he had this."

He held up a small leather waterskin. Full.

Faqid looked at the boy. Then at the skin. Then at the boy again.

"From where?"

The boy did not answer. He looked at the ground.

"From the canal," said the man. "From the seventh tent's share. A woman saw him filling it yesterday and thought he was one of hers."

"And whose is he?"

"Not ours, Elder. He's of the Ravine folk. He came from the plain."

Qayla looked at her brother.

There was nothing in his face. No anger, no pity. His face was as it had been when he sat on the stones. But she saw something in the mouth, in the shut lips, and she saw his right hand, with the silver ring and its blue stone, close.

"The water is for those who accepted," said Faqid. "That's the pact with Qalmir. Whoever accepted, drinks. Whoever didn't, doesn't. And

if someone who didn't accept drinks, they cut the water off from all the tents." He looked at the boy. "Do you know that?"

The boy nodded, without raising his head.

"Then why?"

"My sister," said the boy. Hardly aloud.

Faqid said nothing for a while.

Then he said to the man, "Ten lashes. In front of the seventh tent. So everyone sees."

"Faqid!"

He looked at his sister.

"He's a boy," said Qayla, who had stood up. "And he has one waterskin. For his sister."

"And if I let him go, he'll have twenty boys with him tomorrow. And a hundred the day after. And then Qalmir cuts the water off from everyone." His voice did not rise. "You know the reckoning of wells, Qayla. You've guarded them ten years. A well gives no more than it holds."

"That's what the Sons of Qaydh used to say."

Faqid looked at her.

She had said it without thinking. And she saw the word strike him. She saw it go into him, the way an arrow goes in. She saw his face go white, then red, then return to what it had been.

Then he turned to the man and said, "Five."

The man walked the boy off to the camels.

They did not speak after that for a long time.

Then Faqid, standing by his camel with his hand on the saddle, said, "Come with me."

She looked at him.

"Come with me, Qayla. To the valley. I'll show you the canals. I'll show you the water running. I'll show you the children. Then tell me the Covenant matters more."

"I can't."

"Because you're a knight."

"Because I'm a knight."

"And knights don't lean." He smiled, that smile with nothing in it. "Not even toward the one who's right. Not even if the Chief of the Tribes himself says your brother is right."

Qayla went still.

"What did you say?"

Faqid did not answer. But something passed over his face. A shadow. And she saw it.

"Who told you he said that?"

"People say..."

"People didn't hear him." She had walked to him and was standing in front of him, close. "He said it once. To me alone. In his tent. The night he was killed. Your brother is right. There was no one in the tent but us."

Her brother looked at her.

And she saw in his eyes, for a single moment, her brother. The boy who had taught her to shoot at palm trunks. Who used to break things and want her not to tell. And she saw in them something bigger than anything he had ever broken.

"He said it to you before he said it to me," she said slowly. "When did you meet him, Faqid? When did you meet Dhamyan?"

Faqid turned his face away.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Faqid..."

"I'll tell you what our father used to say," he said, and mounted the camel, and looked down at her. "The house of Nuqar doesn't guess. The house of Nuqar waits." He turned the camel's head. "So wait, Qayla."

And he went. His man went after him, the boy with him.

Qayla stood at the dead well, the sun leaning, the shadow of the worn pulley lengthening on the stones. Hufayr came down from the hill and stood beside her, and said nothing.

Then he said, "He met him."

"Yes."

"When?"

"I don't know." She looked at the road her brother had taken, at the dust he had left, rising and fading. "But Dhamyan told me that night: your brother is right. And my brother knows he said it. And neither of them told me the truth."

They mounted. And on the road back to the plain she did not look back.

But she was thinking about the boy. About his sister, whose name she did not know. About five lashes. And about the word she had said to her brother, which was true, and was the cruelest thing she had ever said.

7. The First of the War

The news came on the twenty-fourth night, with a boy of the Ravine folk on a lame camel.

Qayla had fallen asleep early in the night, the first time since the murder she had slept before midnight, and Hufayr woke her with a hand on her shoulder. He did not speak. He pointed to the door of the tent, where the boy stood panting, sweat running down his face in the cold of the night, holding a cord of red camel hair.

The cord of the Loyal. The cord they had tied on their wrists since Khardash swore.

"I found it on the road," said the boy. "In the northern ravine. Hanging on an acacia. And another like it on the next tree. And on the third." He stopped to breathe. "Thirty trees, Captain. Along the caravan road. All of them with red cords."

Qayla got up.

She knew this. Everyone in Surdan knew it. When a tribe hangs its cords along a road, it is saying to whoever passes: this road is ours, and whoever crosses it without our leave, his blood is forfeit. That was custom before the Covenant. Then the Covenant abolished it, and no one had hung them in twelve hundred years, and nothing of it was left but old women's stories.

"And the Qalmir caravan?" she said.

"It comes through the ravine the day after tomorrow. At dawn. That's what they're saying in the tents." The boy looked at her. "Water for the Unionists of the southern ring. Twelve wagons."

"And the northern ravine..."

"Is inside the Well's sanctuary, Captain." Hufayr said it from behind her, low. "A day from the Well. Inside the sanctuary."

The sanctuary of the Well of Oaths is a circle on the ground that no one sees and everyone knows.

A day by camel from the Well in every direction. No blood is shed in it. That was what the Covenant said, and that was what the knights had been set to guard. No blood is shed in it, no weapon is carried in it except by the knights, and no one is kept from water in it. The knights had been three hundred, then two hundred and sixty, guarding a circle no one could see, in land no one owned, because a covenant written twelve centuries ago said it belonged to no one.

And Qayla knew that all of it was worth nothing if one man decided it was worth nothing.

She rode to Khardash at dawn.

His tents were in the north, at the edge of the sanctuary, on flat ground among small dunes. They were not like the tents the tribes brought to the gathering. They were tents of war: low, dark, unadorned, with camels kneeling between them under their saddles, as if waiting to rise. On the way she saw two red cords on acacia sticks driven into the sand. She did not stop.

She found him in the open, as they had said.

He was sitting on the sand between two tents, under the sky, his back against a dead palm of which only the trunk was left. On his shoulders was a cloak of coarse camel hair, and before him a small fire of camel dung. He did not get up when he saw her.

He had changed. Only twenty-four days had passed since the oath, but the face she had seen on the day of the murder, dark and full, had become another face. Sunken cheeks, cracked lips, eyes larger than they should be. Beside him was a wooden bowl, and in it milk.

She-camel's milk. Not water.

And she understood. He had sworn not to drink water until he knew, so he drank milk. Camel's milk alone. A man cannot live on milk alone for more than a few months, and he weakens. But he does not die. His oath was a reckoning, not madness. And Qayla thought, as she got down from her horse: this is Dhamyan's son. He knows how long he can go hungry.

"Daughter of Nuqar."

"Son of Dhamyan."

He pointed to the sand in front of him. She sat.

He did not offer her the milk.

"The cords," she said.

"The cords."

"The Covenant abolished them."

"The Covenant abolished many things." He lifted the bowl, drank a small mouthful, and set it down. "It abolished vengeance, and the cords, and the holding of wells, and binding. So what is still abolished?"

"Blood in the sanctuary."

"There's no blood in the sanctuary. The caravan passes through the ravine, and the ravine is in the sanctuary. If it passes, no blood is shed.

We don't want its blood. We want its water."

"Its water belongs to the Unionists."

"Its water is stolen." He did not raise his voice. That frightened her more than anything. His voice was calm, like his father's. "Do you know where that water comes from, Captain? From under the ground. From the veins in the rock. The water that used to run to our wells. To the Well of Oaths itself." He pointed south, to where the Well lay beyond the horizon. "Lower your rope tomorrow, and measure. How many cubits has the water dropped since they built the first Spire?"

Qayla did not answer. She did not know. But she remembered the rope on the night of the murder, and how it had been shorter than it should have been.

"Three cubits in two years," said Khardash. "My father measured it. And wrote it down. And the Keepers know. And Qalmir knows. And the Empress knows. She doesn't bring water out of nothing. She takes it from under us, runs it in her canals, and gives it to those who accept. To those who accept, Captain. The water the Covenant says is shared has become water given only on terms. What holding of wells is greater than that?"

"And your father..."

"My father held the Ravine Wells." He said it at once, before she could finish, as if he had been waiting for it. "I know. Everyone says it now. And they drank from them and said nothing while he was alive." He looked into the fire. "My father was wrong. And my father was killed. And I tell you: his wrong doesn't make his blood lawful, and it doesn't make Qalmir's water lawful."

They were silent.

In the tents around them, the men were waking. Qayla saw many young ones among them, too young to have seen a war. On their wrists the red cords. They were looking at her, at her gray cloak, at the sword at her side, and in their eyes was something she had not seen in people's eyes before. They were looking at the knights the way one looks at a stranger.

"If you take the water," she said, "Qalmir will send soldiers. More than six. They'll come with weapons. And they'll say the Loyal broke the sanctuary first."

"Let them say it."

"And they'll say the knights didn't guard it."

"Then guard it." He raised his eyes to her. "Guard it from us. Or guard it with us."

She looked at him.

"This is what you came to ask," said Khardash. "Not the cords. You want to know what you'll do when the caravan comes through. And I tell you: choose. The knights don't lean, that's what you say. But whoever doesn't lean leans with whoever is stronger. And who is stronger today, Captain? We with our cords, or they with their machines?"

He stood. He was tall, and the thinness had made him taller. He looked down at her.

"You said the day we buried my father that you didn't know who went in to him." He paused. "And I believed you. Because the daughter of Nuqar doesn't lie, so they told me. Now a seer has come from Ilsum and looked in his tent and said: a voice like his, and an emptiness with no trace in it. So whom do I believe, Captain? The seer who doesn't see, or the knight who didn't see?"

Qayla said nothing.

She saw him look at her a while. Then he turned his back and walked to the tents.

On the twenty-fifth night Qayla gathered the knights.

Not all of them. Half were on watch along the roads, at the Well, at the graves, with the tribes still on the plain. But a hundred came, and stood in a ring around a large fire before her tent, in their gray cloaks with the cords on their wrists. The knights' cords, green, which no one ties without having sworn not to lean.

She told them what she had decided.

She told them they would ride to the northern ravine before dawn, sixty knights. That they would stand in the road, between the caravan and the Loyal. That they would raise no weapon against anyone. Not against the Loyal, not against the soldiers of Qalmir. That they would say to both sides: this is the sanctuary, and there is no blood in it. Whoever wants to shed blood in it, let him begin with the knights.

The knights were silent.

Then one of them said, "And if they begin?"

His name was Zaabal. A youth of the Northern Ring, nineteen, who had joined the knights two years before; he was the fastest of them on horseback, and after her the best shot. His father was one of the Loyal. Qayla knew that.

"They won't begin."

"And if they do, Captain?" He stepped forward. "If a Qalmiri spears one of the Loyal in front of me, do I stand and watch?"

"You stand."

"And if one of the Loyal spears a Qalmiri?"

"You stand."

"Then what's the sword for?"

Qayla looked at him. And she remembered the night of the murder. The arrow between her fingers, the bow undrawn, the man walking in the dark toward the stone.

"The sword is for the sanctuary," she said. "Not for those in it."

Zaabal looked at her. Then he looked at the knights around him. And Qayla saw in their faces what she had seen in Hufayr's face when she told him: that the words were right, and that they were not enough.

"I'll ride," said Zaabal at last. "Because you're my captain. But don't ask me to watch my father die."

They reached the northern ravine an hour before dawn.

The ravine was a narrow valley between two small mountains of black rock, through which the caravan road ran from the canal lands in the east to the southern plains. At its mouth stood a few scattered acacias, and on every tree a red cord, moving in the cold dawn wind as if alive. At its far end, where the ravine opened onto the plain, the ground was flat and hard and covered with gravel.

The sixty knights stood in the middle of the ravine, a single line, from mountain to mountain. Gray cloaks in the blue dark.

They saw no one.

But they heard. On the eastern mountain, above them, the sound of gravel moving under many feet. And a camel groaning, then going suddenly quiet, as if a hand had closed its mouth.

"Above us," said Hufayr, low. "On the slope. Waiting."

"How many?"

"Two hundred. Or more."

Qayla looked up at the dark slope and saw nothing. But she knew he was there. Khardash. Looking down at her, as he had looked down at her when he rose from the fire.

The caravan came with the first light.

They heard it before they saw it. A sound Qayla had never heard in Surdan: the creak of wood on iron, and a steady knocking, like the beat of a great slow heart. Then she saw it enter the ravine from the east. Twelve wagons, on each wagon two great barrels of iron-hooped wood, each wagon drawn by two mules. The wheels were large, rimmed with iron too, and they ground the gravel beneath them.

There were no wagons in Surdan. The tribes carried water on camels, in leather skins. A wagon was a Qalmiri thing, a thing of cities, of flat land with paved roads. In the ravine, between the two black mountains, it looked like a ship on sand.

Around the wagons were soldiers. Twenty, not six. In armor of polished plates, with long spears, and on their chests the Empress's device: an eye from which a drop falls. Before them a man on a horse, without armor, in a long black robe, his hands bare.

"An Inquisitor," said Hufayr.

Qayla saw his hands. They were ordinary, the hands of a man of forty. But the soldiers around him left a space between themselves and him, the way people leave a space between themselves and a fire.

Qayla rode forward alone until she stopped twenty paces from the man in the black robe. She raised her right hand, open, empty.

"You are in the sanctuary of the Well of Oaths," she said loudly, so that those on the mountain would hear. "There is no blood in the sanctuary. The knights stand surety."

The man looked at her. His face was calm, almost kind, and his eyes were gray.

"We know," he said. His accent was Qalmiri; he turned his q into a catch in the throat. "That's why we came this way. Because there's no blood in the sanctuary." He smiled. "Or has the Covenant changed since yesterday?"

"There are men on the mountain."

"I know." He did not raise his eyes to the mountain. "I've seen them for an hour."

"Then go back."

"The water is for the Unionists in the south. Three tribes. A thousand souls. Half of them children. Do you want me to take it back?"

Qayla did not answer.

"I thought not," said the man. And he moved his horse a step forward.

A sound came from the eastern mountain. A single long sound, like a horn. Then a shout. Then the whole slope was moving.

They came down like a flood.

Two hundred, or more. On camels, on foot, some on horses. With spears and swords and sticks. The red cords on their wrists. They did not shout. That was what Qayla remembered afterward more than anything: that they did not shout. Their sound was the sound of gravel under their feet, and the camels, and their breathing.

They did not come at the knights. They went around them, at both ends, by the two mountains, where the gray line barely reached the rock. And they passed. The knights stood with their swords sheathed, as she had ordered, and the Loyal flowed past them like water around a stone.

"Stop!" Qayla shouted. "The sanctuary! The sanctuary!"

No one stopped.

She saw the Qalmiri soldiers close around the wagons, a ring of polished armor and spears. She saw the first camel reach the ring, saw a Qalmiri spear go into its chest, saw the camel fall and its rider fall from it.

Then the whole ravine was a single sound.

Afterward, Qayla could not tell in order what had happened.

She remembered things. Scattered pictures, the way a trace came to Warda.

She remembered one of the Loyal climbing a wagon and striking a barrel with an axe. She remembered the water coming out of the barrel, not in a gush but in a thin ribbon shining in the first light, falling onto the gravel. And the gravel did not drink it. The gravel let it run over it, between the stones, to the sand. And the sand drank it.

She remembered saying, without hearing herself: "No."

She remembered Zaabal on his horse in the middle of the Loyal, shouting his father's name. She remembered that he had not yet drawn his sword.

She remembered Hufayr beside her, holding her horse's rein, saying something she did not hear.

And she remembered the Inquisitor.

He had got down from his horse and was standing between two wagons, his hands raised in front of him, palms up. Two of the Loyal were running at him with swords. She saw him close his eyes.

Then there was fire in his palms.

It was not like a fire of wood. It was clearer, whiter at its heart, yellow at its edges, and it had no smoke. It did not burn his palms. It sat in them, the way water sits in a bowl. Then he thrust his hands forward.

Qayla remembered the sound. Not the sound of the fire. The sound of the two men.

Then she remembered the smell.

When it was over, less than an hour had passed.

The Loyal had gone back up the mountain, carrying their wounded. The Qalmiri soldiers had closed around what was left of the wagons. Seven. The other five lay on their sides, their barrels holed, and the water that had been in them had become dark patches on the sand at the end of the ravine, drying under the rising sun, turning pale, then not to be seen.

Three lay on the ground.

Two men of the Loyal, by the wagon where the Inquisitor had stood. Qayla did not look at them long. And one man of Qalmir, a young soldier in his polished armor, with a Loyal spear in his side. He was on his back, his eyes open to the sky.

She got down from her horse, walked to the dead soldier, and stood over him.

He was young. Younger than Zaabal. His face was pale and his hair fair, like the people of the Delta. She did not know his name. She never would.

The Inquisitor came to her.

He had washed his hands. She did not know with what. Perhaps with the spilled water. He stood on the other side of the dead soldier and looked at him. Then he looked at her.

His face had changed. Not in its features. In something else. He was calm as he had been before the attack, but the calm had become some-

thing different. Like the calm of stone.

"You said the knights stood surety," he said.

"I said it."

"Surety for what?"

She did not answer.

He looked at the two men of the Loyal by the wagon. Qayla looked with him. And she saw in his face something she did not understand at first. Then she understood it, and something went cold in her chest.

There was nothing in his face.

No regret. No anger. Nothing of what is in a man's face when he looks at those he has killed with his own hands. He looked at them the way a man looks at two stones in the road.

"You'll pay for that," said Qayla, and did not know why she said it.

"I've paid." He looked at her, and for the first time she saw in his gray eyes something like sorrow. A distant sorrow, as if he remembered that he ought to be sorry. "Don't you see? I paid when I lit it." He raised his hands and looked at them. "Kindling takes what it takes. And what it took from me today..." He stopped. "A year ago I would have wept for those two men. I know that. I remember it. But I can't find it."

Then he turned his back and walked to the wagons.

Khardash reached the ravine while the soldiers were harnessing the mules again.

He did not come from the mountain. He came from the north, on his camel, alone, slowly. He got down by the two men of the Loyal, knelt, and laid his hand on the face of each. Then he stood and walked to Qayla.

He stopped in front of her.

She looked at him. She waited for him to say something. To shout. To strike her. To ask her why she had not fought with them, or why she had not fought against them.

He said none of that.

He said, "One of them is my cousin."

Then he said, "You stood."

"I stood."

"As you stood by my father's tent."

Qayla looked at him.

He did not know. He could not know. He said it the way a man throws a heavy word without knowing where it will land. But it landed. And Khardash saw that in her face. He saw something. And he did not know what it was.

He was silent, and looked at her a while.

Then he mounted his camel and went north.

When she came back to the plain in the afternoon, there were twenty-seven knights with her.

Sixty had ridden with her at dawn. Ten were wounded, and their comrades carried them to the healers' tents. And twenty-three did not come back with her. They rode north, behind Khardash, after taking off their green cords and throwing them on the gravel at the end of the ravine, by the pale patches that had been water.

Zaabal was the first.

He said nothing to her. He stood in front of her, took the green cord from his wrist, and put it in her hand, not on the ground. On his forearm was a new wound, not from a sword. A burn. Qayla looked at the burn, then at his face.

"My father was one of the two," said Zaabal.

Then he mounted.

Warda was waiting for her at the tent.

She had not gone with them. Qayla had ordered her to stay, and she had stayed. She was sitting on the ground by the door of the tent, the gloves on her hands, and in her lap something wrapped in cloth. When she saw Qayla get down from her horse, and saw her face, and saw the green cord in her hand, she stood up.

She did not ask.

And Qayla was more grateful for that than for anything else that day.

They went into the tent. Qayla sat on the ground and did not take off her cloak, which had stains on it she did not look at. Warda sat in front of her.

Then the seer said, "I went to the tent again. In the forenoon. While you were in the ravine."

Qayla looked at her.

"I told you Dhamyan tore a small parchment in two," said Warda. "And that he put one half under the large parchment, and the other half... I didn't see where. He moved it toward the patched corner of the rug. So I went back to the patched corner. And this time I didn't touch it. I opened it."

She set the thing wrapped in cloth on the ground between them.

She did not open it.

"I haven't read it," she said. "I waited for you."

8. The Letter

The cloth was wool, gray, the kind bread is wrapped in for the road. When Warda reached out to open it, she saw that her fingers were shaking in the glove, and drew her hand back.

"You open it," she said.

Qayla looked at her. Then she reached out and undid the cloth, one corner after another, slowly, the way one unwinds a bandage from a wound.

Inside was a small parchment. Half a parchment. The size of a palm, yellow, thin, of the gazelle skin the elders of Surdan write on, its left edge torn almost straight, as if the hand that tore it had wanted the two halves equal. On it were lines in black ink. Waste ink, made of charcoal and gum, which turns brown with the years, and had not yet turned brown.

Neither of them touched it.

Warda had found it in the forenoon, as she said.

She had gone to Dhamyan's tent alone while Qayla and the knights rode to the northern ravine and the plain was almost empty, except for the women at the well and the elders in the far tents. There was no guard at the door of the tent. The two guards had ridden with the knights.

She went in.

Everything was as she had left it four nights before. The wooden board, the cold lamp, the rug in its red and black and gold, and the dark bloodstain no one had washed. For custom in Surdan says the tent of a murdered man is not touched until his killer is known; Warda had learned that from Hadran on the road, and had thought: so it is kept for the trace. As if the tribes had known before the Keepers what the Keepers know.

She walked to the patched corner of the rug.

It was in the southern corner of the tent, below where Dhamyan used to sit, and neither Qayla nor anyone else had noticed it. A patch of wool a little darker, sewn onto the rug with thick black thread, in large uneven stitches. A man's sewing, not a woman's. On the first night, in the trace, Warda had seen Dhamyan's hand move toward this patch with the half parchment, then she had seen the emptiness, and not what came after.

This time she did not touch it. She did not take off the glove. She knelt, took from her belt a small knife, the kind the Keepers sharpen their pens with, and cut two stitches of the black thread. Then she slid two gloved fingers between the patch and the rug.

And it was there.

Wrapped in the bread cloth, flat, like a plant dried between two pages.

"Do you know what's in it?" said Qayla now.

"No. I haven't read it. And I haven't seen it." Warda looked at the torn half. "I wanted to see it. I sat in the tent with it in my lap a long time. And I said: if I see it alone, and then tell you, you'll ask me: what did you see? And I'll tell you. And you'll believe me or not. But if we

read it together, we both see what's on the parchment, and you don't need to believe me."

Qayla said nothing. But Warda saw her face change. She saw something in it she had not seen before. Something like surprise.

Then Qayla bent over the parchment and read.

There were six lines. Or seven, if the last was counted, and it was a single word.

The parchment had been torn lengthwise, so all that remained of each line was its beginning. The beginning of each line, because the Covenant Tongue is written from the right. As if Dhamyan had wanted it so: that each half should keep what could only be understood with the other. Or as if he had wanted nothing, and torn it the way a man tears something he fears for.

Qayla read it aloud, slowly, the words catching in her throat the way they had caught in Warda's throat on the day of the stone:

> To Sitmara the Third, mistress of Qalmir, from Dhamyan son of
>
> You wrote to me asking, and I answer you with what I have not
>
> If you stop the machines that are under the valley, and close
>
> I will declare in the Council, before all the tribes, that the wells of
>
> nor given on terms, nor guarded except by the knights, and that

And this is carried to you by one you do not doubt, the son of

Neutrality

Then nothing.

After the word *Neutrality* the parchment was blank. The rest of the last line, and the line after it, and the one after that, to the bottom of the parchment. Blank. No writing, no mark of a pen.

Warda looked at the word.

It was a little larger than the other words, its stroke heavier, as if the hand had pressed harder on the pen. It stood alone in its line, at the start, where a writer begins a new sentence. And the ink in its last letter had run a little and become a small dot like a tear.

"Neutrality," said Qayla. "And what after?"

"Nothing."

"No. In the other half." She looked at the torn edge. "The lines are all cut. Their beginnings here, their ends there. But this..." She set her finger near the word without touching it. "This is at the start of the line. And it's the last thing he wrote. So he didn't finish it. Not here, not there."

Warda looked at her. And she thought that Qayla was not what people thought her. A knight, yes. Silent, yes. But she read. She read the way the Keepers read, looking at what is not written.

"He told me that night," said Qayla, low, "that words once said don't come back. And that some words said at the wrong time kill the one who says them. So he wrote the first word of the words that kill. Then he stopped."

They sat a while.

Outside, the day was leaning, and the light coming through the door had turned yellow, then orange. Warda could hear the wounded knights in the healers' tents, one of them moaning steadily, as if counting. She heard a woman crying somewhere far off, then stop.

Then Qayla said, "See it."

Warda looked at her.

"Now. With me here." Qayla looked into her eyes. "What's on the parchment we've seen together. I want what isn't on it. What was in his head when he wrote *Neutrality* and stopped."

Warda took off her left glove.

The parchment was not like the rug.

The rug had been years. It had been a father and a son, and an old wound, and men who had sat on it, and a woman whose tear had fallen on it, and a cat that had slept on it once. It had been many layers, each layer speaking, and Warda had had to walk through them the way one walks through a crowded market looking for one face.

The parchment was one night.

One night, one hand, one man. And its trace was strong, stronger than she had expected, because the man had written in fear. And fear cuts into matter the way water cuts into stone. Warda went into it all at once, like someone falling into a well.

Dhamyan was writing.

His hand was shaking. Not from age. It was a strong hand, a steady hand. It was shaking from something else. And Warda felt the shaking in her own fingers, as if it had passed into her from the parchment.

He was thinking.

Warda did not hear the thoughts of the dead. That was not possible, and no one in Ilsum had ever said it was. But she felt what the man who left the trace had felt, the way one feels the cold in a cold stone. And now, in Dhamyan's hand as he wrote, she felt several things.

A weight. A great old weight, like a stone he had carried on his back for years and wanted to set down.

And fear. Not for himself. The fear had a face in it. A young face. His son. Khardash. And the fear said: if I declare this, he'll say his father turned traitor. And if I don't, he'll die in the war.

And a third thing, smaller, which she did not understand at first. Then she did.

Hope.

Then Dhamyan wrote: *And this is carried to you by one you do not doubt, the son of*.

And the pen stopped.

And Warda felt in the man's hand, as he wrote *son of*, another face. It was not Khardash. It was a thin face, with sunken eyes and a shut mouth. Warda had never seen this face in her life. But she saw its eyes. And she had seen eyes like them the night before, and the night before that, looking at her over the bow.

The son of Nuqar.

Then he wrote: *Neutrality*.

And at that moment, as he wrote the last letter, he heard something.

Warda felt the sound not as a sound. She felt it as Dhamyan had felt it: as a cold in the back. As a hand on the shoulder with no hand in it.

Dhamyan raised his head from the board and looked at the door. The pen in his hand. The ink on its tip running down, a drop, onto the end of the letter.

There was no one at the door.

Then, in his head, something like a thought, but it was not his thought. Warda felt it come in the way cold air comes in through a gap in a tent: *if you finish it, it won't arrive.*

Dhamyan froze.

Then he put down the pen.

He took the parchment and looked at it. He looked at the six lines, and the seventh word. Then he tore it. With strong hands, slowly, from top to bottom. He put one half under the large parchment on the board. And he said to himself, without speaking, in a voice Warda felt as if it were her own: if they take the large one, they'll take this with it, and think it's everything.

The other half he wrapped in the bread cloth that lay beside him, with the rest of his supper bread in it. He crawled to the patched corner of the rug. He picked open two stitches with his thumb. He slid it in.

And he said to himself: and this stays. Until someone comes who reads the ground.

Then there was the emptiness.

This time Warda knew it. She knew it before she reached it. She felt its edge the way one feels the edge of a cliff in the dark. She wanted to turn back. But the trace was strong, and she was in it, falling into it.

She went into the emptiness.

It was smooth. Cold. Nothing in it. Not darkness, because darkness is something. It was nothing. It was the place where a thing is when it

has been taken out. Like the gap in a mouth after a tooth is pulled. The tongue knows the shape of the tooth from the shape of the gap.

And this time Warda knew something of the emptiness's shape.

It was the shape of a person.

She came out of it gasping.

Qayla was holding her by the shoulders, hard, the way one holds someone drowning. Her face was close, her eyes wide.

"Warda."

"I'm here."

"You were screaming."

"I don't remember." She felt tears on her face, and the taste of salt in her mouth. "How long?"

"Long. The sun has set."

Warda looked at the door. The light was gray-blue. The lamp in the tent was lit. She did not remember anyone lighting it.

She raised her bare left hand and looked at it. It was shaking. She put on the glove.

Then she looked for the price.

She did that every time now. Since the bread lane. She searched her head the way one searches a pocket after passing through a crowd: what is missing? She went over things. Her name. Nawsam's name. The way from the Library door to her room. Hadran's face. The color of the gloves. The taste of sesame bread in the Dyers' Quarter. All here.

Then she came to something and did not find it.

There had been a woman. In the book she had touched with her bare hand days ago, or weeks, in Ilsum. An old woman copying and

weeping. Warda knew she had seen her. She knew it the way one knows one has dreamed, without remembering the dream. But the face was not there. She knew the woman was old, and that she had been weeping. But she no longer knew how she had wept. Or what her face had been.

She did not tell Qayla.

She told her what she had seen. All of it. The shaking hand, the weight, the fear for Khardash, the hope. The thin face she had felt as he wrote *son of*. The voice that was not a voice, and the thought that was not his: *if you finish it, it won't arrive.* The torn parchment, the half under the large parchment, the bread cloth. And *until someone comes who reads the ground.*

She said nothing about the shape of the emptiness.

She was not sure. She told herself that. She was not sure, and emptiness has no shape, and she had been screaming, as Qayla said, and someone screaming sees what isn't there.

But she knew that was not the reason.

Qayla was silent a long time after she finished.

Then she said, "Faqid."

"Yes."

"Dhamyan was going to send the letter with my brother. To Sitmara. The son of Nuqar. One she does not doubt. Because my brother is with Qalmir, and she trusts him. And because my brother..." She stopped. "And because if my brother carried it, he would be the one who brought the peace."

"That's what he's hiding."

"That's part of it." Qayla looked at her. "He told me at the Silt Well: the house of Nuqar waits. He's waiting. Waiting to know who killed Dhamyan, because if the killer was from Qalmir, then Qalmir killed the peace he was carrying. And if it was from the Loyal..." She did not finish.

"And if it was from neither?"

Qayla looked at her. And did not answer.

Taylam the Copyist came after supper.

Warda heard his voice at the door of the tent, asking the guard for her in the polished speech of Ilsum, which draws the words out a little. Before she could get up, Qayla had taken the torn half, wrapped it in the bread cloth, and put it in the breast of her robe. In one quick movement, as if she had done it before.

Taylam came in.

He was tall, taller than the door of the tent, so he stooped. He stood and looked at the Captain, then at the seer, then at the lamp. And he smiled.

"I've disturbed you."

"No," said Qayla.

"The seer hasn't come to our tent since the stone." He looked at Warda. "And the head of the Council will ask. He asked me to write to him every seven days with what has happened. Seven have passed. Have you anything to add to what you said at the stone?"

Warda looked at him.

At his long calm face and his brown eyes. And at his hands. His fingers were blue, as always, and the nail of his right thumb was broken. And she thought: all the Keepers have blue fingers. And she thought: I don't know this man. I met him three times in Ilsum, in the corridors,

and he said good morning to me. And she thought: and I don't know whom in Ilsum Taylam writes to, or who reads what he writes.

She felt Qayla still beside her. Still as a stone is still.

"No," said Warda. "Nothing."

It was the first time in her life she had lied to a Keeper.

After he left, they did not speak for a while.

Then Qayla said, "The letter you wrote to Nawsam."

"I haven't sent it."

"I know. I'm going to ask you something, and don't answer now."

"Ask."

"If Dhamyan had finished the word. If his letter had reached Sitmara, and she had stopped the machines. Who in Deymar would have lost?"

Warda looked at her.

"Khardash doesn't lose," said Qayla. "He gains his father, even if he loses his picture of him. My brother doesn't lose. He becomes the one who brought the peace. The Loyal don't lose. The machines stop, and that's what they want. The Unionists lose the water, yes. But the wells are opened to them. So they don't die." She paused. "And the Empress? Perhaps she loses. Perhaps not. I've never seen her. I don't know what she wants."

"Then who?"

"I don't know." Qayla looked at the lamp. "That's why we're going to her."

Hadran came before midnight and came in without asking leave, as the blind and old friends do. He sat on the ground with his staff across his

knees and his head tilted, as if listening to the tent.

Qayla told him.

He said nothing for a while. Then he said, "To Qalmir."

"Yes."

"By what road? Every road belongs to someone now. The ravine road to the Loyal, with their cords. The valley road to the Unionists, with their soldiers. If the Captain of the Knights goes by one of them, the other will say she leaned."

"I know."

"Then there's no road."

"There's a road." Qayla looked at him. "That belongs to no one."

Hadran was silent. And Warda saw his face change. Something tightened, then eased, the way a man's face tightens when he touches an old wound to learn whether it has healed.

"The Waste," he said.

"The Waste."

"Seven days without a well. Sand that moves. Glass. And other things. No one of the tribes has crossed it since..." He did not finish.

"You crossed it."

"I crossed it." He smiled, and there was no joy in the smile. "And look what it gave me." He raised his hand to his white eyes.

Warda did not sleep that night.

She sat in a corner of the tent, the gloves on her hands, the letter she had written to Nawsam in her lap. Three pages, in her small even hand, written on the night of the stone. Everything was in it. The emptiness, the voice, the blue fingers she had seen in the bow.

She read it again.

At the end she had written, as Keepers write to their masters: *And what I did not understand, I have written to you first, as you bade me.*

She looked at the line.

Then she remembered Nawsam's hand shaking as he said: write it to me first. She remembered that she had not understood why it shook. She remembered that Nawsam, when he sent her, had told her the knights were not to be believed. And had not told her why.

Then she reached out to the lamp and brought the edge of the letter near the flame.

She did not burn it.

She folded it four times, put it in a small leather pouch, and tied it to her belt under her robe. Where no one would see it. Where she had carried, since she was six, something else she did not know why she carried: a small white stone of salt, given to her by a woman whose face she did not remember, who had said to her: don't lose it.

From the Covenant: The Second Article

No blood without judgment, and no vengeance after the Covenant.

Whoever has one of his own killed, his right lies with the Council, not with his sword. If the Council judges, the judgment binds him and the killer alike. And if the Council does not judge within forty days, the Council has borne the blood.

— From the Ravine copy, which the Keepers recite at the Well of Oaths. In its margin, in a small blue hand whose writer is unknown: *"The folk of the Northern Ring read it: then the blood is loosed. In the Covenant Tongue, between* borne *and* loosed *lies one letter, and between the two readings lies a war."*

Part Two: The Waste

9. The Road

Hufayr said, "No."

He said it before she had finished. She had said: I'm going to Qalmir, and had not yet said by what road, or with whom, or when. But Hufayr had served her father twenty years and served her ten, and he knew from her face what she would say before she said it, the way a shepherd knows from the color of the sky what is coming.

"Fifteen days are left," he said. "Of the forty."

"I know."

"To Qalmir across the Waste is seven days. If you survive. And seven back. And whatever lies between. You'll come back after the time is up."

"I know."

"And when it's up, Khardash takes judgment into his own hand. And you're not here." He looked at her with his small eyes in the creased face she had never seen angry. He was not angry now. He was afraid. "And the knights, Qayla. Sixty-three of them have broken away in twenty-five days. If you go..."

"Then you're here."

Hufayr was silent.

"You're here, Uncle." She had not called him uncle since she was small. "You know what I know, and more. The knights listen to you before they listen to me. And if the fortieth day comes and I haven't come back, tell Khardash..." She stopped.

"Tell him what?"

She looked at the parchment wrapped in bread cloth in the breast of her robe. She did not take it out.

"Tell him the Captain of the Knights has gone to ask about the last thing his father wrote."

They left on the twenty-seventh night, after midnight, when the plain was asleep.

Three camels, and three souls. On the camels, water for ten days, in double skins of goatskin tarred on the inside. Dates and ghee and flour. A little firewood, because the Waste has none. Wool cloaks against the cold, because at night the Waste is colder than anywhere in Surdan, and by day hotter.

Qayla took no knight. She had wanted to take two, and Hadran said no. He said: the Waste doesn't like crowds. Three is enough. She did not ask him why. She knew there was something in it he was not saying.

They went out from the plain eastward, then bent northeast, to where the known land ends.

The Waste began without a sign.

There was no border. No mountain, no valley, no rock of which people say what lies beyond it is the Waste. The land changed slowly, the

way a man's face changes as he ages, so that no one knows the day he became old. The gravel grew smaller, and fewer, and became sand. The sand paled, from red to orange to a washed-out yellow. The thornbushes grew fewer, and fewer, then there was one, alone, on a dune, dry, then nothing.

On the first morning, when the sun came up, Qayla looked around and saw nothing she knew.

Sand in every direction. Almost white. And on its surface, where the sun struck it, a faint glitter, like salt. It was not salt. Or there was salt in it. She did not know.

"Salt," said Hadran, as if he had seen what she was looking at. "The whole Waste is salt under the sand. There was a sea here, they say. Before the Flood. Or after. No one knows."

"Who says?"

"The Keepers." He tilted his head toward Warda. "Ask her."

Qayla looked at Warda. The girl was on her camel, bent a little forward, her gloved hands on the front of the saddle, her face pale. Paler than it had been on the plain.

"I don't know," said Warda. "In the Library there are books that say that. And books that say otherwise." She was quiet. Then she said, lower, "But the ground here is... heavy."

Qayla did not understand what she meant until they stopped for the midday rest.

Hadran had chosen the place: a large dune with shade on its north side, room for three. They couched the camels. Qayla got down, and Hadran got down, feeling the ground with his staff before he set his foot. Warda got down.

And stood.

And did not move.

She had put her feet on the sand and stayed standing, as if waiting for something. Her eyes were open, but they were not looking. Then Qayla saw her bend, slowly, and reach her gloved hands to the ground, like someone who wants to be sure the ground is there.

"Warda?"

"A moment."

Then she stood up. Her hands were shaking.

"What?"

"Nothing." The seer held her hands, one in the other. "The gloves. They aren't enough here."

Qayla looked at her.

"Salt keeps the trace," said Warda. She spoke like someone repeating an old lesson to hold on to it. "That's what they teach on the first day. Water erases, salt keeps. That's why the vault under the Library is salt. That's why the gloves are tanned in salt: salt holds the trace, so it doesn't pass through to my hands." She paused. "But here..."

"Here all the ground is salt."

"All the ground is salt. And all the ground keeps." Warda looked at the white sand around her, without end. "Everything that has happened here since... since I don't know. All of it is here. Kept. And nothing erases it. No water, no rain. All of it." She closed her eyes. "I hear it through the gloves. Through my soles. Like the sea."

Qayla did not know what to say.

Hadran said from the shade, without raising his head, "Don't sit on the sand. Sit on the saddle. Don't sleep on the ground. And if you hear something calling you by your name, don't answer."

Warda sat on the saddle in the shade, her knees to her chest, the gloves on her knees. She did not eat. She drank a little.

Qayla sat beside her.

They did not speak for a while. The sun was above them, and the heat shimmered on the sand, so that the horizon looked like water. Hadran was asleep, or seemed asleep, his head on his staff.

Then Qayla said, "What did you forget?"

Warda looked at her.

"When you saw the parchment," said Qayla. "You told me the night of the rug that seeing has a price. That you forgot the number of the tower steps. And when you saw the parchment you didn't say."

Warda did not answer for a while. Then she said, "A face."

"Whose?"

"A woman's." She looked at her hands. "I don't know her. I saw her in a book in Ilsum, before I came. An old woman copying and weeping. She was the first thing I saw. The day the price began. And now I don't know her face. I know she was. And that she wept. And I don't know how."

"Does it matter?"

Warda looked at her. And in her eyes, for the first time, was something like anger.

"I don't know if it matters," she said. "That's the thing. I don't know if it matters. Because I don't remember why it mattered. At first you forget things that don't matter. The name of a lane. A number of steps. Then you forget things without knowing whether they mattered. Then..." She stopped.

"Then?"

"Then you don't know what you've forgotten." She said it like someone talking to herself. "There's a man in the Library, the oldest of

the Keepers after Nawsam. He's been seeing for fifty years. He doesn't know his mother's name. And he doesn't know he doesn't know. If you ask him, he'll tell you a name. A different name, every time."

Qayla looked at the girl sitting on the saddle. Twenty-six years old. She took her gloved hand and held it.

Warda did not pull it away.

"Then why do you see?" said Qayla.

"And why do you guard?"

On the first night, Warda did not sleep.

On the second night she slept a little, sitting on the saddle, her head against the side of the couched camel. Qayla could hear her in the dark, talking in her sleep. Words she did not understand. Not the speech of Surdan, nor the accent of Ilsum. Older words, with heavy sounds, like stones rolling.

In the morning Qayla asked her.

"I don't remember," said Warda. Then: "What did I say?"

Qayla tried to imitate the sounds. She could not.

And Hadran said, tightening the saddle on his camel, "The tongue of the Nuthar. Or what's left of it in the sand."

On the second day Qayla saw the columns.

They were riding in the forenoon along a long dune, like the back of a whale. When they reached its crest, she saw them in the valley below. Tops of stones. Three, or four, or more. Coming out of the sand, each taller than a man, gray, carved. They stood apart from one another, in an almost straight line running north until it vanished in the mirage.

She stopped.

"Don't go down," said Hadran. He could not see them. But his camel had stopped when hers stopped, so he knew.

"What are they?"

"Heads." He got down from his camel, slowly, and felt the sand with his staff. Then he stood with his face to the valley, as if he could see it. "The heads of columns. The columns are under the sand. And what's under the columns..." He stopped.

"A city?"

"It was a city." He did not say its name.

Qayla looked at Warda. The seer sat on her camel with her hands held to her chest, looking at the columns. Her eyes were wet.

"Don't go near them," said Hadran. His voice was sharp, as Qayla had never heard it. "Seer. Not these, not the ones after. Many things will pass us on the road. Don't touch any of them. And don't look at them long."

"Why?"

Hadran was silent a while.

"Because what was in them is still in them," he said at last. "All of it. Since their last night."

They passed it at a distance, along the crest of the dune, without going down.

Qayla did not look at it. But she saw something from the corner of her eye, by the third column. A shape. Standing. The size of a man, or a little bigger. White, like salt. It stood the way a man stands who is waiting.

She looked at it.

It was not there.

Or it was there, and it was not a man. It was a mass of salt in the shape of a man, or in the shape of what had been a man. Hands raised to the face. Head bowed. She did not know if it was carving, or something else.

She turned her face away.

She did not ask Hadran then. That night, when they couched at the foot of a far dune with more stars above them than Qayla had seen in her life, as if the sky were nearer in the Waste, she asked him.

"The shape by the third column."

Hadran did not answer for a while.

"I saw it," she said.

"I know you saw it." He raised his face to the sky, to the stars he could not see. "Your father saw it too. He stood looking at it, as you stood. I told him: don't look. He didn't listen."

Qayla looked at him.

"You were here with my father."

"I was here with your father."

"When?"

"Twenty years ago. You were small. Nine? Ten? I remember you cried when he left." He smiled, and there was no joy in the smile. "Did no one tell you?"

"They said he went to Qalmir. Herding camels for a merchant. A year."

"He went to Qalmir." Hadran nodded. "Across the Waste. With me and two other men you don't know. Not herding camels." He tilted his head, as if without meaning to, toward where Warda slept on the saddle.

"Then what was he doing?"

Hadran was silent.

Qayla waited. She knew this silence. It was her father's silence. The silence that does not say no, and does not say yes. It says: not now.

"We were looking for something," Hadran said at last. "For a man in Ilsum. He paid well. And your father needed the money. The house of Nuqar had fallen, the tribe was hungry, and a man from the League was pressing him for a loan he had never taken. And I was... I was a seer."

Qayla looked at him.

"A seer?"

"I was a seer. One of the Keepers. My fingers were blue, like any Keeper's. And cleaner." He raised his hands and looked at them with his white eyes. They were ordinary hands, cracked, brown, without ink. "Then we went into the Waste. We walked fourteen days, to a place deep inside it that had a door. We found what we were looking for. And I touched it." He paused. "The storm came after I touched it. Not before."

"What was it?"

"I don't remember."

Qayla looked at him.

"I don't remember," said Hadran again, quietly. "That's what it took. Not my eyes. The storm took my eyes. The thing took... what was. I don't remember what it was. And I don't remember what I saw when I touched it. I remember I touched it. And I remember I screamed. And I remember your father carried me on his back for three days." He raised his face. "That's all that's left. I didn't go back to Ilsum for ten years. And no one there knew me. Except one."

"Who?"

But Hadran had turned his face the other way and wrapped the cloak around his head.

"Sleep, daughter of Nuqar. Tomorrow is the Glass Sea."

Qayla did not sleep.

She sat under the stars with the bow across her knees and thought about her father.

She remembered him the way silent people are remembered: a little. A big man, with a black beard and hands that did not tire. And silent. He was the most silent man in the tribe, and people loved his silence, because they said he spoke only the truth. She remembered that he had been gone a year when she was small, and came back thin, with white in his beard that had not been there. He did not speak of the year. No one asked him. Then he died five years later, in the small war over the fourth Ravine Well, by an arrow of the Sons of Qaydh. She was fourteen.

She had not known he went into the Waste.

And she remembered, without knowing why, the song her grandmother used to sing to the bow at night, in a low voice like wind in the acacias:

Seven Seals on seven doors, the Collar on the water, the water on the salt, and if the Collar comes unstrung one night, what lies under the salt comes out asking its name.

She had thought it a song for sleep. Her grandmother said the people of the Collar had made it before the Covenant, when they commanded the Diyazin and the Diyazin obeyed, and that the night the Collar came unstrung was called the Night of Unstringing. She explained no more. And now, under these stars, a day from the Glass Sea, it no longer seemed to her a song for sleep.

She had not known he worked for a man in Ilsum.

And she thought: every man in my life has had a secret. My father. My brother. Dhamyan. Hadran. And she thought: and I. I have a secret

too. Her secret was in the breast of her robe, wrapped in bread cloth, and it had been in Warda's eyes when she read the bow.

She looked at Warda. She was asleep on the saddle, her head against the camel's side, her mouth moving a little, as if speaking the language of stones.

Just before dawn, when the cold was at its worst, Qayla felt something.

It was not a sound. It was not wind. It was in the ground, beneath her. The way one feels, in a tent, a man walking outside before hearing his step.

She laid her palm on the sand.

The sand was warm.

It should not have been warm. The whole night had been cold, the sand around them cold as stone, her fingers stiff with cold. But the sand under her palm was warm. A faint, distant warmth, like the warmth of a sleeper's back.

She lifted her hand.

She looked at the camels. All three camels had risen, in the dark, without anyone raising them. They stood with their necks stretched north and their ears up.

None of them made a sound.

Then, slowly, they couched again. One after another.

Qayla looked at Hadran. He was awake. He was sitting with the cloak on his shoulders, his face to the north. He said nothing. She did not ask him.

On the third day, a little before sunset, they climbed the last dune.

And Qayla saw the Glass Sea.

She had never seen a sea. She knew it from stories, and from the talk of merchants. Water without end, moving, shining. When she saw what lay below her, she thought at first: this is it. This is the sea.

Then she saw that it did not move.

It stretched from the foot of the dune to the horizon, in every direction, smooth, level, shining. The setting sun lay on it, so that it was red, and orange, and gold, like a great cup of wine. And the sky was in it. All the sky. The thin clouds in the west, the first star in the east, all in it upside down, as if the earth had turned over and up had become down.

It was not water.

It was glass. Sand that had melted once, then set. And when Qayla looked at its edge, below the dune, she saw small bubbles in it, trapped, like breaths that had stopped.

"How wide is it?" she said, her voice faint.

"A day," said Hadran. "If we walk by night."

"Why by night?"

"Because by day the sun on it burns the camels from below. And because what's under it sleeps deeper at night."

Qayla looked at him.

Then she looked at Warda.

The seer had got down from her camel and was standing at the edge of the dune, where the sand ends and the glass begins. She looked down. Her face, in the red light thrown back from the glass, was the face of someone standing at the door of an old house she knows without remembering when she lived in it.

Qayla saw her take off the left glove.

"Warda!"

The seer looked at her. There were tears in her eyes, and she was not crying.

“It’s calling me,” she said. “Not by my name. By something else.”

And before Qayla could reach her, she had knelt and laid her bare palm on the glass.

10. The Glass Sea

The glass was not cold.

That was the first thing Warda knew, before anything. She laid her palm on it and waited for the cold, the cold of stone at sunset, the cold of hard smooth things. It did not come. The glass was warm under her palm, like skin.

Then it opened.

It was not like the rug, or the parchment, or the bow.

In all of those, Warda had gone into the trace the way one goes into a room: there is a door, and there is an inside, and she knew where she was. Here there was no door. The trace was everywhere, under her, around her, above her, and she had been in it from the start, as if she had never been anywhere else. Like someone who dives into a sea and opens her eyes and does not know where the surface is.

And she saw a city.

The city stood on a plain, and the plain was green.

She had never in her life seen green like it. Not even in the Delta, with its palms and reeds and rice. This was another green: long grass rippling in the wind, trees whose names she did not know, broad-leaved,

and water running in streams between the fields. Much water. She could hear it.

In the middle of the plain were the columns.

Hundreds of them. Or thousands. She could not count them. They were gray, smooth, each carved from a single stone, and they were taller than anything Warda had seen, taller than Nawsam's tower, taller than all the towers of Ilsum together. They stood in rows, row behind row, like a forest of stone. And among them were houses, and streets, and markets, and people.

The people were tall.

That was the second thing she saw. They were taller than the people of the Delta, or of Surdan, or anyone. They walked slowly, as if they were in a hurry for nothing, as if all time were theirs. Their clothes were white and long, and on their heads were things like small crowns of bright metal.

They did not look at the ground.

Then she heard the humming.

It came from the columns. Not all of them. Some. The tallest, in the middle of the city, around a great square paved with white stone. At the top of each of them was something that shone, like crystal, or like frozen water. The humming came from them, low, steady, like the sound of bees in a far-off hive.

And Warda knew this humming.

She had heard it. Not long ago. In the Salt Vault, under the Library, at the small iron door in the north wall. The cold, and the humming. It was not quite the same sound. But it was of the same kind, the way a brother's voice is of the same kind as his brother's.

And she saw something else.

The humming columns were drinking.

No water went into them. There was nothing to be seen. But Warda was in the trace, and the trace does not lie about this. She felt that the columns were taking. From the ground. From under the ground. From the grass, and the trees, and the water in the streams. They were taking something that had no name, something like what she took when she saw, but they did not take it from matter alone. They took it from the very life that was in the matter.

And she saw the grass at the edges of the square.

It was yellow.

Then the trace moved, as things move in dreams, without her knowing how.

She was in a market. The tall people passed around her and did not see her, because she was not there. The market had everything: fruit she did not know, cloth in colors she had never seen, tools of bright metal, and books. Many books, on tablets of thin stone, carved in heavy letters, like the words she had spoken in her sleep, without knowing it.

And in the middle of the market was a woman.

She was not tall like the others. She was shorter, and thinner, and in a gray robe, not white. There was nothing on her head. She stood on a stone in the middle of the market, and spoke.

Warda did not understand what she said. The words were in the heavy sounds, rolling like stones. But she understood something from the woman's face, and her hands. She pointed to the columns. Then to the ground. Then to the yellow grass. Then to the sky. Then she put her hands on her chest and bowed.

And people passed around her.

Some looked at her and went on their way. Some laughed. And one, a tall man with a crown of red metal, stopped in front of her, looked down at her, and said something short. Then he spat on the stone she stood on, and walked on.

The woman did not stop.

Warda did not know her name. There was no name in the trace. There was only a woman in a gray robe in the market of a great city, saying something no one heard.

Then the trace moved again.

And it was night.

All the humming columns were humming, all together, and the sound was louder, much louder, until it was like a roar. The crystal at the top of each column shone with a bluish white light, like moonlight on water. The square was full of tall people in their white robes, standing in rings, their faces raised.

And the ground under the square was warm.

Warda felt the warmth in her feet, though she was not there. A warmth rising from the depths, a living warmth, like the warmth of a great sleeper's back. Then she felt something else. She felt the warmth move.

As if the sleeper had turned over.

The humming did not stop.

And Warda felt the ground under the square split. She did not see it split. She felt it, the way one feels a bone break in one's own body. A long deep crack, from the middle of the square to the columns. She saw

the tall people lower their heads, and look. They did not move. They stood in their rings, their faces turned down now, to the crack.

Then a breath came out of the crack.

It was not fire yet. It was a hot breath, like the breath of an oven when its door is opened. It passed over the square, and the people, and the columns. Warda felt the heat, and felt the white stone of the square crack under the people's feet. And she heard a sound.

It was the first sound in all the trace unlike anything she had ever heard.

It was not a scream, or a roar, or wind. It was a word. A single long word, of three syllables, in sounds heavier than the tall people's sounds, heavier than any sounds. As if the mountain had spoken. The word came out of the crack and filled the square, and filled the city, and filled the plain.

Then there was the light.

Warda did not see the fire.

She saw the light. White. Then red. Then white again. She saw the columns in the light stand for a moment, black, like fingers stretched to the sky. She saw the tall people in the square, in the light, raise their hands to their faces.

Then, in the middle of the white light, there was the emptiness.

And Warda knew it. She had seen it twice. In the tent, and in the parchment. The smooth cold emptiness that is not darkness because darkness is something. But this was not an emptiness the size of a man. It was the size of the square. It was the size of the city. It began where the light was whitest, and spread, and ate the trace from its edges, the way fire eats a page from its rim.

And it was eating her.

She felt it coming closer. Not like something coming. Like an edge. Like someone standing on a shore with the water eating the sand under her feet. And each time the emptiness came a step closer, something went. A sound. Then a picture. Then...

And she felt a hand on her shoulder.

A real hand. A hand from here, not from there.

"Warda."

She was in the dark.

It was not the darkness of the emptiness. It was the darkness of night, a real darkness, with stars in it. And she was moving. She was on something that moved beneath her, swaying, with a steady rhythm. A camel. She was on a camel.

"Warda. Can you hear me?"

She turned her head.

Qayla was on the other camel, beside her, close, her hand stretched to her shoulder. She was holding her, as if afraid she would fall.

"I hear you," said Warda. Her voice was strange in her ears, rough, as if she had screamed for a long time.

"Thank the Maker." Qayla loosened her hand, but did not take it away. "How many fingers?"

Warda looked at her other hand, raised in front of her, in the starlight.

"Three."

"What's my name?"

"Qayla. Qayla daughter of Nuqar."

"And his?" She pointed ahead, where a third camel walked with a bent shape on it, wrapped in a cloak.

"Hadran."

At last Qayla let go.

They were on the glass.

Warda saw it when she looked down. The camels were walking on a black shining surface that held the stars. All the stars. So the stars were above them and below them, and they were walking among them, in the middle of the sky, as if the earth had vanished.

The camels' feet made almost no sound on the glass. Only a faint whisper, like the whisper of silk.

"How..." said Warda. "Since when?"

"Since sunset." Qayla looked at her. "You touched it at sunset. And screamed. And didn't hear me. I pulled you off it, and you fought me." She paused. "I've never seen anyone fight like that."

"Then?"

"Then you went quiet. Your eyes were open. And you didn't see me. So we put you on the camel, tied you, and went down." Qayla looked ahead, at Hadran. "Hadran said: we don't wait. He said: if we wait for her to wake, we may not cross tonight. And if we don't cross tonight, we may not cross."

"And this is..."

"Midnight." Qayla looked at the sky. "A little after."

They did not speak for a while.

Then Warda said, "I saw the city."

"What city?"

"The one under the columns." She looked down at the black glass the camels were walking on. "Not under the columns. Here. It was here. This..." She did not finish.

Qayla looked down with her.

"It was a plain," said Warda. "Green. With water in it. More than the water of the Delta. And there were people. Tall. They were... they were taking from the ground. With the columns. The way we take. The way the Inquisitor takes. But they took more. And the grass went yellow. And they didn't notice. Or they noticed and didn't care."

"Then?"

"Then something woke." Warda looked at Qayla. "Under the ground. It was asleep, and the columns woke it. And it spoke."

Qayla said nothing. But Warda saw her hand tighten on the camel's rein.

"Then there was fire. And the fire melted the sand." Warda looked at the glass. "This. This is what's left. And the wind came after and buried what didn't melt. The columns we saw yesterday. And the city."

"And the people?"

Warda did not answer.

Then she said, "There was a woman. In the market. Telling them something. And they were laughing."

"What was she saying?"

"I don't know. I didn't understand her language." Warda looked at her hands. "But I know."

Just before dawn they reached the edge of the glass.

The edge was not like the edge by the dune, where the glass begins all at once. Here it was gradual. The glass grew rougher, then there was sand in it, then it was sand with glass in it, like the broken pieces of a bowl. Then it was sand.

They couched the camels below the first dune, in the blue dark before dawn.

Warda got down. Her legs were shaking and she almost fell, and Qayla caught her. She sat on the saddle and looked back at the Glass Sea.

In the first light it was silver-gray, like an old mirror.

Then she asked Qayla.

It was a small question. Warda did not think about it before she asked. She was sitting on the saddle while Qayla unloaded the camel, and Hadran sat in the shade of the dune with his head on his staff. And Warda thought: strange. A few days ago I didn't know this woman. And she wanted to know when she had come to know her.

"When did we first meet?"

Qayla stopped.

She looked at her.

"At the Well," she said. "At sunset. You came with Hadran."

"At the Well," Warda repeated. Then: "And what did you say to me?"

Qayla did not answer for a while.

Then she set the load in her hands on the sand, walked to Warda, and sat in front of her. She looked into her eyes.

"What do you remember, Warda? About that day?"

Warda thought.

She remembered the road. From Ilsum to the Well. Twelve days on a camel, with Hadran. She remembered the last night on the road, when Hadran told her: tomorrow you arrive. She remembered she had not slept that night. She remembered...

She remembered the tent. At night. The rug. The seeing.

And between them, nothing.

It was not the emptiness. It was not smooth or cold. It was only nothing, the way it is in a dream when you move from place to place and

do not know how. There was the last night on the road, and then there was the tent. And between them, a whole day, the arrival, and the Well, the first sight of the plain, the first words she said, the first words said to her, and Qayla's face for the first time: nothing.

"I don't remember," she said.

And she felt something sink in her chest. Heavy. Cold.

"I don't remember that day, Qayla. I don't remember that you... I don't remember seeing you the first time."

Qayla said nothing for a long time.

The light was coming up. And Warda saw her face in the light. There was nothing in it of the hardness of the Captain of the Knights. It was the face of a tired woman of twenty-nine who had not slept for two days, looking at a friend.

Warda had not known she was a friend until she saw it in that face.

"You stammered," said Qayla at last.

"What?"

"When I asked you: are you the seer? You said: y... yes. Then you closed your eyes as if counting in your head, and said your name." Qayla smiled. A small sad smile, the first smile Warda had seen on her face. "And you almost fell off the camel when it knelt. And you had on this gray kerchief. And I asked how old you were, and you said: twenty-six. And I said to Hadran: they sent the youngest. And he said: they sent the strongest." She paused. "And I thought you were one of them. The Keepers. I thought you'd come to cover up what I saw."

"And what did I say?"

"You said: I want to see the tent. And you didn't stammer." Qayla looked at her. "And at night, by the fire, you said: I don't read the trace

of the living without their leave. And I believed you. I don't know why. I thought you were one of them, and I believed you."

Warda wept.

She had never wept before over something she had forgotten. Not the lane, not the steps, not the old copyist's face. Each time she had felt the weight, the cold, but she had not wept. She had told herself: this is the price, and every seer pays it, and Nawsam paid it, and all the Keepers paid it.

But she wept now.

Qayla did not reach out to her. She sat in front of her, looked at her, and waited. The way one waits for rain to end.

When it was over, Warda took a small notebook from her belt. A notebook of thin Delta paper, bound in soft leather, in which she wrote what she saw, to read to Nawsam. She opened it to a blank page at the back. She took out the pen.

Qayla looked at her.

"What are you writing?"

"What's been lost." Warda raised her eyes to her. "From now on. Everything. So that even if I forget it, I'll know it was."

And she wrote, in her small even hand, at the top of the page:

The name of the lane where I buy bread.

The number of steps in Nawsam's tower.

The old copyist's face.

Then she stopped. She looked at Qayla.

"Tell me again. What was the day like?"

And Qayla told her. All of it. The sunset, the Well, the forty knights who had left that morning, the gray kerchief, the stammer, and Hadran

feeling the ground at the door of the tent and saying: someone stood here a long time. And didn't go in.

And Warda wrote:

The day I met Qayla. She said I stammered, and almost fell off the camel. And she said she believed me.

Hadran's voice came from the shade of the dune, without his raising his head from the staff.

"The word you heard," he said. "In the trace. From the crack."

Warda looked at him. She had told him nothing about the word. She had told Qayla, on the camel, in the night, and Hadran had been ahead of them, far off.

"I heard you," said Hadran. "The Waste carries sound. Don't say it. Not now, not later. Not in your sleep, if you can help it."

"Why?"

Hadran raised his head at last and turned his white eyes toward her.

"Because the one who said it is still listening."

11. A Voice Under the Sand

They lost the third camel on the fifth night.

It was no one's fault. Qayla told herself so many times afterward, and did not believe herself once. They had couched in a hollow between two great dunes after a long day's march, the camels tired and the people more tired. Qayla hobbled the three camels with her own hand, as she did every night, a hobble on the left knee, and tied the third, Hadran's camel, to the saddle of the second. The third carried four skins of water. Half of what was left.

She slept.

And the sound woke her.

It was not a sound the ear hears first. It was a sound the bones hear. It was in the ground beneath her, rising from the sand into her back, her ribs, her teeth. It was low, deeper than any sound she had heard. Deeper than distant thunder. Deeper than the sound of the sea she had never heard. As if the earth were breathing.

She opened her eyes.

And the sand was moving.

It was not wind. There was no wind. The night was still, the stars fixed, the air cold and unmoving. But the sand on the slope of the great

dune above them was running. Coming down, slowly, in thin threads, like water running over a stone. It made a whisper, like many breaths.

And the camels rose.

The first two camels rose on three legs, because of the hobble on the knee. One of them groaned, a long drawn groan Qayla had never heard from a camel. A groan like weeping. The other jerked its head back, its eyes white in the dark.

The third broke the rope.

Qayla saw it rise and pull, and the rope she had tied with her own hand snapped, not at the knot but in the middle, as if it were old. Then it ran. It did not run the way camels run, with that swaying gait. It ran like an animal that knows death is behind it. On three legs, limping in the hobble, south, into the dark.

"The water!" Qayla shouted.

And she ran after it.

A hand caught her.

It was Hadran's hand. He gripped her wrist with a strength she had not known was in him, and pulled her back. "No."

"The water, Hadran! Four skins!"

"Don't run." His voice was low, but steady. "Don't run on the sand. Not now."

"Why?"

"Because they hear footsteps."

Qayla stopped.

The camel had gone into the dark. She heard it a while, its feet on the sand and the hobble dragging, then nothing. Then, far off, a single

groan. Then nothing.

The sound under the ground had changed.

It was not louder. It was nearer. Or it was moving. She did not know. It changed the way a sleeper's sound changes when he turns over, so that his moaning comes from another side. The sand on the slope was still running, and the whisper could still be heard.

Qayla looked at Hadran.

He was standing with his hand still on her wrist, his face bent toward the ground. As if listening. He was still as she had never seen him still. She could not even hear his breath.

"What is it?" she said, her voice barely more than a breath.

Hadran did not answer for a while.

Then he said, "It's turning over in its sleep."

She did not ask him what.

She sat on the sand, slowly, where she was, and he sat beside her. They did not speak. Warda was sitting on her saddle nearby, her hands over her ears. Not over her ears. On her temples. As if holding her head so it would not crack.

Time passed.

Qayla did not know how long. An hour? More? The sound under the ground came and went, like waves. It rose until she felt it in her teeth, then faded until she thought it was over, then rose. And each time it rose, the sand ran on the slope, and the camels got up, then knelt.

Then, one time, it did not come back.

It faded, as it faded every time. Qayla waited for it to rise. It did not. The sand on the slope went still. The camels knelt and stretched their necks along the ground, as if dead of tiredness.

And Qayla heard, for the first time since she woke, her own breathing.

"It was here."

Warda said it. She had lowered her hands from her temples, and her face in the starlight was white as salt.

"What?"

"It was here," she said again. "Under us. Not far. I felt it. As I felt it in the glass. In the city. The thing that was asleep under the square."

"Not the same thing," said Hadran.

The two of them looked at him.

"Not the same," he said. "That one's deeper. And farther. In the north. This is another." He paused. "There's more than one."

"How many?" said Qayla.

"No one knows."

"The Keepers?"

"The Keepers know that they don't know." Hadran smiled that smile with no joy in it. "Which is more than anyone else knows."

Then he said it.

Qayla knew the word. Everyone in Surdan knew it. But it was an old women's word, like ghouls and night-hags, used to frighten children at night. Don't sleep outside the tent, or it will eat you. Don't walk on the sand alone, or it will hear you. She had never in her life heard it from a grown man, in a serious voice, at night, in the Waste.

"The Shaghadir," said Hadran.

No one said anything.

"That's what they're called in Ilsum," he said. "In the old books. The tribes say: the sleepers. Or: the folk of the sand. Or they say nothing, which is better." He looked at the ground with his white eyes, as if he could see it. "They fell asleep long ago. In the age of the columns. Since the glass became glass. They fell asleep, and no one woke them."

"Until now," said Warda.

Hadran did not answer.

In the morning Qayla searched for the camel.

She did not search with her eyes alone. She knew that before she began, and she knew she would tell no one.

She walked to where the rope had snapped and saw the tracks on the sand. Deep, uneven footprints, and a dragging line between them, the line of the hobble. The tracks ran south, then curved, then vanished in the sand that had run down from the slope in the night and covered them.

She stopped at the last of what could be seen.

She knelt.

And she laid her hand on the sand, bare. No glove on it. She had no gloves. She had not done this since she was thirteen, the day her grandmother died, when Qayla touched her cold hand and saw something she had told no one, and had never tried again.

She closed her eyes.

It was not as Warda described it.

It was not a room, or a sea, or a market. It was much weaker than that. It was the way you see something from the corner of your eye in

the dark, then look at it and it goes. A shadow. A thread. A feeling in the palm like a faint warmth, leaning toward one side.

Toward the southwest.

And with it, fear. The camel's fear. Not a person's fear. It was simpler, and bigger. A fear that did not know what it feared, and knew only how to run.

Then there was something else.

She did not know what it was. It was at the edges of the thread, like a larger shadow. Another warmth, deeper, farther. It was not the camel. And it was not afraid.

She drew back her hand.

She stood. She turned until she faced southwest. And she walked.

She did not walk long. She found it in less than an hour, in a hollow between two dunes, where she should have found it. It was kneeling. The four skins were on its saddle.

But she did not go near it at once.

She stood at the edge of the hollow, and looked.

The camel was kneeling, its neck stretched along the ground, its head on the sand. Its eyes were open. It was not moving. It was not dead. She could see it breathing, slowly, its chest rising and falling. But it was still the way things that do not want to be seen are still.

And the sand around it was smooth.

Not like sand everywhere, with the small ripples the wind leaves. It was smooth, as if a great hand had passed over it. A perfect circle around the camel, twenty paces across. And in the middle, the camel. And not a single footprint in it.

Not one.

Qayla looked at the tracks she had followed, the tracks of the runaway camel, coming from the northeast and ending at the edge of the smooth circle. Then nothing. Then the camel, in its middle, kneeling.

As if it had not walked there. As if it had been set down.

She went down to it.

She did not think. She knew that if she thought, she would not go. She went down the way one goes into cold water, all at once. She walked on the smooth sand, and it was warm under her feet. Warm as skin. She reached the camel, untied the hobble, and took the rein.

And the camel rose.

It rose at once, as if it had been waiting for her. It looked at her with its big wet eyes. And in them was something she had never seen in a camel's eyes. Something like gratitude.

She led it out of the circle.

She did not look back.

When she got back, Hadran was sitting where she had left him, Warda beside him.

Hadran knew the camel was there before she arrived. He did not see it. He heard it. He raised his head.

"You found it."

"I found it."

"And the water?"

"On its saddle. Four skins."

Hadran said nothing for a while. Then he said, low, "How did you find it, daughter of Nuqar?"

Qayla looked at him. Then at Warda. The seer was looking at her, and in her eyes was something Qayla knew. The question that is not asked.

"I followed its tracks," she said.

"The sand covered the tracks in the night."

"I followed its tracks," said Qayla again.

Hadran was silent.

Warda looked at her a long time. Then she turned her face away and said nothing. But Qayla saw her looking at Qayla's right hand. The bare one. There was a faint tremor in it that Qayla could not stop.

She did not tell them about the smooth circle.

They walked all that day, in the heat, without speaking. Qayla rode with her hand in her lap under the cloak, where no one could see it. And she thought.

She did not know what the price was.

Warda had told her: the price is taken from memory, or from life, or from mercy. Or it may be taken from the ground. Qayla had seen once, the day her grandmother died, and had not known then what she paid. She had been young. And the grief was too big to search for anything lost in it.

Now she searched.

As Warda searched. In her head, the way one searches a pocket after a crowd. Her father: here. Her mother: here, her face, her voice, the way she tied her hair. Her brother. The knights, their names, the two hundred and thirty-seven. Hufayr. The Well. The rope that had been shorter than it should have been. The night of the murder, and the ember, and the blue fingers.

All here.

Then she thought of her notebook.

It was not with her. She had left it in her tent on the plain, in a small box under the bedding, where it always was. A small notebook, bound in black leather, in which she wrote at night when no one could see, then tore out the pages and burned them. No one had ever read it. Not even Hufayr. And she knew what was in it. Every word. Because she wrote the word and then burned it, so it stayed only in her head.

And there had been a poem. About her mother. She had written it three months after her death. Eight lines. She had burned it, as she burned everything. But she knew it the way one knows a prayer.

She said it to herself.

The first line. And the second. And the third. And the fourth.

And the fifth...

It was not there.

There was the fourth, then the sixth. And between them a place. She knew something was in it. She knew it had been a line, and that it had been about her mother's hands. But the words were not there.

And there was no notebook to look in. Because she had burned it.

On the sixth night the sound did not come.

They couched on the back of a dune, not in a hollow, as Hadran had said. Qayla hobbled the camels and tied them to one another with double ropes. She did not sleep. She sat with the bow across her knees and her ear to the ground.

Nothing came.

But at midnight she heard Warda speaking.

She was not asleep. She was sitting on her saddle, awake, her eyes open. Her lips were moving. And when Qayla listened, she heard the

heavy sounds, like stones rolling. But not all of them. In the middle of them she heard a word, a syllable, then another.

Three syllables.

Qayla got up, went to her quickly, knelt in front of her, and put her hand over her mouth.

Warda looked at her. Her eyes were wide, the eyes of someone who wakes from a dream and does not know where she is.

Qayla did not lift her hand.

"No," she said. "Don't say it."

Warda nodded, slowly, under her hand.

Qayla lowered her hand. She did not get up. She sat in front of her on the sand, took her gloved hands, and held them.

"It was calling me," said Warda, in a voice like a whisper. "I didn't want to answer. But the word was in my mouth. As if it were mine."

"It isn't yours."

"I know." Warda looked at her. "But how do I know what is mine, Qayla, when every day I forget something?"

Qayla did not answer.

They stayed like that until dawn. Her hands in Warda's hands. Neither of them said anything.

On the seventh morning they climbed the last dune.

And Qayla saw the land change, as it had changed at the other edge of the Waste, but the other way. The sand turned yellow, then orange. Gravel came into it. Then there was a shrub. Then another. Then there was a line on the horizon.

Green.

It was not like the green of Surdan, scattered patches around the wells. It was a whole line, running from the far north to the far south, as

if someone had drawn it with a pen. And above it, in the light haze, shapes. Tall. Thin. Like fingers reaching to the sky.

"The Spires," said Hadran. He could not see them.

"How do you know?"

"I hear them."

Qayla listened.

And she heard them. Faint, distant, like bees in a hive beyond a mountain.

She had never heard this sound before. But Warda, beside her on her camel, raised her gloved hands to her chest and held them together, as if protecting something.

"I know it," said Warda.

Qayla looked at her.

"From the city. In the glass." She was looking at the long fingers on the horizon. "The columns. They hummed like that."

12. Qalmir

The water was running.

Qayla stood at the edge of the canal and could not take a step forward.

She had seen a canal only once before. A year ago, from far off, when she rode to her brother's tents in the east carrying news from the Council, and saw at the edge of his tents a shining line in the ground, moving. She did not go near it. She told herself then that she did not want to see the machines' water. That was not the reason.

Now the canal was under her feet.

It was of polished gray stone, four men wide and two men deep. The water filled two thirds of it, and ran. Not the way water moves in a bucket when you shake it. It all ran, in one direction, at the speed of a man walking in a hurry. Its surface rippled and shone and broke against the stones, and it made a sound. A sound that did not stop. Like a great deal of talk you cannot understand.

And it did not wait.

That was what frightened her. She thought about it afterward and knew it was that. Water in Surdan waits. In the well, in the skin, in the trough. It waits for the rope and the bucket and the hand. It is drawn by measure, and what is left stays, and is counted. Qayla had lived her

whole life counting it. How much in the well. How far it had dropped. How much was enough. How much was left.

And this water was not counted. It ran and went. If she stood here a whole day, more water would pass in front of her than there was in all the wells of Surdan.

She did not know why she wanted to cry.

From where she stood she saw to the south a bare white hill, without a palm or a blade of grass on it, the canals curving around it and not coming near. She asked a man from the village about it, and he touched his forehead and said, "Spire Hill." And no more.

Later Hadran said, though he could not see it, "That's where the Nuthar built their first Spires, before they drowned. The seers say the salt there keeps nothing. And no one in Qalmir mentions it in front of the Empress."

Warda knelt beside her.

Qayla did not look at her. But she saw her, from the corner of her eye, take off the left glove. She wanted to say: no. Then she saw the girl reach her bare hand to the water and put it in.

Nothing happened.

Warda did not scream. She did not shake. She did not close her eyes. She stayed kneeling at the edge of the canal with her hand in the running water up to the wrist. And her face changed. Slowly. The way a face changes when a heavy load, carried a long way, is finally set down.

"Warda?"

"Nothing." Her voice was calm as Qayla had never heard it. "Nothing, Qayla. I hear nothing."

Qayla looked at her.

"Water erases," said Warda. "Running water most of all. No trace stays in it. Not for a moment." She took out her hand and looked at it, the water dripping from her fingers. Then she put it back. "Since we left the plain, I've been hearing. The sand, the salt, the glass. Everything. Even through the gloves." She closed her eyes. "And here, nothing. Here it's quiet."

Qayla sat on the stone beside her.

She said nothing. But she thought: the water that frightened me has given her rest. And she thought: and neither of us had ever stood beside it before today.

The soldiers came before they got up.

There were five of them, on horses, from the paved road that ran beside the canal. Hadran saw them before Qayla did, or heard them, and said, "Don't reach for the bow." She did not reach.

They stopped at a distance. Their armor was like the armor of the soldiers in the northern ravine: polished plates, and on the chest an eye from which a drop falls. Qayla saw the young fair soldier in the ravine, on his back, his eyes open. She put the picture away.

One of them got down and came forward.

He was a man past his prime, short, broad-shouldered, with a face red from the sun and a trimmed gray beard. On his right hand was a silver ring with a blue stone.

Qayla looked at the ring. Then at his face.

"From the Waste?" he said. In the Covenant Tongue, with the accent of Qalmir, turning his q into a catch in the throat. He looked at the camels, and the nearly empty skins on the saddles. He looked at Hadran and his white eyes. Then at Warda, the water dripping from her hand. Then at Qayla. At her gray cloak, and the green cord on her wrist.

His eyes stopped on the cord.

"Of the Knights of the Well."

"Their captain."

He raised his eyebrows. Then he looked at the Waste behind them, at the white dunes running to the horizon.

"You crossed the Waste."

"We crossed it."

"Seven days?"

"Seven."

"And the Glass Sea?"

"One night."

The man looked at her a while. Then at Hadran. Then he laughed. A short laugh, with something like admiration in it. "No one from your side has crossed it in twenty years. We know, because we count." He looked at the empty skins. "Drink."

Qayla did not move.

"We haven't accepted," she said.

The man looked at her.

"The water is for those who accepted." She said it as her brother had said it at the Silt Well, with his man gripping the boy. "That's your pact. And we haven't accepted. We didn't come to accept."

She saw something change in the man's face. Then it went back. Then he smiled.

"That's in Surdan," he said. "Where water is a pact. There we give the tribes shares, and the share is for those who accept, because a tribe that accepts takes water that is taken from others, so there must be a reckoning." He pointed to the canal. "This is the land of Qalmir. And

the Empress says: no one goes thirsty beside a canal. No stranger, no enemy, no one who hasn't accepted. No knight."

Qayla looked at him.

"Why?"

"Because she says so." He shrugged. "And I do what she says."

Two more soldiers got down, took the skins, went down a small stair cut into the wall of the canal, and filled them. No one asked any questions.

And Qayla drank.

The water was cold. Colder than well water. And its taste... she did not know. It was water. But there was something in it, at the end, like the taste of stone. Like the taste of salt, and not salt.

She looked at Warda. The seer was looking at her waterskin, and had not yet drunk from it.

The man rode with them as far as the post.

The post was a small square house of polished stone where two canals crossed. On one side of it was a short tower, and on the tower a banner with the eye and the drop. From the tower, when Qayla climbed it with the man's leave, she saw the land.

She had never seen anything like it.

The canals ran from the Waste to the east like the veins on the back of a hand. One large one, then it branched, then branched again. Between them, fields. Green, and yellow, and brown where they had been plowed. Wheat, barley, flax, and small trees in rows. Houses of white clay, small villages, along the edges of the canals. Smoke rising from some of them. Men and women in the fields, small with distance, like ants.

"All this was sand," said the man, who had climbed up beside her. "Three years ago. The edge of the Waste. Sand and gravel and a little thorn. And the people in those villages were dying. In the Zahrad valley and elsewhere. The river had shrunk in the drought, the fields along its banks weren't enough anymore, and the villages far from the river... I'm from a village far from the river."

Qayla looked at him.

"My mother died in the second year of the drought," he said. There was nothing in his voice. "And my sister. And my sister's son. We buried the dead in fields that weren't fields anymore." He looked at the green land below them. "And now, look."

Qayla said nothing.

Then she saw, on the southern horizon, at the edge of the Waste, what she had not seen from far off in the morning, because the haze had covered it.

It was taller than anything.

Taller than the tower, than anything in Surdan, than anything she had imagined. It stood at the edge of the Waste, where the green ends and the white begins, alone. A tower of dark stone, round, narrowing as it rose, and at its top something that shone in the sun. Like crystal. Like frozen water.

The humming came from it.

Qayla did not hear it here, at the post. It was far. But she felt it. In her teeth. As she had felt the sound under the sand.

"The Edge Spire," said the man, and his voice had changed. There was some pride in it, and something else. "The first of the Spires. And the greatest. All this runs from it." He pointed to the canals. "The Grand Inquisitor is there. Amnuthar."

"And around it?"

Qayla looked at the foot of the tower. There, small with distance, were many shapes. Tents. Walls. Bright points moving. Armor.

"An army," said the man.

"Why guard a Spire with an army?"

He did not answer for a while.

"The Empress guards what she loves," he said at last. Then he went down from the tower.

In the evening the man put them on a boat.

It was a long flat boat of black wood that went along the great canal, drawn by two mules on the paved road beside it. In it were sacks of wheat, jars of oil, three farmers, and a woman with two children. The boat was going east, to the river, then down the river to the capital.

"Two days," said the man. "Great Sitmar. And the Empress knows you're coming. I sent a bird."

"And why are you taking us to her?" said Qayla.

The man looked at her.

"Because you said you're the Captain of the Knights of the Well. Because you crossed the Waste. And because the knights don't lean, so they say." He smiled. "And the Empress wants to see something that doesn't lean."

Then he gave her a small leather pouch.

In it was a ring. Silver, and a blue stone.

"No," said Qayla.

"It isn't yours." He pointed to the boat. "It's for the guards on the river. If they ask who you are, show it to them. They'll know you come from me." He paused. "Then give it back to me if you come back this way."

Qayla looked at the ring. Then she closed the pouch and put it in the breast of her robe, beside the half parchment. She did not know why she felt she had betrayed something.

Qayla did not sleep on the boat.

The water was under her. Running. She heard it all night, breaking against the side of the boat, making that sound that does not stop. The boat swayed a little, not the way a camel sways. Another swaying, lighter, without rhythm.

Warda slept.

It was the first time since they left the plain that she had slept a real sleep. On the sacks of wheat, her gloved hands on her chest, her mouth shut. She did not speak in her sleep. Qayla watched her in the moonlight and thought: here she rests. On the water that erases.

Hadran sat beside Qayla, his head tilted.

"You're not sleeping."

"No."

"The water?"

She did not answer.

"Your father was like you," said Hadran. "When he saw the river the first time, he stood on its bank a whole day. And didn't drink. He said to me: Hadran, the water that isn't counted, who guards it?"

Qayla looked at him.

"What did you tell him?"

"I said: no one. That's why it needs no guard." He smiled. "And he said: or that's why it needs one."

In the morning, Qayla saw the people.

The boat had entered the river in the night. The river was wide, wider than anything, its far bank a distant line of trees. Its water was brown, not clear like the canal water. It was slow and heavy, as if thinking. There were many other boats on it, with white sails, and others drawn by mules along the bank.

And on the bank, villages.

Qayla saw the children. Swimming in the water, naked, shrieking, laughing, splashing each other. She saw the women on the stone steps, washing clothes. She saw the men in the fields. She saw smoke from the clay ovens and smelled bread.

And no one was dying.

She had not seen children playing in water in Surdan for seven years. She had forgotten it was something that could be. And she saw them now, and thought of her brother. Of his son, who had been four. Of the twenty children in his tribe. Of his saying: that's what I accepted.

Then she saw something else.

On the stone steps was a boy, ten or younger. With him was a small dog, yellow and thin. The dog was jumping around him, wanting something in his hand. Bread.

The boy hit the dog.

That was not strange. Boys hit dogs. But Qayla saw the boy's face as he hit it. There was no anger in it. There was no laughter in it, the way boys laugh when they hurt something. There was nothing in it. He hit it the way one swats a fly. Once, twice, three times. The dog yelped. The boy ate his bread.

No one looked at him.

Not the women on the steps. Not the men. Not the children in the water. As if they had not heard the dog yelp.

Qayla looked at Warda. The seer had woken and was looking at the boy too. There was something in her face.

"Did you see?" said Qayla.

"I saw."

Neither of them said more than that. But Qayla remembered her brother's mouth. The shut lips. The thing that was in his face and had not been in it before. As if someone else lived in him.

Then she remembered her brother saying: ten lashes. Then: five.

Then she remembered that he had said it, the first time, with nothing in his face.

They entered Great Sitmar in the afternoon of the second day.

Qayla had never seen a city. She had seen Qaydhan, the great caravan market of Surdan, with its clay houses and its markets roofed with palm fronds. She had thought it a city. Then she saw Great Sitmar and knew she had seen nothing.

It stood on the east bank of the river, climbing from the water up a great hill, terrace above terrace, like a stair. It was all stone. White stone, and gray, and pink, polished, shining in the sun. It had towers, and domes, and broad stairs going down to the water. It had canals too, running between the houses, with small bridges over them. And there were more people in it than she had seen in all her life.

At the top of the hill was the palace.

It was not a palace. It was a temple. Qayla saw that at once, even from far off. Its huge columns, its triangular front, the great statues standing on either side of its stair, were all older than the rest of the city. Much older. The stone in them was darker, the carving deeper, as if the wind had eaten more of them.

"The House of the God-Kings," said Hadran. He could not see it. "They were worshiped in it. Now the Empress lives there."

They got off at the great stone stair where the boats tie up.

Waiting for them was a man in a blue robe, bald, courteous, who never stopped bowing. He said he was of the Empress's household, that a house had been given them on the third terrace, and that the Empress would see them in three days, because she was in council. Then he said something else, looking at Warda.

"And the Grand Inquisitor asks for the seer. Tomorrow. If she permits."

Warda looked at him. Then at Qayla.

"Amnuthar?" said Qayla.

"The Grand Inquisitor," said the man, and bowed. "He has heard that a Keeper from Ilsum has crossed the Waste. And he wishes to ask her about the Waste."

"And why doesn't he ask the Captain of the Knights?"

The man looked at her and smiled a courteous smile.

"Because the Captain of the Knights does not see."

Qayla said nothing.

They walked through the city to their house, the bald man ahead of them.

They passed through a great square paved with white stone, and in its middle a long wall. A wall of pink stone, with carvings on it. Qayla stopped at it without deciding to stop.

The carvings were pictures. People, rows of them, walking. At the start of the wall they were bound, bending under loads. Then they were

walking at night, the moon above them. Then there was water, a river, and they were on the other bank. And in the water, men on horses, and chariots, drowning. And a great man, bigger than anyone in the pictures, with a tall crown, in the middle of the water.

Under the pictures was a line of writing. Old Qalmiri. Qayla could not read it.

Warda read it.

"The runaway slaves fled by night," she said slowly, translating. "They stole the king's gold and wheat, and the god-king pursued them to take back what was stolen, and the river betrayed him." She paused. "That's what it says."

Qayla looked at the wall.

She knew this story. Everyone in Surdan knew it. It was the story of the Sons of Qaydh, who say their ancestors were the Tirmi, who came out of Qalmir three thousand years ago. Their story said: we were slaves, and the king said he was a god, and killed our children, so we went out by night and took nothing but what was ours, and he followed us to kill us. And the ground under the river went quiet, and its water sank into the cracks for one night, and we crossed on the mud, and then the water rose from the cracks over those who followed us.

The story was told in the tents at night, to the children. Dhamyan used to tell it. Khardash used to tell it.

"Lies," said Qayla.

Warda looked at her.

"Not all of it," said the seer, quietly. "The pictures say they were bound. That they went out by night. That the king pursued them. That he drowned. That's what the Sons of Qaydh's story says too."

"And the gold? The wheat? The betrayal?"

"I don't know." Warda looked at the wall. "I wasn't there."

Then she said, after a moment, lower, "And none of them was there. Not the one who carved this, nor the ones who tell it in the tents. They all heard it from someone else."

At night, in the house, Qayla again did not sleep.

The house was stone, cold, with a large window over the river. She could hear the water. It did not stop. All night. Running under the city, running in the canals between the houses, running in the river, talking that great talk no one understands.

She sat at the window and took the half parchment from the breast of her robe. She opened the cloth and looked at it in the moonlight.

To Sitmara the Third, mistress of Qalmir...

And she thought: in three days I'll stand before her and ask her. And she did not know what she would ask.

Then she took out the other pouch, opened it, and looked at the ring. Silver, and a blue stone.

She put it on.

She looked at her hand with the ring on it, in the moonlight, above the green cord.

Then she took it off, put it in the pouch, and closed it.

And she did not know which of the two movements was hers.

13. The Inquisitor Who Forgets

Amnuthar asked her three times where she came from.

The first time, when she came in, and he rose for her from his chair, slowly, like someone climbing out of a well, and pointed to the chair across from him, and said, "From Ilsum, isn't it? From the Library?" She said yes. He smiled, and sat.

The second time, after they had talked a while about the road, he raised his eyes to her from the open notebook in front of him and said, "And where are you from, my daughter?" She said: from Ilsum. He looked at her a moment, then at the notebook, turned a page, read something, then said, "Yes. Yes. From Ilsum."

The third time she did not answer.

She only looked at him. And he looked at her. Then he bent to the notebook and wrote a short line, in a small shaking hand. Warda read it upside down, because the Keepers learn to read upside down in their first year: *From Ilsum. I asked her three times.*

Then he raised his head and smiled a smile with an apology in it.

"I forget," he said. "You know why."

"I know."

"Of course you know." He looked at her gloves. "You pay too."

The house was on the fifth terrace of the city, near the palace, but it was not a palace. It was a scholar's house. One large room, high-ceilinged, its walls all shelves, the shelves all books and notebooks and tablets and small locked boxes. In the middle was a long table, with instruments on it whose names Warda mostly did not know: small scales, flasks, pieces of polished crystal, a brass globe with rings that turned. And on the table, in front of Amnuthar, the notebook.

It was large and thick, bound in brown leather worn at the edges, as if one hand had held it every day for many years. Its pages were of different kinds: some new and white, some yellow, some rippled as if water had touched them.

Amnuthar did not close it once during the meeting.

He himself was as they said, and more. He was sixty, by the records of Ilsum. He looked eighty, or older. Thin, bent, with skin thin as Delta paper, the blue veins showing beneath it. His hair was white and sparse, his white beard trimmed. But his eyes were not an old man's eyes. They were sharp and gray, and they looked at everything as if measuring it.

His voice was a teacher's voice. Precise, calm, never raised.

"The Waste," he said. "Tell me about the Waste."

And Warda told him. She did not tell him everything. She had decided that before she came, and Qayla had said to her in the morning, tying the gray kerchief on her head the way a mother ties it for her daughter: don't tell him what he doesn't know. Tell him what he knows, and see what he asks.

So she told him about the salt. About the gloves that were not enough. About the columns from far off. She did not tell him about the shape by the third column, or the warm sand, or the camel in the smooth circle.

He wrote. Everything she said. In his small shaking hand. He asked small precise questions: how deep was the salt under the sand? Was the trace stronger at night or by day? Did she feel the trace in her feet first, or her hands? They were questions no one in Ilsum had ever asked. The questions of a man who measures.

Then he said, "And the Glass Sea."

Warda looked at him.

"You crossed it," he said. "In one night. The officer at the post told me. He said the seer was tied to her camel, senseless." He looked at her with his sharp gray eyes. "You touched it."

She did not answer.

"No matter," he said. "Everyone who sees touches it. He can't help touching it. It..." He paused, looking for the word. "Calls."

"Yes."

"And what did you see?"

And Warda decided, at that moment, to tell him.

She did not know why. Perhaps because he had said: calls. No one had said it before him. Not Hadran, not Qayla. She was the one who had said it, at the edge of the dune with the glove in her hand: it's calling me. And this man, in this room, days from the Waste, knew it. Like someone who knows a road because he has walked it.

So she told him about the city.

About the green plain and the abundant water. About the columns, row behind row. About the tall people in their white robes who did not look at the ground. About the humming columns in the middle of the city and the crystal at their tops. About the yellow grass at the edges of the square.

Amnuthar did not write.

His pen was in his hand, over the notebook, and it did not come down. He was looking at her. His face was still. Still the way a face is still when it hears something it knows, and does not want to be seen knowing.

She told him about the night. About the humming that became a roar. About the warm ground under the square, and the sleeper who turned over. About the crack, and the breath, and the word.

Then she stopped.

She did not tell him about the white light. Nor about the emptiness that ate the city from its edges.

Amnuthar was silent a long time.

Then he laid the pen on the table, beside the notebook. Slowly. Like someone setting down something that might break.

"A salt storm," he said.

Warda looked at him.

"That's what happened to Irwath," he said, and his voice was calm, precise, like a teacher correcting a pupil. "In your books in Ilsum, and in ours. The Nuthar built towers for drawing on the trace, yes, and took from the ground more than they should, yes. And the ground dried. And a great salt storm came, in a year of drought, and buried the city. The glass is from the heat of the sun on the salt and sand, over many centuries. What you saw in the trace... the trace in salt is strong, my daughter. Very strong. And a young seer sometimes sees in it what she herself fears, not what was."

Warda said nothing.

But she saw his hand. His left hand, on the table, beside the notebook. It was shaking. Not the way an old man's hand shakes. The way Nawsam's hand had shaken when he said to her: write it to me first.

And she saw that he saw that she had seen.

He drew his hand into his lap.

Then he said something she did not expect.

"Do you know what this is?" He laid his right hand on the open notebook.

"Your notebook."

"My memory." He smiled that smile with an apology in it. "Every morning a student reads it to me. From the beginning. What I wrote yesterday, and before that, and before that. So I'll know who I am, and what I'm doing, and why. And every morning I hear things I don't remember. About a man named Amnuthar. He did this. He said that. He wanted this. And I believe him. Because it's my hand."

Warda looked at him.

"On the first page," he said, and turned the notebook to its beginning, "I wrote this."

He turned the notebook toward her.

On the first page, at the top, in a hand steadier than his hand now, larger, blacker: *I did this for them.*

And under it, in a smaller hand: *My wife: Nisa. My elder son: Hirmar. My younger son: Tuthays.*

Then nothing.

"I don't know them," said Amnuthar. There was nothing in his voice. "I know their names. I read them every morning. And I don't know their faces. I don't know where they are. Alive? Dead? I didn't write it. Or I wrote it and forgot where. And I don't know what this thing is that I did for them. I know it's the Spires. Because everything after this page is about the Spires. But I don't know why the Spires were for them."

Then he raised his eyes to her.

"You're a seer."

"Yes."

"Then see it."

Warda did not answer at once.

She looked at the notebook. At the worn brown leather. At the different pages. And she thought of the rug, which had been years. Of the parchment, which had been one night. Of the Glass Sea, which had been a city. And this… this was a man. A man's life. Every day of it, since he began to forget.

And she thought of the price.

"Why?" she said.

"Because I want to know."

"Know what?"

"Their faces." He was silent. Then he said, lower, "No. Not that. I want to know whether I… whether the man who wrote this first page would be content with what the man who reads it today is doing."

Warda looked at him.

"I don't read the trace of the living without their leave," she said.

"I give it." He laid his hand on hers, on the glove. His hand was cold, light, like a leaf. "I give it, my daughter. And I'll write that I gave it. Even if I forget."

And he wrote, on a new line, under *From Ilsum. I asked her three times*: *I gave the seer leave to read the notebook.*

She took off the left glove and laid her palm on the first page.

And the trace was… not like anything.

It was in layers, like the rug. But the layers were not years. They were days. Thousands of days. And in every one of them was the same thing: a morning, and a student's hand turning the pages, and a voice reading, and a man listening. Listening in astonishment. Then listening with understanding. Then getting up and going to his work. Then writing in the evening. Then sleeping. Then morning. And a student's hand. And a voice reading. And a man listening in astonishment.

And the astonishment was a little weaker each day.

Not because he remembered. Because he was growing used to it. The way one grows used to hearing one's own name from others.

Warda went down through the layers. Deeper. Older. Until she reached the first page itself, the day it was written.

Amnuthar was young.

Not very young. Forty, perhaps. But his hair was black, and his hand was steady. He was writing: *I did this for them.* With a thick pen, in black Qalmiri ink. And he was weeping.

He was not alone.

A woman was with him. Warda did not see her. She felt her. The way one feels someone standing behind one. Her hand was on his shoulder. And the warmth of her hand was stronger in the trace than anything. Stronger than the weeping. She was saying something, in a calm voice, and Amnuthar was writing what she said.

My wife: Nisa.

And Warda felt the hand on the shoulder tighten a little. Like a small laugh.

My elder son: Hirmar. My younger son: Tuthays.

Then...

Then nothing.

It was not the emptiness. It was not smooth or cold. It was... she did not know. The layers beneath the first page, everything before it, everything before the day the notebook began, were not in the notebook. Because the notebook had not existed before then. A trace begins where its matter begins. And everything before the first page, the whole life of the man before he began to forget, was not here.

It had been in his head. And it was gone.

Warda came out.

She looked at Amnuthar. He was looking at her, his gray eyes wide.

"What?"

"She was with you," said Warda. "When you wrote it. Your wife. Her hand was on your shoulder." She paused. "She was alive."

Amnuthar said nothing.

"And she was laughing a little," said Warda. "When you wrote your sons' names."

She saw the man's face change. Not much. Something in the mouth, in the thin lips. Then he bent to the notebook.

He said nothing for a long time.

Then Warda turned the pages.

She did not decide to. Her hand did it. Her bare hand, while she was still in the trace, still feeling the layers. She turned, page after page, and the trace passed under her fingers like water. The Spires. Reckonings. Drawings of towers. Names of Inquisitors. The Empress. The Empress. The Empress.

Then her hand stopped.

It was a page in the middle of the notebook. Stuck to the one after it. Its paper rippled, as if water had touched it. Its color a little paler than the pages around it. And Warda felt something in it. Not a trace. The absence of a trace.

She parted the two pages with her finger, slowly.

Inside, the page was written on. At the top, in Amnuthar's hand. His hand of the middle years, steadier than now, weaker than the first page. A single line, in black ink:

If you read this, stop everything.

And under it... there was another hand. Other writing. Many lines, in a hand that was not his. A finer hand, more slanted, like a woman's hand, or a young man's. But water had passed over it. The words had run, and dissolved, and become gray blots on the rippled paper. Nothing of them was left to read.

Nothing.

Warda laid her palm on the gray blots.

And the trace... there was a trace. Faint, but cut deep, because whoever wrote it wrote in fear, or grief, or love. She felt a hand. A hand writing. The hand was shaking a little. And there was a ring on it. A silver ring. She could not see the stone.

Then the water.

The water was not the emptiness. It was something else. It was like wind on sand, wiping out the trace without eating it. She could feel the words there, under the water, the way one feels stones under sand. But she could not read them. Water erases. That is the first thing taught.

And at the end of the trace she felt another hand. A hand holding a cup. And tilting it. Slowly. Over the page.

She did not know whose hand.

She came out of the trace shaking.

She looked at Amnuthar. He was looking at the page. At the line at its top.

If you read this, stop everything.

His face was still. Completely still. Nothing in it.

"That's my hand," he said.

"Yes."

"I've never seen it." He touched the page with a shaking finger. "The two pages were stuck. The student turns them together every morning. What's under it?"

"I don't know. The water erased it."

"And in the trace?"

"A hand. Writing. And a silver ring. Then another hand, with a cup."

Amnuthar said nothing.

Then he said, "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why should I stop everything?" He looked at her, and for the first time his gray eyes were an old man's eyes. "If there was a reason, it's gone. And a reason that's gone isn't a reason. Is it? If I told you: stop, and didn't say why, would you stop?"

Warda did not answer.

"There are a thousand villages in the valley," said Amnuthar. "In every village, children. They were dying. Now they aren't. That's a reason. I know it. I see it every day from my window." He laid his hand on the page. "And this? A line. A blot. And a hand, and you don't know whose."

Then he closed the two pages, slowly, as they had been.

And Warda looked for the price, as she did every time.

She went over the things. Her name. Qayla. Hadran. The road. The city in the glass. The word that is not said. All here.

Then she came to Nawsam.

And he was here. His face, his hands, the salt plant, the gloves he had given her, the tower. And his voice, saying: what you don't understand, write it to me first.

She stopped.

She remembered that he had said it. She remembered the words. She remembered the room, and the green light. But there had been something else, with the words. Something she had known, and why she had known it, and why it mattered. Something that had kept her from sending the letter. She could feel its place, the way the tongue feels the place of a tooth.

And it was not there.

She took the small notebook from her belt with a shaking hand and opened it to the folded letter she had written to Nawsam. She found the line. In her own hand: *And when you said to me, write it to me first, your hand was shaking. And I did not understand why.*

She read it.

And she knew she had written it. And she knew it was true, because she did not write what was not true.

And she felt nothing.

She did not feel the doubt that had been there. She did not feel the cold that had been in her back when she saw his hand shake. They were words. Words on paper, in her hand, about a man named Nawsam. And she believed them because they were in her hand.

As Amnuthar believed his notebook.

And she wrote, at the back of the small notebook, on the page of lost things, under *The day I met Qayla*:

Why I was afraid when Nawsam's hand shook. I wrote it in the letter. I don't feel it.

She raised her eyes.

Amnuthar was looking at her. And at the small notebook in her hand. And she saw something in his face. It was not pity. It was something nearer to knowing.

"You've begun," he said quietly.

"I've begun."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-six."

He nodded. Then he bent to his great notebook and wrote a line. This time she did not read it. She turned her face away.

When she got up to go, he got up with her and walked her to the door. Slowly.

At the door he laid his hand on her shoulder. As a woman named Nisa had laid her hand on his shoulder, twenty years before.

"My daughter."

"Yes."

"Where do you come from?"

Warda looked at him.

There was nothing in his eyes. No jest, no cunning. He was asking. Because he did not know.

"From Ilsum," she said.

"From Ilsum." He smiled. "Lovely. Ilsum is lovely. I haven't seen it in a long time." Then he lowered his hand. "Come again. I want to ask you about the Waste."

And Warda walked down the stone corridor, and did not look back.

At the end of the corridor, where it turned to the stairs, she heard behind her the sound of a pen on paper.

14. The Empress

The people bowed to the ground before the Empress, and she did not stop them.

Qayla saw that before she saw her. She had climbed with Warda and Hadran the long stair to the House of the God-Kings, the bald man in the blue robe ahead of them, turning every ten steps to be sure they were behind him. On either side of the stair stood statues. Huge, bigger than three men, of dark stone. Men seated on thrones, hands on their knees, tall crowns. They had no faces.

The faces had been carved off. Not carved: scraped. Struck with chisels until nothing was left but a rough surface, paler than the rest of the stone. As if someone had wanted the statues to stay, and the faces to go.

"After the Battle of the Two Banks," said Hadran, low, when she asked him. "When most of them came to believe. They scraped off the faces. And left the bodies."

"Why leave them?"

"Because they're too heavy to move." He paused. "And because people don't like to tear down what their grandfathers built. They're content to wipe out its face."

At the top of the stair, in the square before the great columns, were the people.

Hundreds of them. Farmers in coarse linen, their hands black with mud. Women, with children. Old men. They had come from the villages, said the bald man. Every ten days the people of one of the new villages, the ones on the canals, came to give thanks. They stood in rows, with things in their hands: baskets of wheat, jars of oil, wreaths of green palm.

Then the Empress came out from between the columns.

Qayla had not imagined what she would look like. But if she had, she would not have imagined this. She was a woman of fifty or more, of middling height, a little stout, with a broad calm face and gray hair braided and coiled on her head. She wore no crown. She wore a plain white robe, like all the women of the city, with a blue shawl on her shoulders. With her were only two women, behind her, and two soldiers, at a distance.

She stood at the top of the stair.

And the people bowed to the ground.

No one ordered them. No one said anything. She came out, and they bowed down. All of them, together, the way a crop bends in the wind. Their faces on the white stone, their hands stretched out, the baskets and jars and wreaths before them.

Qayla stayed standing.

Warda stood beside her. And Hadran.

The Empress looked at the bowed people. There was nothing in her face. Neither pleasure nor displeasure. She looked at them the way one looks at rain. Then she raised her eyes.

And she saw three people standing.

She looked at Qayla. A while. Then at the green cord on her wrist.

Then she said something in Qalmiri to the woman behind her. She raised her hand. And the people got up.

She received them an hour later, on a terrace.

The terrace was on the west side of the old house, looking over the river and the city and the canal lands beyond it, with the Waste on the horizon. On it were wooden chairs, and a small table with water and dates and bread. The Empress was sitting alone. She pointed to the chairs.

They sat.

The Empress did not speak first. She looked at them one after another. At Hadran and his white eyes. At Warda and the gloves. Then at Qayla. Her eyes were brown, small, steady.

"You didn't bow," she said. In the Covenant Tongue, with the accent of Qalmir, but softer than the officer's.

"I bow to no one but the Maker."

"Nor do I." The Empress pointed to the square below them, where the people were scattering. "And I didn't ask them to."

"And you didn't stop them."

The Empress looked at her. She did not grow angry. She smiled a little.

"No," she said. "I didn't stop them. Do you know why?"

"No."

"Nor do I. I tell myself: they aren't bowing to me. They're bowing in thanks for the water. And thanks are due to the Maker, and I am his hand. I tell myself that every ten days." She looked at Qayla. "And every ten days, I go out."

Then she asked.

She did not ask about the Waste, or the road. She asked about the Well. About the gathering, and the night, and the murder. About

Khardash, and his red cord, and the northern ravine. About Faqid. She knew many things. Qayla saw that. She knew the number of wagons, and the number of dead, and the name of the tribe Khardash's cousin belonged to. She asked not to learn, but to see what Qayla would say.

And Qayla told her.

Then the Empress asked, "And why have you come?"

Qayla took the bread cloth from the breast of her robe. She laid it on the table, between the water and the dates. And she opened it.

The Empress read it twice.

The first time quickly. The second slowly. Her lips moved a little, like someone reading in a language not her own. Then she set her finger on the last line. On the word.

"Neutrality," she said.

No one said anything.

Then the Empress rose. She went to the door behind her and said something to someone beyond it. She came back. She sat. She waited. She did not speak. She looked at the river.

One of the two women came with a small box of black wood. She set it on the table, and went.

The Empress opened it and took out a sheet of paper.

"In Qalmir we write everything twice," she said. "Once for the one we send it to, and once for ourselves. That comes from my grandfathers' chanceries. I don't love them, but the chanceries were good." She laid the sheet beside the half parchment. "This is what I sent to Dhamyan son of Khardash. Twenty days before his death."

The sheet was in the Covenant Tongue, in the regular hand of the chanceries.

And Qayla read it.

It was short.

From Sitmara the Third, mistress of Qalmir, to Dhamyan son of Khardash, Chief of the Tribes in Surdan. The war between us and your tribes has not yet begun, and I do not want it to begin. It has reached me that you hold the Ravine Wells, and it has reached you that I hold the water of the canals. Each of us claims to give the people drink. If you declare Surdan neutral, neither with Qalmir nor against it, and open the wells of the Sons of Qaydh to every tribe without price, I will stop the building of Spires at the three on the edge of the Waste, and run not one canal into your land except by leave of your Council. I do not ask you to accept my rule. I ask that people not die of thirst between us while we argue over who gives them drink. Send your answer with one you trust.

Qayla looked at the sheet. Then at the half parchment.

If you stop the machines that are under the valley, and close...

I will declare in the Council, before all the tribes, that the wells of...

nor given on terms, nor guarded except by the knights...

And the words answered each other. Like two voices in the night, one replying to the other from far off.

"He said yes," said the Empress. There was nothing in her voice. Then she said it again, lower: "He said yes."

"He said yes," said Qayla.

"And it never reached me." The Empress looked at the last word. "Then he was killed. Then the officer in the valley came to tell me the Loyal were hanging cords. Then the news of the northern ravine came, and three dead, and an Inquisitor who burned two men." She paused. "And I thought he had refused. I thought he had read my letter and laughed, and that his own men killed him because he hadn't refused

hard enough. That's what my counselors told me." She looked at Qayla. "And you tell me he said yes."

"I tell you what's on the parchment."

"And who tore it?"

"He did."

"Why?"

Qayla looked at Warda. Warda looked at her hands.

"Because someone told him that if he finished it, it wouldn't arrive," said the seer, low. "And there was no one in the tent."

The Empress did not ask what that meant. She looked at Warda a while. Then at the gloves. Then she lowered her eyes.

"And the other half?"

"Whoever took the large parchment took it."

"And who took the large parchment?"

Qayla did not answer. And she saw the Empress not answer either. She saw her look at the gloves again. Then at the horizon, to the southeast, where nothing could be seen but the river going on into the haze.

"Ilsum," said the Empress.

No one said anything.

"I don't say it was them," she said. "I say: who loses if this letter arrives? I don't lose. I wanted it. Dhamyan doesn't lose. He wrote it. Your brother doesn't lose." She looked at Qayla. "Yes, I know. He was going to carry it. Your brother writes to me every ten days, and he didn't write about this. And that told me."

Qayla looked at her.

"The Loyal lose a little," said the Empress. "They lose their war. But war isn't what they want. They want the machines stopped. And this

letter stops them at three. So they don't lose much. And who loses if the Spires stop at three and never reach the Delta?"

"No one."

"No one loses." The Empress smiled, and there was no joy in the smile. "And who loses if Surdan and Qalmir fight for years, and Qalmir weakens, and its Spires never reach the Delta, and no one dares build a Spire again?"

Qayla did not answer.

"The Library wants my books," said the Empress. "And I want its books. They have the books of the Nuthar, and the notebooks of the columns. We know that. And they fear the Spires. They say the Spires wake what is under the ground. And they say that if the Spires reach the Delta..." She paused. "I don't know what they say. They don't tell me. They say: the danger. And they don't say what it is."

Qayla looked at Warda.

The seer was sitting still, looking at the Empress. There was something in her face Qayla had seen once before. In the tent, the night of the letter, when Taylam said: have you anything to add? Qayla did not know what it was.

Then Warda said, "They do wake what is under the ground."

The Empress looked at her.

"I saw it," said Warda. "Not what's under the Spires. What's under the glass. In the trace. A whole city, with columns like your Spires, humming like them, taking from the ground as they take. And something woke under it. And on the road here, under the sand, something was turning over. Not in the trace. At night. Truly. You felt it, Qayla."

"I felt it."

The Empress did not speak for a while.

Then she said, “Amnuthar says a salt storm.”

“He told me that too,” said Warda. “And his hand was shaking.”

The Empress rose.

She walked to the edge of the terrace and stood looking at the land below. At the canals, the fields, the white villages. At the Waste on the horizon, and at its edge, small with distance, like a finger, the dark tower.

She spoke without turning.

“I had a brother,” she said. “Two years older than I. His name doesn’t matter. My grandfather, Sitmar the First, had brought back into this house, in a hall beneath us now, what the kings used to do. In secret. No one knew it but the family and a few priests. He would sit on a chair, and the priests would burn incense to him, and the family would bow to the ground.” She paused. “I was nine. And I bowed. Because everyone bowed. And my brother didn’t.”

No one said anything.

“He stood as you stood today,” said the Empress. “And he said: I bow to no one but the Maker. Like that. The same words. And in the morning he wasn’t in his room. He wasn’t in the palace. And my grandfather said: he’s gone traveling.” She looked at the dark tower on the horizon. “He hadn’t gone traveling.”

Then she turned.

“When I became Empress, I tore down that hall. With my own hands. I took an axe, went down, and broke the chair. And I said: no one is worshiped in this house but the Maker, and no one bows to anyone.” She smiled. “And today, you saw.”

“I saw.”

“I know what you saw.” The Empress sat down again. “You saw a woman who hates her grandfather standing where he used to stand,

watching the people bow to the ground, and not stopping them. And saying: this is thanks. And believing it. I see that too. Every ten days. And I don't know what to do with it."

Then Qayla asked her.

"Will you stop the Spires?"

The Empress looked at her.

"If I tell you they wake the Shaghadir," said Qayla. "If the seer tells you she saw. If I tell you I felt the ground warm under me at night. Will you stop them?"

"The three I've built?"

"Yes."

The Empress did not answer for a long time. She looked at the green land below.

"There are a thousand villages in the valley," she said at last. They were the same words Amnuthar had said to Warda. And Qayla saw Warda hear them, and lower her eyes. "No. I won't stop them. Not because I don't believe you. Because I saw the children die, and I didn't see what the seer saw." She looked at Qayla. "If I stopped them today, ten thousand would die next year. I know, because I counted them before the Spires. And if I don't stop them, perhaps something wakes. Perhaps. That's what you say. Perhaps."

"Spire Hill."

The Empress's face changed.

"They told me it was a salt storm," she said.

"A salt storm that leaves no trace?" said Warda. "In the Waste, salt keeps everything. And Spire Hill has no trace in it. That's what every seer in Ilsum says. No trace. The one thing in Deymar no seer can read."

She paused. “A storm doesn’t do that, mistress of Qalmir. Nothing does that except…” She did not finish.

“Except what?”

Warda looked at Qayla. Then she said, “Except what I saw in the glass. At its end. The white light.”

The Empress was silent.

Then she called. The woman came. She said something long to her in Qalmiri. The woman went.

“In two days,” said the Empress, “Amnuthar goes to the Edge Spire. He goes every month. He looks at the reckonings, and the crystal, and the Inquisitors. You’ll go with him.” She looked at Warda. “You’ll see the Spire. With my leave. Beneath it. And you’ll tell me what you saw. Not Amnuthar. Me.”

Warda looked at her.

“And if I see?”

“If you see what you say, I’ll stop the fourth. The one we’re building now in the south. The fourth. Not the three. I can’t stop the three. I can’t kill ten thousand for a perhaps.”

“And the fifth?” said Qayla. For she had heard along the canals that Qalmir would not stop at four.

The Empress looked at her, and did not deny it. “In the Delta. Next year. The ground there is softer, and the water nearer, and no one dies of thirst while waiting.”

Qayla felt Warda move beside her. She did not understand why the seer’s face went pale, or why her hand went to her belt, where she carried the salt stone.

Then the Empress took another sheet from the black box. White. And a pen. And she wrote on it, in front of them, in her own hand, not

the chancery hand. A large irregular hand, the hand of someone who does not write much.

She folded it. She sealed it with a ring on her finger, in blue wax. An eye from which a drop falls.

She held it out to Qayla.

"To Khardash son of Dhamyan," she said. "What I wrote to his father. And more. If he accepts neutrality, I'll stop the fourth, and open the canals to everyone who drinks, without terms, even those who haven't accepted. And if he doesn't accept..." She paused. "Then nothing. Things stay as they are."

Qayla took the sheet. She said nothing.

"You don't lean," said the Empress. "So they say. So carry it as it is. Don't tell him it's good, or that it's bad. Give it to him. And let him read."

As they rose to go, a man came hurrying onto the terrace.

He was a soldier, and in his hand was a small rolled paper, the kind tied to the legs of birds. He bowed, gave it to the Empress, and said something in Qalmiri. The Empress opened the paper and read it.

Her face changed.

Then she raised her eyes to Qayla.

"How many days since Dhamyan was killed?"

Qayla counted. In her head. The nights on the road. The days on the boat. The days here.

She had not counted since she entered Qalmir.

"Forty," she said. And she felt something sink in her chest. "Today is the fortieth."

The Empress looked at her. Then at the paper.

"This is from the canal post by your brother's tents," she said. "They sent it last night. At dawn, the Loyal burned the head of the seventh canal. And went into the tents."

Qayla did not breathe.

"Your brother is alive," said the Empress. "That's what they say. Alive." She looked at the paper again. "And under his name, another line. They say: and the leader of the Loyal has sworn to take judgment into his own hand, and said: the time is up, and the knights did not come."

15. The Edge Spire

Amnuthar knew Warda when he saw her, because he had read about her.

It was on the stone quay by the great boat, at dawn on the forty-second day. The Grand Inquisitor sat on a chair on the deck under a linen awning, the great notebook open on his knees. When the seer came aboard, Qayla saw him raise his eyes, and saw a moment of emptiness in them. Then he bent to the notebook. Turned a page. Read. Then raised his eyes again, and there was something else in them.

"The seer," he said. "You read my notebook."

"Yes."

"You found a page." His hand was on the notebook. "It's written here: the seer found a stuck page. Don't open it. I wrote that to myself. In my hand. Don't open it." He paused. "Why did I write that?"

Warda did not answer.

Amnuthar nodded, as if she had. Then he bent to the notebook, and did not raise his eyes again until they arrived.

Warda said to Qayla that night, on the deck, the two of them sitting on sacks of wheat with the river running beneath them, "He didn't open it."

"How do you know?"

"Because he wrote: don't open it. And he believes his notebook. He wrote it after I left. I heard the pen."

"Why?"

"Because if he opened it every morning and read: stop everything, he would ask every morning: why. And he wouldn't find it. And the question would stay. And a man who lives by a notebook can't live with a question every morning."

Qayla looked at her. And she thought: she understands him. Because she is becoming like him.

She did not say it.

They reached the Edge Spire in the forenoon of the forty-fourth day.

Qayla had seen it from the post, far off, a finger on the horizon. Now she saw it from below.

It was bigger than anything man had made. That was her first thought. Bigger than the House of the God-Kings, bigger than the small mountains of Surdan. A round tower of dark stone, nearly black, polished, without windows, rising from the ground like the trunk of a tree without end, narrowing and narrowing until it ended at the top in something that shone. The crystal. The size of a house, from here. The sun was in it, so that it threw a broken light on the ground around it, many colors, like light passing through water.

And the humming.

It was no longer a distant sound. It was here. In everything. In the ground under her feet, in the air, in her teeth. Low, steady, never stopping. The soldiers around the tower, and the workmen, and the Inquisitors in their black robes, walked in it as if they did not hear it. The way the people of the sea do not hear the sea.

And from the foot of the tower came the water.

From a great arched opening in the dark wall it poured out. A white, heavy, roaring gush, falling into a great stone basin, then running from the basin into the great canal to the east. Its sound was louder than the humming.

Qayla stood looking at it.

And she thought: this is the water of the Well of Oaths. And the water of the Ravine Wells. And the water of every well that has dried in Surdan in seven years. This is our water.

She did not know whether it was true.

They went into the tower by a small door in its side, behind Amnuthar and the Inquisitors.

Inside it was dark and cold, and the humming was louder. There was a stair going down. Stone, narrow, winding around a column in the middle. They went down. And down. The air grew colder, the humming louder, the walls damp. On the walls, every twenty steps, was a lamp in a niche. Qayla counted the niches, as she counted wells. Twenty. Thirty. Forty.

Then the stair ended.

They were in a hall.

Round, wide, its high ceiling held up by columns. In its middle, in the floor, an opening. A well. Wider than any well she had seen. As wide as the great tent at the gathering. Around it a stone parapet, waist-high. The humming rose from it. From its sides small channels took the water and carried it up through the walls of the hall, to the opening outside.

Around the well, on the floor, were the Inquisitors.

Twelve. Sitting in a ring in their black robes, their bare hands on the stones of the parapet. Their eyes closed. They did not move.

"They draw," said Amnuthar. In the teacher's voice. "From the ground. From the veins in the rock. The Spire gathers what they draw and lifts it to the crystal. And the crystal sends it back into the ground, deeper. And it drives the water. Like this." He gestured with his shaking hand. "A circle. Like the heart."

"And what do they pay?" said Qayla.

He looked at her.

"The price," she said. "Every drawing on the trace has a price. That's what the seer said. So who pays the price of this?"

Amnuthar was silent a while.

"They do," he said, and pointed to the twelve. "They're changed every seven days. And they rest." He paused. "And some of the price..." He looked at the notebook in his hand, as if searching it for the answer. "Some of the price the ground pays."

Warda stood at the parapet.

She had not yet taken off the glove. She stood looking into the well. At the darkness in it. Qayla was beside her, Hadran behind them, and Amnuthar a little way off, speaking to one of the Inquisitors in Qalmiri.

"With the Empress's leave," said Warda, low.

"With her leave," said Qayla.

Warda took off the left glove. She laid her palm on the stone. On the parapet. Where the Inquisitors' hands were, between two of them.

She closed her eyes.

Qayla looked at her face. It was changing, as it always changed. But not as it always changed. It was tightening. And tightening. Like someone going down into very cold water and holding her breath.

Then Warda opened her eyes.

She did not take away her hand.

"It isn't sleeping," she said.

At that moment Qayla saw the man.

She had not been looking for him. She had not known he was here. She had been looking at Warda, and then raised her eyes, because something moved at the other side of the hall, by the columns, where workmen were carrying baskets of broken stone to another stair.

And she saw a man walking.

He was one of the workmen. In the dusty gray clothes of the workmen. His hands wrapped in rags, like the hands of men who carry stone. He had a basket on his shoulder. He was walking to the other stair.

Qayla did not see his face.

She saw his walk.

Shorter than the people of the Waste, and thinner. Walking like someone who does not know sand. Lifting his feet more than he needed, and setting them down carefully, as if walking on something he did not trust. His left shoulder a little higher than his right. Then he lifted a bucket, and the end of the rag came loose from his left hand, and she saw in the palm the mark of an old burn, round, the size of an ember. And under the nails, a blueness that had not gone.

She had seen this before.

On a night. In the dark. Twenty paces away. The arrow between her fingers, the bow undrawn. A man coming out of Dhamyan's tent and walking toward the stone and the white tent. With this walk. With this shoulder. His left hand raised a little, as if shielding what was in it from the wind.

She did not think.

"You!"

The man turned.

She saw his face. There was nothing in it she knew. The face of a man of thirty, or a little more. Dark, like the people of the Delta. A short beard. Wide eyes.

She saw the eyes see her. See the gray cloak, and the green cord.

She saw them know her.

Then he threw down the basket, and ran.

Qayla ran after him.

She heard Warda say something behind her, and did not hear what. She heard Amnuthar say something in Qalmiri, loudly, for the first time. She did not stop. The man had reached the other stair, and gone down.

Down. Not up.

She went down after him.

This stair was narrower, and darker, without lamps. It was damp, slippery. The humming in it was louder, much louder, until it was like a roar, and Qayla felt it in her chest, in her ribs, as if her heart were beating to its rhythm. She could hear the man below her. His steps. His breathing.

And warmth was rising.

She did not notice it at first. Then she did. The damp walls became warm. Then hot. The air grew heavy, hard to breathe. And she saw below her, in the dark, a light. Red. Faint. Like the light of embers.

She stopped.

And she heard the man below her stop too.

Then she heard the sound.

It was not the humming. It was under it. It was the sound she had heard in the Waste, on the fifth night, the sound in the bones. But it was not far now. It was here. In the stair, and the walls, and in her. Louder than everything.

And it was moving.

Not the way a sleeper turns over. The way one rises.

And the humming went out.

All at once. The way a rope snaps. And the silence after it was more terrible than any sound. One moment. A moment in which Qayla heard her own breath, and the man's breath below her, and a drop of water falling somewhere.

Then it spoke.

Three syllables.

Qayla did not understand them. There was nothing to understand. It was a word heavier than mountains, coming out from under the ground, rising in the stair, and the well, and the whole tower. Qayla felt it in her skin. In her bones. In her teeth, until she thought they would shatter.

And she heard behind her, above her, far off, a scream. A woman's scream.

Warda.

She turned. And climbed.

Afterward she did not remember how she climbed.

She remembered the heat rising behind her, like the breath of an oven. She remembered the light, red, then orange, then white, filling the stair below her. She remembered she did not look back. She remembered

hearing the man behind her, climbing too, gasping, then hearing him scream.

Then not hearing him.

She reached the hall.

And the whole hall was light.

The light was coming out of the well.

White. Not like sunlight, or firelight. White like salt, like bone, like nothing. It rose from the well in a column, struck the ceiling, and spread. The columns of the hall were black in it, like fingers. And the twelve Inquisitors...

She did not look.

She saw Warda. She was on the floor by the parapet, where she had been. Her hand was still on the stone. Her other hand was over her mouth. She was screaming behind her hand. She was not saying anything.

Qayla ran to her.

She saw nothing. The light was in her eyes, white, filling everything. She ran toward what she remembered. The parapet. Warda. She reached out and caught hold of something. Cloth. And pulled.

And pulled.

The parapet was hot as embers. Warda's hand was on it. Qayla pulled her, and heard a sound like skin coming away from stone. And Warda screamed another scream, a different one.

Then she was in her arms.

"Follow me!"

It was Hadran's voice.

She could not see him. She could not see anything. The white light was everywhere, her eyes were shut, and still she saw it. But she heard his voice. On the left. A little way off.

"Follow my voice, daughter of Nuqar! Don't open your eyes! Follow my voice!"

And she walked.

Warda in her arms, light as a child. Her eyes shut. The heat behind her, pushing her, like a hand on her back. The ground shaking under her. And she heard, everywhere, things breaking. Stones. Columns. And screaming. She did not look back.

"Here! The stair! Climb!"

And she climbed.

Hadran's voice was ahead of her. It did not stop. It said: here. It said: a step. It said: a turn. It said: I'm here. And it was calm. The calmest voice she had heard in her life. The voice of a man who has walked in darkness for twenty years and needs no light.

And Qayla knew, as she climbed, that in this moment she was as blind as he was.

And that he was the one who saw.

They came out of the small door into the sun.

Qayla did not know it was the sun until she fell on the sand with Warda on top of her, and opened her eyes, and saw the sky. Blue. The light yellow, ordinary, the light of the sun.

Then she looked at the tower.

The Spire was burning.

No. It was not burning. There was no smoke, no flame, nothing like the fire she knew. The dark tower stood as it had stood. But the crystal at its top no longer shone. It was white. White as the light in the hall. And the whiteness was coming down. From the crystal, down the wall of the tower. Slowly. The way water runs down a stone.

And where it came down, there was no stone.

It did not melt. It did not crack. It did not fall. It was there, and then it was not. The way a hand wipes a word from a slate. The tower was growing shorter, from the top, slowly, the whiteness coming down through it and eating it.

And the whiteness had no sound.

That was what Qayla remembered more than anything. That the Spire was being erased, and the small town around it, the army's tents and the workmen's houses, was screaming, the soldiers running, the horses bolting, the water from the opening at the foot stopped, the basin emptying, the canal running dry. All of that had sound. And the whiteness had none.

Then she saw what was under the tower.

No. She did not see it. She saw the ground around the foot of the tower moving. The way dunes move in the wind. But there was no wind. The ground was rising and falling, like a back breathing. And in one place, by the side of the tower, it split.

And she saw something in the split.

A gleam. Like the gleam of glass. Like the Glass Sea at sunset. Red, and gold. But moving. Moving the way the skin of a living thing moves. It was large. Too large to know where it ended.

Then the split closed.

And the ground went still.

No one spoke for a long time.

Qayla was sitting on the sand with Warda in her lap, and Hadran was standing beside them, his face toward the tower he could not see. The tower had become half of what it had been. Then a third. Then the whiteness stopped. All at once. As it had begun. What was left of the Spire was a short dark stump, cut off at the top straight and smooth, as if a knife had passed through it.

Warda was shaking.

Qayla looked at her hand. The left. The bare one. The one that had been on the parapet. The skin of the palm was red, inflamed, blistered. And in the middle of the palm was a white patch.

No. It was not white. It was... she did not know. It was skin. But it was smooth. Completely smooth. Without lines. Without those lines that are in every palm, in which the old women of Surdan read the length of a life.

"I can't feel it," said Warda, her lips white. She looked at the smooth patch in her palm. "I can't feel it, Qayla. And I feel nothing in it. No trace. As if it isn't part of my hand."

Amnuthar came an hour later.

Two soldiers carried him from the other side of the small town. He had come out of the hall before them, the soldiers said. A young Inquisitor had carried him on his back when the light began. And the young Inquisitor had gone back to carry someone else.

He had not come back.

The soldiers set Amnuthar down on the sand near Qayla. He sat. He looked at the cut-off tower.

The notebook was in his hand.

He did not speak for a while. Then he opened the notebook. He took the pen from his robe. Qayla watched him, and waited for him to write: a salt storm.

He wrote a line. In his small shaking hand. Then he turned the notebook toward her, without saying anything.

I saw. Do not believe it if you are told otherwise. Even if I am the one who tells you.

In the evening, when the soldiers began gathering the dead, Qayla went to the small door in the side of the cut-off stump.

She did not go in. There was nothing to go into. The door opened onto a stair, and the stair went down a few steps, then ended. It did not break off. It ended. As if what came after had never been. A smooth white surface, like the inside of Warda's palm.

But by the door, outside, on the sand, was a man.

The soldiers had found him there and laid him with the dead. But Qayla saw him from far off, and knew him. By the shoulder. The left higher than the right.

She walked to him.

He had got out. She did not know how. Perhaps by another stair, or by the door itself, behind her, without her hearing. He had got out, and fallen here. And half of him... she did not look at that half. His left side was whole. The face, the shoulder, the arm. The other side was not.

On his left shoulder was a small leather bag, burned at the edges.

His left hand was wrapped in rags.

Qayla knelt. She took off the rags, slowly, one end after another, the way she had taken the bread cloth off the half parchment.

The fingers beneath were blue.

16. The Ink

Warda could not see the bag with her left hand.

She tried. At night, in a small tent the soldiers had given them at the edge of the ruined town, the lamp between her and Qayla, the bag with its burned edges on the ground. She took off the left glove, slowly, because the blisters in her palm stuck to the tanned leather. She laid her palm on the bag.

Nothing happened.

It was not the emptiness. It was not the water. It was the way one lays a hand on something while asleep. She could feel the rough leather under her fingers, the heat of the lamp, the weight of the bag. But the smooth patch in the middle of her palm felt nothing. Neither the leather nor the heat. And the trace, which had always come to her through the palm first, like water from a spring, did not come.

She raised her hand and looked at it.

Qayla looked at it.

"The other one," said Qayla.

"I've never seen with my right."

"And you'd never seen in the Waste before you went into it."

Warda looked at her. Then she took off the right glove.

The right hand was slower.

Like a language she understood but did not speak. The trace came, but it came in pieces, like water from a holed bucket. She had to take hold of it, to pull it, the way one pulls the rope up from a well. She had never done that before. The trace had always pulled her.

Then she took hold of it.

The bag was a journey.

Twelve days on a camel, from Ilsum to the plain. Then a night. Then days on another camel, east, to the canal lands. Then a boat. Then days in the gray clothes of the workmen, hands wrapped in rags, the humming in everything.

And the man who carried it had been afraid all those days.

It was not a fear like Dhamyan's, with a face. It was an old, steady fear, like a dog following its master. And there was something else with it that startled her when she felt it. A feeling she knew. The feeling of someone keeping something for another. The care that is in a copyist's hand on a book he does not own.

He was a Keeper.

Then she went down in the trace to the night.

He was on a camel, in the dark, at the edge of the plain.

And he was waiting.

Warda felt the cold in his hands, felt the camel shifting under him, felt his eyes on the tents. On one tent. The big red one with the black poles. The lamp in it was lit. Then a woman went into it. Then came out. Then the lamp went out.

He waited.

There were words in his head. Warda did not hear them as words. She felt them the way one feels an order received and carried, repeating: *Make sure it is done. Take what he wrote. Do not be seen.*

Then he got down from the camel, and walked.

He went into the tent.

And Dhamyan was dead.

Warda felt the man's shock. It was the first thing in the trace, stronger than the fear. He had not expected it. Or he had expected it, and had not expected to see it. The big man on the rug, in the dark, an ember in the small brazier, the thin thread at the neck.

The man stood still.

He did not go near the body.

Warda felt that he wanted to get out. To run. But he walked to the board. He took the large parchment. He saw something else under it. A half parchment, small, torn. He took that too. He pushed them both into the bag. This bag.

Then he touched something.

He did not mean to. He was going out, in the dark, and his hand touched the ember in the brazier. He did not cry out. He shut his mouth, held his hand, and went out.

At the door he saw in the dark, twenty paces away, a shape. Standing. With a bow in its hand.

And he knew who she was.

Warda felt his heart stop. Then she felt him walk. Not run. Walk, as he had been ordered. Do not be seen. But he had been seen. So he walked like someone who does not know he has been seen, toward the stone and the white tent.

And the woman with the bow did not call out to him.

Warda came out of the trace and looked at Qayla.

She said nothing for a while. Qayla was looking at her, waiting. Her face in the lamplight was still.

"The ember," said Warda at last.

"The ember?"

"He was holding up his left hand. You remember? As if shielding something from the wind." She paused. "He wasn't shielding anything. His hand was burning. He touched the brazier's ember as he went out, so he held it up to the wind to cool it. That's why you saw his fingers in the light of the embers: he was holding them out to it. He went in after Dhamyan was dead, Qayla. Not before. Dhamyan was dead when he went in."

Qayla did not move.

"He went in to make sure," said Warda. "And to take the parchment. That's what he was ordered to do. He didn't kill him. He found him dead."

Qayla did not cry.

But Warda saw something in her face she had not seen in it before. Not at the Well, not in the Waste, not at the Spire. It was like the face of someone who has carried a stone for forty days, and set it down, and does not know what to do with her hands.

"I kept silent," said Qayla. Barely audible. "Forty days. I kept silent about a man who didn't kill him."

"You kept silent about a man you saw."

"I kept silent because I thought he was the killer. And I thought the Keepers had killed him. And I was afraid." Qayla looked at her hands.

"And I was afraid people would say I saw and didn't shoot. That was the real fear. Not the Keepers. Me. And my silence was about nothing."

"Not about nothing."

Qayla looked at her.

"He was ordered," said Warda. "Someone ordered him to make sure it was done. Whoever says make sure it's done knows it will be done."

Then they opened the bag.

In it was the large parchment, rolled, its edge burned. And the small half parchment. And a folded sheet of thin Delta paper, written in blue ink, in a small hurried hand, unsigned. It had not been sent.

Qayla took from the breast of her robe the other half, in the bread cloth.

They laid the two halves on the ground side by side in the lamplight. The tear matched the tear. The way a broken stone matches its other half.

And Qayla read it, all of it, for the first time:

> To Sitmara the Third, mistress of Qalmir, from Dhamyan son of Khardash, Chief of the Tribes in Surdan.
>
> You wrote to me asking, and I answer you with what I have not told my son or my tribe: that I hoarded, and that I was the first to break.
>
> If you stop the machines that are under the valley, and close the Spires at the three, and run no canal into our land except by leave of the Council,
>
> I will declare in the Council, before all the tribes, that the wells of the ravines are shared as the Covenant said, not sold,

nor given on terms, nor guarded except by the knights, and that Surdan neither fights nor is ruled.

And this is carried to you by one you do not doubt, the son of Nuqar, Faqid.

Neutrality

There was nothing after the word. Not on this half, nor on that.

Then Qayla opened the large parchment.

It was a speech for the Council. It was not a letter. It was what Dhamyan would have said before the tribes in the morning, written in his own hand so that he would not stumble. In it were sentences Warda had seen in the rug, taking shape under his hand: *I hoarded the Ravine Wells for thirteen years. I was the first to break the first article. Those who died on the Flat Rock road died, and I know their names.*

Under that were names.

Qayla read them. And stopped at one.

Warda said nothing. She did not need to ask. She saw Qayla's finger on the name, and saw it shaking.

Then Warda opened the blue sheet.

She did not see it. She only read it. Because she knew the hand for what it was before she read. It was not Nawsam's hand. It was the hand of a man who had learned to write in Ilsum, like a thousand others. But the ink was the Keepers' ink. And the way the sheet began was the Keepers' way when they write to the head of the Council.

To the Scribe.

I arrived after it was done. I found him on the rug with the lamp out. There was no one in the tent, and I saw no one come out. I took what was

on the board as I was ordered. With it I found a half parchment, which holds what you did not tell me: that he was going to declare neutrality. If that is what he was going to say, what was it we wanted to prevent?

At the door the Captain of the Knights saw me, and did not call out.

I go on to the Edge as I was ordered, to see the crystal, then down the river. I do not know if I will send this.

Warda read it twice.

Then she laid it on the ground beside the two halves.

And she waited to feel something.

She knew what she ought to feel. She had written it. In the folded letter in her belt, in her own hand: *Your hand was shaking. And I did not understand why.* And she knew, in her head, by reckoning, the way one knows that two and two are four, that the Scribe was Nawsam. That the Keepers write "To the Scribe" to no one but him. That a man had been ordered to make sure it was done. That the order had come from Ilsum. That Nawsam had sent her after the man had gone, and said to her: write it to me first.

She knew all of it.

And she felt nothing.

Not the cold in her back. Not the doubt. Not the fear that had been there. She looked at the blue sheet the way Amnuthar looked at his notebook: words, in the hand of someone she believed, about a man she did not know. And she knew that this man she did not know had raised her since she was six.

"Warda."

She raised her eyes.

"You're crying," said Qayla.

Warda touched her face with her bare right hand. It was wet.

"I can't feel why," she said.

Neither of them slept.

They sat in the tent until dawn, the papers between them on the ground, the lamp dimming. Hadran came once and stood at the door, and listened. Then he came in and sat and said nothing. Then he reached out and felt the papers one after another with his fingertips, the way he felt the ground.

His fingers stopped on the blue sheet.

"I know this ink," he said.

"All the Keepers know it."

"No." He did not lift his fingers. "I know this hand. I taught it." He was silent. "He was my student. Before the Waste. Before I went blind. The cleverest in his class, and the most afraid." He raised his face. "His name doesn't matter now."

"It mattered yesterday," said Qayla.

Hadran did not answer.

In the morning Qayla went to Amnuthar.

Warda did not go with her. She stayed in the tent, the gloves in her lap, the small notebook open at the page of lost things. And she searched.

She was searching for the price of the bag. She went over the things. Then she found it.

It was not large. It was something about Ilsum. The light in the Library. She knew it had had a color. She knew it had passed through something before it reached the shelves. Water? Glass? And she knew she had loved it. And she did not know its color.

She wrote: *The color of the light in the Library.*

Then she stopped. She looked at the line.

Then she wrote under it, in a smaller hand, the way Amnuthar wrote to himself:

The man Qayla saw came after the killing. He wrote to the Scribe: I arrived after it was done. I don't feel this. But I believe it, because it is his hand.

Qayla came back in the forenoon with a sheet of paper.

She said Amnuthar had read the bag. Everything in it. And had read his notebook after it, and found what he had written yesterday: *I saw.* And that he had written to the Empress by bird, at dawn, before Qayla arrived. And that the bird had come back with an answer an hour ago.

She gave the sheet to Warda.

It was in the Empress's hand. The large irregular hand.

I have stopped the fourth. I cannot stop the three yet. And I do not know whether I will be able to.

Go back to your Well, Captain of the Knights, by the river and the canals, not by the Waste. You have the officer's ring. I have ordered that you be given what you need.

And carry my letter to Khardash as it is.

There was nothing in the sheet about Ilsum.

From *Blood of Brothers*, the Ilsumi Account. A note in small blue writing in the margin, its writer unknown:

The book says that the stranger who came in to the Fourth Warden the night he was killed was seen by no one going in,

and the guard saw him coming out, with a seal on his hand. And I say: how many are seen coming out in this book, and how few are seen going in. Whoever writes history writes what the guard saw at the door. And the guard sees nothing but the door.

Part Three: The Library

17. The Return

They went back by water.

Three days on the boat down the river, then two days on the great canal to the west, then a day on a smaller canal that bent to the southwest, to where the land of Qalmir ends and Surdan begins. The officer's ring was in a pouch in the breast of Qayla's robe, and she took it out six times for six guards, and each time the guard looked at it, then at her, then at the green cord, then made way.

She did not put it on once.

She was not afraid of the water this time. Or she was, and did not notice. She was thinking of other things. Of a name on a large parchment, in a dead man's hand. Of a blue sheet that said: I arrived after it was done. Of her brother.

Warda slept on the boat, as she had the first time, her left hand wrapped in a clean cloth Amnuthar had given her, with a salve of wax and honey in it. She did not wear the left glove. She did not need it anymore. She said so with a smile, and the smile was worse than crying.

They reached Faqid's tents in the afternoon of the fifty-first day.

Qayla saw the smoke before the tents. It was not the smoke of a fire. It was old smoke, gray, rising thinly from black ground. Then she saw the head of the seventh canal.

It was a stone basin, like the basin of the Edge Spire but smaller, fed with water from the great canal, then branching from it in small channels to the tents. The basin was broken. Its stones scattered, black from fire. The channels dry. In the bottom of the basin, cracked mud.

Around it, the tents. Half of them burned.

She saw the women. They were carrying water in skins from the great canal, an hour away, on their backs, because the camels were few. She saw the children. Sitting in the shade of what was left of the tents, silent. She counted them without deciding to count. Seventeen.

There had been twenty.

She found her brother sitting on a stone by the broken basin.

His left arm was bound to his chest with cloth, and on his face was a long cut from temple to jaw, beginning to heal. He was looking at the basin.

He did not get up when he saw her.

She got down from the camel, walked to him, and stood in front of him. He looked up at her. Then at Warda and Hadran behind her. Then at her.

"You're late," he said.

"I'm late."

"Khardash was waiting for you. He told the people: if the Captain of the Knights comes with the name, no blood. And he waited until dawn. And you didn't come. So he came."

"How many?"

"Of ours, six. Three of them children, in the tent that burned." His voice did not change. "Of theirs, four. One of them his other cousin. And the Qalmiris at the post didn't come out. They said: the sanctuary isn't our land. And the canal isn't sanctuary. And they didn't come out."

Qayla sat on the stone beside him.

She did not speak for a while. Then she took the bread cloth from the breast of her robe. She opened it. She laid the two halves on his knee, side by side.

Faqid looked at them.

He did not touch them. He read, his eyes moving line by line. His eyes stopped at the sixth line.

And this is carried to you by one you do not doubt, the son of Nuqar, Faqid.

He did not move.

"Where did you find it?" he said, in a dry voice.

"Half in the rug. Half in the bag of a man who died under the Edge Spire."

He looked at her.

"The Edge Spire," he said.

"It burned. With a white fire. From beneath." She looked at the broken basin. "I saw it, Faqid. No salt storm."

He said nothing.

Then he told her. Without her asking. The way he had told her about their mother at the dead well.

"I met him seven days before his death," said Faqid. "At the Silt Well. Where I met you. That's why I came in time. I knew the road."

"He sent for you?"

"He sent for me. He sent a boy of the Sons of Qaydh, with no sign, and said: the Chief of the Tribes wants you at the dead well, alone, at noon." He smiled with half his mouth. "And I went. Because I wanted to see his face. The man who gave us leave to drink on the fifth day."

"And you saw it."

"I saw it." He looked at his good hand. "He was older than I thought. And more tired. And he said to me, before he said anything else: your son was four. I know. Your messenger came to me on the second day, and I held him back three days because I was reckoning. I was reckoning how much was in the Flat Rock Well. And you were burying." Faqid was silent. "He said it like that. He didn't apologize. He said: I was reckoning. And you were burying."

Qayla said nothing.

"Then he told me what's in this." He pointed to the parchment on his knee. "Neutrality. The wells. The Empress. And he said: you carry it. Qalmir trusts you, and you hate me. If you carry it, both sides will believe it. And I said yes."

"And why didn't you tell me?"

"When?"

"After his death. The day of the burial. At the dead well. Whenever you liked."

Faqid looked at her a long time.

"He was killed before he declared it," he said. "So who would believe it? I'm Qalmir's man. If I said: Dhamyan was going to declare neutrality, and I was going to carry his letter, the Loyal would say: he's lying to cover for whoever killed him. And the Qalmiris would say: he was bar-

gaining behind our backs. And I had nothing. No parchment, no witness. He was the witness, and he died." He paused. "And you..."

"And me?"

"And you were on guard. And there was something in your eyes the day of the killing. I saw it from among the people. Something you were hiding. I didn't know what it was. So I said: my sister knows who went in to him, and doesn't say. So why should I?"

Qayla found nothing to say.

Then she told him what she had seen. All of it. The night, the bow, the man, the ember. The silence. The forty days. The man himself, at the door of the Spire, with half a body and blue fingers. And the sheet: I arrived after it was done.

Faqid listened. He did not interrupt her once.

When she had finished, he said, "So we both kept silent."

"Both."

"About true things. And each of us thought our silence was protecting something."

"Yes."

"And what did it protect?"

Qayla looked at the seventeen children in the shade.

She did not answer.

Then she gave him the large parchment.

Faqid read it. Dhamyan's speech to the Council. The words he never said. *I hoarded the Ravine Wells for thirteen years. I was the first to break the first article. Those who died on the Flat Rock road died, and I know their names.*

Then the names.

Qayla watched him read them. Name after name. Sixteen names. She saw his finger, the good one, go down the parchment, the way her own finger had gone down it in the tent at the edge of the Spire. She saw it stop.

At their mother's name.

Then go down.

Then stop at the name after it. Three small names. The last of them a boy's name, and after it, in Dhamyan's hand: *son of Faqid son of Nuqar. Four years.*

Faqid did not move for a long time.

Qayla waited for him to cry.

He did not cry.

He was looking at the name, and his face was still. The shut mouth. The sunken eyes. There was no water in them. Then he raised his eyes to her, and there was something in them she had not seen in them before. Not hardness. Bewilderment.

"I don't cry," he said.

"I know."

"I didn't cry for him." He said it slowly, like someone discovering something. "When I buried him. Or after. Or now. I told myself: this is grief. Great grief doesn't cry. That's what they say. But I cried for my mother. On the third night, before he died. I cried for her until dawn."

Qayla looked at him.

"And a year later the man from Qalmir came," said Faqid. "And we drank from the canal." He looked at the broken basin. "And since then I haven't cried for anything."

Qayla said nothing about a boy on the river steps hitting a dog with nothing in his face. But she saw her brother look at her and understand that she had something she was not saying. And she saw him decide not to ask. As she had decided not to tell.

The first of those four names was her mother's.

Qayla had never seen it written before today. It was not written on the grave. In Surdan nothing is written on graves, because the sand knows who is under it. And she saw it now in Dhamyan's hand, in black ink, between the name of a man from the ravines and the name of a child, as if it were just one of the names.

"You said at the dead well that you sent me a messenger," she said.

Faqid raised his eyes from the parchment.

"I did."

"He came." She did not look at him. "To the Well of Oaths. I was guarding the pilgrims. The messenger was a boy from our tribe, on a donkey. He said to me: your family is on the road between the two wells, and your brother asks you to come. He didn't say: thirsty. He didn't say: your mother. He said: on the road. And among the pilgrims was a woman from Almin, sick, and my watch had three days left. So I said to the boy: tell my brother I'll come after the watch."

Faqid said nothing.

"And I finished the watch," said Qayla. "Three days. Because custom says a knight leaves her watch only for blood. And there was no blood in the boy's words. And I arrived when you had already buried her."

"The boy didn't know," said Faqid after a while. "I sent him on the first day. My mother was alive, and the water was scarce, not gone." He looked at his hand. "I didn't know either, that day, that it would be blood."

"And why didn't you tell me this? Twenty times I asked you: how did she die. Who was with her."

"Because you would have asked: when did you send. And I would have said: on the first day. And you would have reckoned. You reckon the way he reckoned. Wells, and days, and watches."

Qayla found nothing to say. Because it was true. Because she was reckoning now: a day for the boy to the Well of Oaths, and two days for her on horseback, if she had gone. She would have arrived on the third night. The night her mother died.

Her eyes went over the line above the names.

Those who died on the Flat Rock road died, and I know their names.

The Flat Rock Well. The well of the Sons of Qaydh. And the men on it with spears. And she, Qayla daughter of Nuqar, for ten years had guarded a well where the Sons of Qaydh gathered every autumn, and stood by their chief's tent, and judged between them and their opponents as if she had no account of her own with them.

And she had an account with them.

She was fourteen when they brought her father on a camel from the fourth of the Ravine Wells, with a small wound in his chest, too small to kill a man like her father. She did not see the arrow. They said it had been pulled out on the road, and that it bore the tribe's mark: two lines and a bow. The mark of the Sons of Qaydh. No one knew where it went. She did not cry that day. Then, twelve years later, her mother died of thirst on the road to their well.

She had never said this to herself in this order. The arrow, then the well. Her father, then her mother. She kept each of them in its own place, far from the other, the way two fighting camels are kept apart.

And she said: a knight does not lean. Whoever has sworn not to lean carries no vengeance.

And now they lay on her knee together, on one parchment, in the hand of the man whose tent she had guarded.

"You're thinking of my father," said Faqid.

"Of the arrow."

"I've been thinking of it for years." He looked at the burned canal. "That's why I drank from the canal, Qayla. Not because Qalmir is better. Because its water doesn't pass through the Sons of Qaydh."

She did not tell him she understood. But she understood. And that was worse than disagreeing with him.

At night they sat around a small fire in front of his tent, which had not burned.

Qayla and Faqid. Hadran, silent. Warda, her wrapped hand in her lap.

Qayla had taken out the Empress's letter, sealed with blue wax. She laid it on the ground. No one touched it.

"You'll take it to him," said Faqid.

"Yes."

"Alone."

"Alone."

"He'll kill you."

"No. He'll drive me off. He won't kill me. He's Dhamyan's son. He knows how long he can go hungry."

Faqid looked at her.

"And what will you tell him?"

Qayla did not answer at once. She had thought about it for six days on the water. She had thought of the large parchment, and the confes-

sion in it. *I hoarded. I was the first to break.* And of Khardash's face, saying: my father was wrong, and my father was killed, and his wrong does not make his blood lawful. And of his red cord.

"The truth," she said.

"All of it?"

She looked at her brother.

"I don't know all of it." She paused. "I know who went in after the killing. I don't know who killed. I know his father was going to declare neutrality. And I know someone in Ilsum wanted to make sure he wouldn't."

She heard Warda breathing beside her. She did not turn.

"Then tell him that," said Faqid.

"And that his father wrote: I was the first to break?"

Faqid was silent.

Then he said, "I don't know, Qayla." It was the first time in years she had heard him say: I don't know. "His father wanted to say it before the tribes. With his own mouth. That was his price. If you say it for him, you take his price from him."

Qayla got up to sleep.

Faqid took her wrist in his good hand. Above the green cord.

"Qayla."

"Yes."

"Khardash isn't your enemy." He looked at her, and the fire was in his eyes. "Nor am I. Nor the woman in Qalmir. Your enemy is whoever wrote: make sure it's done."

"No one wrote it. Someone said it to a man."

"Then your enemy is whoever said it."

He let go.

Qayla walked to the small tent they had given her. She did not sleep.

Warda was asleep in it, or seemed asleep. When Qayla came in, the seer said in the dark, without opening her eyes,

"Ilsum."

"Ilsum," said Qayla.

"After Khardash?"

"After Khardash."

Warda was silent a while. Then she said, "I don't feel afraid to go back." She paused. "And that's what frightens me."

18. Khardash

Khardash had risen from the sand.

Qayla saw it from far off, when she climbed the small dune overlooking his tents, in the forenoon of the fifty-third day. He was no longer sitting by the dead palm. There was a new tent, low and black, of coarse hair, without poles, pegged down to the ground. A war tent. He was standing in front of it, tall and thin, the red cord on his wrist, talking to men around him.

And he was under a roof.

Qayla understood. The forty days were over, so the oath was over. He had sworn not to stay under a roof until he knew, or until the time ran out and he took judgment into his own hand. And he had taken it. At the head of the seventh canal, at dawn.

She went down the dune alone. On her horse. Without a sword. She left the bow with Hufayr on the dune.

No one rose to stop her.

She passed between the tents, and the men looked at her. Among them she saw faces she knew. Knights who had been with her, and were here now. They had taken off the green cords and tied on red. One of them was Zaabal. Standing by a camel, the old burn on his forearm now

a scar. He looked at her, and said nothing, and did not turn his face away.

She stood before Khardash.

"Daughter of Nuqar."

"Son of Dhamyan."

"You've come after the forty."

"I've come after the forty."

"With the name?"

She looked at him. She had arranged what she would say through six days on the water, two days on the camel, and a whole night at her brother's fire. And now she saw his face. The sunken cheeks, the eyes grown larger than they should be. And she saw in them what she had not seen in the northern ravine. Tiredness. The tiredness of a man who has taken judgment into his own hand and not found in it what he thought.

"No," she said. "Without the name."

They sat in the new tent. He at one end, she at the other, and between them a bowl of milk he did not offer.

And she told him.

She began with what she had told no one before Warda. The night. The watch. The lamp that went out. The man coming out of his father's tent, with a walk that did not know sand, one shoulder higher than the other, and blue fingers. The arrow between her fingers, the bow undrawn. And she did not shoot. And she did not call out. And she stood at the door. And called: Chief of the Tribes. Twice. And did not go in.

"Then I told you on the day of the burial: I don't know," she said. "And I knew I had seen."

Khardash did not move.

He said nothing for a long time. His face was as it had been in the ravine, when he said: as you stood at my father's tent. But now he knew what he had said.

"Forty days," he said at last.

"Forty days."

"And my two cousins died. And Zaabal's father died. And six died in your brother's tents, three of them small." His voice was calm, his father's voice. "And you knew."

"I knew I had seen a man. I didn't know he hadn't killed him."

He looked at her.

And she told him the rest.

The Spire. The same man at its door. The bag. The sheet: I arrived after it was done. She told him that the man she had seen went in after his father was dead, and that the killer had left no trace. Not in the rug, not in the ground, not in anything.

She did not tell him whom the sheet was written to.

She had decided that at her brother's fire, and did not know whether the decision was right. If she said: Ilsum, Khardash would rise tomorrow against the Keepers, as he had risen against the head of the canal. And she had nothing but an unsigned sheet that began with three words. And Warda, who knew and did not feel.

Then she took out the two halves.

Khardash read them once.

Then he laid them on the rug between them, and did not look at them again.

"His hand," he said.

"His hand."

"And you say he was going to declare neutrality."

"I say what's on the parchment."

"And open the wells."

"What's on the parchment."

"And send it with your brother." He looked at her, and for the first time she saw something move in his face. "With the son of Nuqar. Qalmir's man. To the woman who steals the water from under us."

"Yes."

"And where did you get its half?"

"From the bag of a man who died in Qalmir."

"In Qalmir." Khardash rose. Slowly. He stood over her. "You went to Qalmir. And the time ran out while you were there. And you came back on their canals. With a parchment in my father's hand that says he was going to sell us to them."

"He wasn't going to sell you."

"And says he was going to give them the wells."

"He was going to open them. To the tribes. As the Covenant said."

"The Covenant." Khardash laughed. A short dry laugh, like stone on stone. "You don't cite the Covenant, Captain. You cite custom. Everyone knows that. So who taught you the Covenant in Qalmir?"

Then he reached out.

She did not understand at first. Then she saw his hand reach to the breast of her robe, where the bread cloth had been, and where there was another pouch. She did not stop him. He took out the pouch.

He opened it.

The ring fell onto the rug. Silver, and a blue stone.

Khardash looked at it. A long time.

Then he looked at her.

"I didn't wear it," said Qayla.

"You carry it at your breast. Beside my father's hand."

She did not answer.

Then she took out the Empress's letter, sealed with blue wax. She laid it on the rug, beside the ring, beside the two halves.

"This is from her," she said. "To you. What she wrote to your father. And more. I haven't read it. She said: carry it as it is. And I carried it."

Khardash did not look at the letter.

"Do you know why I don't cite the Covenant?" said Qayla.

He did not answer.

"Because custom says: a knight carries no vengeance. And the Covenant doesn't say that. The Covenant says: no blood at the Well. And is silent about what lies beyond the Well." She looked at him, and her voice did not rise. "And I need custom, son of Dhamyan. I need it every autumn. When I stand at your father's tent."

"And why do you need it?"

"Because my father died by an arrow with two lines and a bow on it."

Khardash was silent. She knew he knew the mark. Everyone in Surdan knew it. The mark of the Sons of Qaydh, on camels and on doors and on arrows.

"At the fourth of the Ravine Wells," she said. "In the little war. I was fourteen. No one asked who shot. They said: war. And war isn't questioned." She looked at the ring on the rug. "And twelve years later my mother died of thirst on the Flat Rock road. Your well. Your men on it with spears, by your father's order. And her name is written in his hand, on a parchment I haven't shown you yet."

She saw his face change. It was not anger. It was something slower than anger.

"Then I came every autumn," she said, "and stood with thirty knights on the rise, guarding the tent of the man who ordered the spears, of the tribe of the man who shot the arrow. And I judged between you and your opponents for ten years, and no one ever said: Qayla leaned. So don't tell me I stand above nothing. I stood above myself. And that's harder."

Khardash did not speak for a while.

Then he said, low, as if speaking to the bowl between them, "I didn't know your mother..."

"No one told you. And I didn't."

"And why are you telling it now?"

"Because you said I brought you your father's hand to sell you to Qalmir. If I leaned, I would have leaned away from you ten years ago. Not today."

"Get out," he said.

Qayla looked at him.

"Get out, daughter of Nuqar." He did not raise his voice. "Of my tent. And of my tents. And don't come in among the Loyal after today. And don't say you stand above both sides. You stand above nothing. You were at my father's door, and you stood still. And you were in Qalmir when the time ran out. And you've brought me their ring and my father's hand, saying: your father was with them."

"I didn't say that."

"You said it." He looked at the two halves on the rug. "That's what the parchment says. And I don't believe the parchment. I believe my father. And my father wouldn't have written this."

Qayla looked at him.

And she saw that he was lying. Not to her. To himself. She saw it in his right hand, on his knee, closing and opening. She saw in his eyes that he knew the hand, and knew his father, and knew his father was capable of writing this. And that he could not let himself know it today. Or tomorrow.

She thought of the large parchment. In the messenger's bag, with Warda, on the plain. *I hoarded. I was the first to break.*

She said nothing about it.

And she rose.

At the door of the tent she turned.

"The two halves are yours," she said. "And the letter. I won't take them."

Khardash did not answer.

"And tell me one thing, son of Dhamyan, and then I won't come in to you again."

He looked at her.

"How far has the water dropped in the Well of Oaths since the first Spire?"

"Three cubits. My father measured it."

"And wrote it down."

"He wrote everything down."

"So your father wrote what he didn't say. As he did in this."

And she went out.

No one rose to stop her as she walked between the tents to her horse.

But Zaabal was by the horse.

He stood and looked at her. He had grown thinner. And in his eyes was what had been in Khardash's eyes. Tiredness.

"I heard," he said. Low. "The tent is hair. Everyone heard."

Qayla said nothing.

"The man you saw," said Zaabal. "He didn't kill him."

"He went in after he was dead."

"And my father died in the ravine because we thought it was them. We thought it was Qalmir. Or we thought the Keepers. Or we thought anyone." He was silent. "And no one knew."

"No one."

Zaabal looked at her a while. Then he put his hand into his robe, took something out, and laid it in her hand.

A green cord.

His own cord. The one he had put into her hand in the ravine, which she had given to Hufayr. She did not know how it had come back to him.

"I'm not coming back," said Zaabal. "Not now. My father is here, in the ground. But keep it." He looked at the black tent. "And he'll read the letter. He didn't read it while you were there. But he'll read it."

"How do you know?"

"Because he kept the ring too. I saw him take it when you turned."

She went back to the plain in the evening.

Hufayr was waiting for her at the Well. He looked at her face, and did not ask.

Then he said, "A hundred and forty."

She looked at him.

"The knights. A hundred and forty are left. Ninety-seven went while you were gone. Half to the Loyal after the seventh canal. Half to their

homes. They said: there's no sanctuary if there's no one to guard it. And the ones who stayed, stayed because you came back. Not because they know why."

"Nor do I."

"I know." He laid his hand on her shoulder, the way he laid it on his daughter's shoulder. "But you came back."

She found Warda at her tent, tying the loads onto a camel.

Hadran was with her, feeling the knots one after another and retying the ones he did not like.

"You're going," said Qayla.

"To Ilsum." Warda did not raise her eyes. "Overland. With Hadran. Twelve days." She was silent. "The large parchment is with me. And the blue sheet. And his bag."

"Will you give them to Nawsam?"

Warda raised her eyes.

"I don't know." She looked at her wrapped hand. "I'll go back to the tower. And climb its steps, and not know how many they are. And stand before him. And look at his hands. And see whether I feel anything. And if I don't, I have what I wrote. And I'll read it in front of him."

"Alone."

"With Hadran."

Qayla looked at Hadran. At the blind man's tilted face, which said nothing.

"I'll come," said Qayla.

"After?"

"By sea. Faster. To Qaydhan, then a ship to the Delta." She looked at the Well, at the rope on the pulley, the shadow of sunset on it. "After

I've set the knights in order. A hundred and forty. And someone has to guard."

"And why the sea?"

"Because whoever said to the man: make sure it's done, knows now that he didn't come back." Qayla looked at her. "And he'll be waiting for whoever comes overland."

Warda looked at her a long time.

Then she smiled a small tired smile that did not reach her eyes.

"You guard even what you don't know the place of."

"It's what I know."

19. Ilsum

The light in the Library was green.

Warda knew it because she saw it. Not because she remembered it. She came in through the great door in the forenoon of the sixty-fifth day, Hadran behind her, her hand on his shoulder this time, because her legs were shaking from twelve days on the camel. She raised her eyes to the dome. She saw the light coming down from the high windows, passing over something that moved, and falling on the shelves and tables and faces, green, trembling, like light under water.

The water of the canals. She understood that after a moment. The light passes over the canal water before it comes in.

She stood looking at it.

She had written in the notebook of lost things: *The color of the light in the Library.* And she knew she had loved it. And now she saw it. It was beautiful. And it was like any beautiful light one sees for the first time. There was no home in it.

"What color is it?" said Hadran, low.

"Green."

"It was always green."

"I know now."

No one in the hall knew her.

Or they knew her and did not say. The Keepers passed her in their white robes, with their blue fingers and their notebooks under their arms, and looked at her a moment. At the robe dusty from the road. At the left hand wrapped in a cloth, without a glove. Then they went on. And she heard behind her a whispering, like the sound of paper.

Then she saw Taylam.

He was coming down the great stair with two young copyists. He saw her. He stopped. He looked at her wrapped hand. Then at Hadran. Then at her.

"The seer," he said. He said nothing else.

"Taylam."

"You've come back alone."

"With Hadran."

"And from the east." It was not a question. "We heard you crossed the Waste. And that you were in Qalmir. And that the Edge Spire..." He stopped. He looked at the two young men with him, and they went on. Then he said, lower, "The head of the Council asks about you every day."

"I'll go up to him now."

"No." Taylam looked at her with his narrow eyes, his broken thumbnail scratching the edge of the notebook under his arm. "He's in the Circle. Since dawn. He won't come down before sunset." He paused. "Wash. And sleep. And go up to him at night, as you used to."

Then he went on. At the door he turned, like someone who wants to say something more. He did not say it.

She did not wash. She did not sleep.

She sat in her small room in the east wing, on the narrow bed, the bag with its burned edges on her knees. The room was as she had left it.

The table, the lamp, the small shelf with its three books. But she did not know where to put the bag. She had lived here twenty years, and her hands did not know where she used to put things.

Hadran came an hour later. He sat on the chair. He said nothing for a while.

Then he said, "When I came back to Ilsum after the Waste, after ten years, no one here knew me. I told you that on the road."

"Except one."

"Except Nawsam." He turned his face toward the window. "I was standing in the hall, as you stood today. In the clothes of the Waste. Blind. Not knowing where the stair was. Not knowing anyone. And a man came down the great stair and stood in front of me. He put his hand on my face. Like this. The way a blind man feels. Then he said: Hadran. You've come back. And he took me to his tower. He gave me a room. And food. And work. And he never once asked me where I had been."

Warda said nothing.

"Ten years," said Hadran. "And he never once asked me." He turned his face to her. "And I thought it was mercy."

When he had gone, she opened the window.

Her room looked south, over the Dyers' Quarter, and she had never thought about that. The smell came in. The smell of indigo and salt and the still water in the great vats, which she had smelled every day for twenty years and told herself was the smell of Ilsum.

And she saw, in the last of the light, the women at the vats. Lifting the long cloths with poles, so that they came out of the water blue and dripping. The dye on their arms up to the elbow. One of them was laughing, her hand on her cheek, leaving a blue mark on it.

And Warda did not know why she stood watching her until the quarter was dark.

She climbed the tower after the evening meal.

She counted the steps. Because she did not remember how many there were. She knew that she had known. She counted. Her legs were shaking. Her right hand was on the cold stone wall, and in it were the traces of many hands, the hands of years, going up and coming down. She did not see them. She kept the glove on.

Two hundred and seventeen.

The door was open.

Nawsam was standing at the window, watering the plant.

Drop by drop. From the small cup. Into the white pot of salt stone. The plant was smaller than she had thought. Or she had forgotten its size. Two green leaves, a thin stem, and nothing else.

He turned.

She saw his face. The thin lined face, the gray eyes, the short white beard. She saw him smile. The smile she remembered. She remembered all of it. The words, and the face, and the room. All of it was here, in her head, ordered like the shelves of the Library.

And the place of one thing was empty.

"My daughter."

He came to her. Slowly. He laid his hands on her shoulders. He looked into her face. Then his eyes went down to her wrapped hand.

"What have you done to your hand?"

"The white fire."

His face did not change. But his hands on her shoulders grew a little heavier.

"Sit," he said.

She sat in the chair she always sat in. He sat in the other. Between them was the small table, and on it a lamp, a closed notebook, and a cup of water.

"Tell me."

And she told him.

She did not tell him everything. But she had not decided what to say, so she discovered what she was saying as she said it. She told him about the Well, and the rug, and the torn parchment. About the Waste, and the salt, and the Glass Sea. About Qalmir, and Amnuthar, and the notebook. About the Spire.

She did not tell him about the bag.

Nor about the man at the door.

He listened. He listened as he had always listened. His head tilted a little, his hand on the closed notebook. Asking small questions. Nodding. And once, when she told him about the city under the glass, he said, "Yes. Yes. That's how it was." Like someone reading a book he knows.

She looked at his hands.

They were not shaking.

"And Amnuthar told you: a salt storm."

"Yes."

"And his hand was shaking."

"Yes."

Nawsam smiled. “A hand shakes for many things, my daughter. For cold. For age. For lying. For fear of the truth. And you don’t know which, until you see it. And you didn’t see it.”

“No.”

“Keeping before understanding,” he said. The old saying. “And you kept. That’s all I asked.”

Warda looked at him.

Then she said, “Why did you tell me: what you don’t understand, write it to me first?”

Nawsam’s face did not change.

“Because I love you,” he said. “And because a young seer sometimes sees what she herself fears, not what was. And because I wanted to be the first to hear, before someone heard who would misunderstand.”

Every one of the sentences was true.

Warda knew it. She felt nothing, but she knew. Every sentence was true. And none of them was the answer.

Then Nawsam rose.

“You must sleep.” He laid his hand on her head, as he used to when she was six. “Tomorrow you’ll speak to the Council. Not all of it. The Circle.” He paused. “It’s time you knew what is under the Library, Warda. You’ve seen a great deal. And one who has seen a great deal must know why she guards.”

“The Circle?”

“The Inner Circle. You know it exists. All the Keepers know. And they don’t know who is in it. Seven. I am one of them. And Taylam. And we guard two things. Two Seals. Of the seven. One of them is under our hands. And the other...” He pointed with his finger at the floor.

At what was under the tower. At what was under the whole Library. "The other does not move."

Warda said nothing.

"The iron door in the Salt Vault," said Nawsam. "You remember it?"

"I remember it."

"Its humming."

"I remember it."

"It has grown louder since you left." He looked at the window, to the east, at the darkness beyond which lay the Waste and Qalmir. "A little. Every day. For three months. Since they began building the fourth." He paused. "And yesterday it stopped."

"The humming stopped?"

"No. Its rising stopped."

And Warda saw something in his face. For the first time that night. Something that was not a smile.

"The fourth has been stopped," she said. "The Empress. After the Spire."

Nawsam was silent a long time.

"Then you've succeeded," he said at last. "Where none of us did." Then he smiled. "Sleep, my daughter."

And he went out.

She had not expected that. She had thought he would stay, and she would go. But he took his staff from beside the door, and said, "The Circle. The night isn't over. Go back to your room, or sleep here if you like. The small bed is in the other room." And he went down.

She heard his steps on the stair. Going down. And down.

And she was alone in the room.

She did not get up for a while.

She was looking at the table. At the closed notebook. Then she got up and walked about the room. To the shelves. To the window. To the plant in its pot of salt.

Then she saw the box.

It was under the large table by the wall, where Nawsam wrote at night. A box of salt stone, white, the size of a bread box, with a wooden lid. She had seen it a thousand times. She had never asked about it. It was always there, like the plant, like the chair.

She lifted the lid.

It was full of paper.

Torn paper. Small pieces, the size of a palm, and smaller. Hundreds of them. All of them in blue ink. All in one hand, small and slanting. A hand she had known since she was six.

She had never seen it torn before.

She understood.

It was not understanding from her head. It was from something else. From everything she knew about the Keepers. A Keeper does not burn paper. That is the first thing taught, before keeping, before silence. Burning is erasing. And a Keeper does not erase. Not even what he wrote with his own hand. Not even what he does not want read.

So he tears it. And puts it in salt. Because salt keeps.

Every night. For years.

Warda looked at the torn paper. And she thought: he writes something every night that he doesn't want read, and can't erase.

He is confessing.

She stood a while.

She looked at the door. It was open, and the stair beyond it dark, with no sound on it.

Then she looked at her right hand. In the glove.

I don't read the trace of the living without their leave.

She had said it to Qayla, in the tent, the day she arrived at the Well. She knew she had said it, because Qayla had told her after the Glass Sea. She did not remember saying it. But she knew why she had said it. Because it was a rule. And it was her rule before it was the Keepers' rule. Because reading the trace of the living without their leave is taking. Taking something that was not given.

And Nawsam had taught her that.

She took off the glove.

She did not decide.

Or she decided, and did not know when. Her hand was in the glove, then it was bare. And it was over the box. And the torn paper was beneath it, hundreds of pieces, in blue ink, like the leaves of a tree in autumn.

And she thought, at the last moment, of something she had not thought of before: that she did not know what she would pay. The Glass Sea had taken a day. The notebook had taken the doubt. The bag had taken the color. And this... this was years. Years of nights. Of confession.

And she did not know what was left in her to be taken.

She put her hand into the box.

20. My Father

The confession began from its end.

Because the last thing torn was at the top of the box. Its trace was newer, and stronger, and nearer the surface. So the first thing that came to her was yesterday. Nawsam's hand, at night, at the large table, writing. The hand was not shaking. Then tearing. Slowly. Piece by piece. Then laying the pieces in the salt.

The rising of the humming has stopped. I don't know why. The messenger has not come back.

Then the night before.

The messenger has not come back.

Then the one before. And the one before that. Every night a line, or two, or a page. Not all of it was confession. Some was reckoning. Some was fear. And some was her name.

Warda has not written in thirty days. Taylam says she lied to him.

Warda has not written.

Warda has gone into the Waste. The Waste. With Hadran.

And she went down through the layers.

She found Dhamyan soon after.

It was a night twenty days before the killing. The night news reached Ilsum from Qalmir: that the Empress had written to the Chief of the

Tribes offering peace. Nawsam's hand was shaking that night.

If he accepts neutrality, Surdan makes peace with them. If Surdan makes peace with them, there is no war. If there is no war, the Spires reach the Delta before my generation dies. And under the Delta is the door.

The Circle has voted. Five and two. And Taylam with the five.

I am the one who wrote to them. I am the one who paid. I cannot say the Circle did it.

Then another night, days after the killing:

They say it is done. I have sent someone to make sure. After him I sent Warda. Because whoever sees the rug will see, and because I want to know what she saw before anyone else knows it. That is what I told myself.

And the truth is that I wanted the one who sees to be someone I love. So that I would believe her.

This piece was torn into eight. The letters in it were deeper than the others, as if the pen had pressed.

And she knew all this.

From the blue sheet. From the reckoning. From Sitmara, who had said: who loses? There was nothing new in the layers about Dhamyan. There was what she knew, in the hand of the man who had raised her.

And she felt nothing.

She could have come out. Lifted her hand. She had learned what she came to learn. But the layers were beneath her, deep, years. And the trace pulls. And she felt something at the bottom. Something old, heavy, like the stone at the bottom of a well. And Nawsam's hand, when he tore it, had shaken more than on any other night.

She went down.

Ten years. Fifteen. Twenty.

The paper changed. It grew yellow, thinner. The hand grew steadier, and larger, the hand of a man of fifty. Every night a line. And the line was the same, nearly. Again and again. Hundreds of times.

I did not ask.

I did not ask.

I did not ask.

Then the first night.

It was the night five days after a man came back from the Waste.

The one who came back was a man of Surdan named Nuqar, on a camel, and with him another man on another camel. Hadran was not with them. They had left him, blind, not knowing his own name, in the tents of a caravan at the edge of the Waste, and he did not come back to Ilsum until ten years later. The other man was a guide from the Delta. One of the people of Ilsum. He had taken payment from Nawsam forty days before, to lead the expedition to a place in the Waste that had a door.

And the guide came to the tower.

Warda saw him. Not with her eyes. With Nawsam's eyes, in the trace, the way a Keeper sees what he has written. A man of thirty. Tall. Bald before his time. Hands rough from camel ropes. He was talking fast. He was afraid. He was saying: we saw. We saw what's behind the door. The seer touched it and forgot. We didn't touch it. But we saw. And it has to be written.

And in his hand was a stone.

A salt stone. Small. White. The size of a walnut. He had taken it from the door, he said. From the threshold. As a witness.

And Nawsam wrote, that night, after the guide had gone:

He said he would write it. He said he would write it and put it in the Library, open, for anyone to read. He said people must know what is under the ground.

And I told the Circle.

Then, three nights later:

A man of the Thread came. I did not send for him. He said the Circle had sent for him. And he said that the guide and his wife had been killed on the Surdan road, fleeing, by highwaymen. And that the girl survived. And that shepherds brought her to the door of the Library.

And I did not ask.

And I did not ask why he brought me the news himself, and not the guards.

And I did not ask why there was a black thread on his wrist.

Then, days later:

I have taken the girl. Six years old. She does not speak. And in her hand is a salt stone, and she will not open her hand. They say her mother put it in her hand.

I will raise her. And I will teach her seeing. Because she is her father's daughter, and his trace is in her.

And I will not ask.

Warda lifted her hand from the box.

She did not lift it. It fell. The way a sleeper's hand falls. She was on the floor, on her knees, before the open box, the torn blue paper beneath her. She was not breathing.

Then she breathed.

And the three words were still in her hand. *I did not ask.* Hundreds of times, in a hand growing larger and steadier, like someone carving the

same thing in stone every night to make sure it is there.

And she thought of Qayla.

Of a woman standing at the door of a tent, the bow undrawn, the arrow between her fingers, calling twice and not going in. Then keeping silent forty days. And Qayla had said to her at the Spire, in a voice she had not heard from her before: *I kept silent.* As if confessing to a killing.

And this man had kept silent twenty years. And told no one. He told it to the salt.

And Warda did not know, on her knees, which was heavier. The one who kept silent because she did not know what she had seen, or the one who kept silent because he knew and did not want to ask. Then she knew that this was not her question. Her question was simpler, and crueler: the man who had taught her not to read the trace of the living without their leave had known that in her hand, every night, was her mother's trace. And he had let her hold it twenty years and not see it.

And she did not know whether he had done it out of mercy for her, or out of fear of what was in the stone.

The stone was in the leather pouch under her robe. With the letter. And with the small notebook.

She took it out.

A salt stone. Small. White. The size of a walnut. Smooth from all her holding it. Twenty years. In her hand, at night, before sleep. Not knowing why. "Don't lose it." That was all she knew. And a woman whose face she did not remember.

And she knew, as she knew that salt keeps, that what was in it had not been erased.

Because she had never seen it.

She had been afraid. She had not known it until now. She had been afraid to see it, and find in it her mother's face, and then pay its price. And that the price would be something she did not know she loved until it was gone.

She looked at the stone in her right palm.

Then she closed her fingers on it.

It was a woman.

No. It was a woman's hand. On a small hand. Opening it, hard, and putting something cold in it, then closing it. And she was saying: *Don't lose it. Don't lose it, Warda. This is what your father saw. Don't lose it.*

The night was dark. There was a road. And a donkey. And a man on the ground, not moving.

And there were men.

Three. In dark clothes. Their faces wrapped. They were not shouting. They were not speaking at all. They were walking. Like men who know what they are doing, and do not need to say it.

And on the wrist of one of them was a thread.

Warda saw the thread. Because the woman had seen it. Because the last thing the woman saw, before she turned to her daughter for the last time, was a hand rising, and on its wrist a black thread, thin, pulled tight.

Like the thread at Dhamyan's neck.

Then the woman turned.

And she saw her mother's face.

It was an ordinary face. She had not expected that. She had imagined it a thousand times in twenty years, and each time it was beautiful, sad,

like the faces of mothers in stories. It was not like that. It was the face of a woman of twenty-five, broad, dark, with a slightly large nose and wide-set eyes. And on her left cheek was a mark of blue ink. From the dyeing. She worked at the vats.

And Warda knew, looking at the ink on the cheek, that she had not been born in Surdan. She had been born in the Dyers' Quarter, a few lanes from the vats she smelled every day, and then her parents had fled with her toward the edges of Surdan after her father came back from the Waste. And Nawsam had known it. And he had said to her, the day he sent her: you were born on its borders.

And her mother was smiling.

At that moment. With the men behind her. And the black thread. And her husband on the ground. She turned to her daughter and smiled. A small quick smile, as if to say: it's all right. I'm here.

Then nothing.

It was not the emptiness. It was the end of the trace. Because the small hand closed on the stone, and ran. And after that there was nothing in the stone but a child's hand, then a woman's hand, twenty years, every night, before sleep.

And beneath all that, beneath her mother's trace, she felt something else. Older. Cold as the cold of the threshold it was taken from. She could not reach it. It was like a voice in the next house, known to be a voice, its words not understood. And twenty years of her hand on top of it, like sand over a stone.

Warda cried.

And she could feel why.

She had not cried like this since... she did not know. She was on the floor before the box, the stone in her hand, her mother's face in her

head, clear, whole, as nothing had been in her head since the Waste. And she was crying, and she felt everything. The cold, and the fear, and the love, and the anger. As if something had opened in her chest that had been shut for two months.

Then the crying was over.

And she looked for the price.

She did not find it at first.

She went over the things. Her name. Her mother, now, with her face. Qayla. Hadran. The road. The city in the glass. The Well. The Spire. Amnuthar. Sitmara. The bag. The tower. The steps. Two hundred and seventeen. The plant. The box. The confession.

All here.

Then she heard steps on the stair.

Coming up. Slowly. With a staff. And she knew the sound. She knew it before she thought. The step, and the staff, and the step. A sound she had heard every night since she was six. She did not get up. She did not close the box. She did not put on the glove.

And the door opened.

In the doorway stood a man.

Old. Thin. With a staff. And a white beard.

Warda looked at him.

And looked at him.

And did not know his face.

She knew it was Nawsam. From the steps. From the staff. From the door, and the tower, and the night. She knew it the way one knows that two and two are four. And she looked at the face, searching it for some-

thing. For the eyes she remembered as black. They were gray. And she did not know when she had come to remember them as black, or where that blackness had come from. For the smile she remembered remembering. And the face was before her, in the lamplight, clear.

And it was a stranger's face.

Nawsam looked at her. At her bare hand. At the open box. At the stone in her palm.

He said nothing for a long time.

Then he said, lower than the sound of the lamp,

"My daughter."

And she knew the voice.

21. The Sea

Qayla had never seen the sea.

She saw it on the morning of the sixty-first day, from the last hill on the Qaydhan road, after five days on the camel from the Well. Hufayr had said to her, when he saw her off at the pulley: the sea is like the Waste, but it moves. She did not understand what he meant until she saw it.

It was like the Waste. Wide, without limit, the horizon in it one straight line. But it was blue. And it moved. All of it. As if the whole Waste were breathing.

Its sound reached her from far off, low, steady, never stopping.

And she thought, without wanting to: like the humming.

Then she thought: no. The humming takes. This takes nothing.

She was not sure.

There were many ships at Qaydhan. The big slow caravan ships that carry salt and dates to the islands and come back with timber and fish. The men of the Caravan League were in the harbor, in their striped robes, writing down every load and every passenger in long ledgers.

Qayla did not board their ships.

She had a name. Faqid had given it to her on the last night at the fire by his tents, and said: if you want to reach the Delta without your name

written in a ledger, ask for Lira of the Osin. Don't say I sent you. Say: Nuqar's daughter.

He did not say why.

She found her at the far end of the harbor, where the League's ships do not tie up. The ship was small, narrow, black, with two triangular sails, and on its prow a carved bird's head. A woman was on its deck pulling a rope, four men around her.

She was forty. Short, broad-shouldered, with short black hair and a face dark from sun and salt. In her left ear was a silver ring. She looked at Qayla on the quay, in her gray cloak, with her green cord and her bow.

"A knight of the Well," she said. In the Covenant Tongue, in a soft accent heavy with l's. "In the harbor. That doesn't happen."

"Nuqar's daughter."

The woman's hand stopped on the rope.

She looked at Qayla a long time. Not at the cloak, or the cord. At her face. Like someone looking in it for another face.

Then she said, "Where to?"

"To the Delta. To Ilsum."

"When?"

"Now."

Lira pulled the rope and tied it, then said something to her men in Almini, a tongue like water. The men got up.

"Come aboard," she said. "And don't ask me why."

"I haven't asked."

"You will. Everyone asks." She smiled, a short smile. "And on the third day I'll tell you: don't ask. And you'll be quiet. It's quicker that way."

Qayla did not ask.

Not on the first day, when she was vomiting over the side of the ship and Lira stood behind her and did not laugh. Not on the second day, when she slept at last on the sacks in the belly of the ship and dreamed of a well filled with water to its rim, and in the water her mother's face. Not on the third day.

But she watched.

She watched Lira reading the stars at night with a small brass instrument. And the four men, who did not speak unless she spoke to them. And the cargo. Sacks of Qalmiri wheat, with the seal of the eye and the drop. And under them, in the bottom of the ship, long boxes, nailed shut, with no seal on them.

And she saw Lira see her looking at the boxes.

"Swords," said Lira. "For the Keepers."

Qayla looked at her.

"They don't fight," said Lira. "I know. They say: I keep and do not judge, I witness and do not fight." She nodded at the boxes. "But they buy. Every year. For twenty years. From Qalmir, wheat. From Tumrik, iron. From the Keepers, gold. From the Loyal, names."

"Names?"

"Who passes which well, and when." Lira smiled. "Everything is sold, daughter of Nuqar. That's what Almin knows. And the ones who say they don't sell, buy."

On the fourth night Qayla saw the whales.

The ship was passing between two small rocky islands without trees. Lira had put out all the lamps and ordered her men not to speak. The sea was still. Still as it had not been in the three days. The moon above it.

Then the water parted.

There was no sound. There was a back. Black, glistening, long. Three times longer than the ship. Rising slowly from the water, the way a dune rises in the wind, and passing beside the ship a stone's throw away. Qayla could see lines on it. White. Like writing.

Then it went down.

And there was no sound. No sound of water, no sound of breath. As if the sea itself had gone quiet.

Then another rose. And another.

"Hush whales," Lira whispered in her ear. "They make no sound. Ever. No one knows why." She paused. "Our people say they listen. And that when they hear something they don't like, they turn the ship over."

"And what don't they like?"

Lira did not answer for a while.

Then she said, "Crystal."

Qayla looked at her.

"For three years," said Lira. "Since the Spires began. They turn over every ship carrying crystal from Qalmir. Every ship. Seven ships. And they hadn't turned over a ship in a hundred years before that."

At dawn they passed the lighthouse.

It stood alone on a rock in the sea, far from any island. A tower of white stone, tall, leaning a little, as if tired of standing. There was no light at its top.

"The Silent Lighthouse," said Lira. "It went out the night of the War of the Islands. A hundred and fifty years ago. No one goes into it."

And Qayla saw, at the foot of the lighthouse, by the water, a small boat. With someone in it.

Lira gave her men an order. And the ship leaned toward the lighthouse.

One person came aboard.

A woman. In a long gray robe without ornament. Her head covered with a gray kerchief, like Warda's. She had nothing with her. No bag, no box. She looked at no one. She walked to the bow of the ship and sat there, looking at the water.

Qayla looked at Lira.

"A passenger," said Lira.

"Who?"

"A passenger." Lira looked at her. "Don't ask."

It was the fifth day, not the third. Qayla was quiet.

The gray woman did not speak for a whole day.

She sat in the bow. She did not eat, or drink, or sleep. Or she slept with her eyes open. Lira's men did not go near her. They passed far off and did not look at her, the way one passes a grave.

At night Qayla went to her.

She did not know why. Perhaps because she was on guard. Because there was something on the ship she did not know. Or because the gray kerchief reminded her of Warda.

She stood beside her.

The woman did not turn.

"You guard a well with no water left in it," she said.

It was not a question.

Qayla looked at her. She saw her face in the moonlight. It was neither young nor old. There was nothing in it she would remember. It was a face, and when you looked at it you knew you would not remember it tomorrow.

"There's water in it," said Qayla. "It's dropped three cubits. But there's water in it."

"Three cubits." The woman smiled. "In two years. And the Well is..." She did not finish. "Do you know how old it is, daughter of Nuqar?"

"More than a thousand years."

"More." The woman looked at the water. "There was water in it before the Covenant. Before the Wardens. Before anyone wrote anything on it. And there will be water in it after everything written on it is forgotten." She paused. "Or there won't."

"Who are you?"

The woman did not answer.

Then she held out her right hand, open, to the moonlight. And Qayla saw in its palm, in the middle, a mark. It was not a tattoo, or a scar. It looked as if it had been cut into the skin from within. A circle. And in it lines. Seven. Meeting in the middle.

Then the woman closed her hand.

"Tell the seer," she said, "that the smooth patch in her palm is not a price."

Qayla looked at her.

"How do you know?"

But the woman had turned to the water. She did not speak again.

In the morning she was not on the ship.

No one saw her go down. There was no boat. The ship had not come near land. The Delta was ahead of them, a low green line on the horizon, the towers of Ilsum in it like needles. And the bow was empty.

Qayla looked at Lira.

Lira did not look at her. She was looking at the empty bow. And in her face was something Qayla had seen in the faces of the four men when they passed the woman. Not fear. Something older than fear.

"Do you know her?" said Qayla.

"No." Lira pulled a rope tight. "My mother knew her."

Qayla looked at her.

"My mother carried her once," said Lira. "From the lighthouse to the Delta. Thirty years ago. My grandmother carried her once. Sixty years ago. From the lighthouse to the Delta." She looked at Qayla. "With the same face, they both said. And no one remembers it."

Qayla said nothing.

"That's why I don't ask," said Lira. "And neither do you."

They reached the canals of the Delta in the forenoon.

The water here was brown and slow, running between small islands of reed and mud, and on the islands were wooden houses on stilts. Lira steered the ship through the canals without hesitation, the way one walks through one's own house in the dark. Then she tied up at a small wooden quay in a quarter at the edge of the city. The smell here was sharp and sour, with something of the sea in it and something of iron.

The Dyers' Quarter.

Qayla got down onto the quay.

Then she turned. Lira was on the deck, looking at her.

"Why?" said Qayla.

It was the eighth day.

Lira looked at her a while. Then she put her hand into her robe, took something out, and threw it to her.

Qayla caught it.

It was an arrow. Old. Its fletching broken. On its shaft, near the head, a mark cut with a knife. The mark of the Sons of Qaydh.

Qayla looked at it. Then at Lira.

"This is the arrow that killed Nuqar," said Lira. "In the war at the fourth well. They took it out of his chest and gave it to my mother."

"Why to your mother?"

Lira did not answer.

She gave her men an order in Almini, and the ship drew away from the quay. Lira stood on the deck with the sun behind her, looking at Qayla, until the ship turned into another canal.

22. The Salt Vault

Warda did not know Nawsam's face, so Qayla told her whose it was.

It was in the great hall, in the afternoon of the sixty-ninth day, when Qayla came in through the great door in her gray cloak, salty from the sea, the old arrow in her belt beside the sword. She saw Warda standing by a column, her left hand wrapped, Hadran beside her. She saw Warda see her, and know her at once, and walk to her quickly, then stop before she reached her. As if afraid she had forgotten something else.

"Qayla."

"Warda."

"I know you." Her voice was shaking. "I know you. I wrote your name three times on the road, and I know you."

Then an old man came down the great stair, with a staff, and stood looking at the two of them. Qayla looked at him. Then at Warda. And she saw the seer look at him the way one looks at a stranger in the market.

"Who is that?" said Qayla, low.

"Nawsam," said Warda. "I know it's Nawsam." She paused. "I don't know his face."

Warda told her everything in her room, in an hour.

The box. The confession. Five and two. The guide, and the salt stone, and the three men. The black thread. Her mother's face, and the ink on her cheek. And the price.

And Qayla told her: the whales, the lighthouse, the gray woman. The circle in her palm. And what she had said.

Warda looked a long time at the smooth patch in her left palm.

"Not a price," she said.

"That's what she said."

"Then what is it?"

Qayla did not know.

Nawsam came to them after sunset.

He sent no one. He climbed to the east wing himself, with his staff, slowly, and stood in the door of the small room. He looked at the three of them: Qayla on the chair, Warda on the bed, Hadran by the window.

"Daughter of Nuqar," he said. "You came by sea."

"I came by sea."

"Because whoever waits stands on land." He smiled. "Your father used to do that. Never came by the road he was expected on." Then he looked at Warda, and Qayla saw something pass over his face. "And you don't know my face, my daughter."

Warda did not answer.

"I knew it yesterday, when you looked at me. The price of the salt. I know."

Then he said, "Come with me. All three. I'll show you what I've shown no one outside the Circle." He looked at Qayla. "And after that, ask me what you like. And I'll answer you. All of it. Not half."

They went down.

Qayla counted the steps as she counted wells, and lost count after a hundred. Long corridors, small oil lamps every ten paces, then another stair, then another. The air grew dry, and cold, and salty on the lips. The old guard at the great door was asleep in his chair. Nawsam did not wake him.

They went into the Salt Vault.

And Qayla saw the mother copy.

It was in the middle of the vault, in a glass case, on a base of salt. An old brown parchment, folded half over on itself. At its edges were stains. Dark. Like rust.

Qayla stood before it. She could not help standing.

She had sworn on it. On this. At the Well of Oaths, before the carved stone, at sixteen. She had sworn on a copy carved in stone, from a copy written on parchment, from this. And it was here. Before her. With the stains at its edges.

"Barhad's blood," said Nawsam beside her. "The fourth Warden. He was killed with it in his hands. Here in the Library. A thousand and fifty years ago." He paused. "No one washed it. A Keeper does not erase."

Then Nawsam walked to the north wall.

To the small iron door, black, with its lock that had no keyhole.

The humming was here.

Qayla heard it before she reached the door. Low, steady. Like the humming of the Spire. No. Lower. And older. As if the Spire had been trying to imitate it.

Nawsam laid his bare palm on the lock.

For a while nothing happened. Then Qayla heard a sound inside the iron, like stone moving on stone. And the door opened.

"It has no key," said Nawsam. "It reads the trace. It knows who has sworn the inner oath." He looked at Warda. "And you haven't sworn it yet."

Behind the door was a stair. Narrow, stone, going down. It was not blocked with stones, as the guard had said.

They went down. Nawsam with a lamp in his hand, Warda behind him, then Hadran, Qayla last.

The walls here were not salt. They were rock. Black. Smooth. And there was carving on them. Writing Qayla did not know, in long lines going down with the stair. Warda walked with her right hand in its glove, away from the wall, like someone walking beside a fire.

"The Collar Tongue," said Nawsam. "Two thousand years ago. Before the Covenant, and before the tribes. When there was a college here, not a library. When the people of this island thought they could bind everything." He did not turn. "And we built the Library on top of it. Not to keep books. To keep this."

Then the stair ended at a hall.

It was not a hall. It was a gallery. Stone, narrow, with a railing of latticed iron. And beyond the railing, below, far down, a wide emptiness. Like a well. But wider than any well. Wider than the Edge Spire. It was dark, except at its center.

At its center, at the bottom, on the floor, was a light.

It was not a light. It was a carving. In the rock itself. A huge circle, as wide as the square before the House of the God-Kings. And in it, lines. Seven. Meeting in the middle. And the lines were glowing. A pale blue glow, like ink in water.

Qayla looked at it.

Then she looked at Warda.

Warda was looking at the circle, then at her right palm, covered. Then at Qayla.

Neither of them said anything.

"The seventh Seal," said Nawsam. "The Prison Seal. It cannot be moved. Because it is carved into the island's rock. And because it is carved, it stayed when the other six came apart on the Night of Unstringing." He looked at the glowing circle. "And under it is something."

"The Shaghadir?" said Qayla.

"No." His voice was low. "The Shaghadir are creatures. Large, old, but creatures, with sleeping and waking. This isn't one of them. This was one of those who swore. One of the Diyazin. One of the great followers of the Oathbreaker. And the Collar imprisoned it here, with the Seal, before it came apart. It has a name. I don't say it here."

He looked at Warda. "You know why."

"Because whoever said it is still listening," said Warda. Hadran's words in the Waste. And Qayla saw Hadran move his head a little.

"The humming," said Nawsam, "is the sound of the Seal holding. When it rises, it's because it's straining. And when what's around it is drawn on, the ground and the water and the rock, the Seal weakens. Because it takes its strength from the ground itself." He looked at Qayla. "One Spire in the Delta is enough. I don't say perhaps. I say enough. That's what is in the notebooks of the columns, and in the books of the Collar. And Qalmir is planning a Spire in the Delta. Next year."

Then he turned to them.

He set the lamp on the railing. His face in its light, from below, was strange. Like the faces of the statues that had been scraped.

"Ask me, daughter of Nuqar."

Qayla looked at him.

"You paid."

"I paid."

"The Black Thread."

"The Black Thread."

"Why?"

"Because Dhamyan was going to declare neutrality." His voice did not change. "And if he declared neutrality, Surdan would make peace with Qalmir. And if it made peace, there'd be no war. And if there was no war, Qalmir would be strong, and the Spires would be built, and reach the Delta. And if they reached the Delta..." He pointed to the circle below them. "This."

"And he was going to ask her to stop the Spires."

Nawsam did not answer for a while.

"I learned that from the blue sheet," he said at last. "The one Warda read. And didn't send me." He looked at Warda. "I saw the bag in your room, my daughter. I didn't touch it." Then at Qayla. "Yes. He was going to ask that. And I didn't know. And I killed the one man who could have stopped them without a war."

No one said anything.

"And how did you know about Sitmara's offer?" said Qayla. "Before anyone knew it?"

Nawsam looked at her. Then he put his hand into his robe and took something out. He did not open his hand.

"By the fourth Seal," he said. "The Seal of Knowledge. We have it. It whispers the secrets people know. And its price..." He paused. "Do you know its price, Warda?"

"Mercy," said Warda, without raising her eyes.

"Mercy." Nawsam looked at his closed hand. "I have used it three times in my life. The first, twenty years ago. The third, three months ago." He put it back in his robe. "And the first time, three nights after, a man with a black thread came to me. And I did not ask him."

Warda looked at him.

She did not know his face. But she knew the voice, and knew he was telling the truth, and that was not what mattered.

"I asked," she said.

Nawsam looked at her.

"You didn't ask," said Warda. "Twenty years. You wrote it every night: I did not ask. And I asked. I put my hand in your box, without your leave. And I broke my rule. The rule you taught me." She looked at her right palm. "And I came to know my mother's face. And forgot yours."

Nawsam said nothing.

"I don't know whether I hate you," said Warda. "I don't know your face to know."

Nawsam asked for nothing. He did not say: forgive. He did not say: I loved you. He lowered his eyes to the lamp on the railing, like someone awaiting a judgment he already knows.

And Hadran spoke.

He had said nothing since they came down. He was standing by the wall, his tilted face toward the emptiness, his hand on the black rock, not afraid to touch it, because he could see nothing.

"Ten years," he said, "you gave me a room and food, and didn't ask me where I'd been." He turned his face toward Nawsam's voice. "I thought it was mercy. And it was because you knew where I'd been. You were the one who paid the guide to lead us to the door."

"Yes."

"And you know what took my eyes."

"No," said Nawsam. "That alone I don't know. That's why I didn't ask you. I was afraid you'd remember."

And Hadran laughed. A short laugh, almost without sound, like the laugh of a man in the Waste who hears that the sea is near.

"I won't remember," he said. "The Waste doesn't give back what it takes. You should have asked me."

Then Nawsam turned to Qayla.

"Now listen to me, because this is what you came for." His voice was calm, a teacher's voice, like Amnuthar's. "In twenty days the Council of the Tribes meets at the Well of Oaths. Khardash has called it. To declare war on Qalmir in the name of the Covenant. Faqid will come. Qalmir will send someone to listen. And you are the Captain of the Knights. And you may speak."

"I know."

"If you speak the truth. All of it. The letter, the large parchment, the blue sheet. And Ilsum. And me. The war stops. Khardash believes you or not, but the tribes believe. And neutrality is declared. And the two sides make peace. And the Spires stop at three, as Sitmara wanted. And the fourth isn't built."

"And that's good."

"Good." He nodded. "And in five years, or ten, Sitmara dies. And after her comes someone who says: the three Spires fed the valley, so why

not build in the Delta? And there's no war to weaken him. And no one to stop him." He pointed to the circle. "And if you keep silent, or tell half the truth, the war comes. And people die. Many. Of the Loyal and the Unionists. And Qalmir is weakened for a generation. And this stays sealed."

He looked at her in the lamplight.

"The truth, or the ground?"

Qayla did not answer.

She looked at the glowing circle below her. At the seven lines. She thought of the open palm in the moonlight. Of a woman whose face is not remembered, saying: the Well is older than the Covenant.

Then she said, "The fourth."

Nawsam looked at her.

"You said: the humming rose, then its rising stopped. On the day Sitmara stopped the fourth. And why did she stop it? Because a seer went to her and told her what she saw. And paid for it from her hand. And because Amnuthar wrote: I saw. The truth stopped the fourth, head of the Keepers. Not the war. Not the payment."

"The fourth. Not the three."

"Not the three yet." Qayla paused. "But no one had told her the truth before that. You've feared the Spires for three years, and you have the notebooks of the columns. And not one of you went to Qalmir to say: this is what is under Ilsum. You went to the Black Thread. And you buy swords every year, in boxes with no seal, on ships whose names aren't written in any ledger. I saw them in the belly of a ship from Almin. I keep and do not judge, I witness and do not fight. And who carries those swords?"

Nawsam did not deny it.

Nawsam did not answer.

"Why?"

He did not answer for a long time.

Then he said, "Because my grandfather saw a library burn, because a Keeper opened the door to Qalmir. And because whoever tells Qalmir what is under Ilsum tells it where the door is."

They went up.

No one spoke on the stair. Nor in the Salt Vault, when they passed the mother copy with Barhad's blood on its edges. Nor in the corridors.

At the great door of the vault, the old guard had woken. Another man was with him. Thin, with narrow eyes, a white robe, and a notebook under his arm.

Taylam.

Taylam looked at them. At Nawsam. At the three behind him. Then at the small iron door at the far end of the vault, which had closed.

"Head of the Council," he said. "The Circle has been waiting for you for an hour."

"I know."

Taylam looked at Qayla. Then at Warda. His right hand was on the notebook, his broken thumbnail scratching its edge.

"You showed them," he said. It was not a question.

"I showed them."

Taylam said nothing. He walked ahead of them to the stair.

And Qayla saw his hand as he walked. It was shaking.

23. The Well of Oaths

All the tribes came to the Well, as they had come on the night of the killing.

Qayla saw them from the northern dune, in the forenoon of the eighty-ninth day, when she came back. The tents on the plain, hundreds of them, in the colors of the tribes. The camels. The smoke. The people at the Well, around the trough, drinking and filling. Everything was as it had been eighty-nine days before.

Except the cords.

They were on wrists everywhere. Red, and white. The red were in the north, around the low black tent, and the white in the south, around her brother's tents. And between them, in the middle, at the Well, an empty ground. A bowshot wide. No one stood in it.

And in the empty ground, the sanctuary. The carved stone. The knights.

A hundred and forty, with green cords. Standing in a ring around the Well. Their backs to the stone, their faces to the tents.

She came down the dune with two men behind her.

Nawsam, on a mule, with his staff and his white robe. He had come with her from Ilsum, thirteen days, on a Keepers' ship and then on

camels. He had spoken little on the road. Every night he sat alone and wrote in a small notebook. And tore nothing.

And Hadran.

Warda had not come.

She had said to Qayla, on the last morning in Ilsum, at the great door: I'm staying. Qayla looked at her. And Warda said: the Circle is six without him. And Taylam is one of them. And the fourth Seal is in the vault. And who guards that if the head of the Council goes and the Captain of the Knights goes? Then she smiled, and this time her smile reached her eyes a little, and she said: you taught me.

And she gave her the large parchment.

Hufayr was at the stone.

He looked at her, then at the old man on the mule, then at her.

"Who is this?"

"The head of the Keepers."

Hufayr said nothing. But Qayla saw his hand go down to his sword, then stop.

"The Council is after noon," he said. "Khardash speaks first. He's the one who called it. And a man has come from Qalmir. Short, red-faced. He says he's an officer from the Edge, and that the Empress sent him to listen. He's in your brother's tents." He looked at Nawsam again. "And everyone knows you went to Ilsum."

"And what do they say?"

"They say you'll speak." Hufayr looked at her. "And that the Captain of the Knights hasn't spoken in the Council for three hundred years. And that if you speak, the knights are no longer above anything."

The Council was not in a tent.

It was at the Well. In the empty ground. Because the big red tent with the black poles had been folded on the day of the burial, and no other had been raised. The elders sat on the ground in a half circle, the Well behind them. The Loyal on the right, the Unionists on the left. And Qayla standing at the carved stone, the knights around her.

Khardash stood up.

He was thinner than she had seen him thirty-six days before. The red cord on his wrist. He stood in the middle of the empty ground and looked at the tribes.

And he spoke.

He spoke of his father. Of the night. Of the forty days, and the Council that did not judge. Of the second article of the Covenant: *the Council has borne the blood.* Of the caravan, the northern ravine, the seventh canal. Of the Spires. Of the water drunk from under the ground so that the wells dry up. His voice was his father's voice, deep, calm, never raised.

And he said at the end, "And I ask this Council to declare what my father should have declared. That Surdan does not accept the rule of Qalmir. And that the Covenant commands us to fight whoever takes water from the thirsty." He looked to the left, to Faqid's tents. "And whoever drinks from their canals."

No one spoke.

Then Khardash turned to Qayla.

"And the Captain of the Knights does not speak in the Council," he said. "That is custom."

Qayla looked at him.

She thought of the large parchment at her breast. Of Faqid, at the fire: if you say it for him, you take his price from him. Of Nawsam, in the blue light under the Library: the truth, or the ground? Of a woman in a gray robe, saying: the Well is older than the Covenant.

And she walked to the middle of the empty ground.

She stood before Khardash.

"Custom," she said, "is that the Captain of the Knights does not speak in the Council." She raised her voice, so that the elders would hear. "Because she is above both sides. And I am no longer above both sides. You told me so in your tent, son of Dhamyan, and you were right. I was at your father's door, and I stood still."

She took the green cord off her wrist.

She heard the knights behind her move. She heard Hufayr say something, low. She did not turn.

She laid the cord on the carved stone.

"And now I speak," she said. "Not as Captain. As witness. And the Covenant gives leave to a witness."

And she spoke.

She told what she had seen on the night of the killing. The man with the blue fingers. The silence. She said he had not killed him. That he had gone in after he was dead. She told of the Spire, and the white fire, and the bag. She told of Sitmara, and her letter. She told of the two halves of Dhamyan's letter, and recited them, word for word, from memory, because Khardash had them.

And the tribes listened.

She could see their faces. The Loyal on the right, the Unionists on the left. The short red-faced officer among her brother's men, the ring

on his finger. Faqid, with his bound arm. And she saw the faces change when she said: neutrality. And when she said: the son of Nuqar, Faqid.

Then she said, "And the one who ordered the messenger to make sure it was done is here."

And she looked at Nawsam.

Nawsam rose.

Slowly. With his staff. He walked to the empty ground. He stood beside her.

He did not wait for anyone to ask him.

"I am Nawsam," he said. "Head of the Council of the Keepers." His voice reached the last of the elders, though he did not raise it. "And I paid for the killing of Dhamyan son of Khardash. To the Black Thread. Because I thought that if he made peace with Qalmir, its Spires would reach the Delta. And under the Delta is what I do not say here." He paused. "And I was wrong about Dhamyan. And I was wrong about the way. And I am not wrong about the Delta."

No one spoke.

Then a man of the Loyal shouted. Another stood. Qayla heard swords coming out, on the right, and on the left. She saw the knights behind her come forward, without an order. She saw Khardash raise his hand.

And the Loyal stopped.

Khardash looked at Nawsam a long time. There was no anger in his face. There was what Qayla had seen in the black tent. Tiredness. And something nearer to bewilderment.

"And why have you come?" he said.

"Because my daughter asked," said Nawsam. "And I did not ask."

No one understood what he meant. Except Hadran, at the stone, who bowed his head.

Then Qayla took out the large parchment.

She did not open it.

She held it out to Khardash.

"This is what your father was going to say to this Council," she said. "In the morning. In his own hand. So that he wouldn't stumble. I haven't read it to the people. And I won't. They're his words. And you're his son."

Khardash looked at the parchment in her hand.

He did not take it for a long time.

Then he took it.

And opened it.

Khardash read the large parchment aloud.

He began in his father's voice. Deep, calm. *Elders. I am Dhamyan son of Khardash, of the Sons of Qaydh, Chief of the Tribes in Surdan.* Then he reached the third line. And stopped.

He looked at the parchment.

Then he read it.

"*I hoarded the Ravine Wells for thirteen years,*" he said. His voice had not changed. "*I was the first to break the first article. Those who died on the Flat Rock road died, and I know their names.*"

He did not read the names at first. Then he read them.

Sixteen names.

And his voice changed, name after name. It did not rise. It sank. And when he reached the last of them, *son of Faqid son of Nuqar, four years*,

it was not his father's voice. It was his own. The voice of a thin man of forty who had sworn not to stay under a roof.

Then he read the rest.

And I declare before you that the wells of the ravines are shared as the Covenant said, not sold nor given on terms. And that Surdan is neutral, neither fighting nor ruled. And that I have written so to the mistress of Qalmir, on condition that she stop her Spires. If she accepts, it is peace. And if she does not accept, we have spoken the truth, and the Well bears witness.

And the Maker knows best who broke.

Khardash folded the parchment.

He looked at the tribes. Then he looked to the left. At Faqid.

And he walked to him.

Qayla saw the Loyal move, and saw Faqid's men move. And Khardash raised his hand again, and looked at none of them. He walked until he stood before Faqid.

And they stood.

Neither of them said anything for a while.

Then Khardash said, "Your son."

"My son."

"My father knew his name."

"He knew it. He asked me about him at the dead well."

Khardash looked at the parchment in his hand. "And he didn't write it. He wrote: son of Faqid. What was his name?"

Faqid looked at him.

And said it.

Qayla did not hear it. She was far off, and the wind was on the plain. But she saw her brother say it, saw his shut mouth open, saw something in his face move. Then she saw him raise his good hand to his eyes.

There was no peace that day.

There was a truce.

The Council declared it at sunset, after the elders had spoken one after another, for hours. Forty days. In which no one fights anyone in Surdan. And neutrality is declared, as Dhamyan wrote. And the Ravine Wells are opened. And word is sent to Qalmir: if you stop the Spires at three, and do not build in the Delta, it is peace.

The short red-faced officer stood and said he would carry it. And that the Empress had stopped the fourth. And that he knew nothing about the Delta. And that he would ask.

The Loyal said they did not trust Qalmir.

The Unionists said they did not trust the Loyal.

Khardash said he trusted no one. And that the truce was forty days. Like his father's forty.

And no one raised a sword.

As for Nawsam, he said to the Council, "Tomorrow I stand before the Covenant Court. Here. At the stone. I ask for nothing. Neither mercy nor justice. I ask that what I said today be written down. All of it. And kept."

"And what's under the Delta?" said one of the elders.

Nawsam looked at him.

"That is written too," he said. "And kept. In the Salt Vault. And Qalmir may read it if it wishes." He looked at the officer. "That is what I did not do for twenty years."

At night Qayla went back to the carved stone.

The green cord was on it, where she had laid it. No one had taken it. Hufayr was sitting beside it, guarding it.

"No one's taken it," he said.

"I know."

"The knights said: we won't choose another captain. They said: a Captain of the Knights who takes off the cord to speak the truth is the captain. And they don't know whether that's custom. They said: it's custom now."

Qayla looked at the cord.

Then she took another cord from her belt. The cord Zaabal had given back to her. And she tied it on her wrist.

She left the first on the stone.

Then she took something else from her belt, wrapped in a rag.

The arrow Lira had given her by the sea. Its head black with old blood, and on its shaft two lines and a bow. She had carried it twenty days, from the Delta to Ilsum and then here, and told no one. And in the Council, when Khardash stood to ask for war, she had laid her hand on it under her robe. And had not taken it out.

"What is that?" said Hufayr.

"My father."

Hufayr looked at it. Then he turned his face away, the way a man turns from a wound he cannot bear.

She heard steps behind her. She did not need to turn. She knew his walk now. Khardash stood two paces off, the red cord on his wrist, and looked at the arrow in her hand, and at the mark.

"It was with you in the Council," he said.

"It was with me."

"And you didn't take it out."

"If I had taken it out, what I said about your father would have become vengeance." She laid the arrow on the stone, beside the green cord. "And I said it as witness."

Khardash looked at the arrow a long time. Then he sat on the sand by the stone, as he had sat by the dead palm for forty days.

"I don't know who shot it," he said.

"Nor do I. And I don't want to know tonight." She sat at the other end of the stone. "Lira says they took it out of his chest and gave it to her mother. And she doesn't say why. And that's a question for another truce than this one."

They did not speak after that. But they sat by the stone until the sand grew cold, the arrow and the cord between them, and neither of them took anything.

Before dawn, when the sand had grown cold as water, Khardash moved.

He did not get up. He put his hand into his robe, took something out, and laid it on the stone beside the arrow.

A ring. Silver. And a blue stone.

"Give it back to its owner," he said. "At the Edge."

"Why did you keep it?"

Khardash looked at her.

"Because you didn't wear it," he said. "And I wanted to know why." He paused. "And I didn't know. Until today."

Then he got up. He stood looking at the Well. At the rope on the pulley. At the water at its bottom, which cannot be seen, and which has dropped three cubits in two years.

"Three cubits," he said.

"Three cubits."

"And Qalmir won't stop the three." He did not turn. "I know that. And you know it."

"I know."

"So the war isn't over."

"No."

"The truce is forty days. And after?"

Qayla did not answer.

Khardash looked at the Well again. Then he walked to his tents, in the dark, the red cord on his wrist.

And he was without a roof.

24. The Face

The bird came on the night Nawsam stood before the court.

Warda was in the copying hall, in the west wing, where the copyists sit up until dawn. Taylam was with her. Sitting at the table across from her, reading, his lamp between them. He had taken to sitting with her every night since Nawsam left. He did not say why. She did not ask him. He read, and wrote, and scratched the edge of the notebook with his broken thumbnail, and looked at her from time to time, like someone making sure a thing is still in its place.

The young copyist came with the small rolled paper. He gave it to Taylam.

Taylam read it. Then he gave it to Warda.

The head of the Council stood before the Covenant Court at the stone. He confessed to what he had said. The court ruled that he be held at the Well of Oaths until the full Council judges after the truce. He did not object. He asked for his notebook.

The truce is forty days.

And the Captain of the Knights took off the cord.

Warda looked at the last line a long time.

Then she smiled.

Taylam looked at her.

"You're smiling," he said.

"She took off the cord."

"And that makes you laugh?"

"No. But I know why she took it off. And I know that I know." She folded the paper. "And that's a great deal."

Taylam said nothing. But she saw him write something in his notebook. Then stop. Then say, without raising his eyes:

"I voted with the five."

Warda looked at him.

"In the Circle. When the head of the Council decided." He put down the pen. "I don't know whether he told you."

"I read it."

"You read it." He nodded. Then he raised his eyes to her. "And you don't know his face. And you know mine."

"I know yours."

"Then look at it well." There was nothing in his voice. "Because I'm the one who sent the messenger. He gave me the order, and I chose the man. He was Hadran's student before I was in the Circle. And I knew he was afraid. I chose him because he was afraid. A frightened man doesn't ask."

Warda looked at him.

She saw his hand on the notebook. It was shaking.

"Why are you telling me?"

"Because you asked," said Taylam. "You asked the head of the Council, and he never asked. So he went to the court. And I want to know whether I can do what he did. I don't know yet."

Then they heard the bell.

It was not the bell for prayer, or the bell for fire. It was a bell Warda had never heard. Deep, slow, coming from below. From the belly of the Library. Three strokes. Then silence. Then three.

Taylam stood up.

And she saw his face, in the lamplight, go white.

"The vault," he said.

They ran.

Through the corridors, the small lamps every ten paces, the stair, then the stair. Copyists were coming out of the rooms, and Keepers in their white robes, looking, not knowing. And the bell struck. Three. Then silence. Then three.

They reached the door of the Salt Vault.

The old guard was on the floor.

He was not dead. He was sitting, his back to the wall, his hand on his chest, panting. Around him were three of the young guards. When he saw Taylam, he raised his hand. And pointed at him. His finger was shaking.

"You," he said.

Taylam stopped.

"You," said the old guard. "You came down an hour ago. And you said: by order of the Circle. And I didn't ask you. You're of the Circle." He looked at him, his eyes wide. "Then you came out. With something wrapped in your hand. And I said: Taylam, what's that? And you looked at me. And you looked at me. And your eyes weren't your eyes."

The young guards looked at Taylam.

And Warda saw their hands go down to their swords. The swords that had come from Almin, in nailed boxes, though the Keepers do not fight.

"He was with me," said Warda.

They all looked at her.

"Since sunset," she said. "In the copying hall. He didn't get up. He was reading. And I read his face every hour." She looked at the old guard. "It wasn't him."

"I saw him," said the old man. "I saw his face. And his robe. And his nail." He looked at Taylam's hand. "The broken nail. I saw it on the notebook."

"And I saw him," said Warda. "In the copying hall. At the same hour."

No one said anything.

Then Taylam said, barely audible, "The Seal of Faces."

They went into the vault.

It was as it had been. Cold. Dry. The walls of salt. The mother copy in its glass case, on its base, with Barhad's blood on its edges.

But the small iron door in the north wall was open.

Taylam walked to it. And went down. Warda did not follow him. She heard his steps on the stone stair, going down, then stopping. Then going down. Then silence.

Then he came back.

There was nothing in his hand.

"The niche," he said. "Under the gallery. Where the fourth Seal was. Empty."

"And the seventh?"

"In its place. It can't be moved." He paused. "And the humming..." He looked at the iron door. "I don't know. I don't know whether it's changed. I didn't go down often."

Warda stood before the iron door.

She looked at the lock. The lock with no keyhole. That reads the trace, and knows who has sworn the inner oath. And it had been opened. Not by force. There was no scratch on it. It had been opened the way Nawsam opened it, with a palm on the iron.

"Whoever opened it swore the oath," said Warda.

"Or..." said Taylam, and did not finish.

"Or the lock reads the face too." She looked at her hand. "Not the palm alone."

Then she took off the right glove.

She looked at the lock. And she thought of the price. Of what was left in her to be taken. Her mother's face, which had come back. Qayla's name, which she had written three times. The first letter of everything.

Then she looked at her left hand.

Wrapped. Without a glove. And the smooth patch in its middle, under the cloth, in which she felt nothing. *Not a price*, the gray woman had said. Qayla did not know what it was. Nor did Warda.

She put the glove back on her right hand.

And took the cloth off the left.

Taylam said, "Warda."

She did not answer.

She laid her left palm on the iron lock. The smooth patch in its middle on the cold iron.

And she did not feel the cold.

She felt nothing. As in the tent at the edge of the Spire, when she had laid it on the bag. Not the iron, nor the cold, nor the trace. She almost lifted it.

Then it came.

It did not come the way the trace comes.

The trace had always pulled her. Water from a spring, or a rope from a well. This did not pull her. It was there. All of it. At once. The way one sees a room on opening one's eyes, not one thing after another.

And she saw the hand.

A hand on the lock, an hour before. A man's hand, thin, the thumbnail broken. Taylam's hand. And she saw the hand, and saw at the same time that it was not Taylam's hand. The way one sees water and its bottom together. Taylam's hand was on the surface, and beneath it another hand.

There was another hand beneath it.

Nawsam's hand. On the same lock. Long before. A thousand times. No. It was not Nawsam's hand. It was a hand wearing Nawsam's hand, as it had worn Taylam's.

And beneath it a hand.

Then a hand.

The hands were many. Many faces. Layers, like the rug, but not years. They were masks. Faces wearing faces. And she went down through them, without price, without pulling, the way one goes down a stair one knows.

Until she reached the first hand.

The hand was on a parchment.

An old brown parchment, folded half over. And at its edges blood. Fresh. Red. Running.

And Warda knew this blood.

Not from the trace. From herself. From the night a year ago when she had touched the mother copy in its case with a bare hand and was sick for two weeks. She had forgotten what she saw. She had thought she had forgotten it. And it was here. Whole. A big man on the floor, the parchment in his hands, his blood on it. And a hand reaching for the parchment, to take it, then stopping.

And in the palm of the hand, in the middle, was a smooth patch.

Without lines.

And Warda raised her eyes from the trace to the owner of the hand.

That was not possible. The trace does not raise the eyes. The trace is seen from inside it, from the side of the matter, not the side of the person. She was seeing from the lock, and the parchment, and the blood. She could not see a face that the matter had not touched.

And she saw the face.

And it was changing.

It was the face of the guard at the Warden's door, a thousand years ago, in his turban. Then it was Taylam's face. Then Dhamyan's face, tall, his cloak on his shoulders, walking on the night of the Well from the direction of the stone, between two guards who stood aside for him. Then Nawsam's face. Then Qayla's face, with her eyes that do not blink. Then the face of a broad dark woman with blue ink on her cheek.

Then Warda's face.

And her face looked at her.

And she knew the feel of it.

Not the face. What was beneath it. The place with nothing in it, where the face-wearer should have been. Smooth. Level. As if time had

been cut and then joined.

She had touched it before. On a red rug, in the tent of the Chief of the Tribes, on the twenty-first night after the killing. She had called it emptiness then, and thought it was erasure. It was not erasure. It was this: a face being worn, so that nothing is left of the wearer in the trace but his place.

And she understood.

Dhamyan had not got up from the rug that night. She had seen it with her own hand. And the one who came back from the direction of the stone, and passed between the two guards so that they stood aside for him, and whom Qayla saw from the rise and did not count as going in, was not Dhamyan. It was this. In Dhamyan's face. Then it called to the guards in his voice, from inside the tent, while Dhamyan sat in the dark with his hands on his knees, hearing his own voice dismiss his guards.

And she saw the hand that had worn Dhamyan's face. And on its wrist, under the face, a thin black thread.

Then she saw it go out.

It did not go out in Dhamyan's face. It went out, after everything in the tent had gone silent, in the face of one of the guards. With his turban, and his spear, and his walk. And it walked to the distant fire like someone going back for something he had forgotten. And whoever saw it that night, if anyone saw it, saw a guard walking to the fire. And a guard is not counted. A guard is part of the night, like the pulley and the stone.

She saw no more than that. There was no face under the thread. There was only the smooth place.

Warda lifted her hand.

It did not fall this time. She lifted it. The way one lifts a hand out of water. She was standing before the iron door, in the Salt Vault, Taylam behind her, and the guards, and the bell had gone silent.

She looked at her left palm.

The smooth patch was as it had been. Smooth. Unfeeling.

And she looked for the price.

As she did every time. She went over the things. Her name: Warda. Her mother: the broad face, the ink on the cheek, the smile. Qayla. Hadran. The Well. The Waste. The city in the glass. The word that is not said. Amnuthar. Sitmara. The Spire. The bag. The tower. The steps. Two hundred and seventeen. The box. The confession. The blue circle at the bottom.

She went over them again.

And a third time.

Then she took the small notebook from her belt and opened it to the page of lost things. The page was full. *The day I met Qayla. Why I was afraid when Nawsam's hand shook. The color of the light in the Library. Nawsam's face.*

She took the pen.

And she wrote beneath them, in a steady hand that did not shake:

Nothing.

The word on the paper looked at her a long time.

Then she wrote, on the line after it, in a smaller hand:

The smooth patch reads and does not take. With it I saw the hand in Barhad's blood. And in its palm the same patch.

And the one who went in to Dhamyan wore his face, and came out in his guard's face, with the black thread on his wrist.

And I saw my own face.

I don't know what this is.

She climbed the tower before dawn.

No one was in it. The door was open as Nawsam had left it the day he went, the notebooks on the shelves, the large table by the wall, and under it the salt box, closed. She did not count the steps. She knew there were two hundred and seventeen, and that was enough.

The plant by the window had wilted a little. Its two leaves drooping, the soil in the white pot dry.

She took the small cup, filled it from the jar, and watered it. Drop by drop. As he used to. She did not know why she did it. She did not love the man whose face she did not know, and she did not hate him. But the plant had done nothing.

Then she sat in her chair, the one she always sat in, across from the empty chair. She took the salt stone from the pouch and set it on the table between them. She looked at it in the first light of dawn.

Then she took one of his sheets of paper, and a pen, and wrote to Qayla. In a steady hand. She did not write in it: *I don't feel.* She did not write: *I don't know.*

I know how he got in to Dhamyan, Qayla. He didn't get in. He came back. And you watched him come back, and didn't count him, just as the two guards didn't. So don't carry this too. You didn't see the killer go in, because you saw Dhamyan.

And I don't know who he is. But I know the feel of him now. And that is more than anyone knows.

Guard the Well. And I'll guard here.

She folded the paper. And did not tear it.

Outside, above the vault, above the Library, above the whole island, was the night.

In the east, beyond the Waste, three Spires were humming.

In the south, in the sea, between the rocky islands, whales were passing without a sound.

And at the Well of Oaths, in Surdan, an old man held captive was writing in his notebook, and tearing nothing. A woman was sitting at the carved stone, a green cord on her wrist, and another cord on the stone. And a man with a red cord was walking among his tents, without a roof.

And the truce was in its first day.

And no one, that night, knew where the fourth Seal was.

Or who carried it.

Or in what face.

The End of Blue Ink.

Names and Places

For the reader who wants to remember who this is, and where that is. It gives away none of the novel's secrets.

People

- **Qayla daughter of Nuqar:** Captain of the Knights of the Well.
- **Warda:** a young seer of the Keepers of Ilsum.
- **Dhamyan son of Khardash:** Chief of the Tribes in Surdan. His father was named Khardash, and he gave his son the same name.
- **Khardash son of Dhamyan:** his son, leader of the Loyal. He carries his grandfather's name.
- **Faqid son of Nuqar:** Qayla's brother, leader of the Unionists.
- **Nuqar:** father of Qayla and Faqid; he was a knight.
- **Nawsam the Scribe:** head of the Council of the Keepers in Ilsum.
- **Taylam the Copyist:** a Keeper, head of the Keepers' mission to the Well of Oaths.

- **Hadran the Blind:** an old seer, and a guide in the Waste.
- **Hufayr:** the oldest of the Knights of the Well.
- **Zaabal:** a young knight from the Northern Ring.
- **Sitmara the Third:** Empress of Qalmir.
- **Amnuthar:** the Grand Inquisitor of Qalmir.
- **Nisa, Hirmar, and Tuthays:** Amnuthar's wife and sons.
- **Lira of the Osin:** a ship's captain from Almin.
- **Barhad the Forbearing:** the fourth Warden of the Library, in the old days.

Groups

- **The Knights of the Well:** guards of the Covenant at the Well of Oaths. Their cloaks are gray, their cords green.
- **The Loyal:** the tribes of Dhamyan's alliance, who swore with Khardash after his father's death.
- **The Unionists:** the tribes that lean toward Qalmir.
- **The Sons of Qaydh:** the tribe of Dhamyan and Khardash, one of the tribes of Surdan.
- **The Keepers:** the scholars of the Library in Ilsum. Their robes are white, their fingers blue with ink.
- **The Inquisitors:** the sorcerers of Qalmir.
- **The Caravan League:** the merchants of Qaydhan.
- **The Black Thread:** a name people whisper.

Places

- **Deymar:** the whole world.
- **Surdan:** the land of the tribes.
- **The Well of Oaths:** the well where the Covenant was made.
- **The Silt Well:** a dead well between the plain and the valley.
- **The Ravine Wells:** wells held by the Sons of Qaydh.
- **Qaydhan:** the caravan market city.
- **The Uthmar Waste:** the white salt desert at the heart of the world.
- **The Glass Sea:** a land of glass in the Waste.
- **Irwath:** an ancient, vanished city.
- **Qalmir:** the eastern empire.
- **Great Sitmar:** the capital of Qalmir.
- **The Zahrad:** the river of Qalmir.
- **Ilsum:** the city of the Library, in the Delta.
- **The Salt Vault:** beneath the Library of Ilsum.
- **The Dyers' Quarter:** the quarter of the indigo vats in Ilsum.
- **Almin:** the lands of the western sea.

Words

- **The Covenant:** the old compact between the tribes, from which history is counted.
- **The Covenant Tongue:** the common tongue.
- **The trace:** what things keep of what has happened to them.
- **Seeing:** reading the trace by touch.

- **A seer:** one who reads the trace.
- **Inquisition:** drawing from the trace.
- **The Spires:** the tall towers of Qalmir.
- **The Shaghadir:** the sleepers under the sand.
- **The Nuthar:** a vanished nation that built the columns.
- **The Maker:** what believers call the Creator.
- **Market Day:** a day in every week.