

— ✧ — THE LASTLIGHT CHRONICLES — ✧ —

A Ledger of Ash and Lamplight



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Your Name — ✧ —

A Ledger of Ash and Lamplight

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Nine Lamps, Eight Fires

The wall road ended the way all wall roads did: at a deliberate narrowing where the stone parapets drew together before an iron gate and forced a traveller to stop counting the Lamps and start counting the sentries. I had been counting the Lamps since the coast road turned inland. Nine towers along Morrow Bay, each with its own fire, each burning against a line of white that sat on the water like a second horizon. Eight fires. One dark gap where the Eighth should have been. The sum had not changed in four years, and I had not expected it to, but I wrote it in the margin of my travel ledger anyway, because a Remembrancer records what is, not what she wishes she were seeing.

The Pale was thin this early in autumn. From the wall road I could see it only as a white seam far out on the bay, no higher than a man's knee, the kind of fog a fishing boat might drift through and think nothing of. In ninety days it would stand taller than the towers. The Lamps kept it

there, at the water's edge, where it belonged. Everyone knew that. Everyone also knew that four winters ago, on the Longest Night, the Eighth Lamp over Saltreach had gone dark, and the Pale had come ashore, and it had closed over my brother Tobin and left him standing in it, Blank. Everyone knew that the Kindler on duty that night had refused to kindle.

His name was Davor Kesh, and I was going to meet him.

The folded note was still in my hand. I did not remember taking it from my pocket, but my fingers had found it the way they always did when I counted the Lamps and got eight. Tobin's name, the date of his Blanking, the Saltreach registry number the Quill House had assigned him afterward. I had written it four years ago on a scrap of ledger paper, and the ink had gone soft at the creases from being opened and closed and opened again. I folded it once more and tucked it into the cuff of my sleeve, where the fabric was tight enough to hold it. My fingers left a grey smudge on the paper. They always did. The ink stains on my first two fingers were permanent now, sunk into the whorls like the mark of a trade, which they were.

The keep rose ahead of me, a block of dark stone against a sky that was just beginning to think about evening. Lastlight Keep. The Ninth Lamp. The last fire before the coast broke into open water, and the post I had asked for by name.

I had prepared for the gate to be guarded. It was. Two sentries in garrison grey stood at either side of the gate,

their hands resting on the hilts of short blades, their faces set in the particular blankness of men who had been standing in the wind for a long time and had stopped feeling it. One of them opened his mouth, and I reached for my commission, the wax still hard on the seal, the ribbon still crisp.

He did not get the chance to ask for it. The man who came down from the keep was taller than either sentry, and he moved like someone who had been walking these stones long enough that his feet knew where the worn places were. Black hair, a white streak at the left temple that caught the afternoon light, and when he lifted a hand in greeting I saw the burns across his palm before I saw his face. Old burns, the skin smooth and tight and pulled into ridges that ran from the base of his thumb to the heel of his hand. The same on both palms. I had read the description in the Saltreach record. I had read it so many times that seeing it in flesh felt less like a discovery than a confirmation, the way a copied text matches its original.

Davor Kesh stopped three paces from me, on the keep side of the bars, and looked at my satchel. The leather was stamped with the Quill House mark, a quill crossed over a lamp, the same mark that was on my commission and on the collar of my travelling coat. He looked at it for a long moment. Then he looked at me.

“You’re not needed here,” he said.

His voice was dry, the words delivered without heat, as if he were remarking on the weather. I had imagined this

meeting a hundred times on the road from the Quill House, and in none of those imaginings had he opened with that.

I let my hand fall from my satchel strap. “The Quill House disagrees.”

“The Quill House sent me a Remembrancer fourteen years ago. Oswin Pell. You know what happened to him.”

“I know he’s dead.”

“He fell from the lamp stair. The ruling was an accident.”

“I read the ruling.”

Davor’s gaze moved from my satchel to my face and stayed there. The sentries were watching us, and I could feel their attention like a third presence, but neither of them spoke. The wind came through the bars of the gate and pulled a strand of hair loose from my braid. I did not tuck it back.

“You read the ruling,” Davor repeated, “and you came anyway.”

“I came because of the ruling.”

Something shifted in his expression, too quick to name, gone before I could decide whether it was surprise or wariness or something else entirely. He folded his arms, and the movement drew my eyes back to his palms, to the scars that the record said he had got from the Lamp itself. The Saltreach account had been careful about that detail. The burns were consistent with direct contact with a kindled Lamp, and Davor Kesh had been kindling the Ninth for fourteen years, and the scars proved nothing about the

night the Eighth went dark except that he had them and the Lamp had not.

“Go back down the road, Remembrancer,” he said. “There is light enough to reach the waystation.”

I could have said it then. The accusation was right there, shaped and ready, the words I had been carrying for four years along with the folded note and the ink stains and the sum that never came out right. Davor Kesh refused to kindle the Eighth Lamp, and Saltreach fell, and Tobin is Blank because of you. But the law was clearer than the accusation, and I had not come all this way to let anger do what precision could do better.

He had not asked my name. He had not asked to see the commission in my hand, the wax still hard on its seal. He had looked at a satchel and decided, and I recognised the manner of a man who was used to his decisions being the end of a conversation.

Behind him, somewhere in that block of dark stone, were fourteen ledgers in a dead man’s hand, and in one of them was the night my brother was lost. Between those ledgers and me stood an iron gate and the man the account had taught me to hate.

I did not go back down the road.

Nine Lamps along Morrow Bay. Eight fires. One dark gap where the Eighth should be. The sum had not changed in four years, and I had come to find out why. I unrolled the commission and reached for the law.

The Kindler's Gate

The gate was iron, twice my height, and it had not been opened.

Davor Kesh stood on the keep side of it with his arms crossed and his weight settled back on his heels, the way a man stands when he has decided a conversation is already over. The sentries had withdrawn to their post beside the winch, which meant they expected this to take a while but did not expect it to turn into something they would have to report. Behind him the keep rose in grey tiers against the evening sky, the Lamp stair winding up its eastern flank toward the Ninth, which was burning low on whatever had fed it the night before.

I had walked the wall road for three days to reach this gate. My boots were still dusty from it, my braid coming loose at the nape, and I was not going to turn around because a tall man with burned hands had decided I was inconvenient.

“Merrit Sayle,” I said. “Remembrancer, Quill House,

assigned to the Ninth Lamp by commission dated the twelfth of Harvest." I held the document flat against the bars so he could see the seal. "You received the courier's notice three weeks ago."

"I received it." He did not unfold his arms. "I didn't send for you."

"The Quill House does not require an invitation. Article twelve, section four of the charter. A Remembrancer assigned to a Lamp holds the right to enter the keep that houses it and to take up residence in the quarters adjoining her Kindler's."

"I know the charter."

"Then you know I am not asking."

One of the sentries shifted his weight. The other kept his eyes on the wall road behind me, as if pretending he could not hear a Kindler being argued with by a woman who barely reached his shoulder. I did not look at them. I looked at Davor Kesh, at the white streak that cut through the black at his left temple like a scar of its own, at the way his hands stayed crossed over his chest so that the scars on his palms were hidden against his sleeves.

"You walked here alone," he said.

"The road is safe in daylight."

"The road is never safe. The Pale doesn't care about daylight."

"The Pale is a white line out on the bay. I walked on stone, not in fog." I slid the commission back into my satchel and buckled the strap. "Are you going to open the

gate, or are we going to continue listing things we both already know?"

He did not smile, but something shifted in his face. Not warmth. Recognition, maybe, of the particular kind of stubborn that does not tire.

"I don't need a clerk," he said.

"I am not a clerk. I am a Remembrancer. The distinction is in the charter as well, article four, if you would like the citation."

"I wouldn't."

"Then I will spare you." I straightened the strap of my satchel where it had twisted. The leather was warm from my body, and the motion gave my hands something to do while I decided how much patience I had left. Not much, as it turned out. "No Kindler burns unrecorded. That is not a suggestion. Before every kindling, the Remembrancer writes down the memory as the Kindler speaks it. The record is preserved in the Wall Archive. The Kindler is not permitted to kindle without a Remembrancer present, and a Remembrancer sleeps in the room beside her Kindler's and goes where he goes. Those are the obligations, and I did not write them."

"You have them memorized."

"I have the whole charter memorized. It is part of the training."

He looked at me for a long moment. The evening light was going thick and amber, the kind of light that makes stone look softer than it is, and in it his face was harder to

read than I wanted it to be. I had expected anger. I had expected the particular bluster of a man caught in something he did not want witnessed. What I got was a tiredness so deep it had stopped showing on the surface, the way old wood stops showing grain.

“What do you think you are going to accomplish?” he asked. “Writing down words I won’t remember speaking?”

It was not the question I had prepared for. I had prepared for objections about space, about resources, about the inconvenience of a stranger in his keep. I had not prepared for him to ask me what the point was.

“The ledger preserves the account after the sacrifice,” I said. “The memory itself is gone once you give it to the flame. You will not recall it. You will not recall speaking it. What remains is what I write.”

“And what use is that to me?”

“That depends on what you want to remember.”

He uncrossed his arms. The motion was slow, deliberate, and it left his palms facing outward for the first time since I had arrived. The scars were old and thick, ridged across the center of each hand in a pattern that was not random. I had seen burn scars before, on smiths and glassworkers and once on a woman who had pulled a child from a house fire. These were different. These were the marks of a man who had held something hot on purpose, over and over, and had not let go.

I did not look away from them. I knew he was watching to see if I would.

"A memory's emotional weight determines how long it feeds the Lamp," I said. My voice stayed even, which was a small victory. "A trifle burns out within the hour. Something beloved can hold the flame a whole night. But the mechanism is the same in both cases. Bare-handed contact with the fire. The memory is surrendered through the skin, and once it is gone, it is gone. The record cannot restore it. No one has ever found a way."

"So you will sit beside me and write down everything I lose."

"Yes."

"And then what?"

"Then the ledger goes into the archive, and you go on, and if you ever need to know what you gave up, you can read it."

"Read it," he repeated. The word came out dry, almost amused, but not in a way that suggested humor. "I could read a hundred ledgers and not feel a single thing I'd written down. You know that."

"I know it."

"Then what are you preserving, exactly?"

I had asked myself the same question, in different words, on the wall road when the wind was up and the dark was closing in and I could not stop thinking about Tobin's face the last time I had seen it, which was before the Pale took Saltreach and left him Blank. I had not found an answer that satisfied me. I did not think there was one.

"The record," I said. "The fact that it happened. The fact

that someone was there to witness it.”

He was quiet for a moment. Behind him the keep's windows were going dark one by one as the household lit the evening lamps, the small domestic fires that had nothing to do with the Ninth and everything to do with ordinary life continuing in the shadow of something larger.

“The first kindling is tonight,” he said.

I had not expected that. I had expected more argument, more obstruction, more of the clipped resistance he had met me with so far. Instead he said it the way someone might say the tide was coming in: a fact that did not care about my readiness.

“Then I will need my ledger,” I said.

“Yes. You will.”

He turned and spoke to the sentries, too low for me to hear, and the winch began to grind. The gate lifted in slow inches, iron scraping stone, and I stepped through it onto the keep side of the wall for the first time.

Davor Kesh was already walking toward the Lamp stair. He did not wait for me. He did not look back to see if I was following. But he had opened the gate, and that was enough for now.

I followed him across the yard, my satchel heavy against my hip, my hand finding the folded note in my cuff without my telling it to. Tobin's name, pressed against the inside of my wrist. The Ninth Lamp, guttering above us, waiting for whatever Davor was going to give it.

I did not know yet what memory he would speak, or

what it would cost him, or whether Pell's ledgers would tell me what I had come here to learn. But I knew the law, and I knew my duty, and I knew that a Remembrancer did not stop writing until the last word was down.

The stair was narrow and the stone was cold and the night was coming on fast. I climbed.

Stolen Plums

The ninth Lamp stood in a chamber at the top of the stair, and it was smaller than I had expected.

Not small in the way a candle is small. The bowl was wide enough to wash a child in, hammered copper gone dark with years of flame and the oils of human hands. The wick assembly rose from the center on a mechanism of iron and brass that looked older than the keep itself, and the oil in the reservoir beneath smelled of something I could not name, something that caught at the back of the throat and tasted faintly of the sea. But the room was tight, barely six paces across, the walls dressed stone on three sides and open on the fourth, where a wide arch faced the bay and the white line on the water. The flame in the bowl had sunk to a low blue rim, and most of the light came from the two oil sconces flanking the door Davor had closed behind us.

My ledger was open across the small writing desk someone had wedged into the corner. The Quill House satchel

hung from the chair back. I had inked the date at the top of a fresh page, and the nib of my pen rested against the paper, waiting.

Davor stood on the far side of the lamp bowl, his hands at his sides, his gaze on the failing flame. He had not spoken since we entered. The burn scars across his palms caught the scone light, old and silvered, the skin drawn tight in a way that suggested the wounds had healed badly and a long time ago.

"The law requires you to state the memory before you kindle," I said. "Word for word, as you recall it. I write it down. Then you burn."

"I know the law." He did not look at me. "I have done this before."

"Then you know I need the words."

A long pause. The oil in the sconces made a small sound, a spitting hiss where the flame met something impure. Davor turned his hands over, palms up, studying the scars as if they might tell him something he had forgotten.

"I was nine," he said. "Maybe ten. There was a walled garden on the south side of the town, behind the old tannery, and the plums came ripe in late summer."

I wrote: *I was nine. Maybe ten. A walled garden on the south side of the town, behind the old tannery. The plums came ripe in late summer.*

"The wall was high but the mortar was bad. I could get my fingers into the gaps. My mother had told me never to climb it, and I had told her I would not, and I climbed it any-

way.” His voice stayed level, unhurried, as if he were reading from a ledger of his own. “The tree was an old one, bent over the wall like a shoulder. The plums were purple and soft, the kind that split when you bit them and ran juice down your chin. I sat in the crook of the branch and ate six of them, one after another, and the seventh I put in my pocket for later. It was warm from the sun. I remember the warmth more than the taste.”

I wrote it all. My pen moved across the page in the shorthand the Quill House had drilled into me, every phrase captured, every pause marked. The warmth more than the taste. A boy in a plum tree, lying to his mother, the juice on his chin, the seventh plum warm in his pocket. The ordinary weight of it settled into the ledger, and I understood, with a clarity that made my hand slow, that I was writing down the last hour this memory would belong to him.

“That is the whole of it,” he said.

I looked up. He was watching me now, his dark eyes unreadable in the low light. The white streak at his left temple caught the flame from the sconces and held it.

“You have it?”

“I have it.”

He nodded once and stepped toward the lamp bowl.

I had seen kindlings before. Every Remembrancer trains at the Quill House in the capital, and the House keeps a small Lamp for practice. The instructors kindle with memories they have volunteered, small ones, a childhood song or the face of a long-dead aunt, and the flame takes them

cleanly. I had written a dozen such kindlings during my training and thought I understood what I was watching.

But the practice Lamp at the House used a taper. The Kindler touched the flame to the wick with a long brass rod, and the memory passed through the metal at a remove, and the cost was real but distant, a thing you saw happen to someone else from across the room.

Davor put his bare hands into the bowl.

He reached into the copper basin and set both palms flat against the wick assembly, the iron and the brass and the oil-darkened rope, and he held them there. The sconces guttered. The air in the small stone room tightened, and I felt the pressure of it in my ears, a drop like weather coming on. Then the flame caught.

It did not climb. It arrived, fully formed, a column of pale gold that rose from the wick and filled the bowl and threw Davor's shadow huge and sharp against the wall behind him. The light was clean and steady and gave off no heat I could feel, though I was standing not four feet from the bowl. Davor's hands remained in the flame. His back was to me, and I could not see his face, but I saw the line of his shoulders go rigid, and I saw his fingers curl once against the iron before he pulled them free.

The flame stayed. The lamp was lit.

He stepped back from the bowl and turned his hands over again, the way he had before. The scars looked the same. The skin was not reddened, not blistered. Whatever the flame took, it did not mark him where I could see.

“Write the time,” he said. His voice was hoarser than it had been, a single rough edge it had not carried before.

I looked at the small hour-candle burning on the desk. “Half past the eighth hour of evening.”

I wrote it down. The pen felt heavy in my hand. I finished the entry and blotted the ink and sat back in the chair, and Davor remained standing by the lamp bowl, his eyes on the flame, his hands loose at his sides.

“What did I give you?”

The question came out flat, without self-pity, the way a man might ask what the weather had been that morning while he was still indoors. I looked at the page in front of me and then at him.

“You were nine,” I said. “Maybe ten. There was a walled garden on the south side of the town, behind the old tannery. You climbed the wall and sat in a plum tree and ate six plums and put a seventh in your pocket. It was warm from the sun. You said you remembered the warmth more than the taste.”

He listened without moving. When I finished, he said nothing for a long moment, and the flame in the lamp bowl burned steady and gold and gave no sign of what fed it.

“Plums,” he said at last. “I don’t remember any plums.”

I closed the ledger. The leather cover made a soft sound against the desk, and the sound felt too loud in the small stone room. “No,” I said. “You would not.”

“How long will it burn?”

“I cannot say. A childhood memory carries weight. The

warmth of it, the disobedience. The pleasure. It should hold until morning. A trifle would not have lasted the hour. The lamp will tell you when it needs more.”

He nodded and turned back to the flame. I stayed in the chair, the closed ledger under my hand, and watched him watch the light he had made. The gap between preservation and possession sat in the room with us, a third thing that neither of us named. I had the words. He had the fire. Neither of us had the plums.

The door opened behind me, and a voice came through it before the person did.

“Well, that’s done, then. The sentries saw the flame from the wall and Hobb nearly dropped his supper.”

I turned. The woman who filled the doorway was broad-shouldered and fair-haired, her nose a crooked thing that had been broken and set and broken again, and she wore the garrison captain’s badge on the collar of a tunic that had seen more years than the woman herself looked to have. She was grinning, but the grin had an edge to it, the dry acknowledgment of someone who had seen enough kindlings to know what they cost and had decided long ago that solemnity did not help.

“Captain Oake,” I said.

“Remembrancer Sayle.” She stepped into the room and let the door swing half shut behind her. “You got him to burn with a scribe in the room on your first night. He has had Brother Rudd scratching for him since Pell fell, and liked it even less. That’s either very impressive or very

alarming, and I haven't decided which."

"It was his choice. I only wrote it down."

"That's what they all say." She looked past me to Davor, who had not turned from the lamp. "Kesh. The kitchen kept a plate for you. I'm supposed to tell you that Cook will be insulted if you let it go cold, and I'm also supposed to tell you that I don't care about Cook's feelings but I do care about whether you eat."

Davor did not answer. After a moment, Captain Oake shrugged and looked back at me.

"You'll want to see your room. It's next to his, as the charter requires, and I had the garrison sweep it out this morning. The mattress is thin and the window faces the yard, which means you'll hear the sentries changing at every hour, but the door locks from the inside and the hearth draws well."

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet. You haven't tried the porridge." She held the door open and waited. "Come on, then. I'll walk you down. Let the man stare at his fire in peace."

I stood and gathered my satchel and the ledger. At the door I paused and looked back. Davor had not moved. His silhouette cut a dark shape against the gold of the flame, and his hands hung at his sides, and the scars on his palms were hidden now, turned inward where no one could see them.

"Good night," I said.

He did not answer, and I did not expect him to. I fol-

lowed Captain Oake down the narrow stair, and the light from the lamp chamber shrank behind us until it was a single point at the top of the stone spiral, and then it was gone.

The room next to Davor's was small and square and clean, with a hearth at one end and a narrow bed at the other and a writing desk beneath the window that looked onto the yard. Captain Oake had been right about the mattress and the sentries. I could hear two of them talking below the window, their voices low and easy, the words too muffled to make out but the rhythm of it familiar, the way garrison talk always sounded, a kind of music that filled the spaces between watches.

I set the satchel on the desk and lit the candle from the small oil lamp beside the door. Then I opened the Quill House ledger and read over the entry I had written. *I was nine. Maybe ten. A walled garden on the south side of the town.* The shorthand was clean and precise, every word captured, every pause marked. A good record. The kind of record that would stand up in a Quill House inquiry, if it came to that.

But the inquiry was not tonight. Tonight there was only the memory of a boy who had stolen plums and the man who had burned that boy away to keep a light burning, and neither of those things fit neatly into the account I had come here to build. Davor Kesh had kindled without argument. He had given the words I needed and stood aside while I wrote them and put his bare hands into the flame

without flinching. That was not the act of a man who refused to kindle. That was not the act of a man who let a lamp go dark and a town fall to the Pale because he would not pay the price.

I opened the satchel and took out a second book, smaller than the Quill House ledger, bound in plain brown leather with no mark on the cover. I had bought it in the capital the morning I received my commission, and I had not written in it yet. Now I opened it to the first page and wrote the date at the top, and beneath it I wrote: *First kindling. Ninth Lamp. Davor Kesh gave a childhood memory of stolen plums. The flame took cleanly. He asked me what he had lost, and I read it back to him, and he said he did not remember any plums. The lamp should hold the night. I do not yet know what this proves.*

I blotted the ink and closed the book and put it back in the satchel. The Quill House ledger stayed on the desk, open to the page I had written, because a Remembrancer's ledger was a public record and hiding it served no purpose. The brown book was private. A Remembrancer who meant to accuse a man kept her evidence in order, and evidence was not the same thing as a record. Evidence required context. Evidence required a pattern. Evidence required me to watch and write and wait, and I had ninety days before the Longest Night, and I did not yet know what I was waiting for.

Through the wall I heard a sound, faint and brief: the scrape of a chair on stone, then silence. Davor had come

down from the lamp chamber. I listened for footsteps, for the creak of the door to his room, and after a moment I heard both. Then the small sounds of a man settling into a space he knew well, the familiar noises of a room and a routine and a life that had been going on for years before I arrived and would go on after I left.

The candle on the desk burned low. I trimmed the wick and turned the page.

Fourteen Ledgers

The keep woke in layers. First the garrison bells, iron and impatient, ringing the change of watch. Then the grind of the yard gate and boots on stone, voices carrying up through the window I had left unshuttered. Then the smell of bread from the kitchens below the great hall, and with it the realisation that I had been awake for some time already, lying still in the narrow bed and listening to the silence through the wall where Davor Kesh slept.

Two days since the first kindling. Two days of ordinary duties, of learning the keep's rhythms and the names of its corridors, of sitting in the Quill House annex with my hands folded while Brother Rudd explained procedures I had already memorised from the charter. Two days of watching Davor across the yard or at meals and finding nothing in his manner that answered the question I had carried here. He moved through the keep the way a man moves through a room he has lived in a long time, his hands knowing the latches before his eyes found them, his

silences comfortable rather than guarded. It unsettled me more than hostility would have.

I dressed in the grey light and pinned my braid tightly, then took the Quill House ledger from my satchel and checked the entry from the first kindling. The words were still there. The ink had dried cleanly. I closed the cover and went to find the Ninth Lamp.

The lamp chamber was different by morning. The flame still burned in its copper basin, steady and heatless, but the room around it had become a working place. A man I had not yet met was bent over the lamp's base with a wick knife, his back curved into a permanent arch and his beard a white cascade that nearly reached his belt. He scraped something from the bowl's rim with small, unhurried strokes, and he did not look up when I entered.

Davor sat on the stone bench beneath the lamp, a ledger open across his knees. His own ledger, I realised after a moment. The one Pell had kept before me. He was reading it with the kind of attention a man gives a letter from someone he has not heard from in a long time, his finger moving slowly beneath the lines, his lips shaping words he did not speak aloud.

"You're the new one," the old man said. He straightened with effort, one hand pressed to the small of his back, and turned to face me. His eyes were pale and watery, but the look in them was not. "The Remembrancer."

"Merrit Sayle."

"I know your name. Captain Oake told me." He wiped

the knife on his sleeve and sheathed it at his belt. "I'm Hobb. I keep the lamp."

He said it the way someone might say *I keep the weather* or *I keep the sea*, as though the task were too large for the words and he had stopped trying to find better ones. His hands were dark with soot to the wrists, the lines of his palms picked out in black like a map of rivers.

"You've been here a long time," I said.

"Since before this one took up the Lamp." He nodded toward Davor. "Nineteen, he was. Walked in with those burn scars already on his palms and a look on his face like he'd been given something he didn't know how to carry. I showed him how to trim the wicks. He learned faster than most."

Davor turned a page. He had not acknowledged either of us, and I understood that this was not rudeness. He was somewhere else, in the years the ledger described, and the man sitting on the bench was only the body he had left behind while his mind travelled.

"He does that every morning," Hobb said. "Reads what Pell wrote down. Learns himself from the page, since he can't keep it in his head." He picked up a rag and began working oil into the bowl's rim, his strokes as steady as the ticking of a clock. "A ledger can wound its reader as surely as it preserves a truth. You understand that?"

"I understand what the charter requires of me."

"The charter." He said it without contempt, but without deference either. "The charter doesn't sit up here at dawn

watching a man forget himself. I do.” He set the rag down and looked at me fully for the first time. “Oswin Pell was a careful man on a stair. I watched him climb it a hundred times, and he never missed a step. They ruled it an accident, and I’ll tell you that plainly because you’ll hear otherwise if you ask around long enough.”

I had not asked. I had not even mentioned Pell’s name. Hobb was answering a question I had carried silently, and the fact that he knew it before I spoke told me more about him than his words did.

“I’m not here to ask about Pell’s death,” I said.

“No,” he agreed. “You’re here to ask about Saltreach.”

Davor’s finger stopped moving on the page. It was a small thing, a hesitation no longer than a breath, and then it resumed. But Hobb saw it too. He picked up his knife again and turned back to the lamp, and his shoulders settled into a line that said the conversation was over.

“You’ll do what you came to do,” he said. “I’ll tend the wicks. We’ll both be here in the morning.”

I stood there a moment longer, waiting for something I could not name. Davor did not look up. Hobb scraped at a spot on the bowl that looked clean to me. The flame burned without sound, without heat, without any sign that it was consuming anything at all, and I thought of the memory it had already eaten and the ones it would eat next, and I left the chamber with my questions unasked.

* * *

The Quill House records were kept in a long, low room behind the great hall, its walls lined with shelves that held the kindling ledgers in rows of brown leather spines. The window was a narrow slit that faced the yard, and the morning light fell across the reading table in a single pale stripe. The room smelled of old paper and the particular dryness of a place where moisture was not permitted.

Brother Ansel Rudd met me at the door. He was thin and neatly dressed, his grey robe pressed into sharp creases and his hands folded in front of him like an offering. A ring of iron keys hung at his belt, and they chimed softly when he moved.

“Remembrancer Sayle.” He inclined his head. “I was told to expect you.”

“Then you know what I’m here for.”

“You wish to consult your predecessor’s records. A reasonable request.” He said it as though reasonable requests were his favourite kind, and his smile was the sort that invited you to share his pleasure in them. “The charter is clear on the matter. Article twelve, section four.”

“I know the article.”

“Of course you do.” He stepped aside and gestured me into the room. “Oswin Pell’s ledgers have been placed on the far table for your convenience. Fourteen volumes, covering the full period of his service to Kindler Kesh. You may read them here, during the hours I am able to attend you.”

I stopped halfway to the table. “Attend me.”

“A formality.” The smile did not waver. “The records of a Kindler’s memories are sensitive. The Quill House requires that a proctor be present when they are consulted by anyone other than the Remembrancer who created them. I’m sure you understand.”

I understood perfectly. He was not offering me access. He was granting me permission to read under his supervision, and he was doing it with such courtesy that a refusal would sound like paranoia. I filed the tactic away and took my seat at the table.

The ledgers were stacked in chronological order, the oldest on the left. I opened the first one and found Pell’s handwriting, small and precise, the letters formed with the care of a man who knew that his words would outlast the memories they described. The earliest entries dated back fourteen years, to Davor’s first months as Kindler. Each one followed the same format: the date, the hour of kindling, the memory spoken aloud, and a note on how long the flame had burned afterward.

“You’ll find him a meticulous record-keeper,” Brother Rudd said from his chair by the door. He had produced a small book of his own and appeared to be reading it, though I noticed his eyes moved less often than the pages turned. “Oswin was trained at the Quill House in the capital. His instructors spoke highly of him.”

“Did you know him well?”

“We corresponded. A proctor and a Remembrancer at the same keep develop a working friendship, or so I’ve

found. He was a careful man.”

The same phrase Hobb had used. I turned a page and let the repetition sit in my mind without comment.

The morning passed in the turning of pages. Pell had recorded a kindling for every night, and on the hard nights several, the memories varying from the ordinary to the intimate: a childhood swimming lesson, the smell of his father’s pipe, a quarrel with a friend that had ended in laughter. Davor’s life, dismantled piece by piece and written down in another man’s hand. I read each entry as testimony, watching for the pattern I had come to find.

By the fourth ledger, I had learned the rhythm of Pell’s record-keeping. By the seventh, I could predict where he would place a comma. By the tenth, I had reached the winter of the fall.

The entries around that season were different. Pell’s handwriting remained precise, but the memories Davor gave grew heavier: a conversation with his father that he had never finished, the last time he saw the harbour at sunset, a promise he had made to someone whose name Pell recorded only as “E.” The entries for each night multiplied. The flame, Pell noted, was burning through them faster.

And then, in the middle of the eleventh ledger, I found the first reference to Saltreach itself.

The Kindler states that the Eighth Lamp has begun to gutter. He reports this as observation only, without alarm. I have noted it in the margin for the record.

The margin note was there, a small asterisk and the

words *Eighth Lamp*, *Saltreach*, *reported guttering*, *14th of Snowfall*. That was all. No mention of what Davor had done about it, or what he had been asked to do. No indication that anyone at Lastlight Keep had been informed beyond Pell's tidy notation.

I read the entry again. Then I read the ones before and after it, searching for a thread I could follow. The guttering was mentioned twice more, each time in the same dispassionate tone: *the Eighth Lamp continues to fail*, and then, a week later, *the Kindler has received word from Saltreach*. *He does not state the contents*.

He does not state the contents. The words sat on the page like a locked door. Pell had not pressed him, or if he had, he had not recorded the answer. The official account said Davor Kesh refused to kindle the Eighth Lamp on the Longest Night. These entries said nothing about a refusal. They said nothing about a kindling at all.

"You've gone quiet," Brother Rudd observed.

"I'm reading."

"Of course."

I sat back in my chair. The light from the window had shifted across the table while I read, and my shadow fell across the open pages. Brother Rudd was watching me with an expression of polite inquiry, his book forgotten in his lap.

"Have you found what you were looking for?"

"I've found what Pell wrote."

"Which is not the same thing."

It was not a question. I looked at him, and his face gave nothing back, and I understood that he knew exactly what I was searching for and had known since the moment I walked in.

“The official account of Saltreach’s fall states that Davor Kesh was asked to kindle the Eighth Lamp and refused,” I said. “These entries make no mention of a request, a refusal, or a kindling. They record only that the Lamp guttered, that Davor received word from Saltreach, and that he did not share its contents.”

“The official account is not always complete.”

“No. It isn’t.” I closed the ledger and rested my hand on its cover. “I have not finished the eleventh volume, and there are three more after it. I’d like to continue this evening, after my duties.”

Brother Rudd’s smile did not flicker. “I regret that procedure does not permit it. The record room is closed after the eighth hour, and a proctor must be present at all times. I am not available in the evenings.”

“Then I’ll return tomorrow morning.”

“I look forward to it.” He rose and crossed to the table, his keys chiming softly. “There is one other matter I should mention, since you are new to the keep. A sealed copy of the First Ledger lies beneath every Lamp, the Ninth included. It is the foundational record, the one that established the covenant between Kindler and flame. Only the Lamp’s Kindler may request it, and only the proctor holds the key.” He touched the ring at his belt. “I tell you this so

you will not waste your time searching for it among Pell's volumes. It is not there."

I had not thought to search for it. Now I would not forget that it existed.

"Thank you for the clarification," I said.

"Clarification is my purpose." He gathered Pell's ledgers into a neat stack and carried them to a locked cabinet against the far wall. "Shall I expect you at the eighth hour tomorrow?"

"You shall."

I walked out of the record room and into the yard, where the afternoon light had gone thin and the wind was rising from the north. The garrison was changing watch again, the same bells ringing the same hour, and the keep's routines continued around me as though I had not just spent a morning learning that the story I had carried here was missing its middle pages.

The official account said Davor Kesh refused to kindle. Pell's ledgers did not confirm it. They did not deny it either. They simply stopped where the answer should have been, and the silence where it belonged was louder than any accusation I had prepared.

I crossed the yard toward the lamp stair. There were three volumes and the end of a fourth still unread, and a proctor whose courtesy was a locked door, and a sealed book beneath the flame that I had no right to open. I had come to Lastlight Keep looking for proof of a refusal. What I had found instead was a gap in the record, deliberate and

tidy, and a question I had not thought to ask: if Davor Kesh had refused to kindle, why had Pell written nothing of it?

The wind bit at my cheeks. I pulled my collar tighter and climbed the stair toward the chamber where the Ninth Lamp burned, and I did not let myself answer the question. Not yet. I would read the remaining ledgers first, and I would find what Pell had left in them, and I would not mistake a secondhand claim for proof simply because I wanted it to be true.

That was the Remembrancer's discipline. The truth did not belong to me until I had written it down.

The Pages Removed

The records room smelled of old paper and lamp oil, a combination I had come to know as well as my own satchel in the four days since my first search. Brother Rudd had kept the eastern shutters open that morning, and the light fell in long rectangles across the table where I had left Pell's ledgers stacked by number. I reached for the eleventh volume and found only empty wood.

"I took the liberty of reshelving the volumes you had finished with." Brother Rudd stood near the door, his iron ring of keys glinting at his belt. "A proctor's duty is to maintain order in the records. I hope you understand."

I did not sit. "I had not finished with them."

"You had examined ten ledgers and made your notes." His voice stayed quiet, unhurried. "The remaining volumes are here, on the lower shelf, where you may consult them under my supervision. Quill House procedure encourages a Remembrancer to review her predecessor's work. It does not grant indefinite custody of the originals."

I let the silence stretch long enough that he would hear it as a choice. Then I pulled my satchel from my shoulder and set it on the table. “Then I will review them here. Now.”

“Of course.” He gestured toward the chair I had used four days ago, the one facing the window. “I have the volumes ready for you.”

He had arranged them in a neat row on the shelf closest to the door: ledgers eleven through fourteen, their spines aligned with a precision that belonged in a shrine. I crossed the room and took the eleventh ledger from its place. The leather cover was cool under my fingers, the binding loose from years of handling. I carried it to the table and opened it to the last entry I remembered reading.

Pell’s hand was steady, the ink a dark brown that had barely faded. The date at the top of the page read the twenty-first of Snowfall, six days before the Longest Night. His entry recorded a kindling Davor had performed that morning: a memory of learning to tie a fishing knot from a man Pell had not named. The flame had taken well, he noted, and the Ninth Lamp had burned steady through the afternoon. Below that, a single line in Pell’s smaller script: *The Kindler received word from Saltreach. He did not state its contents.*

I had read that line four days ago and let it sit in my private ledger as a question mark. Now I turned the page and found what came next.

The entry was dated the twenty-third of Snowfall. Pell had recorded the weather, a supply shipment, and a minor repair to the lamp stair's outer door. Saltreach appeared nowhere on the page. I turned to the next. The twenty-fifth of Snowfall brought an account of Davor's restlessness, his refusal to eat the evening meal. Pell had written: *The Kindler is troubled. I have asked, and he has not answered.* I read it twice, and the second time I heard the weight Pell had given the word *asked*.

The Longest Night should have filled the pages that followed. I knew the date as well as I knew Tobin's face: four winters ago, the Eighth Lamp had gone dark, and the Pale had swallowed Saltreach whole. Pell had been there, quill in hand, recording what Davor did or did not do. The account had to exist.

I turned the page and found the first of the cuts.

Three leaves had been removed. The edges where they had been severed from the binding were straight and clean, the work of a sharp blade drawn in a single pass. No tearing, no age-frayed paper. Someone had opened this ledger, placed a knife against the spine, and taken the pages out.

I did not touch the cut edges. My hands stayed flat on the table, one on either side of the open book, and I breathed in through my nose and out through my mouth the way I had learned to do in the weeks after Saltreach fell, when the smallest thing could send me spiraling into a grief that had no shape and no end.

Brother Rudd had not moved from his place by the door. I could feel his attention on me, patient and unblinking.

"Pages have been removed from this ledger," I said.

"I am sorry to hear that."

I looked up. His expression was the same careful arrangement it had been four days ago: concern without urgency, sympathy without investment. "You did not know."

"I do not read the ledgers. My responsibility is their safe-keeping, not their contents." He paused. "Which pages are missing?"

"The ones that would have recorded the Longest Night. Saltreach's fall. What Davor Kesh did when the Eighth Lamp went dark." I kept my voice level, a Remembrancer stating facts for a record. "The cuts are clean. This was done with a blade, on purpose."

Brother Rudd stepped closer, his soft-soled shoes making almost no sound on the stone floor. He bent over the table and examined the cut pages without reaching for them. "You have a sharp eye."

"I have a Remembrancer's training. We are taught to notice what has been altered."

"Then you will understand my position." He straightened and folded his hands in front of him. "The ledgers were in Oswin Pell's keeping until his death. After that, they came to the Quill House records here at Lastlight Keep. I have held the keys to this room for seven years. I cannot account for every hand that may have touched a

volume before it reached my shelves.”

I went through the twelfth ledger, then the thirteenth and the fourteenth, leaf by leaf, counting the gatherings. They were whole. The twelfth simply began eleven days after the Longest Night with an ordinary kindling, as if nothing had happened at all. Whatever Oswin Pell had written about Saltreach had been in those three leaves and nowhere else.

The physical absence sat in my chest like a held breath. Not the suspicion I had carried up the wall road six days ago, the certainty I had nursed through four years of grief. That suspicion had been a thing I could shape and sharpen. This was a hole cut into the record itself, and I could not fill it with anything I had brought with me.

If the pages had been removed to hide Davor’s refusal, I had lost the proof I came to find. If they had been removed to protect him from a false accusation, I had lost the evidence that would clear him. If they held something else entirely, some third truth the official record could not contain, I had lost that too. And Tobin, who stood somewhere in the fog over Saltreach, Blank, and could not tell me what he had seen or heard, was as silent as the cut paper in front of me.

I closed the fourteenth ledger and set it on top of the others. The stack was smaller than it should have been, the missing pages subtracting a weight only I could feel.

“Who had custody of these volumes between Pell’s death and their arrival here?”

Brother Rudd considered the question with his head tilted slightly to one side. “The keep’s garrison would have secured Pell’s effects after the accident. Captain Oake may have a record of the transfer. Beyond that, I cannot give you a name you could verify.”

“You cannot, or you will not.”

“I have told you what I know.” His voice did not rise, did not harden. “I am a proctor, not an investigator. My duty is to the records that remain, not to the ones that have been lost.”

I opened my satchel and took out my private brown leather notebook, the one I had started on my first night at the keep. I turned to a fresh page and wrote what I had found: the date, the ledger number, the number of leaves removed, the condition of the cut edges. I noted that the cuts were clean and deliberate, that Brother Rudd had disclaimed knowledge of the removal. I recorded his statement about the garrison securing Pell’s effects. I wrote nothing about Davor, nothing about Tobin, nothing about what I believed or hoped or feared.

What I had written was a discrepancy, not a conclusion.

I closed the notebook and returned it to my satchel. The light through the eastern shutters had shifted, the rectangles on the table stretching toward the door. Outside, the wind had picked up, and I could hear it working at the keep’s stone walls, looking for a way in.

“I will need to examine the garrison’s transfer records,” I said.

“You may submit a request to Captain Oake. I am sure she will accommodate you.” Brother Rudd moved toward the door and held it open. “Will you be returning tomorrow?”

“I will return when I have more questions.”

I walked past him into the corridor, and the door closed behind me with a soft click of the latch. The keep’s passages were quiet at this hour, the garrison at their duties, the kitchen staff beginning the long work of the evening meal. I climbed the stair toward the yard, and the wind met me at the top, cold and smelling of stone dust and the distant flatness of the Pale.

The cut pages stayed in my mind as I crossed the yard. I had come to Lastlight Keep looking for a record that would condemn Davor Kesh, and I had found a record that had been silenced. The absence did not exonerate him. It did not condemn him. It did something worse: it left me with nothing but his word, and I had not yet asked him for it.

I stopped in the yard and looked up at the lamp stair, where the Ninth Lamp burned behind its stone walls. The garrison rooms lay to my left, and in them were men and women who had served at Lastlight Keep when Saltreach fell, who might have heard what was said and done in the days before the Longest Night. Davor Kesh was somewhere above me, in the chamber where he tended a flame with memories he could not keep.

I would not find my answer in Pell’s ledgers. The pages were gone, and whoever had taken them had left no name

behind. But Davor was still here, and the garrison was still here, and I was done waiting for the written record to tell me what a living man could say aloud.

Not tonight, and not in some quiet corner of the stair. I would give the records a few more days to prove me wrong. Then I would ask him in front of witnesses, and I would write down whatever answer he gave.

The wind pushed at my back as I walked, and I let it.

A Question in Public

I had spent five days trying to make Pell's ledgers yield something they no longer held. Five days of returning to the Quill House records at every hour Brother Rudd would admit me, going back to the cut edges in the eleventh volume as if the gap might close if I stared at it long enough. It did not. The pages remained gone. And Brother Rudd remained unable, or unwilling, to name the person who had custody of those volumes between Pell's death and their shelving in the archive.

On the sixth morning I stopped looking at the ledgers and started looking for Davor Kesh.

I found him at midday in the garrison rooms, which was luck or something less charitable. The garrison rooms occupied the keep's eastern wing, a long hall of trestle tables and benches where Captain Oake's soldiers took their meals and sharpened their blades and waited out the hours between patrols. The ceiling was low, the hearth was lit against the autumn chill, and the air carried the smell of

barley broth and whetstone oil. A dozen garrison soldiers sat at the tables. Two were dicing near the hearth. Three more were eating. The rest were pretending not to watch as I walked in with my satchel slung across my body and my notebook in my hand.

Davor stood near the far wall with a cup of something that steamed. He was not sitting with the garrison and he was not quite standing apart from them either. It was the posture of a man who had spent fourteen years in a keep where everyone knew his face and no one quite knew what to do with him. The white streak at his left temple caught the hearth-light. His burned palms rested against the cup as if the heat did not register.

He looked at me when I entered. He did not look surprised.

“Remembrancer,” he said.

“Kindler.” I set the notebook on the nearest trestle table, open to the page where I had drawn the cut edges of Pell’s eleventh ledger. The garrison room went quieter than it had been. The dice stopped rattling. “I have a question. It concerns Saltreach.”

His expression did not shift, but his hands went still around the cup. “Ask it.”

I had rehearsed this moment in my room the night before, lying on my cot and staring at the ceiling beams while the words arranged themselves into something clean and unassailable. Now, with the garrison’s attention pressing against my back and Davor Kesh watching me with the

patience of a man who had been waiting four years for someone to corner him, the rehearsed words felt like a borrowed coat.

I wore them anyway.

“Four winters ago, on the Longest Night, the Eighth Lamp at Saltreach went dark. The Pale took the town. The official account states that you were asked to kindle that Lamp and that you refused.” I did not look at the soldiers, but I heard the bench creak as someone shifted. “I am asking you, before witnesses, whether that account is true.”

The silence that followed was the kind that happens when a room full of people stops breathing at the same time. Davor set his cup down on the window ledge. The motion was slow, deliberate, the way a man might set down a weapon he did not want to use.

“I don’t know,” he said.

I had prepared for denial. I had prepared for deflection. I had prepared for a confession. I had not prepared for that.

“You don’t know.”

“The memory is gone.” He turned his palms up, and the old burn scars showed pale against the darker skin. “Whatever I did that night, whatever I chose or failed to choose, I surrendered it to a flame. I have wanted to know for four years. The record is gone, and so am I, on that point.”

I looked at his palms and did not let myself look away. The scarring was old and thorough, the kind of mark that came from bare-handed contact with a Lamp’s fire, and it

told me exactly what I already knew: that Davor Kesh had given up memories to keep the Ninth Lamp burning, that the cost was real and visible, that his hands carried the proof of every sacrifice he had made. What it did not tell me was whether one of those sacrifices had been Saltreach.

A burn scar was evidence of kindling. It was not evidence of refusal. It was not evidence of anything except that a man had touched fire and lost something.

“You’re saying you cannot confirm or deny the official account,” I said. “You’re saying no one can.”

“I’m saying I’ve been waiting for someone to ask the question properly.” He met my gaze without flinching. “You’re the first.”

One of the soldiers near the hearth made a sound that might have been a laugh if Captain Oake had not chosen that moment to stand up from the bench where she had been sitting, unnoticed by me, her back against the wall and her arms crossed. She did not say anything. She did not need to. The soldier swallowed the laugh and went back to studying his dice.

Juna Oake’s gaze found mine across the room, and I could not read what was in it. She had been there the whole time. She had heard everything.

I turned back to Davor. “The ledgers your previous Remembrancer kept, the ones covering the Longest Night and Saltreach’s fall, have pages missing. Cut out cleanly with a blade.” I paused, watching for a reaction. “Someone

wanted the written record gone, and now you're telling me the memory is gone too. That's either a coincidence or it's not."

"I didn't cut the pages."

"I didn't say you did."

"You were thinking it."

"I was thinking," I said, "that if you wanted to know what happened four years ago as badly as you claim, you would have looked at those ledgers yourself long before I arrived."

Davor picked up his cup and did not drink from it. "I read my own ledger. The one that tells me who I am. Pell's records were his work, not mine, and I had no right to them without a Remembrancer's permission. You know the Quill House charter as well as I do."

I did. Article twelve, section four gave a Remembrancer the right to review all records kept by her predecessor. It did not give that right to the Kindler himself. The law that let me search Pell's ledgers was the same law that had kept Davor from opening them.

"So you waited," I said.

"I waited." His voice was dry, almost wry. "Fourteen years of kindling teaches a man patience. It also teaches him that some questions have no answers, or none that survive the fire."

I thought of Tobin. I thought of my brother standing somewhere in the fog over Saltreach, Blank, his memory stripped clean, the same face with no one behind it. I

thought of the folded note with his name that I carried in my cuff, the one I had written to remind myself why I had come to Lastlight Keep. I thought of the missing pages and the careful, careful gaps where a record should have been.

And I thought of the fact that I was standing in a garrison room with a dozen witnesses and a record full of holes, and the man I had come to accuse was telling me he had no memory of the night I needed him to account for, and I could not tell whether that made him guilty or innocent or something worse: a man who had lost the only evidence that could clear him.

"If you don't remember," I said, "then we can't establish what happened from your recollection. And if the ledgers are cut, we can't establish it from the record. That leaves us with the official account and nothing to test it against."

"Yes."

"The official account says you refused."

"Yes."

"Do you believe it?"

Davor was quiet for a long moment. The garrison room had gone so still that I could hear the hearth fire eating through a log, the soft collapse of ash, the scrape of a spoon against a bowl somewhere near the back of the hall.

"I don't know what I believe," he said. "I know what I would have wanted to do. I know what kind of man I hope I was. But wanting and doing are not the same thing, and hope is not memory." He looked at his palms again, then back at me. "I have spent fourteen years giving up pieces

of myself to keep a Lamp burning. If I gave up the piece that would tell me whether I failed Saltreach, then that is the cost I paid, and I cannot get it back by wishing.”

I had come to this room expecting to corner a man who would lie to me. Instead I had found a man who could not lie because he did not know the truth, and that was worse. A liar could be caught. A liar could be broken open with the right question, the right pressure, the right piece of evidence. But a man with no memory of his own guilt or innocence was a locked door with no key.

Captain Oake shifted her weight against the wall. The bench creaked. “Sayle.”

I turned.

“You’ve asked your question,” she said. Her voice was blunt, unhurried, loud enough to carry. “He’s answered it. What happens now?”

What happened now was that I had no proof of refusal and no proof of innocence, and the only person who might have known the difference had lost the knowledge to a flame before I ever set foot in this keep. What happened now was that the missing pages mattered more than they had before, because they were the only record left, and someone had gone to considerable trouble to make sure no one could read them.

What happened now was that I could not restore Tobin by accusing Davor Kesh. I could not make the record whole by wishing it unbroken. And I could not stand in this room forever, holding a drawing of cut pages, waiting for

an answer that had already been burned away.

I closed the notebook. The sound was small in the quiet room, but it felt final.

"I propose," I said, "that we investigate the missing account together."

Davor's gaze sharpened. "Together."

"You're the only person bound to the event. I'm the Remembrancer assigned to record what can still be known. Separately, we have a missing memory and a missing record. Together, we might have something closer to the truth." I met his eyes and held them. "This is not trust. I am not offering you trust. I am offering you a witness."

He considered this. The hearth fire popped. Someone's spoon scraped the bottom of a bowl.

"And if we find nothing?" he asked.

"Then we find nothing. But we find it honestly, and we record what we looked for and where the trail ended. That's more than anyone has done in four years."

Davor picked up his cup. He drank this time, a long swallow, and when he set the cup down again his hand was steady.

"All right," he said. "I'll work with you. Not because I trust you either, Remembrancer. Because you're the first person who's asked me what I remember instead of telling me what I did."

Captain Oake pushed off the wall. "If you two are finished making agreements in front of my garrison, some of us have a patrol to run." But her voice was not unkind, and

when she looked at me there was something in her expression that might have been approval. “Keep me informed. Both of you.”

She said it like an order, and I nodded like a soldier, and the garrison room slowly returned to its ordinary noise. The dice rattled again. The spoons scraped. The hearth fire settled into its work.

I tucked the notebook back into my satchel. Davor did not move from his place by the window, and I did not move toward him. The agreement we had made sat between us like a newly lit candle: small, provisional, easy to extinguish if either of us breathed wrong.

But it was lit. And that was more than I had walked in with.

The cut pages remained an open question. The memory of Saltreach remained lost. Tobin remained Blank. But I had a path forward now, and a witness who was also the accused, and a search that neither of us could conduct alone. I would begin in the morning, with the surviving ledgers and whatever Davor could tell me about the gaps between them.

Outside the garrison windows, the autumn light was thinning toward afternoon. I heard the wind pick up along the wall, and I thought of the Pale sitting out on the bay, patient and white and waiting, and I did not let myself think of Tobin’s face. Not yet. Not while there was work to do.

The Wall Road

The gate was iron and it stood open.

That was the first thing I noticed. The gate had not been open since I arrived at Lastlight Keep, not once, and now it yawned onto the road like a mouth that had forgotten how to close. Davor stood beside it with his back to me, adjusting the girth on a grey mare I had not seen before. A second horse, a bay gelding with a white snip on his nose, waited with his head low and his ears flicking at the early cold.

Thirteen days. Thirteen nights of watching Davor press his palm to the Ninth Lamp's flame and come away lighter by something I recorded in careful script. Thirteen mornings of searching the keep's records for any trace of the missing pages, any copy, any note Oswin Pell might have left elsewhere. We had found nothing. The Wall Archive held no duplicates. Brother Rudd's keys had opened every cabinet and every drawer, and every drawer had been empty of what we needed.

So now we were going to the place itself.

“You ride?” Davor did not turn around. His voice carried the same dry flatness it always did, as if the question cost him nothing and meant less.

“I ride.”

He glanced back at me then, one eyebrow lifting a fraction. “Well enough to keep up.”

“I did not say I ride well.”

The corner of his mouth twitched. He handed me the bay’s reins and turned back to his own horse without another word.

The yard was grey with the thin light that came before true dawn. Frost had settled in the cracks between the cobblestones, and my boots left dark prints where I walked. I had dressed for the road: my Quill House wool dress under a heavier travelling cloak, my satchel cross-body with my notes on Pell’s ledgers packed tight, my notebook in the pocket against my hip. The folded note with Tobin’s name stayed where it always stayed, tucked into the lining of my left cuff.

Davor swung into his saddle with the ease of someone who had done it a thousand times. I managed the bay with less grace but got myself up without incident. The horse snorted once, as if reserving judgment, and then stood steady.

“Before we go,” I said.

Davor had already reached into the leather pouch slung from his saddle horn. He drew out a book I recognized: his

own ledger, the reading copy a Remembrancer keeps up for her Kindler, into which I had copied every kindling since the night I arrived. He opened it across his thigh and began reading, his eyes tracking down the entries with the patience of a man who had done this every morning for years and would do it every morning until he could not.

I had watched him read it before. He never rushed. His finger traced the lines, and sometimes he paused over an entry as if testing its weight, as if the order of the words could steady something his memory could no longer hold. This morning he stopped twice: once at the record of his first kindling at the Ninth, once at something further back that I could not see from my angle.

“The Saltreach references,” I said. “May I compare them with my notes?”

He looked up, and for a moment I thought he would refuse. Then he handed the book across the space between our horses, and I took it carefully, the leather warm from his hands.

I had brought my notes on Pell’s eleventh volume. I opened both across my knees and found the entries I had marked. Pell had noted in the eleventh ledger that Davor received word from Saltreach and did not state its contents. The matching entry in Davor’s copy, two days before the Longest Night, said only: *Word from Saltreach. The Kindler is troubled.* After it the leaves were gone from his copy too, cut as cleanly as Pell’s.

I read it twice. The phrasing was Pell’s, not Davor’s. That

much I had learned to recognize. Pell wrote in full sentences with a clerk's precision; Davor's own entries, the few I had seen, were shorter, stripped to the bone.

"Pell wrote this," I said. "Not you."

"He wrote most of it." Davor held out his hand for the book, and I gave it back. He checked the line himself, as if he did not trust my reading. "I told him I was troubled. He wrote it down. That was his work."

"And what troubled you?"

"I don't remember." He closed the ledger and returned it to the pouch. "If I did, we would not be riding to Saltreach."

He said it without self-pity, the way another man might state the hour. The loss was simply a fact he had learned to carry, and I found that harder to reckon with than grief would have been. Grief I understood. This was something else.

"The Ninth Lamp," I said. "While we are gone."

"Hobb."

"Trifles from the garrison?" I had heard the arrangement, but I wanted it confirmed.

Davor nudged his mare toward the gate. "An hour of light for each small memory a soldier can spare. This early in autumn the Pale keeps far out on the bay by day. The nights are what matter, and Hobb knows the wicks better than I do." He paused. "He will manage."

I did not ask what would happen if he could not. The question answered itself, and neither of us needed to hear

it spoken.

We rode through the gate and out along the wall.

The wall stretched east and west, grey stone against grey sky, and the road along its landward side was rutted but passable. Davor took the lead without discussion, and I fell in beside him where the track allowed. Behind us the keep's light was still visible, the Ninth Lamp burning steady in its high chamber, and I felt its pull even as the distance grew.

"The road along the wall would be faster," I said. "Straight to Saltreach."

"No one rides the wall road between the Ninth and Saltreach." Davor did not look at me. His eyes were on the track ahead, and his hands held the reins with the loose grip of long practice. "The stretch has stood under fog since the Eighth died. Four years of the Pale pressing close, and the wall holds, but the road is not safe. We go round."

"Round where?"

"Landward road to the Seventh Lamp. A day and a half, if the weather holds. Then back along the wall from the side that still has light."

I turned the route over in my mind. The Seventh Lamp lay west of Saltreach, the next beacon in the chain that lined Morrow Bay. If the fog had claimed the road between the Eighth and the Ninth, approaching from the west made sense. It also meant riding into territory I did not know, toward a Kindler I had never met.

“Sevrin Ault,” Davor said, as if he had read my thought. “The Seventh’s Kindler. He knows the state of the wall better than anyone.”

“And he will talk?”

“Whether asked or not.”

The track narrowed, and I dropped back to ride single file. The landward side of the wall was all scrub and thin soil, the kind of ground that had never been good for planting and never would be. Gorse and bracken crowded the ditches, and the morning mist clung to the low places, shredding as the sun climbed.

I thought about the ledgers I had not found. Fourteen volumes, and the leaves that mattered cut clean out of the eleventh. Someone had done that work with care. Someone who had access to the records room, or to the garrison’s custody before the ledgers were transferred. Brother Rudd had given me no name, and I had not been able to press him further without revealing what I suspected.

But the missing pages were not the only evidence. The dead Lamp itself was evidence. If Davor had refused to kindle, the Lamp would show one set of signs. If he had tried and been interrupted, or if the kindling had failed for some other reason, it would show another. I did not know what those signs were. I was not sure Davor did either. But the place where it happened would hold something the ledgers could not.

“What are we looking for?” I asked his back.

He did not turn. "At the Eighth?"

"At the Eighth. What distinguishes a refusal from a failed attempt? From an interrupted kindling?"

The mare's hooves beat four strokes before he answered. "A refusal leaves the wicks untrimmed and the bowl dry. A failed kindling leaves residue. An interrupted one leaves the tools where they fell."

"And you know this how?"

"I have been a Kindler for fourteen years." His voice carried no pride and no defensiveness. "I know what a Lamp looks like after each kind of failure because I have seen the ones that failed."

I waited.

"The Fourth Lamp, twelve years ago. The Kindler died before he could finish, and the bowl was still warm when they found him. The tools were on the floor where he dropped them." He paused. "The Second, eight years ago. The Kindler walked away. The wicks were cold and the oil had congealed."

"And you were sent to kindle them?"

"I was sent to relight them. A different thing."

The road opened again, and I brought the bay up alongside him. His profile was unreadable in the grey light, the white streak at his temple catching the first thin sun.

"So we will know," I said. "When we reach Saltreach. We will see what the Lamp shows."

"We will see what is left of it." He turned his head then, and his dark eyes met mine. "Four years is a long time. The

Pale may have taken more than the town.”

“But if the Lamp is intact.”

“Then yes. We will know.”

I wanted to believe him. I wanted the physical evidence to settle the question the ledgers could not, to tell me whether the man riding beside me had chosen to let my brother’s town fall. But wanting a thing and trusting it were different disciplines, and I had been trained in the second.

Davor reached into his saddlebag and drew out a small object wrapped in oilcloth. He unwrapped it one-handed, the reins loose in his other grip, and held it out for me to see.

A lantern. But not a lantern of glass and oil. This was a hand-sized lamp bowl, copper by the look of it, with a single wick and a reservoir that would hold perhaps a thumb’s worth of fuel. It was built to the same design as the great Lamps along the wall, scaled down to something a rider could carry.

“A wall-rider’s lantern,” he said. “It burns on memory, like its sisters. Throws a circle a few strides wide. Enough to keep the Pale at bay if the fog closes in.”

“What will you feed it?”

“Whatever I have left.” He wrapped the lantern again and stowed it. “Write it down. You are my Remembrancer. You record what I give.”

I pulled my notebook from my pocket and wrote: *One wall-rider’s lantern, copper bowl, carried by Davor Kesh.*

Memory-fuel unspecified. The ink was thin and pale in the morning cold, but it would hold.

The sun was fully up now, burning the last mist from the low ground, and the wall stretched ahead of us in a long grey line. The keep's light had faded to a point behind us, and then it was gone entirely, swallowed by distance and the curve of the land.

I did not let myself look back.

"Sevrin Ault," I said. "What should I expect?"

Davor's mouth did something that was not quite a smile. "He has been Kindler of the Seventh for eleven years. He knows every stone of the wall between his Lamp and Saltreach. He will offer you tea and ask you questions you do not want to answer, and he will do both with the same expression."

"Is he a friend?"

"He is a Kindler. We do not have friends. We have colleagues and we have memories, and the second does not last."

The road bent south, away from the wall, and we followed it into rougher country. The gorse gave way to bare rock and patches of heather, and the wind picked up, carrying the first real bite of autumn. I pulled my cloak tighter and felt the weight of my satchel against my hip, my notes solid and silent inside.

Thirteen days of searching had given us nothing. But the road to Saltreach was open, and the Seventh Lamp lay ahead, and somewhere beyond it the dead Eighth waited

with whatever truth it still held.

I pressed my heels to the bay's sides and rode.

The Seventh's Dry Wit

The landward road gave us the Seventh Lamp a little past noon, and it rose from the ridge like a fist uncurling one finger at a time: the squat tower first, then the wall-gate beside it, then the lamp chamber itself, a stone drum open to the north where the beacon faced the bay. The fog lay thick beyond the wall, a grey bank that swallowed the horizon, but the road had been clear all morning, and the bay gelding had kept a steady pace behind Davor's grey mare since we broke camp at dawn.

Sevrin Ault met us at the gate with an easy smile and a kettle already steaming on a hook over the yard fire. He was copper-skinned and handsome in a way that seemed to cost him nothing, and he looked at Davor the way garrison soldiers look at someone they have carried a stretcher with.

"Two travelers from the Ninth, and one of them's brought a scribe," he said, taking the grey mare's bridle before Davor had finished dismounting. "I'd offer you the

full hospitality of the Seventh, but the menu's gone short. My remaining memories are a thin list, and nothing on it's worth ordering."

Davor swung down from the saddle and clasped Sevrin's forearm. "You always say that."

"I always mean it. The difference is this year I'm not joking." Sevrin turned the smile on me, and it stayed in place even as he spoke of what he had lost. "You'll be the new Remembrancer. Sevrin Ault, Kindler of the Seventh, at your service for as long as the service holds out. Which, between us, may not be long."

"Merrit Sayle," I said. "Assigned to the Ninth."

"Assigned to the Ninth and riding the landward road to Saltreach. That's a particular kind of assignment." He did not wait for an answer. "Come up. The kettle's hot and the wind off the wall will strip the warmth from you before you've finished being polite."

The Seventh Lamp's chamber was smaller than the Ninth's, its copper bowl dark in the daylight but tended: the wicks trimmed, the tools laid out on a cloth that had been washed and rewashed until the weave showed through. A Remembrancer's desk sat against the inner wall, bare except for a single register bound in brown leather, thinner than any of Pell's fourteen volumes. The room smelled of lamp oil and the particular clean sharpness of a fire that had burned through the night and been let to rest.

Sevrin poured tea into three clay cups that did not match. "My own scribe is down at the garrison mess. She

says my jokes go down easier on a full stomach. You'll want the way onward to Saltreach. I can give you that. But you've been on the road since yesterday, and the Pale doesn't move faster because you're in a hurry. Sit."

I sat. Davor took the stool by the window, where he could see the fog beyond the wall, and Sevrin settled himself against the desk with the ease of a man who had stopped treating his own lamp chamber as a solemn place sometime around his fifth year of kindling.

"How long has a memory kept the Seventh alight?" I asked. "And what determines the duration?"

Sevrin raised his cup in a small salute. "Straight to it. Davor, your new scribe argues as well as she writes, I hope."

"Better," Davor said, and drank his tea.

Sevrin laughed, a quick bright sound that filled the small room. "The short answer is that it depends on the weight. A memory that mattered to you, that you carried close, that shaped something in you: that one burns longer. A trifle, a passing thing: an hour, maybe two. The memory itself is gone either way. The flame doesn't care whether you'll miss it."

"And you've been kindling the Seventh for eleven years."

"Eleven years, and I can tell you exactly how many memories I have left that would hold a whole night on their own." He held up four fingers, then folded one down. "Three. The rest is small change, an hour apiece, and I spend it by the handful. The last dear one I gave up was

the smell of my mother's bread. Not the memory of my mother, you understand. Just the bread. The particular way the kitchen smelled on winter mornings, the crust cracking under my thumb, the sound of her setting the loaf on the sill to cool. I thought it was a small thing. It wasn't." He set his cup down and looked at his hand as if the missing memory might still be tucked between his fingers. "The flame took it, and now I know I had a mother who baked bread, but I can't tell you what it smelled like. I can't tell you if she hummed while she worked. I know she must have. I can't hear it."

Davor did not look at him. He was watching the fog, but his hands had gone still on his knees, and I recognized the stillness: the same quality of attention he gave his own ledger each morning, the careful not-interfering of a man who understood exactly what the other person was losing.

"The emotional weight determines the duration," I said, writing it down. "And the memory is permanently lost."

"Permanently," Sevrin agreed. "Your register won't bring it back, Remembrancer. I've read my own entries. They're accurate. They're also dead words on a page. Knowing I once remembered something isn't the same as remembering it."

I recorded the limits precisely. I did not tell him that a ledger could return anything. That would have been a lie, and he had not asked for comfort.

"The difficulty," Sevrin said, refilling my cup before I had finished it, "is choosing what to lose when the list is short."

When you have forty memories that matter, you can bargain. When you have four, every choice is a subtraction you'll feel in your bones." He glanced at Davor. "How many does the Ninth take from you these days?"

"Enough."

"That's a Davor answer." Sevrin shook his head, still smiling, but the smile had pulled tight at the corners. "He's been like this since he was nineteen. You'd think fourteen years would loosen a man's tongue, but no."

"You talk enough for both of us," Davor said.

"Someone has to." Sevrin turned back to me. "There was a night, maybe eight years ago, when the Seventh guttered in a storm and I had to kindle it twice. Davor rode from the Ninth in the dark, through weather that would have killed a less stubborn horse, and arrived at my gate with his lantern and a bottle of something he claimed was wine. It wasn't wine. He stayed three days while I recovered, and he didn't say more than twenty words the whole time." Sevrin paused, and the smile flickered. "He told me a story, though. The second night. Something about a dog he'd had as a boy. I can't remember how it ended."

The silence in the room was not stretched or heavy. It was simply there, a small absence where the ending of a story had been.

"The dog ran off after a cart," Davor said quietly. "It came back three weeks later with a limp and a piece of rope around its neck that someone had tied there. I kept the rope."

Sevrin nodded slowly, and something in his face eased. "Right. You kept the rope. Thank you."

Davor said nothing. He finished his tea and set the cup on the windowsill, and I saw how Kindlers looked after one another: finishing each other's stories, carrying the endings when the teller had given too much away. It was not a grand gesture. It was practical, like trimming a wick before it burned uneven. And it mended almost nothing. Sevrin still did not remember the dog. He had simply been reminded of what he had lost, and Davor had done the reminding because the alternative was letting a friend sit in the gap and feel it widen.

I wrote none of that in my notebook. I wrote only what Sevrin had told me about the memory's weight and the flame's cost, and I let the rest sit where it belonged: in the room, between the three of us, unrecorded.

"The way to Saltreach," Sevrin said after a moment, and his voice had recovered its easy rhythm. "You'll follow the wall road east from here. A day's ride, maybe a little more if the fog thickens. The road is sound. I walk it twice a month to check the wall between my lamp and the Eighth, and the stones are holding."

"The Pale," I said. "How close does it press?"

"Closer every autumn. This year it's been sitting just beyond the lamp's reach for a week now, and it doesn't pull back at dawn the way it used to." He gestured toward the window, where the fog lay in a bank so dense the bay was invisible beyond it. "I can't tell you what it is. I've been

watching it for eleven years, and I know less about it now than I did when I started. It doesn't have a nature I can name. It simply is, and it moves, and the lamps hold it back."

"And if a lamp goes dark?"

Sevrin looked at me, and the easy smile was still there, but it had become something closer to arithmetic: a calculation of how much truth a stranger could carry without dropping it. "You know what happens when a lamp goes dark. Saltreach is what happens."

Davor stood. "We should ride."

"You should." Sevrin walked us down to the yard, where the horses had been watered and stood waiting. The fog beyond the wall had crept closer while we talked, or perhaps I had simply not noticed how near it was when we arrived. It pressed against the light like a held breath, grey and seamless, and I understood for the first time why Sevrin's jokes sounded the way they did. They were not wit. They were a man counting what he had left and trying not to let the tally show.

At the gate, Sevrin clasped Davor's arm again. "Come back when you've found what you're looking for. I'll have a fresh kettle and the same short menu."

"I will," Davor said.

Sevrin turned to me, and the smile warmed into something less guarded. "Take care of him, Remembrancer. He's terrible at asking for help and worse at accepting it, but he'll finish your sentences if you let him."

"I've noticed," I said.

He laughed again, and the sound followed us through the gate and onto the wall road, where the fog was already curling over the stones like something testing its bounds. I looked back once. Sevrin was still standing in the gateway, a copper-skinned figure against the grey stone, and behind him the Seventh Lamp's chamber sat dark and waiting for nightfall, when he would go up and count out small change by the handful, to keep from spending one of the three he had left.

The road bent east, and the fog gathered beyond the wall on our left, thick enough now that I could no longer see where the bay began. Tomorrow we would reach Saltreach. Tomorrow the dead Eighth Lamp would tell us what it still held. But tonight we would camp under the wall with the Pale pressing close enough to touch, and the wall-rider's lantern unlit between us, and the weight of Sevrin's arithmetic settling into my bones like cold.

I pressed my heels to the bay's sides and did not look back again.

A Shape in the Pale

The wall road bent east and the grey bank of the Pale rode beside us all day, never pulling back, never thinning enough to show the water beneath. I kept the bay gelding at a steady walk and said little. The satchel with my notes bumped against my hip with every stride, and the folded paper with Tobin's name pressed against the inside of my wrist where I had tucked it that morning, a habit I had not broken in twenty-seven days.

Davor rode ahead of me on the grey mare, the wall-rider's lantern hanging from his saddle in its leather sling. He had not lit it. The fog was close but not yet on us, and the daylight, even fading, was still light. He had spoken perhaps six sentences since we left the Seventh Lamp at dawn. I had counted them. It was the kind of thing I did when the evidence was thin and the questions had no answers.

The drowned Eighth Lamp came into view as the sun touched the horizon behind us.

Saltreach had been a fishing town of perhaps three hundred people, built against the seaward side of the wall where the stone dropped fifteen feet to a narrow shelf of rock and a small harbor. The Lamp had stood at the wall's edge, its chamber facing the bay. What remained of it now was a blackened stone housing with the iron Lamp-cradle still bolted to the floor, the bowl gone, the wicks long since rotted away. The tide had been higher then, or the storm that came with the fog had pushed the sea over the wall. Salt crusted everything. The housing smelled of brine and old rust.

Davor dismounted and stood at the wall's lip, looking down into what had been the street below. I tied the bay to an iron ring set in the stone and joined him.

The fog lay over Saltreach like a second sea. It filled the streets, lapped at the windows of the lower houses, and curled around the roof of the net-maker's shed where Tobin had worked. Nothing moved in it. No gull called. The only sound was the wet push of the real tide somewhere beneath the grey, a sound that came up through the stone rather than through the air.

"The bowl is gone," I said. My voice came out flatter than I meant it to.

"Storm took it." Davor did not look at me. His gaze was on the Lamp-cradle, his hands still at his sides. "The iron's sound. No cracks."

"And that tells you what."

"That it wasn't the Lamp that failed first." He crouched

and ran a finger along the cradle's inner curve, then held it up. Soot, fine and black, mixed with salt. "It burned. Then it drowned."

I pulled my notebook from the satchel and wrote that down. My fingers were cold and the ink came out thin, but I wrote it anyway. *Burned, then drowned*. The distinction mattered. A Lamp that had never been kindled would show no soot. A Lamp that had been kindled and then gone dark would. But a Lamp that had guttered over days, as Pell's records said this one had, might show exactly this.

"Does this tell you whether someone refused to kindle it?"

Davor straightened. He was tall enough that the fog-light made his face hard to read, the white streak at his temple catching the last of the sun. "No."

"Then we still have no account."

"We have what the Lamp says."

"The Lamp says it burned and then it drowned. That's not the same as saying who did what on the Longest Night."

He turned his head at that, not quite toward me, and I saw his jaw tighten before he spoke. "I know what it isn't."

I closed the notebook. The folded paper with Tobin's name had worked its way out of my cuff and I pushed it back in, a small sharp motion that Davor did not miss. He said nothing about it. He had the grace for that, at least.

The light was failing fast. The fog seemed to rise with the dark, thickening upward, and the wall road behind us

had gone soft at the edges. I could still see the horses, but only just. Davor reached for the wall-rider's lantern and held it out to me.

"If I light this, it costs me a memory, and we see what's close. Nothing more."

"And if we don't?"

"We leave now and come back at dawn."

I took the lantern. It was heavier than it looked, the copper warm from his hand. "I didn't ride two days to turn around at dusk."

"Then we use what daylight is left." He took the lantern back and hung it at his belt, unlit. "A quarter hour. No more."

In the last of the light the wall was solid stone, the Lamp-cradle was iron and soot, and Davor's face was tired in a way I had not seen before. Beyond the parapet the fog pressed close and white and utterly still.

I walked to the wall's seaward edge.

Below me, Saltreach dissolved into the Pale. I could make out the roofline of the chandlery, the leaning post of the harbormaster's signal, the stone steps that led down from the wall to the street where the fishing families had lived. The fog moved over these things without disturbing them, a slow drift that was not wind and not tide but something else, something that had been sitting here for four winters and had never once pulled back.

And then I saw him.

He stood in the street below the net-maker's shed,

about twenty feet from the base of the wall. He was facing the sea, or what had been the sea before the fog took it, and he was perfectly still. His hands hung at his sides. His hair was the same dark brown it had been when he was nineteen, uncut and a little too long over his collar. He wore the same canvas apron he had worn the last morning I saw him, the one with the tear in the left pocket that he had meant to mend.

I knew his hands. I had watched those hands knot twine since he was eight years old.

“Tobin.”

The name came out of me before I knew I was going to speak. It was not loud. It was not a question. It was the word I had written on a folded piece of paper and carried against my wrist for twenty-seven days, and it sounded exactly like that.

He did not turn. He did not move. He stood in the fog as if the fog had always been there and he had always been in it, a figure preserved at the moment the Pale came ashore, Blank and silent and alive.

Davor’s hand closed on my arm. “Sayle.”

“That’s him.”

“I see him.”

“That’s my brother.”

“I know.” His grip tightened. “You can’t go down there.”

The wall had a stair. I had seen it on the plans in the Quill House records, a narrow stone stair cut into the wall’s seaward side, fifteen steps down to the street. It was

about thirty feet to my left. I could see the top of it now, the stone worn smooth by years of fishermen climbing up to tend the Lamp.

"The fog doesn't reach the stair," I said. "The top of it is still clear."

"The top of it. Not the bottom."

"He's twenty feet away."

"He's been twenty feet away for four years. He'll still be there at dawn."

I turned to look at him. The last of the light caught the burn scars on his palms, the old white lines that crossed them like a map of every memory he had given up. His face was set in something that was not quite anger and not quite fear.

"You don't know that," I said. "You don't know if he'll still be there. You don't know what the fog does at night. You don't know if it moves."

"Neither do you."

"I know he's my brother."

I pulled my arm free. It took more force than I expected. Davor let go, but he stepped into my path, putting his body between me and the stair.

"If you go into the Pale," he said, and his voice was very even, "you won't come back with your memory whole. You know that. You've read the records. You've written the records. You know exactly what it does."

"I'm not going into the Pale. I'm going to the bottom of the stair."

"The fog is at the bottom of the stair."

"Then I'll stop before it."

"You won't."

The word landed between us and sat there. He was right. I knew he was right. I had spent four years building a discipline out of evidence and procedure and the exact recording of other people's losses, and I knew, with the part of my mind that still worked like a Remembrancer, that walking down those stairs was the kind of choice that got people killed or Blank or both.

But the part of my mind that was a sister had already made the choice.

Tobin stood in the street below, and he had not moved, and he was not going to move, and I could not stand on the wall and watch him stand there and do nothing. The distinction between evidence and grief, which I had kept so carefully separate for twenty-seven days, collapsed into a single fact: my brother was twenty feet away, and I had not been twenty feet away from him in four years.

I stepped around Davor.

"Merrit."

He used my given name. He had never used my given name. It stopped me for half a breath, and then it didn't.

"Stay with the lantern," I said. "I'll be right back."

I was lying. We both knew I was lying. I did not know if I would be right back. I did not know if the fog would take my memory the moment I touched it, or if it would let me reach him, or if reaching him would matter at all. The

records said nothing about what happened when you walked into the Pale on purpose. No one had ever written that down, because no one who did it had ever come back to write it.

I went down the stair.

The stone was cold and rough under my boots. I counted the steps the way I counted everything. One. Two. Three. The fog thickened as I descended, not rolling toward me but simply present, a white wall that grew more solid with every step. By the seventh step I could no longer see the top of the stair behind me. By the tenth I could no longer see Davor or the lantern or the wall.

By the twelfth I could see Tobin's face.

He was looking at the sea. His eyes were open and his expression was calm, the way it had been when he was mending nets and half his mind was somewhere else, working out a knot or a pattern or a thing he wanted to say but hadn't found the words for yet. His hands were still. His chest rose and fell with breath I could not hear.

I stepped off the last stair and the fog closed around me.

It was cold in a way that had nothing to do with temperature. It was the cold of a room where someone had just stopped speaking. I could feel it on my skin and behind my eyes and in the space where my thoughts were supposed to be, and for one long moment I could not remember why I had come down the stair or what I was supposed to do next.

Then I looked at Tobin and remembered.

I took a step toward him. The fog swirled around my ankles and the ground was wet stone and I could hear Davor shouting something from the wall above, but the words did not reach me. The Pale swallowed sound the way it swallowed memory, and all I could hear was my own breathing and the soft wet push of the tide beneath the street.

Another step. Tobin did not turn. He did not blink. He stood in the fog as if I was not there, as if I had never been there, as if the four years between us had erased not only his memory of me but the possibility that I could ever reach him at all.

I was close enough now to touch him. I raised my hand.

The fog between us was no thicker than a sheet of paper. Beyond it, my brother stood alive and unchanged and utterly lost, and I had no idea whether my hand would find his shoulder or pass through him like smoke or pull him back into a world he no longer knew.

I reached forward anyway.

The Sea He Surrendered

The fog had no texture I could name. It did not press or cling or chill the way mist ought to. It simply was, and where it touched me, the world grew less distinct, and the reasons I had for standing in it grew less distinct with it.

Tobin stood three paces ahead. His canvas apron hung exactly as I remembered it, the tear in the left pocket still shaped like a fishhook, the hem dark with the same salt stain he had earned hauling nets the summer before the town fell. His hands hung at his sides. His face held no expression at all.

I said his name. The fog ate the sound before it reached him.

I took another step and the wall behind me became a suggestion. The stone stair, the iron cradle of the Eighth Lamp, the grey mare waiting above. All of it receding into white. I knew I should care about that. I knew Davor had shouted something from the parapet. But the knowing sat somewhere outside me, a fact that belonged to someone

else's ledger.

Tobin's eyes were open. They did not move when I stepped into his line of sight. I reached for his hand, the one with the rope burn across the knuckles from the day the net-lines had tangled in a squall and he had held them bare-handed rather than let the catch go. The scar was still there. His skin was warm.

"Tobin," I said again, and this time my voice broke on the second syllable, and I hated that, because a Remembrancer's voice is supposed to be steady. "It's Merrit. I came back."

Nothing. No flicker. No turning toward the sound. He stood the way a tree stands, present and entirely indifferent to whether anyone named it.

The fog thickened between one breath and the next. I kept my grip on his hand and tried to remember why I had come down the stair. There had been a reason. A question about a lamp. No, a question about a man who had refused to light one. But the shape of the question kept sliding away from me, and all that remained was the warmth of my brother's palm against mine, and the knowledge that I was supposed to pull him back toward something, some place where the light was, and I could not recall what light was.

I held on.

The white pressed closer, and the pressure was not physical but it was real all the same, a slow erasure that began at the edges of my mind and worked inward. I forgot

the name of the keep where I had spent the last twenty-seven days. I forgot the colour of the ink I preferred. I forgot the sound of my own footsteps on the stone stair I had just descended, and then I forgot the stair itself, and then I forgot that there had ever been anything but the fog and my brother's hand and the slow, quiet certainty that I was standing in a place where nothing was required of me except to stay.

That was the part the stories never captured. The Pale did not hurt. It did not frighten. It simply made the world so gentle that leaving it seemed like an effort no reasonable person would make.

A voice cut through the white. Not close, not distinct enough to parse, but sharp-edged in a way the fog was not. I turned my head and the motion felt like swimming through wool. The voice came again, and this time I caught words.

"...no Kindler burns unrecorded, and you are the only scribe I have."

Davor. His name surfaced through the blank and brought other names with it. Lastlight Keep. The Ninth Lamp. The wall. The reason I was here.

I tried to answer and my throat produced nothing. My hand was still locked around Tobin's. I could not make myself let go.

Then the light came.

It started small, a point of gold no bigger than a candle flame, but it grew the way a memory does when you let

yourself dwell on it, spreading outward in a circle that pushed the fog back stride by stride. The colour was wrong for what Davor had told me of the wall-rider's lantern: a modest copper glow, a circle a few paces wide. This was something else. This was the light of a thing that had been loved for a very long time.

Davor's voice reached me again, and this time it was not a shout. It was quieter, closer, and he was speaking the way a man speaks when he is giving something up and wants a witness.

"I was seven. My father took me up the headland above the bay, the one where the gorse grows right to the cliff's edge, and he said, close your eyes and tell me what you hear."

The light burned brighter.

"I heard it before I saw it. A sound with no edges. A sound that was too big for anything made of land to make. And then I opened my eyes and there it was, all the way to the horizon, grey and green and silver where the sun cut it, and I understood for the first time that the world was larger than anything I had been told."

The fog peeled back in a rush, and I could see the stones at my feet, the base of the wall stair, the iron cradle above me. I could see Tobin's face, still empty, still unchanged. And I could see Davor striding toward me through the white, the lantern cradled in one hand, its flame a column of gold that reached higher than any lamp oil could justify.

His other hand closed on my arm. His grip was not gen-

tle.

“Walk,” he said. “Now.”

I did not let go of Tobin. I could not. My fingers had locked around his the way a child’s fingers lock around a doorframe in a nightmare, and Davor had to pry them open one by one, his scarred palm rough against my knuckles, his face set in a concentration I had never seen on him before.

“He stays,” Davor said, and the words were flat but not cruel. “He has been here four years. He will be here when we come back.”

My hand came free. Tobin did not react. He stood where he had always stood, nineteen years old and unreachable, and the fog closed over him the moment Davor pulled me past the lantern’s circle.

The climb back up the wall stair took everything I had. Names came back to me on the way up, one at a time, like feeling returning to a numbed hand: the keep, the Lamp, my own. The fog had not held me long enough to keep them. My legs shook. My breath came in ragged pulls that caught on the cold stone air. Davor kept one hand on my elbow and the other on the lantern, and he did not speak again until we reached the parapet and the grey mare and the iron cradle of the drowned Eighth Lamp.

He set the lantern on the stones. The flame was already sinking, the gold dimming to amber, the circle shrinking stride by stride. I watched it gutter and knew, with the exacting part of my mind that never quite stopped record-

ing, that the memory was almost spent.

“Write it down,” Davor said.

I stared at him. My hands were still shaking. My satchel was still slung across my body, the strap cutting into my shoulder where he had hauled me up the stair. I had not noticed it until that moment.

“Write it,” he said again. “While it’s still exact. That’s your duty.”

I pulled the satchel open. My private notebook was there, the brown leather one I had meant to fill with evidence against him, and my ink and my pen. I sat down on the cold stone, my back against the parapet, and I wrote what I had heard him shout into the fog. The headland above the bay. The gorse growing to the cliff’s edge. The sound with no edges. The grey and green and silver where the sun cut the water. The world larger than anything he had been told.

My handwriting was uneven. I did not let it stop me.

When I finished, I looked up. Davor was watching me, his dark eyes steady, his scarred palms resting on his knees. The lantern flame was a thread now, barely visible against the white of the fog below the wall.

“What was it?” he asked. “What did I pay?”

He did not remember. He had known, when he set his hands into the bowl, exactly what he was giving up. He had spoken it aloud to make sure someone heard it. And now it was gone, and he was asking me to tell him what he had lost.

I read the words back to him. My voice was steadier than my hands. "You were seven. Your father took you up the headland above the bay. You heard the sea before you saw it. You said it was a sound with no edges, and that when you opened your eyes you understood the world was larger than you had been told."

He listened the way a man listens to a story about someone he has never met. His expression did not change. But his hands, resting on his knees, turned palm-up, and I saw the new burn there, the skin already blistering across the old scars, the mark of a memory given bare-handed to a flame that asked more than a trifle.

"The sea," he said.

"Yes."

He looked at his palms. Then he looked at me. "I always said I would not give that one."

"You gave it."

"I know."

The lantern flame died. The fog pressed against the parapet below us, white and patient and entirely indifferent to what we had paid to escape it. I closed my notebook and tucked it back into the satchel, and the motion felt too small for what had just happened, too ordinary, the kind of thing a Remembrancer did a dozen times a day without thinking.

"Does it hurt?" I asked.

"The burn or the loss?"

"Both."

He flexed his fingers. The motion pulled at the blistered skin and he did not flinch. "The burn heals. The loss does not."

I wanted to ask him what that felt like. Whether the space where the sea had been was a hollow he could still measure, or whether the forgetting was so complete that he could not even name what was missing. But the question sat in my throat and would not come out, because asking it meant acknowledging that he had done this for me, that the account in my notebook was there because I had run into the Pale and he had followed and the cost was written in blisters across his palms and in a silence inside his own mind that he would never fill.

The rain began. It came without warning, the way weather does on the wall, a thin cold drizzle that slicked the stones and darkened the shoulders of Davor's coat. He stood and offered me his hand. The scarred one. The one with the new burn laid over the old.

"The waystation is most of a day's ride," he said. "We go as far as we can tonight, before the weather turns worse."

I took his hand and let him pull me up. The satchel bumped against my hip, and inside it my notebook held the account of a memory he could no longer recognise as his own. I had written it because he asked me to. I had read it back because he needed to know. And neither of those acts returned what he had lost.

He tied the bay's lead rein to the mare's saddle, swung up, and reached down for me. I was in no state to ride

alone, and neither of us pretended otherwise. I settled behind him, my arms around his waist, the satchel pressed between us. The rain picked up, and the fog below the wall stayed white and still, and somewhere inside it my brother stood unchanged, a nineteen-year-old net-maker who did not know my name.

Davor turned the mare west along the wall road, back the way we had come. I rested my forehead against his shoulder, the wool of his coat rough and damp, and I felt the ledger pages bend inside the satchel, the ink still fresh enough to smudge.

His reliance on that account was because of me. Every word I had written was a word he had paid for with a piece of himself, and the record existed only because I had been there to make it. I could not call that hatred. I could not call it anything I had a name for.

The rain came harder. Davor's hand, the scarred one, pressed briefly over mine where they clasped his waist, and then returned to the reins. We rode west into the dark, and the sea he had surrendered was behind us, and the words I had saved it in were the only sea he had left.

One Cot at the Waystation

The waystation squatted against the Lampwall like a stone box someone had forgotten to retrieve. Its door faced inland, away from the sea and the Pale that rode the other side of the wall, and the lintel had settled at an angle that made the whole structure look as though it were leaning into the wind even when the air stood still. Davor pushed the door open with his shoulder, and the hinges gave a sound I felt in my back teeth.

The sleeping room held one cot, a hearth with a stack of split wood beside it, and a single window shuttered from the inside. The cot's frame was iron, its mattress a straw tick covered in wool that had been patched in three places with stitches too large to be professional. I counted the patches because counting was easier than thinking about how close the room's walls were, and how long the storm had been chasing us, and how the rain had found every

seam in my coat during the day's ride from Saltreach.

Davor set his satchel on the floor beside the cot and knelt to build a fire. His movements were slower than usual. The fresh burns across his palms showed pink and raw at the edges when he turned his hands toward the kindling, and I saw him adjust his grip on the flint twice before it struck. He did not ask for help. I did not offer it. The fire caught on the third try, and the room began to smell of birch smoke and wet wool.

"One cot," I said.

"I noticed." Davor straightened and looked at it, then at me. "The waystation architect had strong opinions about solitude."

"Apparently the garrison budget had stronger ones."

He made a sound that was not quite a laugh, and I shrugged off my coat and hung it from a peg near the hearth. The peg had been carved into the shape of a fish, which struck me as optimistic for a building perched on the edge of the Pale. Someone had taken the time to give it scales.

We ate cold rations from Davor's pack, sitting on opposite ends of the cot because there was nowhere else to sit. The fire worked its way into the room's chill, and the rain hammered the roof in gusts that made the shutter rattle. Neither of us mentioned Saltreach. The rescue sat between us like a third person who had not been invited and would not leave.

My satchel rested against the cot's iron leg. My note-

book was inside it, the pages still holding the words he had spoken on the wall. I knew them by heart now. *I was seven. My father took me up the headland above the bay.* I could recite the whole account from memory, every pause and inflection, and none of it would give him back the salt air or the colour of the water or the way his father had stood beside him and let him look. The record preserved the facts. It could not preserve the experience. I had spent four years believing that records were enough, that a ledger kept the truth safe from time and loss, and now I was sitting next to a man who could not remember the sea and holding a written account that mocked both of us with its precision.

“You’re doing it again,” Davor said.

“Doing what.”

“Counting things in your head. Your fingers move.”

I looked down. My right hand had been tapping against my thigh, index finger to thumb, the rhythm I used when I was cataloguing evidence. I made it stop. “Old habit.”

“How many ledgers did you read before you came to Lastlight.”

“Thirty-seven. Not counting Pell’s.”

He nodded as though that confirmed something he had already guessed. The fire popped, and a spark landed on the hearthstone and died. Outside, the storm was building toward something louder.

We took off our boots and set them near the hearth to dry. The cot was narrow enough that two people could not

lie on it without touching, and we both knew it. Davor stretched out first, on the side closer to the door, and I lay down beside him with my back to his chest and a strip of empty straw between us that was maybe four inches wide. The wool blanket was thin and smelled of cedar, and I pulled it up to my shoulder and listened to the rain.

Four inches. I had measured greater distances in ledger margins.

“This cot,” Davor said, his voice dry as kindling, “has no respect for professional boundaries.”

A laugh surprised me before I could stop it, short and genuine, and I felt some of the tension in my shoulders loosen. “It’s a cot. It doesn’t have opinions.”

“It has one opinion, and it’s very clear about it.”

I turned onto my back, and the movement brought my shoulder against his arm. He did not pull away. The fire had burned down to embers, and in the low light I could see his hands resting on the blanket, the old scars crossing his palms in pale lines and the new burns running over them like a second layer of script. My own hands lay beside his, close enough that I could see the ink stains on my first two fingers, the ones that never quite washed out.

His hands had paid for the words on my fingers. That was the transaction, whether I had meant to make it or not.

“I keep trying to remember what the water looked like,” he said quietly. “Not the memory itself. Just the shape of it. The colour. And there’s nothing there. I know I told you

about it. I know you wrote it down. But the place where it was is just gone.”

“It’s not gone,” I said. “It’s in the notebook. Every word you said.”

“That’s a record. That’s not the sea.”

I had no argument for that. I had built my whole profession on the belief that a record was enough, and here was the proof that it was not, lying beside me on a narrow cot in a waystation at the edge of the world.

“There’s a difference,” I said, “between keeping a record and keeping a person.”

“Is there.”

“A record doesn’t change. It sits in a ledger and waits. A person keeps going. Keeps losing things. Keeps needing things the record can’t give back.”

He was quiet for a moment. The shutter banged once and settled. “You’ve been thinking about this.”

“I’ve had a long day.”

Another sound from him, closer to a laugh this time. “So have I.”

I turned onto my side to face him. The four inches between us had become two, and I could feel the warmth of his shoulder through the blanket. His face was closer than I had expected. The white streak at his temple caught the firelight, and the rest of his hair was still damp from the rain.

“Do you want me to read the entry again,” I said. “The sea memory. It’s in the satchel.”

He considered it. I watched him weigh the offer, his jaw shifting slightly, and then he shook his head. "Not tonight."

"All right."

"But stay close enough that I know you're there."

I nodded. The blanket rustled. "I can do that."

Our shoulders touched first, through wool and linen and the damp hem of his shirt. Then his hand found my waist, light at first, as though he were waiting for me to pull back. I did not pull back. I lifted my fingers to his jaw, where the stubble was rough and the skin beneath it was warm from the fire, and I felt him exhale.

The kiss was slow. It began as a question and became an answer before either of us had decided to give one. His mouth was careful, and then it was not. My hand moved from his jaw to the back of his neck, and the blanket slipped, and the space between us stopped being space. His scarred palm pressed against my waist through my shirt, and I could feel the texture of the burns even through the fabric, the old ones smooth and the new ones still raised. I did not pull away from them. I did not want to.

The fire had burned to coals, and the only light in the room was the dull orange glow that picked out the edge of his shoulder and the curve of my wrist. His mouth traced a line from my lips to the corner of my jaw, and my breath came shorter, and I let my fingers slide into his hair where it was still damp at the nape of his neck. The cot creaked under us, and the rain hammered the roof, and for a long

moment there was nothing in the world except the warmth of his body and the taste of woodsmoke and the sound of his breathing mixing with mine.

We stopped. Not because the wanting stopped, but because we both felt the edge of it, the point where stopping would become impossible. His forehead rested against mine, and his hand stayed at my waist, and neither of us spoke. The choice hung in the air between us, acknowledged and set aside, and that was its own kind of intimacy.

After a while, I turned back onto my side, and he let his arm rest across my ribs, and the storm went on battering the waystation while we lay still and listened to it. I did not sleep for a long time. When I finally did, I dreamed of nothing I could remember.

Morning came grey and quiet. The storm had loosened sometime before dawn, and by the time I woke, the rain had thinned to a drizzle that tapped the shutter with a gentler rhythm. Davor was already up, feeding the last of the split wood into the hearth, and the room smelled of fresh smoke and wet stone. My coat had dried near the fire, stiff in the shoulders but warm.

I folded the blanket and laid it at the foot of the cot. The notebook was still in my satchel, the sea memory still waiting on its pages. I did not take it out. The warmth of the cot followed me as I laced my boots and pulled on my coat, and it stayed with me when I stepped outside into the thin rain and found the road passable and the sky beginning to

clear.

Davor was already checking the horses' tack. He looked up when I came out, and something in his expression was different, a door left open that had been closed before. He did not smile, but he met my eyes and held them, and that was enough.

"The road's rideable," he said.

"Then we should go."

We mounted, the bay under me again and steadier than I was, and the waystation shrank behind us until it was only a stone box leaning into the wind. The long way round toward Lastlight Keep stretched ahead, wet and empty, and the warmth of the cot went with us into the morning.

First Snow at the Keep

The first snow came on the forty-fifth day of autumn, and it came early.

I stood beside the Lampwall with my collar turned up and my breath hanging in front of me, watching the flakes dissolve against the stone before they could settle. The horses were stabled. The garrison had banked the hearths. Seventeen days of routine had worn a groove between my room, the Lamp chamber, and the Quill House records, and I had walked it so many times that my feet knew the turns before my mind did.

Davor and I had not spoken of the waystation. We had not spoken of the cot, or the kiss, or the way his hand had settled at my waist with the weight of something that was not quite permission and not quite asking. We recorded. We kindled. We sat through meals in the garrison hall with Captain Oake's soldiers and Brother Rudd's clerks, and Davor passed the salt before I reached for it, and I handed him the ink without being asked, and neither of us said

what any of that meant.

The ledger still held the sea memory. I knew because I had checked, three days after we returned, flipping to the entry in my private notebook and reading it back to myself while Davor slept in the adjoining room. The words were exact. The memory was preserved. And Davor could no more recall the sound of waves than he could recall the taste of stolen plums.

I had not offered to read it to him again. He had not asked.

The snow thickened as the light failed. I pulled my gloves from my satchel and worked my fingers into them, the wool catching on the ink stains that never quite washed out. Below me, the wall dropped forty feet to the rocks and the thin strip of shore where the Pale lay in its usual autumn bank, white and still and patient. It had been pressing closer all season. Sevrin Ault had warned us it no longer pulled back at dawn, and he was right. Each morning I looked out my window and found the fog sitting exactly where it had been the night before, as if it had learned to wait.

I heard Davor's boots on the stone before I saw him. He climbed the Lamp stair with his hands in his coat pockets and his shoulders set against the wind, and when he reached me he stopped a careful arm's length away and looked out at the Pale the way a farmer looks at a cloud that might be rain or might be nothing.

"Hobb says the wick needs trimming before kindling."

His breath steamed. "He wants you to note the condition in the record."

"I'll note it."

"Good."

We stood there while the snow collected in the joins of the masonry. Somewhere below us a garrison soldier called out to another, and the sound carried thin and strange in the cold. Davor's hair was dusted with white, the streak at his temple nearly invisible against the rest of it now.

"It's early," he said.

"The snow?"

"All of it. The snow. The dark. The way the Pale is sitting." He pulled one hand from his pocket and flexed it, the scars pulling pale across the palm. "I don't like how close it's come."

I looked at the fog bank and tried to measure the distance. Fifty feet from the wall's base, perhaps less. It had been farther in the summer. Everyone said so. The garrison veterans talked about it in the hall, comparing this year to years past the way old men compare harvests, and every comparison came out worse.

"The Lamps have held it this long," I said.

"The Lamps hold what they're fed." He put his hand back in his pocket. "And every kindling burns a little shorter than the last one did, if the memory isn't strong enough. You know that. You've been recording it."

I had. Fourteen ledgers from Oswin Pell, and the pattern

was there if you knew how to read it: the hours of protection shrinking by minutes each season, the Kindler reaching deeper into a store of memory that did not replenish. Davor had been kindling for fourteen years. He had given up the sound of the sea, the taste of plums, and more than I had yet read. And the Pale was still coming.

A shout went up from the wall walk below us.

Not a routine call. Not the casual hail of one soldier to another. This was a voice that had forgotten its training, high and raw, and it cut through the snow-muffled air like a blade through cloth.

Davor turned first. I followed his gaze down to the base of the wall, where the fog was no longer sitting fifty feet out.

It was moving.

The Pale rolled forward in a slow, silent surge, white over white over the dark rocks, and I watched it reach the foundation stones and keep coming. It did not stop. It did not pause. It poured through the gap between the wall and the shore the way water pours through a cracked hull, and on the other side, where the ground should have been clear, where the Lamps should have held it back, the fog began to pool.

“That’s not possible.” I heard myself say it the way I would state a fact in a ledger: flat, precise, wrong. “The Lamps are lit. The boundary should hold.”

Davor was already moving toward the Lamp stair. “The boundary is only as wide as the light. And the light is only

as strong as what feeds it.”

I followed him, my boots slipping on the fresh snow. The garrison bell began to ring, three quick strikes and a pause, the signal for a breach. Doors slammed open below us. Captain Oake’s voice carried up from the yard, ordering men to the wall with lanterns, and I heard the clatter of weapons and the scrape of boots on stone.

The Ninth Lamp chamber was warm with the flame’s steady presence when we reached it. Hobb was already there, bent over the great iron cradle with his wick knife in hand, and he did not look up when we came through the door.

“It’s breached,” Davor said.

“I know.” Hobb trimmed the wick with a single clean stroke and wiped the blade on his apron. “I felt the Lamp flicker. Just a breath, but I felt it.”

“How far in?”

“Can’t say yet. The wall walk will have a better view.” He straightened, and I saw that his soot-darkened hands were steady. “You’ll need to kindle early tonight. Give it something strong, or the breach widens.”

Davor nodded once. He crossed to the Lamp and stood before it, and I took my place at the small table where the record book lay open, the ink already mixed, the pen waiting. This was the work. This was what we did. And the Pale was spilling through a gap in the wall’s protection while we did it, and nothing in Pell’s ledgers had prepared me for that.

“The account of the sea,” Davor said quietly. “You still have it.”

It was not a question. “Yes.”

“If I need it tonight, I’ll ask. But I want to try something else first.” He turned his hands over, studying the scars. “Something smaller. A trifle. The first fish I ever landed off a harbour wall, and how it got away from me on the stones. It won’t hold long, but it might hold long enough.”

“And if it doesn’t?”

“Then you read me the sea, and I burn it again, and we see if a memory can be kindled twice from a written record.” His mouth twitched. “I don’t recommend the experiment.”

I opened my mouth to argue, and Hobb set down his wick knife.

He wiped his hands on his apron, slowly, the way he did before he said anything that mattered. Then he crossed to me and pressed something into my palm, closing my fingers around it before I could look.

“Pell left this with me,” he said. “The morning before he fell. He told me to keep it for whoever wrote for Davor next. Said I’d know when the time was right.”

I opened my hand.

It was a key. Small, iron, unadorned except for a notch in the shaft that matched no lock I had seen in the Keep. The metal was warm from Hobb’s grip.

“I held it back,” Hobb said, “because I wasn’t sure you wrote for Davor. Took me these weeks to decide. You

write for him. You don't write against him. That's the difference Pell would have wanted."

I stared at the key. "Where does it fit?"

"The lamp stair. Under the tread where he was found. There's a hollow in the stone." Hobb's voice was unhurried, practical, the same tone he used to explain wick trimming. "I never looked inside. Wasn't meant for me."

The lamp stair was forty steps from where I stood. The tread where Oswin Pell had died, where his body had been found at the foot of the stone steps with a broken neck and the official ruling of an accident, was forty steps away, and beneath it was something Pell had wanted his successor to find.

The breach alarm rang again.

"I can't go now," I said. "The kindling..."

"The kindling can't wait," Hobb agreed. "And the stair won't go anywhere. But you hold onto that key, Remembrancer. Pell meant you to have it. He meant you to look."

I closed my fist around the iron. It was small and cold and heavier than it should have been, the way a key always is when you don't yet know what it opens.

Davor had turned back to the Lamp. He stood with his hands at his sides and his head bowed slightly, and I recognized the stillness: he was choosing the memory. Sorting through what remained of his boyhood for something small enough to burn and strong enough to matter.

I sat down at the table and opened the record book to a

fresh page. I wrote the date, the hour, the condition of the wick as Hobb had trimmed it. I wrote that the Pale had breached the wall below the Ninth Lamp. I wrote that the Kindler intended to offer a memory of a fish lost off a harbour wall.

And beneath the table, where no one could see, I pressed Pell's key against my thigh and felt the shape of it through my skirt, the promise of something Oswin Pell had hidden because the official ledgers were not enough.

The garrison bell kept ringing. The snow kept falling. Davor Kesh stepped toward the Ninth Lamp and reached for the flame with his bare right hand, and the light surged up to meet him, and I wrote down what he told me to write, and I did not look toward the stair.

Not yet.

The night would be long. The breach would need fighting until dawn. Captain Oake's soldiers would walk the wall with lanterns and swords and whatever small memories they could spare to feed the flames, and the Pale would press at the opening like a tongue testing a loose tooth, and somewhere forty steps from where I sat, under a stone tread where a man had died, a hollow waited with whatever Oswin Pell had thought his successor would need.

Davor's hand closed around the flame. He did not cry out. He never did. I watched his shoulders tighten, watched the new burn bloom across the old scars, and I kept the pen moving because that was my duty and because I did not know what else to do with the fear that

was pressing at my own ribs the way the Pale pressed at the wall.

The snow gathered on the window ledge. Hobb fed another trifle to the Lamp's base wick. And I held Pell's key in my left hand and wrote with my right, and waited for the hour when the Lamp could spare me.

The Stair Beneath the Flame

The Lamp burned steady through the first hours of the night, and I wrote down everything Davor fed it.

Hobb moved between the wick tray and the oil shelf without speaking, his soot-darkened fingers finding each tool by touch. The garrison's noise reached us in pieces through the stone. A shout. The clang of something dropped on iron. The particular silence that followed a wave of Pale breaking against the wall and finding no purchase. Then the sounds would resume, a little thinner than before.

Davor stood at the bowl with his right hand still cupped around the new burn, not nursing it so much as keeping it company. He had not looked at me since the kindling. I had written the date, the hour, the memory surrendered, and the fact that the flame arrived fully formed and gave off no heat I could feel. The entry sat in my ledger like a receipt

for a purchase nobody wanted to make.

Near midnight he turned from the bowl and said, "There's a winter from when I first came here. Nineteen years old, and Hobb teaching me to trim a wick with the snow blowing in through the arch, cursing me for a fool every time I cut it crooked, and laughing when I cursed him back."

I wrote it down, every word, and did not look at Hobb while I did it. Davor put his hands into the bowl, and the flame stood up tall.

"It'll hold for hours," he said. "Go."

I looked at Hobb. Hobb looked at the Lamp, then at me, and nodded once. He had known I would go the moment the night gave me room. He had probably known since he put Pell's key in my hand.

I set the ledger on the stool and walked to the stair.

The lamp stair wound down from the Ninth Lamp's chamber in a tight spiral, each tread worn smooth in its center from decades of feet that had climbed toward the flame or descended away from it. The light from the bowl above threw my shadow ahead of me, long and broken across the curve of the wall. I counted the treads as I went. Hobb had said the hollow was under the seventh from the top. I found it and stopped.

The stone looked like every other stone. I knelt anyway and pressed my palm against its surface. Cold. Gritty. The mortar along its edges was older than the mortar around it, a slightly different grey, as if someone had worked it

loose and reset it with care but not with skill.

I fitted Pell's key into the notch in the mortar. The key turned with a sound like a tooth coming free of its socket, and the stone shifted under my fingers.

Behind it, the hollow was no larger than a folded shirt. And inside it, curled tight against the dark, were pages.

I lifted them out. The edges caught the stairwell's light and glinted where the blade had passed through. Clean cuts. Three leaves, maybe four, the parchment stiff with age and the particular dryness of a place that had not seen moisture since the day they were hidden. The hand was Pell's. I had been reading it for six weeks. I would have known it anywhere.

I sat on the stair and began to read.

Pell had written the date at the top of the first leaf: the twenty-seventh of Snowfall, the Longest Night. Below it, in his careful, unhurried script, the words that the Quill House records said did not exist.

The Kindler received word from Saltreach at the seventh hour. The Eighth Lamp was guttering. He did not speak of the message. He took his cloak and the wall-rider's lantern and went down the stair before I could finish asking.

I read the next line, and the next. The noise of the garri-son faded. The cold of the stair seeped through my skirts and into my knees and I did not move.

At Saltreach the Lamp burned low and green, the color of a memory nearly consumed. The Kindler approached the bowl without hesitation. He fed it the face of his mother. The

flame rose and steadied, and for a quarter hour we believed it would hold.

His mother's face. I stopped reading and pressed my thumb against the edge of the page. The parchment was cool. It did not burn me. It was only paper, only ink, only a dead man's record of a living man's loss. I made myself continue.

The Lamp guttered again before the half hour. The Kindler returned to the bowl and fed it the house where he was born, every room and every stair and the smell of tar from the boat shed below it. The flame climbed and held for twelve minutes.

Twelve minutes. I thought of Davor's hand closing around the flame in the Ninth Lamp's bowl not three hours ago, the way his shoulders had tightened, the way he had not cried out. He had done this three times in one night. He had stood at the Eighth Lamp's bowl and watched his mother's face burn away to nothing and then he had gone back and done it again.

At the ninth hour the Lamp failed a third time. The Kindler fed it the name he was called as a boy, the name his mother gave him, and the flame did not rise. The bowl went dark. The Pale came over the wall.

I let the page rest against my knee. The words were still there when I looked again. They did not rearrange themselves into something easier.

The next paragraph began in a different rhythm, quicker, the letters crowding together as if Pell had been

writing against time.

I lost sight of the Kindler in the fog. When I found him again he was carrying a child, a girl of perhaps six, and he had tied a rope from his wrist to the wall stair. He went back into the Pale four times. I counted. He brought out eleven people before the fog thickened past the point where a lantern could cut it. The eleventh was an old woman who wept and struck at him and would not be comforted. He carried her anyway.

Eleven people. The official account said Davor Kesh had refused to kindle. The Quill House records said the pages had been lost. But Pell had written it all down, and someone had cut those pages from the ledger with a blade, and hidden them in a hollow under the stair where a dead man had once fallen.

I read the count again. Eleven. I knew, without needing to check, that Tobin's name was not among them. He was still standing in the Pale below the net-maker's shed, twenty feet from the base of the wall, where I had left him four years ago and where I had found him again eighteen days past. Davor had carried eleven people out of Saltreach, and my brother was not one of them, and I had spent four years hating a man who had paid more that night than anyone had asked of him.

The proof I had wanted was in my hands. I took no pleasure in it. It sat in my lap like a stone I had picked up expecting to throw and now could not put down.

At the foot of the last page, below the final entry, Pell

had written a short note in a hand that was smaller than the rest, as if he had been running out of room or time.

I have asked the Kindler what he remembers of this night, and he cannot tell me. The memories are gone. What remains is the record, and the record must not be lost. Whoever reads this, keep it. The truth of what happened here belongs to someone who can still carry it.

Beneath it were a few more lines, smaller still and crowded against the edge of the leaf, that I could not make out by the light of the stairwell. I would read them properly when there was time, when the breach was over, when I could sit alone and let the words do whatever they were going to do to me. For now I had what I came for. I had the pages, and the pages had the truth, and the truth was nothing like I had imagined.

I climbed the stair with the pages pressed against my chest. The light from the bowl grew stronger as I rose, and when I stepped back into the chamber Hobb was trimming a wick and Davor was still at the bowl, his back to me, his shoulders set in the way of a man who had been standing for hours and intended to stand for hours more.

“You found them,” Hobb said. It was not a question.

“I found them.”

Davor turned. His face was grey with what the night had cost, the kind of exhaustion that went past tired into something that looked like illness. The white streak at his temple had spread, or seemed to, in the uncertain light. He looked at the pages in my hands and said nothing.

“They’re Pell’s,” I said. “The missing account. The Longest Night.”

He nodded, once, as if I had confirmed something he had been waiting four years to hear.

“Read it,” he said.

I sat on the stool by the Lamp. Hobb stayed at the wick tray, his hands still, his attention on us both. I began to read aloud.

I read Pell’s date and his first line and his second. I read the part about the message from Saltreach and the lantern and the stair. When I reached the moment where Davor fed his mother’s face to the Eighth Lamp, my voice did not catch. I did not let it. I read the words as if they were any other record, any other entry in any other ledger, because Davor was listening and he deserved to hear it told plainly, without the ornament of my horror.

He stood motionless while I read. When I reached the twelve minutes the flame had held, he closed his eyes. When I read the part about the name he was called as a boy, the name his mother gave him, he opened them again and looked at the Lamp’s bowl as if it might have something to say to him.

I read the rescue. The child. The four trips into the fog. The eleven people. The old woman who wept and struck at him.

When I finished, the silence in the chamber was not the silence of the garrison fighting below. It was the silence of a room where someone had just heard the shape of their

own absence.

Davor said, "Read it again."

I looked at him. His expression was careful, the way a man's expression is careful when he is listening for something he knows he will not find.

"The part about what I surrendered," he said. "Read that part again."

I turned back to the page and found the lines. "He fed it the face of his mother. The flame rose and steadied, and for a quarter hour we believed it would hold." I paused. "The Lamp guttered again before the half hour. The Kindler returned to the bowl and fed it the house where he was born, every room and every stair and the smell of tar from the boat shed below it."

I read the third part too, the name he was called as a boy, and when I finished Davor was still looking at the bowl, and I knew he was trying to find something inside himself that matched the words and finding only the space where it had been.

"I don't remember her face," he said.

I did not tell him that the record would be enough. I did not tell him that the words could bring her back. I had written down his memory of the sea, and I had read it back to him, and he had listened to it like a story about someone else. The pages in my hands were proof of what he had done, but they were not proof he could feel. They were a receipt for a purchase that could not be returned.

"I know," I said. "Do you want me to keep reading?"

He shook his head. Then he turned back to the bowl, and the flame rose a little, as if the Lamp had been waiting for his attention.

I stayed on the stool with the pages in my lap. The cut edges caught the light every time I shifted, sharp and clean and deliberate. Someone had removed them from Pell's ledger on purpose. Someone had hidden them in a hollow under a stair where a man had later died. The pages proved that Davor had kindled three times and carried eleven people to safety, but they left no name. They did not say who had cut them or why anyone would hide a rescue.

The question sat in the room with us, unasked, while the garrison fought below and the snow kept falling and the Lamp burned on a memory of a winter when an old man had taught a boy of nineteen to trim a wick.

By the time the sky began to grey beyond the window ledge, the sounds from below had changed. The shouting had stopped. The clang of iron had given way to the slower rhythm of men hauling something heavy, and then to voices that were tired rather than afraid. Hobb went to the window and looked out and came back to the wick tray without comment, but his shoulders had dropped half an inch, and I knew the breach was held.

Davor stepped away from the bowl. The flame stayed steady behind him. He looked at the pages in my hands and then at me, and I saw him make a decision that cost him nothing because the memory of the cost was already

gone.

“Keep them,” he said.

I folded the pages carefully along their cut edges and tucked them inside my own ledger, between the entry for the night’s kindling and the blank pages that waited for whatever came next. They fit as if they had been cut to the same size, which they had. Pell had made his ledgers to a standard, and the standard had not changed.

“I’ll keep them,” I said.

The snow had stopped. The light through the window was the colour of water. Somewhere below us, in the garrison rooms, someone was laughing with the particular relief of having survived something that should have killed them. I listened to it and thought of the lines at the foot of Pell’s last page, still unread, and the question the pages had not answered.

Who cuts proof of a rescue out of a ledger and hides it under a stair? Who benefits from a story in which the Kindler refused to kindle, when the truth is that he gave everything and the Lamp died anyway?

I did not know yet. But I had Pell’s pages, and I had Pell’s key, and I had a ledger of my own to fill. The answer was somewhere in the keep, in the records, in the gaps between what people said and what they had done. I would find it. That was my work. It was the only work I had left.

What the Ledger Holds

I brought Pell's pages into Davor's room when the keep had gone quiet. The bell in the low tower had rung the ninth hour an hour past, and the garrison had settled into the particular silence of exhaustion after a fight. Through the narrow window slit I could hear the wind working at the stone, but the snow had stopped. The Ninth Lamp burned steady in its chamber above us, fed an hour ago with a memory I had written down and left to Hobb's watching, and its heatless light came down the stairwell and through the slit above the door. I had not yet grown used to a flame that gave nothing back.

Davor sat on the edge of the narrow cot, his right hand wrapped in clean linen where Hobb had dressed the fresh burn. The dressing was already spotting through. He looked up when I closed the door, and his expression was the one he wore when he was too tired to be guarded and not tired enough to sleep.

"You have the look," he said.

“What look.”

“The one that means you’ve found something I won’t like.”

I sat down on the stool beside his writing table and laid my ledger flat, the cut pages tucked inside the front cover. The stool was the only other place to sit; the room held the cot, the table, and a peg where his cloak hung still damp from the breach. I had been in this room every night since I arrived, but I had never sat on the stool. I had always stood.

“There’s a note at the foot of Pell’s pages,” I said. “I didn’t read it aloud on the stair. I wanted to read it properly first.”

Davor watched me open the ledger. The pages were thinner than the rest of the book, worn at the edges where Pell had handled them. I found the last leaf and turned it to the note written in Pell’s small, upright hand. The ink was brown with age but perfectly legible.

“The Lamp died fully fed,” I read. “The wick was trimmed, the oil was full, and the flame went out as if someone had pinched it between two fingers. I have examined the mechanism. There is no flaw in the iron, no crack in the bowl. The Pale grows each year by exactly as much as the Lamps burn. See the First Ledger. I can offer no explanation.”

I set the page down on the table between us. Davor did not pick it up. He sat with his bandaged hand resting on his knee and his gaze on the words as if they were a diagno-

sis he had been expecting.

“Fully fed,” he said. “He wrote that.”

“He wrote it as a warning, not an answer. He didn’t know why the Eighth failed any more than we do.”

“But he knew it wasn’t for lack of fuel.”

“Yes.”

Davor was quiet for a moment. Then he reached across and turned the page back, past the note, past the account of the eleven he carried out, to the place where Pell had recorded the three kindlings. His finger stopped on the line I had read to him on the stair: *the Kindler surrendered his mother’s face.*

“You wrote the sea memory down,” he said. “After Saltreach. On the wall.”

“I wrote what you told me. The color of the water, the way the light broke on it, the salt on your lips after. That you were seven.”

“Read it.”

I turned to the pages of my own notebook I had copied into the ledger. The entry was fresh, the ink still black where Pell’s had gone brown. I read him the account of a boy standing on a headland above a bay he had never seen before, the water stretching out to a horizon that made no sense to him, the sound of it filling his ears until he understood that the world was larger than the village he had been born in. I read the part about the gulls crying and the way his father had laughed at his silence and said nothing, just let him look.

When I finished, Davor was staring at the page.

"That's good," he said. "That's exactly how it was."

"You don't remember it."

"No. But I know it's right. The way you know a story about yourself that someone told you when you were small. You don't remember the event, but you remember being told." He lifted his hand from the page and flexed the fingers of his bandaged palm, once, as if testing the pain. "What do you think a record owes the person it describes?"

I considered the question longer than he had probably expected. The light from the stair stood perfectly still on the wall, not flickering, not guttering, in a way that still unsettled me.

"Accuracy," I said. "A record owes accuracy. Not comfort. If it tries to comfort, it stops being a record and becomes a story someone told themselves to make the facts easier."

"And has accuracy made the account easier to bear?"

I looked at the pages spread between us, Pell's brown ink and my black, the list of what Davor had given and the note about the Lamp that died anyway.

"No," I said. "It hasn't."

He nodded, once, as if I had confirmed something he already knew. Then he closed the ledger gently, with his unbandaged hand, and set it aside on the table next to my satchel.

"Will you stay?" he asked.

The question landed differently than it would have a night ago, or an hour ago. It was not a request for company, or for a witness to his next kindling. It was a question with a door in it, and the door was open, and walking through it was a choice we would both have to make.

“Yes,” I said. “But not because of the pages. And not because of the breach. I want to be clear about that.”

“I understand.”

“Do you want me near?”

“I asked, didn’t I.”

I stood up from the stool. The room was small enough that one step brought me to the edge of the cot. Davor looked up at me, and the white streak at his temple caught the Lamp light, and I thought of all the memories that mark had cost him and how many of them I had written down in ink that would outlast his own mind.

I bent and kissed him.

It was a careful kiss, a question asked with breath instead of words. He answered it by lifting his good hand to my jaw, his fingers light against the hinge of bone below my ear. We stayed like that for a moment, neither of us moving to deepen it, both of us checking.

I pulled back. “If you want to stop, tell me. I mean it.”

“I know you mean it.” His voice was steady. “I don’t want to stop.”

“Neither do I.”

I reached for the tie of his tunic, a plain knot at the throat, and worked it loose. The fabric was wool, rough

under my fingers, still carrying the cold of the night he had spent on the Lampwall. He let me draw it over his head, lifting his bandaged hand carefully to clear the sleeve. Beneath it he wore a linen undershirt, and beneath that the skin of his shoulders was warm and smelled of the herbs Hobb used in his burn salve, sharp and green.

He reached for the buttons at the back of my dress. His left hand was sure; his right he kept cupped, the bandage a white shape in the low light. I turned so he could work the buttons free, and I felt each one give way like a small decision confirmed. The dress slid from my shoulders. I stepped out of it and hung it over the back of the stool, because the peg was taken and I could not bear to leave it on the floor.

When I turned back, Davor was watching me with an expression I had not seen on him before. Not guarded, not wry. Open, in a way that cost him something.

I sat down beside him on the cot. The straw mattress shifted under our weight. I took his bandaged hand in both of mine, cradling it, and he let me. The linen was rough against my palms.

“Does it hurt?”

“Yes. But it always hurts. I’m used to it.”

“You shouldn’t have to be.”

He didn’t answer that. He leaned forward and kissed me again, and this time the kiss was not careful. It was deliberate. His mouth was warm, and he tasted faintly of the tea Hobb had pressed on him after the dressing change, bitter

and a little sweet. I put my hand on the back of his neck and felt the tension there, the knotted muscle, the way he held himself even now.

We lay back together on the narrow cot. It was too small for two people; we had to fit ourselves together carefully, my hip against his, his arm under my head. The Lamp light played across the ceiling, steady and heatless, and I thought of the sea memory, the boy on the headland who no longer existed anywhere except in my ledger.

He touched my collarbone with his unbandaged hand, tracing the line of it. "Show me," he said. "Tell me what you want."

I told him. Not in the clipped sentences I used for arguments, but plainly, the way I would have recorded a fact I needed to get right. He listened, and he followed my words, and when his bandaged hand faltered I took it and guided it to a place where the pressure would not hurt him. We learned each other's pace in the half-dark, my breath and his, the small sounds the cot made, the way he said my name once, just once, in a voice I had never heard him use.

Afterward we lay still, my head on his shoulder, his good hand resting on my hip. The Lamp had not flickered. The wind had not risen. The keep held its silence around us like a held breath.

I did not ask him what he was thinking. I did not tell him that I was already composing the ledger entry in my head, the one that would record this night and everything it

meant, knowing that the record would outlast his memory of it if he ever had to kindle again.

I got up after a while and retrieved my dress from the stool. I dressed without hurry, aware of him watching me from the cot. When I had fastened the last button, I picked up my ledger from the table and opened it. Pell's pages were still tucked inside the front cover, the cut edges aligned with the spine.

I closed the ledger and set it on the table beside the cot, within reach of where Davor lay. Not hidden. Not locked away.

"You're leaving it," he said.

"I'm leaving it where we can both find it. Tomorrow you'll kindle again, and I'll write down what you give. Whatever it is." I pulled my cloak from the peg and swung it around my shoulders. "The pages stay with the record. That's where they belong."

He said nothing. But his hand, the bandaged one, moved to rest on the ledger's cover, and stayed there.

I let myself out and closed the door quietly behind me. The passage was cold, and my breath showed in the Lamp light from the stairwell. I stood for a moment with my palm flat against the stone, feeling the keep settle around me, the weight of all its records and all its silences.

Then I walked back to my own room, and I did not look behind me, and I did not let myself wonder what memory the flame would take next.

Boots and Laughter

The week passed in small repetitions, and I learned them the way I had once learned the tides at Saltreach: by watching, by marking the intervals, by trusting that the pattern would hold until it didn't.

Davor woke before the bell every morning and went up the lamp stair to check the flame. I heard his door open and close, heard his footsteps on the stone treads, and by the time I had dressed and braided my hair he was back in the passage with a report of three words or fewer: "Steady," usually, or "Wick's holding," or once, after a night of wind that shook the shutters, "No change." I wrote each one into the ledger, not because the law required it but because the record had become a habit I no longer questioned. He watched me do it and said nothing, but on the third morning I found my chair pulled out from the table before I reached for it, and on the fourth morning there was a clean cup waiting beside the inkpot.

I left his reading copy of the ledger on the table outside

his door each night, open to the day's entry, and in the morning it was gone and a fresh sheet of notes waited in its place, weighted with the smooth stone he kept for the purpose. The notes were never long. *Hobb says the north wick is wearing faster than the south. I think the cold does it. Or: Captain Oake wants to know if you take sugar. I told her I didn't know. I did take sugar, and I told her so myself, and the next note read: She says you take sugar. Now I know.*

We traded remarks across the passage the way the garrison soldiers traded cards: quick, dry, worth nothing and everything. I came out of my room one morning to find him examining the sole of his left boot, holding it up to the Lamp light from the stairwell with the expression of a man cataloguing a museum artifact.

"That boot is older than some of the garrison," I said.

"It's older than Hobb," he said, not looking up. "Hobb asked me to stop wearing them three winters ago. I told him I'd stop when they stopped."

"They haven't stopped."

"They haven't." He turned the boot so the light caught the worn place where the leather had gone thin as paper. "I can feel the cold of the stone through the sole. It's like walking barefoot, but slower."

I laughed. I didn't mean to, and I couldn't have said why that particular dry observation undid me when so much else had not, but the sound came out before I could catch it, bright and sudden in the close stone passage. Davor lowered the boot and looked at me with an expression I had

not seen on him before: not surprise, exactly, but something nearer to recognition, as if he had found a thing he had forgotten he was looking for.

“What?” I said.

“Nothing.” He set the boot down. “I just hadn’t heard that in daylight before.”

“Heard what?”

He didn’t answer, and I didn’t press him. The moment sat between us in the passage, small and private, and I wrote none of it down because it was not a kindling and it belonged to both of us. For a little while, that was enough.

The days stayed cold. Frost bloomed on the inside of the window in my room, and I took to wearing my cloak at the writing table. Hobb brought up extra blankets and complained about the price of tallow. The garrison drilled in the yard below my window, their breath rising in white plumes, and Captain Oake’s voice carried up through the stone: *Again. Slower. If you can’t do it slow you can’t do it fast.* I found myself listening for Davor’s footsteps on the stair at odd hours, and when I heard them I noticed that my shoulders dropped a fraction, that the quill stopped scratching, that some part of me had been waiting without my permission.

On the fifth evening he brought his ledger to my room instead of leaving notes. “I want to check something,” he said, standing in the doorway. “The entry from your first night. The one about the plums.”

I found it for him. He read it standing, one hand braced

on the table, and when he finished he closed the book and stood very still.

“None of it,” he said. “Not the garden wall, not the tree, not the seventh plum in my pocket. I read it and it is some other boy.”

“That’s how it works.”

“I know how it works.” His voice came out flatter than he meant it to, and he corrected himself with a small shake of his head. “I know. I just hadn’t checked in a while.”

He left the ledger with me and went back to his room, and I sat at the table for a long time after, watching the flame from the lamp stair throw its steady light across the passage floor. The light did not flicker. It never flickered. That was the thing about the Ninth Lamp: it burned with a constancy that made you forget what fed it, until something reminded you.

On the evening of the seventh day, the Lamp needed feeding early.

Hobb came down from the lamp chamber with the word, his face set in the particular gravity he wore when the wick was running low. “It’ll hold another hour, maybe two,” he said, standing in the passage where Davor and I had both come out at the sound of his tread. “But not the night.”

Davor nodded. “I’ll come up.”

I fetched the ledger and my ink and followed him up the lamp stair. The chamber was cold, as it always was, and the flame sat steady in its iron cradle, pale gold at the crown

and deepening to blue where it met the wick. Davor stood before it for a moment, his bandaged right hand resting at his side. The burn from the breach night had healed enough that he no longer winced when he moved it, but the dressing was still fresh; Hobb changed it every morning, and I had learned to read the state of the healing by how tightly Hobb's mouth set when he worked.

"What will you give it?" I asked. The question was part of the ritual. The law required that I ask, and that he answer, and that I record both.

He didn't answer right away. He looked at the flame, and then at me, and then at the flame again. "Not what's left of my boyhood," he said. "Not yet."

He had told me, the night after the breach, how little of it there was. The sea was gone, and Hobb's lesson, and everything Saltreach had cost him. A handful of his childhood remained, and I understood without his saying it that he was rationing it the way a besieged garrison rations grain.

"Something small, then," I said.

"Something new." He turned his hands over, palms up, the scars catching the lamp light in ridges of silvered tissue. "There's a morning. Earlier this week. I was holding a boot."

My hand stopped above the page. I looked up at him, and he met my eyes with a steadiness that told me he knew exactly what he was offering.

"You laughed," he said. "I held it up and you laughed,

and the sound did something to the cold in the passage. I don't know how to describe it. It wasn't a long laugh, and it wasn't at anything important, but it was the first time I'd heard it in this keep, and I wanted to keep it." He paused. "That's the memory. That's what I'm giving."

The law required that I write it down in his words. I bent my head and did it, keeping my hand steady because the record would not wait for me to feel what I was feeling. *The morning she laughed at my boots. I held it up and she laughed, and the sound was warm in the cold passage, and I wanted to keep it.*

"Done," I said, and my voice sounded exactly as it always did.

Davor stepped toward the Lamp. He unwound the bandage from his right hand, letting the linen fall to the stone floor, and the fresh scar showed pink and tight across his palm. He reached into the flame.

The fire took him the way it always took him: without violence, without sound, the pale gold light licking up around his wrist as if welcoming something home. His face went still. Not pained. Just absent, the way a face goes absent when the person behind it has stepped briefly out of the room. I had seen it before, and I knew the stillness would pass, and I knew what would not pass with it.

The flame burned higher. Not by much; a hand's span, perhaps, a brightening that anyone who had not spent seven weeks watching this Lamp would have missed. But I saw it, and Hobb saw it, and Hobb's eyebrows drew

together in a way that told me he was doing sums in his head and not liking the result.

"That's longer than a trifle," Hobb said quietly.

"I know," I said.

"A good deal longer."

"I know."

Davor withdrew his hand. The flame settled back to its ordinary height, steady and golden and utterly indifferent. He looked at his palm for a moment, flexing the fingers, and then he looked at me.

"What was it?" he asked.

The question landed in my chest and stayed there. I had known it was coming. The law required that I record, and the law required that he forget, and the space between those two requirements was where I did my work.

"The morning you held up your boot," I said. "You said the sole was worn through and you could feel the cold of the stone. I laughed. You said you hadn't heard it in daylight before."

He searched my face. I watched him try to find the morning in my description, reaching back through the week the way he had reached for the taste of the plums, and I watched him fail.

"I said that?"

"You did."

"I don't remember it." He said it plainly, without self-pity, the way he might have said *I don't remember where I put my gloves*. But his hands stayed open at his sides, and

his breathing had gone shallow in a way I recognized from the night he burned the memory of Hobb's lesson. The body keeps a record the mind cannot access. I had written that in my own notebook, weeks ago, and now I was watching it prove itself again.

"Do you want me to read the entry?" I asked.

He nodded. I read it back to him, the words I had written in his voice: *The morning she laughed at my boots. I held it up and she laughed, and the sound was warm in the cold passage, and I wanted to keep it.*

When I finished, the silence in the lamp chamber was the kind of silence that has its own weight. Hobb had stepped back to the doorway and was very carefully not looking at either of us.

"That's it," Davor said. "That's what I gave."

"Yes."

"And it's gone."

"Yes."

He turned his bare hand over, studying the scar as if it might offer something the rest of him could not. "I believe you," he said. "I believe the record. But I can't find it. I can see the passage, and the boot, and you standing in the doorway, but the laugh isn't there. There's just a space where something used to be."

I closed the ledger. The sound of the cover settling was louder than I expected. "That's what the record is for."

"I know." He looked at me, and his expression was the same one he had worn that morning in the passage: not

surprise, but recognition, as if he was finding something he had known once and misplaced. “Keep it close,” he said. “The ledger. Keep it where I can find it.”

“I will.”

“Because I won’t remember to ask. I won’t remember that there’s something to ask about.”

“I know that too.”

He nodded once, and then he bent to pick up the discarded bandage from the floor. The movement was practical and untheatrical, the same motion he made every time he dressed a wound or trimmed a wick, and something about its ordinariness undid me more than any grand gesture could have. He was already accommodating the loss. He was already folding it into the routine of the keep, the way he folded everything, because the Lamp would need feeding again tomorrow and the day after and the day after that, and there was no room in the rhythm for standing still.

I left the ledger open on the table beside the lamp stair. The entry sat face-up, the ink still fresh enough to smudge if I touched it. The joke had become evidence. I remembered it and he did not, and that imbalance was not a temporary condition I could correct by reading aloud. It was the shape of everything ahead of us.

Hobb caught my eye as I passed him in the doorway. He said nothing, but the look he gave me was the look of a man who had been tending the Ninth Lamp for fourteen years and had watched its Kindler forget more things than

anyone had bothered to count. I held his gaze for a moment, and then I walked down the stair into the cold passage, where the frost was already forming on the inside of the stones and the light from the lamp chamber followed me only as far as the third tread.

The Sealed Book

I found the discrepancy on the morning of the sixty-first day, eight days after Davor forgot the sound of my laugh. The Wall Archive kept a register of every key drawn from its board, and the register showed Brother Rudd had drawn the key to the lamp-stair recess twice in the past week, at hours when no Remembrancer was present. The entries were neat, his own hand, and each one noted a purpose that had nothing to do with that key.

I checked the entries against my own notes. The sealed First Ledger beneath the Ninth Lamp sat in a recess cut under the lamp stair, opened only by the proctor's key and at the Kindler's formal request. Davor had made no such request. I would have known. I wrote down everything he surrendered to the flame, and a request to open the foundational record was not a thing he could ask without my presence. The law required it.

I closed the register and went to find Juna Oake.

The garrison captain was in the yard, overseeing the

stacking of firewood against the keep's eastern wall. She stood with her back to the wind, her cropped fair hair damp from the morning's sleet, and she listened to my account without interrupting. When I finished, she wiped her nose on the back of her glove and said, "You want me there because a captain makes it harder for him to call it informal."

"Yes."

"And if there's nothing to find?"

"Then I owe Brother Rudd an apology and you lost ten minutes of firewood duty."

She grinned, the expression pulling at the bridge of her broken nose. "Ten minutes I'll never get back. The wood will simply have to stack itself." She raised her voice to the nearest soldier. "Tomas, if this pile isn't chest-high when I return, you're explaining the delay to the cook."

The man touched his brow. Juna fell into step beside me, and we crossed the yard toward the lamp stair.

The stairwell was colder than the yard had been. The stones held a chill that the season's thin light never reached, and the treads were worn smooth at their centers from fourteen years of Davor's boots and Hobb's and, before them, whoever had climbed to the Ninth Lamp when the keep was new. Our footsteps echoed in the narrow space, Juna's heavier than mine, and the sound bounced off the walls in a way that made it hard to tell whether the noise ahead of us was our own or someone else's.

It was not our own.

We came around the first turn and saw him.

Brother Rudd knelt on the stair below the ninth tread, where a hollow had been cut into the stone. The recess was open. The First Ledger was in his hands, its binding thick with age, its seal a disc of wax the colour of old bone. A small flame burned in a copper dish at his knee, the kind of flame a proctor might use to melt wax for a new seal. But he was not melting wax. He held one corner of the book over the dish, and the leather was already blackening, the edges of the leaves beneath it curling inward like a fist closing.

Juna moved before I could speak. She crossed the distance in three strides and knocked the dish aside with her boot. The flame spilled across the stone and guttered out, leaving a dark smear and the smell of hot copper. Brother Rudd lurched backward, his thin shoulders hitting the wall, and I stepped past him and pulled the book clear of the mess. The leather cover was warm under my palms. Scorched, not burned through. The pages beneath the seal were whole.

“Brother Rudd,” Juna said. Her voice carried the flat, carrying quality she used on the yard. “Explain yourself.”

He straightened his robe with both hands, a gesture so precise it looked like prayer. The iron ring of keys still hung at his belt. “Captain Oake. Remembrancer Sayle. You find me at a difficult task.”

“We find you burning a sealed record,” I said.

“A record I am charged to protect.” He spoke quietly, each word placed as if on a tray. “The seal was compromised. I was containing the damage before the text could be misread.”

“Misread by whom?”

He did not answer. His gaze moved to the book in my hands and then to the scorched wax and then back to my face, and his expression was the same careful, deferential mask he had worn since the day I arrived. I had taken it for courtesy once. Now it looked like a door someone had locked from the other side.

“The seal is intact,” I said. “Scorched, not broken. You hadn’t opened it yet.”

“A precaution.”

“You were burning it unopened.”

His hands folded in front of him. “The Remembrancer is understandably distressed. The First Ledger is a restricted text. Its contents are not meant for general circulation. If the seal had failed, the proper course was to destroy the volume and request a replacement from the Quill House archives in the capital.”

“That isn’t an answer,” Juna said.

“It is the procedure, Captain.”

“Procedure,” I repeated. “The register shows you drew the recess key twice this week at hours when no Remembrancer was working. Davor made no request to open it. The law says the Kindler must request it, and the Kindler’s Remembrancer must be present. You opened the

recess alone.”

Brother Rudd’s gaze did not waver. “The proctor holds a key for the security of the records, not merely for their distribution. Routine inspection of sealed materials falls within my remit.”

“Routine inspection doesn’t end in a fire.”

“The seal was compromised.”

“You said that already,” Juna said. She had positioned herself between Brother Rudd and the stair, her broad shoulders blocking the only way up. “You haven’t said how.”

He looked at her, and then at me, and something in his expression shifted. Not fear. Not guilt. Something closer to exhaustion, the particular weariness of a man who had been holding a door shut for a long time and had just felt the hinges give.

“The volume is old,” he said. “The wax was brittle. When I examined it this morning, I found cracks radiating from the seal’s edge. A damaged seal is as good as no seal at all. The proper course is destruction and replacement.”

“The proper course,” I said, “would have been to notify the Kindler and his Remembrancer before you struck a flame.”

He said nothing.

“Who were you protecting?” I asked.

“The record.”

“From whom?”

The question hung in the cold air of the stairwell.

Brother Rudd's hands remained folded, his thin fingers interlaced, and the keys at his belt caught the grey light from the arrow slit above us. He did not look away from me, but he did not answer, either.

Juna shifted her weight. "Merrit."

I looked at her.

"He's not going to say it here." She nudged the overturned copper dish with her boot. "Let's move this somewhere with a door that locks."

I tucked the First Ledger against my chest. The leather was still warm, and the scorched wax left a faint smudge on my sleeve. "The Wall Archive," I said. "The table where I've been working."

Brother Rudd inclined his head, a small, formal motion. "As the Remembrancer wishes."

"It isn't a wish," I said. "It's a record that someone tried to burn. That makes it evidence."

We walked him through the passage to the archive, Juna at his left shoulder and me a step behind. The keep was quiet. The garrison had not yet changed watch, and the only sound was our boots on the stone and the faint, distant hiss of the Ninth Lamp burning in its chamber overhead. Brother Rudd moved like a man who had walked these corridors a thousand times and knew every uneven stone, and he did not try to run. I had not expected him to. A proctor who burned a book and fled would have been a simpler problem. A proctor who burned a book and then stood waiting to explain himself was something else

entirely.

The archive table was exactly as I had left it: Pell's ledgers stacked at one corner, my notes beside them, the register open to the page I had marked. I set the First Ledger in the center of the table, away from the inkpot, and I did not open it. The seal held. Whatever was inside had not been touched.

Juna closed the archive door and stood with her back against it. "Sit," she said to Brother Rudd.

He sat. He placed his hands on the table, palms down, and the keys clinked softly against the wood.

"You opened the recess without the Kindler's request," I said. "You lit a flame. You held the book over it. You told us the seal was compromised, but you didn't send for the Kindler or for me. You didn't notify the garrison. You went to the recess alone, at an hour when the stair is empty, and you tried to burn the foundational record of the Ninth Lamp." I paused. "Why fire?"

Brother Rudd looked at his hands. The knuckles were bony, the skin dry from the cold. "Fire is clean."

"That isn't what I asked."

"I know what you asked."

We waited. The silence stretched, and I did not fill it. Juna's weight shifted against the door, a creak of leather and the faint rasp of her glove on the handle, and still Brother Rudd did not speak. The lamp on the archive wall burned steadily, its flame a small, steady tongue of gold that threw our shadows long across the flagged floor.

“You believe I was destroying evidence,” he said at last. “You believe I was protecting someone, or myself, from what the First Ledger contains. You may be right. You may also be wrong. The distinction does not matter, because I cannot give you the answer you want.”

“Cannot,” I said, “or will not?”

“The result is the same.”

Juna made a low sound in her throat, not quite a laugh. “You’re going to have to do better than that, Brother.”

He looked at her, and for the first time his careful expression showed a crack. Not anger. Something closer to sorrow, the particular grief of a man who had spent his life tending records and had just been caught setting one alight. “I have served the Quill House for twenty-two years, Captain. I have preserved accounts of every kindling the Ninth Lamp has ever known. I wrote for Davor Kesh myself in the weeks between Oswin Pell’s death and Remembrancer Sayle’s arrival. I do not destroy records lightly.”

“But you do destroy them,” I said.

“I did what I believed was necessary.”

“For whose protection?”

He folded his hands again. The keys lay still against his belt. “I cannot answer that.”

“Then you’ll spend the night in the garrison cells,” Juna said. She pushed off the door and stood with her arms crossed, her broken nose and her cropped hair and her loud, unhesitating voice filling the small room. “Maybe

tomorrow you'll remember how."

Brother Rudd rose without being told. He smoothed his robe once, a habitual motion, and then he walked to the door and waited for Juna to open it. She looked at me over his head, one eyebrow raised, asking without words whether I had more to press him with. I shook my head. He had given me procedure when I asked for motive, and silence when I asked again, and I did not yet know whether the silence meant fear of exposure or a conviction that no one else should decide what the record said.

Juna opened the door. A garrison soldier was passing in the corridor, and she called him by name and gave the order. Brother Rudd walked between them without resistance, his thin frame upright, his keys still swinging at his belt. The sound of his footsteps faded down the passage toward the yard.

Juna lingered in the doorway. "You all right?"

"I'm holding a book someone tried to burn."

"That's a yes or a no, Sayle."

I looked at the First Ledger on the table. The scorched wax had cooled to a dull, cracked grey. The leather was darker where the flame had kissed it, a patch the size of my palm, but the binding held and the pages beneath were whole. "I don't know what it is."

"Fair enough." She pulled the door nearly shut, leaving a hand's width of light from the corridor. "I'll post a watch on the archive tonight. If he wants to explain himself in the morning, the offer stands."

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet. I just locked up a Quill House proc-tor on your word. If that book turns out to be blank, we’re both explaining ourselves to the capital.” She grinned, the expression tired but genuine. “Get some rest. You look like you haven’t slept in a week.”

She left. The door closed with a soft, final sound, and I was alone in the archive with the scorched book and the register and the fourteen volumes of Oswin Pell’s ledgers that had started all of this.

I sat down at the table. The First Ledger lay in front of me, its seal unbroken, its cover bearing the mark of a flame that had not been allowed to finish its work. I did not open it. Opening it without the Kindler present would violate the same law Brother Rudd had tried to circumvent, and I was not ready to decide whether that law still served the people it claimed to protect.

The lamp on the wall burned steadily. Somewhere overhead, Davor was in the Ninth Lamp chamber, his bandaged hand resting on his knee, his memory of my laughter gone where all the other memories had gone. I had promised him an honest record. The record was sitting on the table in front of me, scorched and silent, and the man who had tried to destroy it was spending the night in a garrison cell with nothing to read but the stones.

I pulled my notebook toward me and wrote down everything that had happened, beginning with the register entry and ending with the sound of Brother Rudd’s footsteps fad-

ing down the corridor. When I finished, I blotted the ink and closed the cover and set the notebook beside the First Ledger, two accounts waiting to be read.

The archive was very quiet. I sat with my hands flat on the table and waited to see what the silence would become.

Ash Beneath the Ink

Brother Rudd did not speak when they brought him up from the cells. I heard his footsteps in the corridor before I saw him: a measured tread, slower than it had been the day before, and the scrape of a soldier's boot beside him. Juna had sent Tomas. I recognized the rhythm of his walk from the garrison yard, heavier on the left foot.

The door opened, and Brother Rudd entered the Wall Archive with his hands folded in front of him. He was not bound. Juna had not ordered it, and I had not asked. His keys were gone from his belt. Someone had taken them in the night, and the absence made his tunic look loose at the hip, as though a necessary weight had been lifted and left him unbalanced.

He sat in the chair I had placed opposite mine. The First Ledger lay on the table between us, its cover blackened at the corner, the seal still whole. I had not touched it since the night before. The scorch mark on the leather was shaped like a hand that had tried to close and been

stopped.

Juna stood by the door with her arms crossed. She had positioned herself so that Brother Rudd could not see her without turning, and she did not speak when he sat down. Her presence was a fact I was grateful for, solid as the stone behind her.

“I have questions about Oswin Pell’s death,” I said.

Brother Rudd looked at the ledger. “The procedures governing access to sealed records are set out in the Quill House charter, articles eleven through fourteen. I have explained this. The seal on that volume was compromised, and I acted to contain the damage. A Remembrancer of your experience will understand that preservation sometimes requires intervention.”

“I did not ask about the seal.”

His gaze stayed on the book. The corner of his mouth moved, a small tightening that was not quite a frown. I waited. Juna waited. The lamp on the archive table burned without sound, and the flame did not flicker.

“Oswin Pell fell on the lamp stair,” Brother Rudd said. “The death was ruled an accident.”

“I know what the ruling says. I am asking you what happened.”

He lifted his eyes to mine. They were pale, the color of water in a shallow dish, and they gave me nothing I could read. “A ruling is a finding of fact. It is not an invitation to reopen an inquiry.”

“I am not reopening an inquiry. I am asking a man who

was there.”

The silence that followed was the longest I had sat through since I arrived at Lastlight Keep. It filled the archive like water rising, and I let it. Brother Rudd’s hands remained folded, and he did not fidget or look away, but something in the set of his shoulders shifted, a fraction of an inch, as though the air in the room had grown heavier.

Juna spoke from the doorway. “The pages could have been lost for good. That book was a breath from ash when we found you.”

Brother Rudd closed his eyes. When he opened them, he looked at me and not at the ledger.

“I pushed him,” he said.

I heard the words plainly. I made myself hear them, the three syllables and the pause before them and the quiet that came after. Juna’s arms stayed crossed, but I saw her weight shift onto her back foot, the way a soldier braces for something that has already landed.

“Say it again,” I said. “All of it.”

“I pushed Oswin Pell down the lamp stair. He fell. The fall killed him.”

“Why?”

Brother Rudd looked at the scorched ledger. “He found something in the records. Something he intended to make public. I believed then that the knowledge would do more harm than the act of suppressing it. I believed I was protecting the Lamps.”

“And now?”

“Now I am sitting here, and the book is on the table, and you are asking me questions I cannot answer without telling you that I killed a man to keep a truth quiet. I do not know what I believe.”

I pulled my notebook toward me and wrote it down. Not a summary. The words he had spoken, as close to verbatim as my hand could manage while my pulse beat hard in my fingertips. I wrote the admission and the reason he gave and the uncertainty at the end. Juna watched me write. Brother Rudd watched the lamp.

“Captain Oake,” I said, and my voice came out steady in a way I did not feel, “you have heard what he said.”

“I have.”

“Then I am entering it into the record.”

Juna nodded once. She stepped forward and took Brother Rudd by the arm, not roughly, but with the finality of a door closing. He rose without resistance. At the threshold he paused and looked back at me, and for a moment I thought he would speak again, but he only inclined his head, a small formal gesture, and then Tomas was walking him down the corridor and the footsteps faded into the keep’s deeper quiet.

I sat alone with the ledger. Juna had gone to see Brother Rudd secured, and the archive was still. My notebook lay open beside the scorched volume, the ink drying on the page. I had what Pell’s death had been asking for since before I came: a confession, a name, a reason. It did not feel like an ending.

The door opened again. Davor stepped in, and the cold from the lamp stair came with him, the particular chill of stone that had been frozen and thawed a thousand times. He was wearing his old grey tunic, and the bandage on his right palm was fresh. Hobb must have changed it. He closed the door and stood beside the table, looking at the First Ledger.

“Brother Rudd confessed,” I said. “He pushed Pell. He admitted it in front of Juna, and I wrote it down.”

Davor pulled out the chair beside mine and sat. “I passed them in the corridor. He did not look at me.”

“He said he was protecting the Lamps. That Pell found something he meant to make public, and Rudd decided the knowledge would do harm.”

“What knowledge?”

I put my hand on the ledger’s cover. The leather was cool, and the scorched corner crumbled a little under my fingers, a fine black dust that clung to the whorls of my skin. “He did not say. But Pell’s note directed us here.”

The seal was wax, old and brittle, impressed with the Quill House mark: a quill crossed with a lamp wick. I had seen the same mark on my commission, on the charter hanging in the records room, on the spine of every volume Pell had filled. I broke it with my thumb. The wax split cleanly, and the halves fell onto the table.

I opened the cover.

The first page was parchment, thinner than the paper in Pell’s ledgers, and the ink was brown with age. The hand

was not Pell's. It was older, more angular, the letters slanted hard to the right as though the writer had been hurrying toward something he did not want to reach. I read the opening lines in silence, and then I began to read aloud, because Davor was beside me and the words belonged to him as much as to anyone.

“Let this record stand as the first and binding account of the covenant between the Kindler and the flame. What follows was learned in the founding of the First Lamp, and it is true of every Lamp kindled after. The fire takes what is given. The memory burns, and the burning feeds the light. But what is burned is not destroyed. It rises. It gathers. It returns as the fog that lies upon the water and presses at the wall.”

I stopped. Davor's hand was on the table, the bandaged one, and he had not moved it since I started reading. I looked at him, and he was looking at the page as though it were a door he had just recognized.

“Keep going,” he said.

“The Lamps hold back the Pale because the Pale is made of what the Lamps have burned. Each kindling adds to the fog. Each surrendered memory swells it. The covenant is a circle: the fire consumes the past, the past becomes the threat, the fire is needed to hold the threat at bay. There is no ending this cycle except to let the Lamps go dark, and the darkness would be total.”

The lamp on the table burned. I heard it now, the small steady hiss of oil meeting wick, and I thought of every kin-

dling I had recorded, every memory Davor had spoken aloud and let the flame take. His mother's face. The house where he was born. His boyhood name. The sea at seven years old. My laugh.

"It feeds on what we give it," Davor said. His voice was dry, almost conversational. "Every night I burn something, and every night the fog gets a little thicker."

"That is what it says."

"Then Pell knew. And Rudd knew. And the Quill House has known since the First Lamp was lit."

I turned the page. The text continued, a dense account of the founding, the measurements of the First Lamp's flame, the early records of the fog's behavior. There was nothing in it about how to stop the cycle. There was nothing about how to get a memory back. The words were a diagnosis without a treatment, a description of a wound that could not be closed.

Davor reached across and turned the page back to the one I had read. His fingers rested on the paragraph about the circle, the covenant, the darkness that would be total. "I have been feeding the thing I am trying to hold back."

"You have been keeping the Ninth Lamp burning. That is what a Kindler does."

"It is what the covenant requires. It does not mean it is right."

I did not have an answer. I closed the ledger and looked at the back board, where the last few leaves had fused together in the heat of Brother Rudd's fire. The edges were

black and brittle, and the pages were sealed to each other, unreadable for now. I would have to ease them apart, a hair's breadth at a time, with a blade and a steady hand and more patience than I had ever given to any record.

"I am going to make a copy," I said. "The whole book, every page that is still legible. Pell wanted someone to keep the record. I am keeping it."

Davor looked at me. His dark eyes held the lamp's light, and the white streak at his temple caught it too, a thin bright line against the black. "You think the words will help."

"I think not having them would be worse."

He nodded, a small movement, and then he pushed his chair back and stood. "I should check the Lamp. Hobb trimmed the wick at dusk, but it has been burning high the last few nights."

"Davor."

He stopped at the door.

"I will read you the rest when the copy is done. Whatever is in these pages, you will know it."

He did not turn. "I know. You are a Remembrancer." And then he was gone, and the door closed, and the lamp on the table burned on.

I opened my notebook to a fresh page and began the fair copy. The first line of the First Ledger was the same line I had read aloud, and I wrote it carefully, matching the old scribe's slant as closely as I could: *Let this record stand as the first and binding account of the covenant between the*

Kindler and the flame. The ink was wet on the page, black and glossy, and I watched it dry to a duller black, the color of ash beneath the shine.

I set the fused leaves aside at the edge of the table, where the lamp's heat would not reach them. They would need a different kind of care, and I would give it when I was ready. For now, the words I could read were enough. They were not a cure. They were not a promise. They were a record, and I was its keeper, and the fog was still out there beyond the wall, growing thicker with every lamp that burned against it.

An Offer in the Archive

Eight days is not a long time. Eight days is long enough to copy thirty-seven pages in a steady hand, to learn the exact weight of a silence at a bedside, to watch a man you love reach for a memory that is no longer there and cover the reach with a question about the weather.

I learned the weather. I learned that Davor asked about the wind direction when he could not remember why he had walked into a room, and that he held his bandaged right hand slightly curled, as though cupping something fragile, and that he never once asked me to stop reading the entries back to him even when the reading made him quiet for hours afterward. I learned that the garrison cells had a particular smell, stone and old straw and the iron tang of the door hinges, and that Juna Oake posted two soldiers on Brother Rudd's door at all hours and rotated them every six. I learned that the First Ledger's words did not soften with rereading. They sat on the archive table in their scorched binding and said the same thing every time

I looked at them: every kindling feeds the fog.

On the afternoon of the seventieth day, I was in the Wall Archive with my copy open beside the original, matching a line about the covenant's third provision, when I heard boots in the passage. Not the garrison's rhythm. A heavier tread, and more of them.

I set down my pen and stood.

Juna met me at the archive door. Her face was set in the particular way that meant she had already decided to be angry later and practical now. "The High Remembrancer is in the yard," she said. "With six House guards."

"Perpetua Lorne."

"The same. She's asking for Brother Rudd."

I closed the ledger copy and left it beside the original. The scorched cover caught the lamp's glow, blackened at the corner where Brother Rudd's flame had licked it. "She knows."

"She knows enough to bring six guards." Juna fell into step beside me. "I can stall her."

"You cannot stall Perpetua Lorne."

The yard was bright with the thin sunlight of late autumn, the kind that sharpens shadows without warming anything. Perpetua Lorne stood near the well with her hands folded in front of her, immaculate in Quill House robes the colour of undyed wool, her silver hair pulled back in its familiar twist. The six House guards behind her wore the grey tabards I remembered from my training years, and they stood at a stillness that was not garrison

ease but something closer to a held breath.

“Remembrancer Sayle,” Lorne said when she saw me. Her voice carried the same measured courtesy it had always carried, in the lecture hall and the examination room and the quiet office where she had told me, five years ago, that I had passed my final review. “I understand Brother Rudd is being held here.”

“He confessed to the murder of Oswin Pell,” I said. “Captain Oake has kept him secured.”

“Then I am grateful for the captain’s care.” Lorne’s gaze moved to Juna. “A proctor of the Quill House answers to the House, not to a garrison. I am here to take custody of him.”

Juna’s jaw worked. “He pushed a man down a stair.”

“And the House will address that. But it will address it under House authority.” Lorne’s tone did not sharpen. It did not need to. “I have the charter writ, Captain. You may read it if you wish.”

One of the guards produced a folded document. Juna took it, read it, and handed it back with the careful neutrality of someone who had already counted the swords in the yard and found the arithmetic unfavourable. “I want my objection on record.”

“It is noted,” Lorne said. “Now. I would speak with Remembrancer Sayle alone.”

Juna looked at me. I nodded. She turned and walked toward the garrison, her boots loud on the stone, and the House guards fanned out to the yard’s edges, and then it

was only Lorne and me and the thin autumn light between us.

“The archive,” Lorne said. It was not a question.

I led her inside.

The Wall Archive smelled of old paper and lamp oil and the particular dust that gathers on books that are read often. The First Ledger lay on the table where I had left it, my fair copy open beside it, the fused last leaves set apart at the table’s edge. Lorne stopped just inside the doorway and looked at the table for a long moment.

“You opened it,” she said.

“Brother Rudd tried to burn it. I read it aloud to the Kindler.”

“And now you are copying it.”

“The words deserve to survive.”

Lorne crossed to the table but did not sit. She touched the scorched corner of the First Ledger’s binding with one finger, lightly, the way she had once touched a student’s flawed transcription before explaining the error. “I cut the Saltreach pages from Oswin Pell’s eleventh ledger.”

I had half known it. I had half known it since the day I first saw the clean blade-cut edges in the eleventh ledger and measured them against the House’s discipline. Knowing and hearing were different things. I set my hand on the table’s edge and let the wood’s grain press into my palm.

“I concealed them,” Lorne continued, “because I believe the Lamps buy Orrowmere twenty years at the cost of its

eventual fall. If we let them go dark now, the kingdom falls this winter.”

“The First Ledger says the burnings make the Pale grow.”

“Yes.”

“So every kindling brings the fall closer.”

“Yes.” She withdrew her hand from the book. “Twenty years of lighted windows and children who grow up and fields that can be harvested, against the fog now. That is the choice the House has made. That is the choice I have made.”

I thought of Davor in the Lamp chamber, his bandaged palm still healing, his memory of the sea gone to fuel a lantern that had saved my life. I thought of the eleven people he had carried out of Saltreach. I thought of Tobin standing Blank in the fog, and of the fact that no choice I made now would reach backward and undo the moment the Eighth Lamp drowned.

“Does the order to preserve the Lamps,” I said, “require preserving a lie about their price?”

Lorne met my gaze. She did not look away, and she did not offer me the comfort of an answer that would let me stop asking. “I taught you to keep the record.”

“You taught me to keep it whole.”

“I taught you to choose what the public is allowed to read.” She moved to the other side of the table, so that the two ledgers lay between us. “The House will need a new High Remembrancer. Not tomorrow. But soon enough.

You have proven that you will follow a record wherever it leads, and that is a quality the House requires. You have also proven that you understand what a record can do when it falls into the wrong hands. That is a quality the House cannot do without.”

I did not speak.

“I am offering you my seat, Merrit. When the time comes. You would have the authority to protect the Lamps by controlling what is known about them. You would decide what the public is allowed to read.”

The offer hung in the quiet air of the archive. I looked at the First Ledger’s scorched binding, at my own copy with its thirty-seven pages of careful script, at the fused last leaves that still held words I had not yet recovered. The lamp on the table flickered, and the flame’s small movement sent a ripple of shadow across Lorne’s folded hands.

“You want me to keep the truth from being used to bring the Lamps down,” I said.

“I want you to keep the Lamps burning.”

“By hiding what they cost.”

“By choosing when the cost is told, and to whom.” She straightened. “The offer remains open. I will not press you for an answer today. But I will tell you that the discipline I taught you has never been only about preservation. It has always been about judgment. You know that. You have always known that.”

She turned and walked to the archive door. At the threshold she paused and looked back, not at me but at the

table, at the two books lying open side by side.

“Keep copying,” she said. “Whatever you decide, the record should be whole.”

Then she was gone, to the guest rooms over the gatehouse that Hobb had been told to air, and the House guards’ boots sounded in the passage, and I was alone in the archive with the smell of old paper and the First Ledger’s impossible words and an offer that sat beside the scorched book like a third volume I had not yet opened.

I stood at the table for a long time. Then I picked up my pen. The ink had dried on the nib, and I wiped it clean with the cloth I kept for that purpose, and I sat down and opened my copy to the next blank page. Davor was at the Lamp. He had heard none of it. I did not yet know what I would tell him, or how much longer our shared memories would last, or whether the offer Lorne had left behind was a gift or a trap or something that could be both at once.

The lamp burned steady. I dipped the pen and began the next line.

The Empty Place Beside Her

Four days had done little to soften the offer Lorne left behind. I turned it over in my mind the way I turned the pages of the First Ledger during the daylight hours: carefully, one edge at a time, watching for what might tear. The copy had grown to forty-three pages. The fused last leaves still sat apart on the archive table, waiting for the right tool and the right hour. Lorne had not left. She had taken the guest rooms over the gatehouse, with her guards and her prisoner lodged below her, and she waited with the patience of a woman who had never been refused. Davor and I had spoken of small things since she made her offer, the wick Hobb replaced, the frost that silvered the yard stones each morning, the garrison's new roster Juna pinned beside the mess-hall door. We had not spoken of what Lorne told me in the archive. I had needed the four days to be certain of my answer, and to be certain I could

give it without asking him to make it for me.

The ninth hour of evening had come and gone when I climbed the lamp stair. Hobb was at the wick-box, bent over a coil of fresh cord with the concentration of a man who had done the same work fourteen years and still refused to hurry it. He glanced up as I passed, nodded once, and said nothing. The door to Davor's room stood a hand's-width open. I pushed it wider and found him at the small table beneath the single shelf that held his spare tunic and the tin cup he used for water. His ledger lay open in front of him. His right hand rested beside it, the fresh bandage from that evening's kindling still clean, the linen wrapped tight across the palm where the new burn sat beneath.

"I need to tell you what Lorne said," I told him.

He did not lift his hand from the table. "Four days. I was starting to think you'd decided against it."

"I needed to decide something else first."

"Then sit." He pulled the room's single stool from under the table and set it beside his own. "You look like you've been arguing with yourself and losing."

I sat. The stool was hard and the room was small, the cot pushed against the far wall, the peg where his cloak hung, the lamp stair's glow bleeding under the door from the chamber beyond. I could hear the Ninth Lamp burning, a low steady sound like wind through a narrow place, and I let it fill the pause while I found the start.

"Perpetua Lorne cut the pages from Pell's eleventh

ledger,” I said. “She admitted it in the archive. She cut them to conceal what happened at Saltreach, that you kindled three times, that you surrendered your mother’s face and your father’s house and your boyhood name, and that the Eighth Lamp still failed. She cut them because the truth about the Lamps feeding the Pale would undo the kingdom’s faith in the beacon chain, and she believes the Lamps buy us twenty years at the cost of the eventual fall. Letting them go dark, she said, means Orrowmere falls this winter.”

Davor’s wrapped hand moved, the fingers curling inward. He did not speak.

“She offered me the seat of High Remembrancer,” I went on. “When she steps down. The condition was that I protect the Lamps by controlling what the public is permitted to read.”

He turned his head. The white streak at his temple caught the lamp light from the stair, and his expression was the one he wore when a wick burned unevenly and he had not yet decided whether to trim it or let it settle. “And what did you tell her?”

“I told her no.”

The word sat in the small room. I had said it to her that afternoon, across the archive table, and she had inclined her head as though I had told her the hour. For four days before that I had only kept copying, page after page, while the refusal hardened into something I could hold.

“I told her I would not take a seat whose condition is

concealing the cost of the Lamps. I am a Remembrancer. The record is the work. If I start cutting pages to protect the kingdom's faith, I stop being what I am, and the record stops being true." I looked down at my hands. The ink stains on my first two fingers had deepened over the four days, the skin gone blue-grey at the creases. "That is not a claim that I know how to save anyone. It is only a choice about what I will not do."

Davor was quiet for a long moment. Then he said, "You turned down the highest seat in the Quill House."

"I did."

"For the record."

"For what the record is supposed to be."

He looked at me, and the look was not surprise, it was recognition, the kind that passes between two people who have each made a choice the other understands without needing it explained. His wrapped hand uncurled. He reached across the table and set his fingers over mine, the linen rough against my knuckles, the warmth of his palm bleeding through the bandage.

"I've been checking my ledger more often," he said.

"I noticed."

"The entries still read like my own words. But I don't remember writing some of them. The ones from the early years, I know the facts, but the feeling behind them is gone. It's like reading a report someone else filed."

I turned my hand under his and laced my fingers through the unwrapped ones. "May I see?"

He hesitated. His gaze dropped to the open page, and for a moment I thought he would close the book and set it back on the shelf. Then he drew it toward himself instead, and his free hand found the entry he wanted, and he read aloud.

“Year five, the eleventh of Thaw. Fed the Lamp the memory of my mother singing while she worked the dough. The song was in the old dialect. I cannot recall the words now, only the rhythm of her hands. The Lamp burned seven hours.”

He stopped. His thumb moved across the ink as if testing whether the letters still belonged to him.

“Year nine,” he read, “the third of Harvest. Fed the Lamp the memory of the first horse I broke myself, a bay mare with a white star. Her name is gone. I remember the smell of the stable and the way she leaned into the bit when she trusted me. Four hours.”

He closed the ledger. His hand stayed flat on the cover.

“I don’t know how many losses it takes,” he said. “To be alive but no longer myself. I cannot measure it. The ledger tells me what I gave, but it cannot tell me what I have left, because I do not know what I started with.” His voice was even, the dry register he used when a fact was too sharp to dress in anything plainer. “I might already be past the point where I would recognize the man I was at nineteen. I have no way to check.”

I did not tell him he was still himself. He had not asked for reassurance, and I would not offer him a comfort I

could not prove. Instead I said, “A written account can preserve what you said. It cannot preserve the person who remembers saying it.”

“I know.”

“I will keep recording. I will read back what you give. But I cannot promise the record will anchor you. I do not think anything can.”

“I know that too.” He turned his hand under mine so our palms met, his scarred and bandaged, mine ink-stained and cold. “I am not asking for a promise.”

We sat like that, our hands tangled on the table, the lamp stair humming its low note behind the door. The room was no larger than it had been when I entered, but the walls felt closer, the air warmer, the space between us filled with something that had been building across the seventy-four days since I first climbed these stairs with a commission in my satchel and a folded note against my wrist. I had come to Lastlight Keep to find proof that he let Saltreach fall. I had found instead a man who gave eleven people his mother’s face and his father’s house and his own name, and who sat now in a room beside a flame that fed on everything he had been, checking a ledger to see if he was still there.

“I love you,” I said. The words were plain. I did not dress them in anything grander, because nothing grander was true.

He looked at me, and his dark eyes held the same quiet that came over him before a kindling, the stillness of a man

who had learned to measure what he was about to lose. “I love you,” he said. “And the next kindling may take a memory that holds you. Or more of whatever I use to know you when you walk into the room.”

“I know.”

“It will not stop me from kindling.”

“I know that too.”

His fingers tightened on mine. He did not offer a promise, and I did not ask for one. We sat in the small domestic quiet of his room, the cot, the shelf, the tin cup, the cloak on its peg, and held what we had, which was now, which was this, which was no protection from the Lamp or the Pale or the ledger’s slow emptying of the man beside me.

A knock at the door broke the stillness. Three sharp raps, the pattern Juna used when the message could not wait.

“Come,” Davor said.

Juna pushed the door open. She was still in her garrison coat, the wool smelling of frost and horse, and she held a folded paper in her hand. Her face was the face she wore when she had already decided what the news meant and was only delivering the fact.

“Hand-copied message from the Seventh Lamp’s garrison,” she said. “Rider brought it in ten minutes ago, and he has been a day and a half on the road. The Pale surged there, higher than it has in eleven years. Sevrin held it alone. The message says the fog pressed the wall for six

hours and nearly overtopped it. It does not say what holding it cost him." She held out the paper. "Their captain is asking for whatever help can be spared."

Davor took the message. He read it without unfolding it fully, his eyes moving down the cramped script. Then he set it on the table beside his ledger and stood.

"We ride at first light," he said.

Juna nodded once and left, her boots sharp on the stone as she descended the lamp stair.

I looked at the message on the table. The paper was cheap, the ink smudged in one corner where the rider's hand had brushed it before it dried. Sevrin Ault, who had kindled the Seventh Lamp for eleven years and knew every stone of the wall between his post and Saltreach. Sevrin, who had three memories left that would hold a night, the last time I saw him, and had since spent six hours holding back a surge that nearly took his Lamp.

"I'll ready the horses," I said.

Davor turned from the peg where he had been reaching for his cloak. "You'll bring your ledger."

It was not a question.

"Yes," I said. "I'll bring my ledger."

He pulled the cloak around his shoulders. The bandaged hand disappeared into the fold of wool, and the other hand found the door frame, and for a moment he stood looking back at the small room, the cot, the shelf, the tin cup, the table where his ledger lay closed beside the message from the Seventh Lamp.

“First light,” he said.

I picked up the folded paper and tucked it into my satchel beside my notes and Pell’s key and the forty-three pages of the fair copy that was still not finished. The lamp on the stair burned steady behind the door, and I listened to it while Davor went down ahead of me, and I thought of the road to the Seventh Lamp, and of Sevrin standing alone at his post with whatever he had left and the Pale clawing at his wall, and of the man ahead of me on the stair who had already given more than anyone had the right to ask and would give more tomorrow because there was no one else to give it.

I closed Davor’s door and followed him down.

A Smile at the Seventh

The landward road ran longer than the coastal track, and Davor pushed the horses harder than was wise this late in the season. I felt the bay gelding's ribs working beneath me through every mile, his breath coming in steady white plumes that the mist swallowed as soon as they left his nostrils. The Pale had not pulled back at dawn. Wherever the road climbed near enough to the wall to show the bay, it stood against the seaward stones in a white bank as high as the parapet. What lay on the road itself was only weather, a grey sea-mist that turned the trees on either side into suggestions of themselves, but the further west we rode the closer the white pressed behind it, until I could taste the salt-tang of it on my tongue and the ink on my fingers began to feel like a thin defence against something that had already decided how far it meant to reach.

Davor rode ahead of me with his cloak pulled high and his ledger strapped to the saddle where he could reach it. He had not spoken since we broke our night's halt at a

drover's barn, a few cold hours taken for the horses' sake, and I had not pressed him. The quiet between us was not the silence of a quarrel. It was the silence of two people carrying the same weight and knowing that talking would not lighten it. At the gate the morning before, Juna had laid out the arithmetic in the flat voice she used for facts she could not change: Hobb and the garrison's trifles would buy the Ninth Lamp an hour apiece, and an hour was not nothing, but it was also not enough if the surge ran long. Davor had nodded once and swung into the saddle, and I had followed because following was what the commission required and what I would have done anyway.

The Seventh Lamp's gate appeared out of the fog as a dark square in a darker wall, and the garrison soldier who met us did not ask for our names. He looked at Davor's hands and then at my satchel and then he stepped aside, and the way he did it told me everything the ride had not prepared me to hear.

"Where is he?" Davor asked.

"Lamp chamber." The soldier's voice was hoarse, and he did not meet Davor's eyes. "He's been there since it ended. Wouldn't let us move him."

Davor dismounted and handed the grey mare's reins to the soldier without another word. I slid down from the bay and my legs held, barely, and I followed him through the gate and up the stone stair with my satchel banging against my hip and the fog pressing in behind us like a door closing.

The Seventh Lamp's chamber was smaller than the Ninth's, and the Lamp itself sat on a plinth of grey stone that had been worn smooth by years of hands bracing against it. The flame burned steady in its bowl, a pale gold that looked thin after what it had been asked to do, and beside it, on a low stool with his back to the wall and his hands folded in his lap, sat Sevrin Ault.

He was smiling.

I had seen that smile before, in the fog below the wall at Saltreach, on a face I had known all my life. It was the smile of someone who was not looking at anything in particular and would not look at anything in particular again. Sevrin's copper skin was unmarked, his tunic was clean, someone had combed his hair back from his forehead, and the person who had done all those things was not inside him anymore. The Lamp had taken the last of him, and what remained was sitting on a stool with its hands folded and its mouth curved in an expression that meant nothing at all.

Davor stopped in the doorway. His breath went still in his chest, and I heard it stop because I was standing close enough to hear the absence of it, and then he crossed the chamber in three strides and crouched in front of the stool and said Sevrin's name.

Sevrin turned his head toward the sound. The smile did not change. His gaze passed over Davor's face the way light passes over a wall, registering nothing, attaching to nothing, and then it drifted back to the middle distance

and stayed there. He had burned his last memory to hold the surge; the soldier had called that much after us on the stair. Three memories that would hold a night, the last time I stood in this chamber, and now there were none, and the surge had held.

“Sevrin.” Davor said it again, lower, and his scarred hands closed on the edge of the stool but did not touch the man sitting on it. “It’s Davor. I came.”

Nothing. The smile stayed where it was, easy and untroubled and terrible, and I thought of Tobin standing in the fog below the net-maker’s shed with the same emptied face and the same stillness in his hands. The Pale had taken Tobin’s remembered life all at once, in a single night when the Eighth Lamp failed and the fog rolled over the wall and swallowed everything he had ever been. Sevrin had fed his to the flame one piece at a time across eleven years of kindling, and the end was the same. A person still breathing, still standing where his memories should be, and nothing left behind his eyes.

I set my satchel on the plinth and opened it. My fingers found the ledger by touch, the worn leather familiar against my ink-stained fingertips, and I drew it out and held it in both hands while Davor remained crouched before the stool with his head bowed and his shoulders set in a line I recognised. It was the line of a man who had learned to carry what could not be put down.

“Do you want me to read an entry?” I asked.

He did not answer at first. Then he straightened and

turned and took the ledger from my hands, and he opened it himself. His thumb traced down the page, finding the lines I had written in his own plain words, the record of memories he no longer possessed and could not check against anything inside himself. He read for a long moment, and I watched his face, and what I saw there was not grief and not fear but something closer to recognition. Sevrin's fate was close enough to count. Davor knew it. He had known it before we rode out, and now he was looking at the proof.

He closed the ledger and gave it back to me. "Don't soften them."

"I wasn't going to."

"I know." He looked at Sevrin again, and his voice stayed level, but the stillness in his breathing had not eased. "That's why I asked."

I sat down on the cold stone of the plinth step and opened the ledger across my knees. The garrison had left a lamp burning on a bracket by the door, and its light was enough to write by, and I wrote. I recorded the date and the hour and the condition of the Seventh Lamp's flame, and I recorded that Sevrin Ault, Kindler of the Seventh Lamp for eleven years, had burned his last memory to hold a six-hour surge and that the surge had held. I recorded the smile. I recorded that he did not know Davor's voice and did not know his own name and did not know that he had saved the garrison and the wall and the land behind it, because the knowing had been the price, and he had paid

it.

The pen moved across the page, and the scratch of the nib was the only sound in the chamber except for the Lamp's low burn and Davor's breathing and the distant shuffle of the garrison somewhere below. I thought of the First Ledger's account of memories returning as Pale fog, and the growing surge at the Seventh Lamp took on a logic that was not comforting. Every memory Sevrin had burned across eleven years had fed the fog that was now pressing against his own wall. The Lamps bought time, Perpetua Lorne had said, and the cost was the Pale's eventual victory. I was looking at one of the payments, and the receipt was sitting on a stool with a smile that would never fade.

Davor pulled the other stool from the corner and set it beside Sevrin's and sat down. He did not try to speak to him again. He just sat there, close enough that their shoulders nearly touched, and I wrote that too. Two Kindlers in the lamp light, one emptied and one still holding on, and the distance between them was nothing you could measure in inches.

When I finished the entry I blotted the ink and closed the ledger and sat with it in my lap while the Lamp burned on and the fog pressed at the walls. The ride back to Lastlight would be long, and the Pale would not have retreated while we were gone, and somewhere in the keep the Ninth Lamp was burning on trifles that would not hold forever. But I did not stand up. I stayed where I was, and I looked at Sevrin's smile, and I carried it forward into the

place where I kept the things I could not fix and could not forget.

“We need to go.” Davor’s voice came out of the quiet without warning, and it was steady in the way a wall is steady when the wind has been blowing against it for a long time. “Report the surge. The Ninth can’t run on trifles much longer.”

I nodded and stood, and my legs had gone stiff from the cold stone, and I did not complain about it because complaining would have been an insult to the man on the stool. Davor rose and looked at Sevrin one last time, and then he turned toward the door, and I followed him. The garrison soldier was waiting at the bottom of the stair, and I told him to send word if Sevrin’s condition changed, and the soldier nodded in a way that meant he would send word if there was any change to send word about and we both knew there would not be.

We rode out through the gate and onto the landward road, and the mist closed around us again, and I kept the ledger pressed against my ribs under my cloak where the damp could not reach it. Davor rode ahead of me, and I watched the set of his shoulders and the way his scarred hands held the reins, and I thought of the next kindling and the one after that and the one after that, and I did not promise him that the Lamp would spare him. I could not. The First Ledger had given me the truth of what the Lamps cost, and the truth did not come with a guarantee.

The road unrolled beneath the horses’ hooves, and the

mist swallowed the sound, and I carried Sevrin's smile forward into the dark.

The Recall Order

The morning of the eightieth day broke thin and grey over the keep, and I spent it in the Wall Archive with my copies spread across the table. I had finished the fair transcription of the First Ledger two hours before dawn, my fingers cramped around the pen, the last of the fused leaves yielding their lines to careful prying and a steadier hand than I had thought I possessed. The originals sat in a neat stack beside my work: Pell's Saltreach pages, the scorched First Ledger, the eleventh ledger with its surgical gaps. Perpetua Lorne's clerk had been in twice already to ask whether I was ready to surrender them.

I was not ready. I kept transcribing.

Davor had not spoken more than a dozen words to me since the ride back from the Seventh Lamp. He took his meals in the garrison hall and I took mine in the archive, and the distance between those two rooms had become a thing with weight and texture. I told myself it was exhaustion. I told myself the sight of Sevrin Ault smiling at noth-

ing had carved something out of him that needed silence to heal. I told myself a great many things, and none of them held.

When his footsteps sounded on the archive stair I knew them at once. I had learned the rhythm of his tread the way I had learned the creak of the lamp stair and the particular silence that fell over the keep just before a kindling. He came through the door with a folded paper in his hand and his cloak still damp from the yard, and he did not sit down.

“You have been writing all night,” he said.

“The copies had to be finished.” I set the pen in its groove and straightened the pages with the heel of my hand. “Lorne’s clerk is impatient.”

“Lorne is leaving.”

“I know.”

He laid the paper on the table beside my copies. I saw the Quill House seal first, the familiar circle of the quill and the lamp, and then I saw the lettering beneath it. A recall order. Formally drawn, properly witnessed, every line of it correct under the charter. The name at the top was mine, and the signature at the bottom was his.

I read it twice. The language was Lorne’s: calm, balanced, courteous. A Remembrancer could not be withdrawn mid-season without her Kindler’s signature. Article twelve, section four of the charter I had quoted at him at the gate on my first day, when I had stood in the mud with my commission in my hand and demanded he admit me.

He had signed below the seal in the plain, unadorned hand
I had watched across eighty days of kindlings.

“You signed it,” I said.

“Yes.”

“You asked me to keep the record. You gave me your ledger and told me not to soften it.”

“I remember.”

I looked up at him. His face gave me nothing. “Then explain this.”

He was quiet for a moment, and when he spoke his voice was even. “The law is clear. A Remembrancer serves at the Kindler’s consent. I am withdrawing mine.”

I waited. He offered nothing else.

“That is not an explanation,” I said. “That is the text of the order.”

“It is the only answer I have.”

I folded the recall order along its original crease and slid it into my satchel beside my copies. My hands were steady. I made them steady. “Lorne offered me her seat and I refused it. I stood in this room and told her the record mattered more than power, and then I climbed the stair and told you. I rode to the Seventh Lamp beside you and wrote down everything I saw, and when you asked me not to soften it I did not soften it. I have done nothing but keep faith with the charter and with you.”

“I know what you have done.”

“Then what is this?”

He did not answer. He looked at the table, at the stack

of originals and the fair copies beside them, and I saw his hand move toward the edge of the table and stop. A small, arrested gesture. The same hand that had signed the order.

“The House clerk will write for the Ninth Lamp,” he said. “Your copies are yours to keep.”

The words landed and settled, and I understood then that he was not going to explain. Whatever reason he had, he had decided I did not need to hear it. He had made a choice about what I could carry and what I could not, the same way he had made a choice at Saltreach and come back unable to remember his mother’s face. I had spent eighty days learning to read the gaps in his memory, and now he had opened a gap between us and stepped into it.

“You signed your name,” I said. “That is the only thing I need to know.”

I gathered my satchel and my copies and left the originals on the table for Lorne’s clerk. The First Ledger sat where I had laid it, its binding scorched and its pages whole, and I did not touch it again. It belonged to the House now, and so did Pell’s pages, and so, it seemed, did the truth of what Davor had done at Saltreach. I had my fair copies. I had the private ledger I had written every night since the first day. A scribe keeps what a scribe can carry, and I had learned to carry a great deal.

In the yard the horses were already saddled. Lorne’s party made a dozen riders, House clerks and guards, and a covered cart for the records. Brother Rudd sat a horse

near the rear, his hands bound loosely at the wrist and his expression as careful as it had ever been behind the archive desk. He did not look at me. I did not expect him to.

Perpetua Lorne stood beside the cart, her silver hair pinned immaculately beneath her hood, her hands folded at her waist. She watched me cross the yard with the same measured calm she had worn in the archive when she offered me her seat and I told her no.

“Remembrancer Sayle,” she said. “I am glad you will travel with us. The roads will be difficult this late in the season.”

“I am sure they will.”

“Your copies are complete?”

“Down to the fused leaves.”

She nodded, and if she felt any satisfaction at the outcome she did not show it. “Then we understand each other.”

Captain Oake appeared at my elbow before I could answer. She had a travel pack slung over one shoulder and her sword belt cinched tight, and her voice carried across the yard in the way it always did. “The garrison will escort the High Remembrancer as far as the first waystation. I’ll lead the escort myself.”

Lorne turned her head. “That is unnecessary, Captain. My own guard is sufficient.”

“I don’t trust your guard.” Juna said it pleasantly, the way she might remark on the weather. “They don’t know

the road. Mine do.”

A small pause. Lorne inclined her head. “As you wish.”

I mounted the horse they had saddled for me and settled the satchel against my hip. The recall order was folded inside it, the paper already softening at the creases from the damp. I had not looked at it again. I did not need to.

The gate stood open. The same gate where I had stood on the first day of autumn with my commission in my hand and my grief for Tobin still raw enough to bleed, quoting the charter at a Kindler who had not wanted me there. I had argued the law and won, and now the law had been used to send me away, and I could not find the seam where one had become the other.

Davor stood in the gate’s shadow, his cloak pulled close against the morning chill. He had not followed me into the yard. He had taken up the same position he held on that first day, when I had looked up at the keep and seen a tall man with a white streak in his hair and burn scars on both palms, and I had thought: here is the man who let Saltreach fall.

I knew better now. I knew what he had burned and what he had carried out. I knew the weight of his silences and the dry edge of his humour and the way his hands moved when he was deciding something he would not explain. And none of it altered the fact of the signature at the bottom of the recall order, or the short answers he had given me in the archive, or the choice he had made to send me away without telling me why.

I had been one more page in his ledger. Recorded, preserved, and set aside when the keeping became too difficult.

The party began to move. Juna rode at the head with four garrison soldiers behind her, and Lorne's clerks fell in behind the cart, and Brother Rudd kept his eyes on the road ahead as if the mist that lay beyond the gate were a problem he could solve by staring at it. I urged the horse forward and did not look back until we had passed through the gate and the road began its long curve inland.

Then I looked back once. Davor stood where I had left him, a dark shape against the grey stone, and the distance between us was already too great for words. He did not raise his hand. He did not call out. He stood and watched, and the morning mist closed around the keep, and I carried the recall order and the unanswered meaning of his signature forward into the mist.

The road unrolled beneath the horses' hooves. Juna dropped back to ride beside me in a silence that asked nothing, and I was grateful for it. I had my copies and my private ledger and the weight of eighty days pressed between their pages, and I did not yet know what to do with any of it. But I would learn. I had spent four years carrying Tobin's name against my wrist, and I had learned to carry what could not be put down.

The mist thickened as we rode, and the keep faded behind us, and I did not look back again.

What Is Spoken Back

The waystation stood on a low rise where the landward road bent closest to the wall, a stone box with a slate roof and a single chimney. We reached it an hour before dusk on the first day's ride, and Lorne's clerks unpacked the baggage train with the efficiency of people who had done this route many times and would do it many more. The garrison soldiers saw to the horses. Juna posted two men at the door and two more on the wall walk, then went inside to check the room where Brother Rudd would sleep under guard.

I stood in the yard and looked at the waystation's narrow windows and remembered the last time I had slept here. The storm that caught us on the return from Saltreach. The single cot. Davor's chest warm at my back in the dark, and four inches of straw between us that did not last the night, while the wind shook the shutters and the Pale banked against the wall like something waiting for an invitation. That had been fifty-two nights ago. It felt like

longer, and it felt like yesterday, and both sensations were true in the way that only grief makes true.

The room they gave me was the same one. I recognized the iron bedstead, the washstand with its chipped basin, the hook by the door where Davor had hung his wet cloak. The cot had been pushed against the far wall, and someone had left a fresh candle on the sill, but the room remembered what it had held. I set my satchel on the bed and did not sit down beside it. The recall order was folded among my papers, and I knew exactly where, and I did not take it out.

I tried to sleep. The candle burned down past its first hour, and the garrison's footsteps crossed the yard below in their regular rounds, and Juna's voice carried up from the common room where she was reviewing the watch schedule with Lorne's guard captain. I lay on top of the blankets in my clothes and listened to the wall. The wind had not risen, and the shutters hung still, and the quiet was worse than any storm. In the quiet I could hear the shape of what Davor had not said. A recall order required no explanation. A Kindler could withdraw his consent, and a Remembrancer could leave, and the law asked nothing more of either of them. But Davor had signed his name below a line of formal script and laid it on the table in front of me, and I had spent eighty days learning to read what he would not speak aloud, and his silence in that moment had been the loudest thing in the room.

I gave up on sleep an hour before dawn. The candle had

guttered, and the grey light through the shutter crack was enough to read by. I pulled my satchel onto the bed and took out my copy of the First Ledger, the fair pages I had finished in the Wall Archive on the morning everything broke apart. Sixty-one leaves in my own hand, the ink dry and the edges still crisp from the knife. I had copied them in haste on that last night, working by lamp light while the keep slept, and I had been thinking of accuracy rather than sense. Now I wanted sense.

The final leaves were the ones that mattered. The First Ledger's earliest entries described the founding of the Lamps, the covenant between Kindler and flame, the practice of burning memory to hold back the dark. All of that I had read and understood. But the last pages, the ones Brother Rudd's fire had fused together and that I had eased apart and copied last of all, those pages said something else. I turned to them now, sitting cross-legged on the cot with the ledger spread across my knees, and read the words I had transcribed without fully hearing.

In the original the hand had been old, the script cramped and irregular, the ink faded to brown. In my own copy the meaning was clear once I let myself read for it. The first Remembrancers had done more than record. They had taken their ledgers to the wall's edge and read the memories aloud to the fog. The practice was called speaking back. The entry described it in plain terms: a Remembrancer would stand at the wall and recite the memory exactly as the Kindler had given it, keeping the

account precise rather than turning it into a prayer or a plea. The fog would thin where the words reached it. What is spoken back is laid to rest: that was the line, and it was the last line on the last leaf. It did not return to the Kindler, and the Kindler did not remember what had been spoken, but the Pale lost something it had taken.

The Quill House ended the practice. The entry did not say when, and it did not name the High Remembrancer who made the decision, but the reason was set down as plainly as the rest: because it showed where the fog came from. Speaking back proved that the Lamps' sacrifices fed the Pale, and the House could not allow that proof to stand where anyone could see it. So the practice stopped, and the ledgers stayed in the archives, and the fog kept growing.

I read the passage three times. The first time for the words. The second time for the logic. The third time because I was thinking of Davor's first entry, the stolen plums, the small bright memory he had given up on my first night at Lastlight and would never have again. I knew it by heart. I had written it into the Ninth Lamp's ledger and into my private one, and I could recite it without looking at the page. A walled garden behind the old tannery, six plums eaten in the crook of a branch, and a seventh in his pocket, warm from the sun.

I closed the ledger. The grey light at the shutter had brightened to something nearer dawn, and the waystation was still quiet around me. I put on my boots and my cloak

and went down the stairs without waking anyone. The garrison soldier at the door looked at me with the particular expression of a man who has been on watch too long and has stopped expecting anything interesting to happen. I told him I was walking to the wall. He nodded and let me pass.

The wall walk was narrow and the stones were slick with the night's damp. The Pale lay out on the bay as it always did, a white bank that stretched to the horizon and hid the water and the far shore and everything that had been there before the fog came. But close in, below the wall, a ribbon of it had curled in against the stones. It was thin, no wider than a cart track, and it moved with the slow idle motion of something that was not wind and not water and not quite alive. I had seen the Pale press against the wall before. I had seen it surge and breach and take. This was different. This was a finger of fog that had drifted in on the night tide and stayed, and it hung below me in the grey light like an unasked question.

I stood at the wall's edge and looked down at it. The garrison had not raised an alarm, which meant it had not climbed, and the watch on the wall walk had probably seen it and decided it was not worth reporting. A ribbon of Pale that stayed at the stones' foot was not a threat. It was only the fog being the fog, and everyone who lived on this coast had learned to stop noticing the fog unless it moved.

But I had just read a set of instructions that no one had followed in generations, and I had a memory I knew by

heart, and the ribbon was right there.

I did not pray. I did not ask the fog for anything. I stood with my hands on the cold stone and spoke the words exactly as Davor had given them, keeping my voice level and my account precise, the way I would read any entry into any record. He was nine, maybe ten. There was a walled garden on the south side of the town, behind the old tannery, and the plums came ripe in late summer. The tree was an old one, bent over the wall like a shoulder. The plums were purple and soft, the kind that split when you bit them. He sat in the crook of the branch and ate six, one after another, and the seventh he put in his pocket, and it was warm from the sun, and he remembered the warmth more than the taste. That was the whole memory. I did not add anything. I did not say his name.

The ribbon thinned. It did not pull back or roll away or do anything dramatic. The fog simply grew fainter, the white bleaching to grey and then to nothing, and the air where it had been was empty. Below the wall the stones were wet and dark and bare, and the Pale out on the bay was unchanged, a white bank that stretched to the horizon and did not care what had just happened at its edge.

I stood there for a long time. The sun was beginning to break the horizon, and the light on the water was the colour of old pewter, and nothing returned to Davor. He was a day's ride behind me, standing at the keep gate or walking the lamp stair or sitting in his room with his bandaged palm and his dwindling store of memories, and he

would never know those plums again. The words I had spoken had laid them to rest, and the fog had lost a little of what it had taken, but the loss was still his. Speaking back was not restoration. It was a small repair in a large fabric of damage, and it did not give back what had been burned.

Footsteps on the wall walk behind me. I knew the tread before I turned. Juna walked the way she did everything, with her weight forward and her shoulders set, and she stopped a pace from the wall's edge and looked down at the empty air where the ribbon had been.

"That was Pale," she said. It was not a question.

"It was."

"And now it's not."

I turned to face her. She was wearing her garrison cloak over her tunic, and her hair was flat on one side from sleep, and her expression was the one she wore when a situation had stopped making sense and she was waiting for someone to explain it in words she could use. "I read one of Davor's memories aloud. The first one he gave me. The plums."

"And the fog went away."

"That ribbon did. The rest of it is still out there." I nodded toward the bay, where the Pale lay white and unmoved. "One memory thinned one ribbon. That is all."

Juna looked from the empty air to the bay and back again. "But it worked."

"It worked once, on a small scale, under conditions I cannot replicate without more ledgers and more time." I heard

my own voice come out in the clipped, precise cadence I used when I was arguing a point and did not yet know if I was right. “The First Ledger says the early Remembrancers did this regularly. The House stopped it because it proved the Lamps feed the Pale. I have just confirmed that the practice is real and that it functions. That is proof of possibility, not proof of safety, and certainly not proof of a solution.”

“But it’s a start.”

I looked at the bare stones below the wall and thought about what a start was worth. “Lastlight holds the Wall Archive. More than two thousand ledgers from all nine Lamps. Every memory every Kindler ever burned, written down and stored in one place. And the Longest Night is nine days off.”

Juna was quiet for a moment. The sun had cleared the horizon now, and the light caught the broken line of her nose and the set of her jaw. Behind us the waystation was beginning to stir, voices carrying from the yard and the smell of cookfire smoke rising from the chimney. Lorne’s camp was waking, and Lorne herself would be at her papers soon, and the day’s ride would begin whether I was ready for it or not.

“How fast can a scribe ride?” Juna said.

I looked at her. She was not joking. Her face was the face she wore when she was calculating distances and supply lines and how many horses a garrison could spare, and she was looking at the road back to Lastlight as if it were a

tactical problem she intended to solve before breakfast.

"I rode from the keep to here in a day," I said. "I can ride back in the same."

"On a garrison horse, with a garrison escort, and no baggage train to slow you down." She was already turning it over in her mind, her eyes on the road and her hands resting on the wall stones. "You could be at the keep by nightfall and in the archive tonight. That gives you eight days before the Longest Night."

"And Lorne behind us," I said. "She will turn back the moment she finds me gone."

"With a cart." She shrugged, the small economical motion of someone who had learned to work with whatever margin she was given. "You said two thousand ledgers. How many can you read in eight days?"

I thought about the Wall Archive, the long tables and the ranked shelves and the smell of old paper and lamp oil. I thought about Davor's signature on the recall order, the clean stroke of ink that had set me on this road and closed the gate behind me. And I thought about what I would say to him when I rode back through that gate without his consent and without his permission and carrying a truth he had not asked me to find.

"Not enough," I said. "Not alone."

Juna nodded once, the short sharp nod of a captain who had made a decision and was already moving to the next one. "I'll get the horses."

She turned and walked back along the wall toward the

waystation, her boots loud on the stone and her cloak snapping in the wind that had risen with the dawn. I stayed at the wall's edge a moment longer. The Pale lay white and vast on the bay, and the stones below me were bare, and the air where the ribbon had been was still empty. I took out my private ledger and my pen and marked the place and the hour: the wall waystation, first light, the eighty-first day. One memory spoken. One ribbon dissolved. The rest still waiting.

Then I closed the ledger and followed Juna down from the wall, and the day's work began.

The Road Turned Back

The garrison horse knew the road better than I did, and I let her have her head for the last mile. Juna rode beside me with her cloak open despite the cold, singing a marching song about a quartermaster who cheated at dice and got thrown into the bay. Her voice carried across the empty road and bounced off the stones of the wall, and she did not seem to care who heard.

“You’re cheerful,” I said.

“I am.” She grinned without looking at me. “My orders were to ride to the first waystation. Nobody said which way to ride afterward. I followed my orders to the letter.”

“Lorne will disagree.”

“Lorne can disagree from the landward road, where she’s been riding all day in the wrong direction.” Juna tipped her head back and laughed, and a pair of crows lifted from the wall in alarm. “She’ll turn back the minute she finds you gone. Probably already has. We’ll have House guards at the gate by midday tomorrow demanding to

know what I thought I was doing.”

“And what will you tell them?”

“That I was escorting a Remembrancer to the archive where her charter gives her every right to be.” She nudged her horse closer to mine. “You’re worrying. Stop it.”

I had been worrying since the waystation, since the ribbon of Pale dissolved and left only bare stone and the cold wind off the bay. One spoken memory had thinned one narrow curl of fog. It had not restored anything to Davor. It had not touched the great white bank that lay over Saltreach, where Tobin stood unchanged in the mist below the net-maker’s shed. I had carried that result carefully all day, turning it over in my mind like a stone I was afraid to drop. One ribbon dissolved. One memory laid to rest. The Pale still lay on the water as far as the eye could see, and the Longest Night was nine days away.

The road curved and the keep came into view against the darkening sky, its towers black against a band of amber light low in the west. The Ninth Lamp burned at the top of the lamp stair, steady and small. I did not let myself look for a figure at the gate.

We rode through as the last light failed. Tomas took the horses with a nod and no questions, and Juna walked me straight to the Wall Archive without stopping at the garrison room or the Quill House annex. The archive was cold and smelled of old parchment and lamp oil, and the rows of ledgers stood in their shelves like teeth in a jaw. More than two thousand of them, from all nine Lamps, and I had

read fourteen.

Juna lit the lamp on the long table and I laid out what I carried. My fair copy of the First Ledger, sixty-one leaves in my own hand, the last line still fresh: *what is spoken back is laid to rest*. My private eighty-day ledger, opened to the page where I had marked the place and the hour: the wall waystation, first light, the eighty-first day. One memory spoken. One ribbon dissolved. The recall order with Davor's signature, which I set at the corner of the table where I would not have to look at it.

Juna pulled out a chair and sat, her broad shoulders blocking the light. "All right. Tell me what the House did."

I set my copy of the First Ledger's last leaves beside the note of the dissolved ribbon. "The first Remembrancers practiced speaking back. They read burned memories aloud at the wall's edge, and the Pale thinned where the words reached it. It laid the memories to rest. It didn't return them to the Kindler who gave them, but it proved where the fog came from."

"The Lamps," Juna said.

"The Lamps' sacrifices fed the Pale. Every kindling swelled the fog. The House knew this, and they stopped the practice. They didn't merely hide a record." I tapped the page. "They stopped people from testing knowledge that bears on the safety of all Orrowmere. The First Ledger was sealed under the lamp stair. The Saltreach pages were cut from Pell's ledgers with a blade. Anyone who might have spoken back was silenced before they could try."

Juna was quiet for a moment. Then she said, "What does a reading give the families who have someone standing in the fog?"

The question landed exactly where I had been carrying it all day. I had measured the proof against my hope for Tobin and found the hope wanting. The ribbon had dissolved, and Davor had not remembered the plums, and the fog on the bay had not retreated. Speaking back was testimony. It was a way to name the lost and lay burned memories to rest. It was not a way to call anyone back.

"Testimony," I said. "A way to name them. The memories the Kindlers burned are still out there, in the Pale. Speaking them aloud lays them to rest. It doesn't restore the person who gave them, and it doesn't pull anyone out of the fog."

"So Tobin..."

I did not let her finish. "Tobin is the question I cannot set down. But the proof offers me a choice, and I am choosing the truth." My hand was flat on the table, and I made myself keep it there. "If every memory in these ledgers were spoken back on the Longest Night, the Pale might have nothing left to come ashore with. It would take every voice that can read, and the Ninth Lamp would have to shield the readers until dawn."

"That means Davor."

"Yes."

Juna leaned back in her chair and looked at the rows of ledgers. "The garrison reads, after a fashion. Not well, most

of them, and not fast, but they can sound out words and they'll do it if I tell them to. I'll start with them in the morning."

I had not expected her to agree so quickly. "Juna..."

"You said it would take every voice. You're a voice. I'm a voice. Tomas can read supply lists, which is more than half the garrison can say." She stood and pulled her cloak straight. "I'll have them in the archive by the third hour after dawn. Get some sleep before then."

She left, and the door closed behind her with a soft click. The lamp on the table burned steadily, and the ledgers stood in their rows, and I was alone with the weight of what I had just set in motion. Eight days. Two thousand ledgers. A garrison that could read supply lists.

I looked up from the archive table toward the lamp stair. The door at the top was closed, and no light showed beneath it, but I knew what lay beyond. The Ninth Lamp, burning in its chamber. And in the room beside it, the man who had signed my recall order and sent me away without a word of explanation. The one person I had not yet told.

I had ridden all day with the proof in my satchel and the question of his signature burning alongside it. He had stood at the gate and let me go. He had not called out. He had not asked me to stay. And now I was back, and the work I meant to do on the Longest Night depended on his willingness to shield the readers until dawn, and I had not spoken to him since the morning I left.

The recall order lay at the corner of the table. I folded it

once and put it in my satchel. Then I stood and walked toward the lamp stair, and the stone was cold under my boots, and the door at the top was still closed.

I did not know what I would say when I reached it. I only knew that I could not sit in the archive with the truth in my hands and leave him in the dark another night.

The Scribe at His Door

I climbed the lamp stair with the recall order in my hand and my satchel heavy against my hip, and the stone steps were cold even through my boots. The door at the top stood closed, and a thin line of lamplight showed beneath it. I did not knock. I put my hand flat against the wood and pushed, and the door swung inward on hinges that Hobb kept oiled so well they never made a sound.

Davor sat at the table with his reading ledger open before him, his bandaged right palm upturned on the page as if he had been studying the linen wrap. The cot was rumpled but empty. The Ninth Lamp burned steady in its chamber beyond the inner door, and the light it cast through the gap was the colour of late honey. He looked up when I entered, and the look was not surprise. It was the expression of a man who had been waiting for a particular sound and had just heard it.

"The House clerk is in your room," he said. "Lorne left her behind with instructions to pack the rest of your

things in the morning.”

“I know. I passed her on the stair. She was carrying my spare boots.” I crossed to the table and set the recall order down beside his open ledger. “I am not leaving in the morning.”

He looked at the order, then at me. The white streak at his left temple had widened a little in the weeks since I had first noticed it, or perhaps I was only looking for it now. “You rode all night.”

“No. I left the waystation at dawn and rode hard. Juna is in the garrison hall telling her soldiers that she bent Lorne’s orders and does not regret it.”

“Juna.” He said her name the way he said most things, dry and short, but the corner of his mouth moved. “She was supposed to see you off this coast.”

“She saw me back to it instead. I asked her to.” I pulled the other chair out and sat across from him. The table between us held his ledger, my recall order, and a cup of water that had gone cold. “I need to tell you three things, and I need you to let me finish before you answer.”

He closed his ledger. The motion was careful, his bandaged hand doing less of the work than the other. “All right.”

“The First Ledger’s last leaves describe a practice called speaking back. The first Remembrancers used to read burned memories aloud at the wall’s edge, and where the words reached the Pale, the fog thinned. It did not destroy it. It did not return the memory to the Kindler who gave it.

It only laid the memory to rest.” I set my hands flat on the table, and my ink-stained fingers looked very dark against the pale wood. “The Quill House ended the practice because it proved that the Lamps’ sacrifices feed the fog. They hid the knowledge and stopped anyone from testing it.”

“Lorne knew.”

“Lorne knew. I am certain of it.”

He waited. The lamp in the chamber hummed faintly, a sound so steady I had stopped hearing it weeks ago.

“This morning at the waystation, I read your stolen-plum memory aloud at the wall’s edge. Juna watched. A ribbon of Pale that had curled in close below the stones dissolved where my voice reached it. One memory, one ribbon. That is all.” I did not make it sound like more than it was. “It is not a cure. It will not restore anything you have surrendered, and it will not bring anyone back from the fog. It is proof of possibility, and that is all it is.”

Davor picked up the cup of water, looked into it, and set it down again without drinking. “You went to the wall alone.”

“Juna followed me out. I did not ask her to.”

“You went to the wall alone,” he repeated, “and you read my memory into the fog.”

“Yes.”

He was quiet for a moment, and the quiet was not the kind that needed filling. He was turning something over, the way he turned a page in his ledger when he was check-

ing a date against his own recollection. Then he said, "What did it look like. When it dissolved."

"Like mist burning off a field when the sun hits it. It did not recoil. It did not fight back. It simply stopped being there."

He nodded once. I watched him file the information somewhere I could not see, and I let him. He had earned the right to take his time with what I was telling him.

"The second thing," I said. I touched the recall order with two fingers and slid it across the table until it stopped against his ledger. "Did you sign this to spare me from watching what your losses will do."

His bandaged hand went still on the table. "Yes."

"Say it plainly."

"I saw Sevrin smiling at nothing." He did not look away from me. "I saw him sitting on that stool with his hands empty and his eyes open and nothing behind them, and then I saw you standing where I was standing, looking at me the way I was looking at him, and I could not do it. I could not make you watch that."

I had half understood it on the road, somewhere between the waystation and the keep, when the horse was picking her way along the wall road and I had nothing to do but turn the shape of his choice over and over. Understanding it did not make the hurt of being sent away vanish. I let that hurt sit in the room with us, unspoken, and I did not try to soften it for his sake.

"You do not get to make that choice for me again," I

said. "I decide what I can witness. Not you."

"I know."

"Do you."

"I know because you rode back." He reached for the recall order and turned it over, and his thumb rested on the place where his own signature sat at the bottom of the page. "You rode back with proof in your satchel and a garrison captain who had no orders to follow you, and you walked up the lamp stair in the middle of the night and put this on my table. That is not the action of someone who wants to be spared."

"No. It is not."

He looked at me across the table, and the lamp from the chamber caught the dark of his eyes and made them unreadable. "Are you staying because you believe a record can save me."

"No." I leaned forward and put my hand over his, the bandaged one, and his fingers turned under mine and held on. "I am staying because I love you, and I know that no record will make you remember me. I know that when you burn what you have left, the ledger will say what you gave and it will not give it back. I am staying anyway."

He did not speak for a long moment. Then he let go of my hand, turned the recall order over, and took up his pen. Beneath his own signature he wrote, in the same plain hand he used for every entry in his reading ledger: *The Ninth Kindler asks for his Remembrancer back*. He dated it and pushed it across the table to me.

I read the line twice. Then I opened my satchel, took out my pen and ink, and wrote beneath his words: *Entered, Merrit Sayle, Remembrancer to the Ninth Lamp*. The ink was still wet when I set the pen down.

Davor stood. I stood. The space between us was the width of the table and then it was nothing, because he came around it and put his hands on either side of my face and kissed me, and his bandaged palm was rough against my cheek and his mouth was careful in a way that told me he was still afraid of what he might break. I put my hands on his wrists and held them there, and after a moment the kiss stopped being careful.

We undressed each other without hurry. His tunic first, and I had to help him lift it over the bandage without snagging the linen. My shirt next, and his fingers worked the buttons with the same attention he gave to trimming a wick, precise and patient. The cot was narrow and the blanket was thin, and neither of us cared. He laid me back on it and I pulled him down after me, and the weight of him was warm and solid and real in a way that the road and the waystation and the long ride had not been.

I traced the edge of the bandage on his right palm, and he let me. The scar tissue beneath it was old and ridged and mapped the years of his kindling in lines I had learned by touch. He kissed the ink stains on my first two fingers, and the gesture was so deliberate that my throat tightened. I did not try to hide it. I had stopped hiding things from him on the road back, somewhere between the wall

and the keep, and I was not going to start again now.

We moved together slowly, and the lamp in the chamber burned on without flickering, and the keep was quiet around us in the deep part of the night. His mouth found the place below my ear that made my breath go uneven, and I dug my fingers into his shoulders and pulled him closer, and the cot creaked once and then was still. There was no haste in it. There was no promise that this would outlast the coming kindlings or shield either of us from what the Longest Night would demand. There was only the two of us in the room beside the Ninth Lamp, and the choice we had both made, and the particular tenderness of people who know exactly what they are risking and have decided to risk it anyway.

Afterward we lay tangled on the cot with the blanket pulled over us, and I rested my head in the hollow of his shoulder and listened to his heart beat. It was steady and slow and it did not hammer or race or do any of the things that books said hearts did after love. It was just a heart, doing its work, and I found that more comforting than any metaphor.

“The Longest Night,” I said into the quiet. “Nine days from now. I am going to need every reader I can find, and I am going to need them speaking the archive aloud from dusk until dawn. The Ninth Lamp will have to shield them the whole time. That is the price.”

His hand stilled on my back. “All night.”

“All night. And I do not know how many memories that

will cost you.”

He was quiet. I felt him count, the small pause between each tally, the sum adding up to something he did not speak aloud. His hand resumed its slow motion on my spine.

“You are not going to tell me the number,” I said.

“No.”

“Because you think I will try to talk you out of it.”

“Because knowing it will not change what I have to do, and it will only give you another weight to carry.” He turned his head and pressed his mouth to my hair. “You are already carrying enough.”

I did not argue. I had argued with him enough for one night, and the argument I wanted to have was not one I could win. He was right, and I hated that he was right, and I let the hatred sit beside the love and did not try to separate them.

When his breathing slowed toward sleep, I eased myself off the cot and pulled my shirt back on. The room was cold away from his body. I went to the table and opened my private eighty-day ledger to a fresh page, and I wrote by the light of the lamp from the inner chamber.

The first entry I chose was the memory of his mother’s face. The second was the house where he was born. The third was his boyhood name. I wrote them in order, the way Pell had written them in the hidden pages, and I left a blank line beneath each one for the name of whoever would read it aloud at the wall.

The lamp burned on. Davor slept. I kept writing, and the page filled, and the night outside the narrow window moved toward morning one slow hour at a time.

Every Voice at the Wall

The wall road had been quiet all day, and that was the first thing wrong with it.

Nine days of preparation had stripped the Archive of its silence. Ledgers had come down from the shelves in armloads, carried by soldiers who swore when the bindings cracked and by kitchen girls who held each volume as if it might bite. I had sorted them by Lamp and by year, and when the sorting broke down I had sorted them by whatever thread held: memories of water, memories of children, memories of bread. The system mattered less than the hands that would hold them. By dusk on the Longest Night, the first thousand books lay stacked on trestle tables in the yard below the Lampwall, their spines catching the last grey light, with the rest ranked on the Archive shelves nearest the door to be carried out as the tables emptied, and the people of Gull's Rest had walked up the wall road with their children and their lanterns and stood waiting in the cold.

Hobb had spent the afternoon in the Lamp chamber, trimming wicks with the small knife he kept in his apron pocket. I found him there when I climbed the stair to check the bowl, his back bent and his fingers dark with soot, and he did not look up from his work.

"Kindler's been in his room since noon," he said. "Ledger open. Not writing."

I knew that. I had passed Davor's door on my way up and heard nothing through it, which was worse than hearing him pace. "The readers are assembled. Juna's putting them in rows."

Hobb straightened and wiped the knife on his apron. "Two thousand ledgers. How many can read them?"

"Enough. The garrison clerks, half the household, three of the fishing families brought their eldest daughters. Juna's been teaching her soldiers for a week."

"A week." His mouth moved around the word as if tasting it for rot. "And you trust them to speak it right."

"I trust them to speak it at all." I stepped closer to the Lamp. The flame burned steady in its bowl, the wick drawing oil from the reservoir Hobb had filled that morning. "The Quill House forbade the reading. No sworn clerk will touch a ledger. So I went to the people House law does not bind."

Hobb nodded once, a slow dip of his white beard. "Lorne won't like that."

"Lorne returned the morning after I did. She's been in the gatehouse with her guards and her prisoner for eight

days. She knows what I'm doing."

"Knowing and liking aren't the same thing."

I watched the flame lean toward the wick as if listening. "She believes the kingdom dies without the Lamps. If the reading shows the Lamps make the Pale, no one will light them again. She can't allow it."

Hobb tucked the knife back into his apron. His hands, I noticed, were steady. "Then she'll try to stop it."

"I know."

He looked at me for a long moment, and whatever he saw in my face made him nod again, shorter this time. "I'll keep the bowl full."

I left him there and went down to the yard.

* * *

Dusk came in grey and then in white.

The Pale rose from Morrow Bay like a sheet being drawn over the water, and by the time the last light failed it had reached the Lampwall and begun to climb. I stood at the wall's edge with Juna beside me and watched it coil against the stone, slow and thick and silent, the way it must have coiled against the wall at Saltreach four winters ago. The cold came with it, a particular cold that had nothing to do with the season, and I heard the fishing families draw their children closer.

"Right," Juna said. Her voice carried across the yard without effort, and the garrison soldiers straightened where they stood. "Readers to the tables. Everyone else behind

the Lamp line and keep your lanterns lit. The fog doesn't cross the light."

I walked to the first trestle table and picked up the top ledger. It was a Fourth Lamp ledger, the spine cracked from years of handling, and the page I opened to recorded a memory surrendered by its Kindler sixty years ago: his daughter's first word. I had marked it with a slip of paper that morning, and my hand did not shake when I held it out to the young garrison clerk who stood nearest.

"Read what is written," I said. "Do not add to it. Do not soften it. And do not promise anyone a cure."

The clerk took the ledger. Her name was Silla, and she had been at the keep for three years, and her fingers left damp marks on the leather. "What if I stumble?"

"The next reader takes up the line."

She nodded and carried the book to the wall.

I moved down the tables, putting ledgers into hands. Juna's soldiers took theirs with the same grip they used on sword hilts. The kitchen girls held them flat on both palms. The eldest daughter of the Gull's Rest net-maker, a girl of perhaps fifteen with her mother's broad shoulders, opened hers to the page I had marked and read the first line under her breath, testing it, and her mouth set in a line I recognized.

At the head of the yard, the Ninth Lamp burned in its high window, and the light it threw cut a clean arc across the stones. Davor had not come down. I did not expect him to. He was up there feeding the flame, memory by mem-

ory, and the Lamp's light was the only thing standing between hundreds of open books and the fog.

Juna moved to stand beside me. "Lorne's still in the gatehouse."

"I know."

"She'll have heard the reading start."

"I know that too."

Juna's mouth twitched, not quite a smile. "You want me to post someone at the Archive door."

"Yes."

She turned and called two names, and the soldiers peeled away from the tables and jogged toward the keep.

* * *

The reading began with a memory of rain.

Silla's voice was thin at first, the words coming too fast, but by the third line she had settled into the rhythm of the old scribe's handwriting. The memory belonged to a Kindler who had surrendered the sound of rain on a slate roof, and as Silla read it aloud the Pale against the Lampwall shivered. Not much. A tremor, a thinning, the way mist thins when a door opens. But everyone in the yard saw it.

The net-maker's daughter read next. Her voice was stronger than Silla's, a carrying voice that had been trained by shouting across the bay, and the memory she read was a Kindler's last sight of her mother standing in a doorway. The Pale pulled back from the wall in a narrow curl, a strip

of fog retreating the width of a hand, and one of the fishing children made a sound that was not quite a gasp.

“It’s working,” Juna said.

“It’s showing them where the fog came from.” I kept my eyes on the wall. “That’s what Lorne cannot allow.”

The readers kept on. A garrison clerk read a memory of a first kiss, stumbling over the words until the soldier beside her touched her elbow and she steadied. A kitchen girl read a memory of a brother lost at sea, and her voice cracked on the last line, and the woman next to her took the ledger from her hands and finished the page. The Pale thinned in ribbons and strands, pulling back from the wall in places where the voices carried, and the cold in the yard eased by a degree.

But the fog did not retreat from the bay. It crowded the Lampwall still, a white bank that stretched to the horizon, and the Ninth Lamp burned on, and I knew Davor was feeding it.

I had placed my copy of the First Ledger on the last table, beside the ledgers from the Seventh and Second Lamps. No one had picked it up yet. The readers had taken the Remembrancer accounts first, the records they could understand, and my fair copy sat where I had left it with its pages open to the line I had read nine days ago at the waystation: *what is spoken back is laid to rest*.

One of Juna’s soldiers reached for it. A woman with grey in her cropped hair and a scar across her knuckles, who had been reading supply lists aloud to her squad for prac-

tice. She opened the First Ledger to the first page and began to read, and her voice was flat and careful, the voice of someone who had learned to read late and did not trust it.

“Let this record stand as the first and binding account of the covenant between the Kindler and the flame...”

The Pale shivered again.

* * *

Lorne entered the Archive through the inner door.

I did not see her come in. I was at the wall, listening to the soldier read the First Ledger, and the first sign I had was the sound of the Archive door slamming open and Juna’s shout from the keep. I turned and ran, my boots slipping on the cold stones, and reached the Archive door just as Juna’s soldiers were moving to block it.

Lorne stood inside, alone. Her Quill House robes were immaculate, her silver hair pinned back, her hands folded at her waist the way she folded them when delivering difficult decisions. In her right hand she held a clay pot with a wick protruding from the mouth, and the wick was lit.

“High Remembrancer.” I stopped in the doorway. My voice came out steady, which surprised me. “The reading is under way. You are welcome to join it.”

“You know why I am here, Merrit.” Her voice was calm, each clause balanced, the cadence of a teacher correcting a student. “What you are doing tonight will leave Orrowmere without Lamps by spring. The people listening

at the wall will understand what the records show, and they will refuse to kindle.”

“They will understand the truth.”

“The truth will kill them.” She took a step toward the shelves. “The Pale has pressed closer every autumn for four hundred years. The Lamps have held it back. If the Lamps go dark, the fog takes everything. You know this.”

“I know the Lamps feed the fog. I know the First Ledger says so. And I know you cut the Saltreach pages from Pell’s ledgers to hide it.”

Lorne’s hands tightened around the clay pot. “I cut the pages because they showed a Lamp failing fully fed. Three memories burned, a man’s mother and his home and his own name, and the Eighth went dark all the same. If that record had circulated, no Kindler would ever have lit a Lamp again.”

“And Oswin Pell died for it.”

The flame on the wick guttered in the draft from the door. “Brother Rudd acted beyond my instruction. I did not order Pell’s death.”

“But you did not mourn it either.” I stepped into the Archive, and the soldiers behind me shifted their weight, waiting. “You are here to burn the ledgers. All of them. Every record that might show the reading works.”

“I am here to preserve the Lamps.” Lorne’s voice did not rise. “The kingdom dies without them. I have believed that for twenty years, and nothing I have seen tonight has changed it.”

“Then answer me one question directly.” I stopped three paces from her, close enough to see the way her knuckles had gone pale around the pot. “Would you burn the evidence that could save lives?”

She held my gaze. The flame between us flickered, and the shadows on the shelves shifted, and for a long moment I thought she would not answer.

“I would burn evidence that saves lives today if keeping it costs every life tomorrow.” Her voice was quiet, measured, the voice of a woman who had made her peace with the arithmetic. “That is the judgment the Quill House has always made. It is not a comfortable judgment, Merrit, but it is the one the kingdom requires.”

“That is not a direct answer.”

“It is the only answer I have.”

She lifted the pot toward the nearest shelf. The ledgers there were old, the leather dry, and the flame would catch them in seconds.

Juna’s soldiers took her arms before the wick touched paper.

* * *

The pot fell and cracked on the stones, and the flame went out in a hiss of spilled oil. Lorne did not struggle. She stood very still between the two soldiers, her hands still extended toward the shelf as if she had not yet registered that they were empty, and her face showed nothing at all.

“Take her to the gatehouse,” Juna said from the door-

way. “Two guards on the door, two on the window. She doesn’t leave until the reading’s done.”

The soldiers moved, and Lorne went with them without resistance. At the door she paused and looked back at me, and whatever she meant to say, she did not say it. Her lips parted and closed, and then she was gone, her footsteps receding down the stone passage.

Juna let out a breath. “Blunt sort of defense, a reading.”

“It is testimony.” I bent and picked up the cracked pot. The oil was cold on my fingers. “Not a weapon. It does not attack the Pale. It speaks what was burned, and the speaking lays the memory to rest. The fog thins because the memory is no longer feeding it.”

“Doesn’t restore it, though.”

“No.” I set the pot on the table. “It never restores it. That is the cost. The reading can check the Pale’s advance, but it cannot give Davor back what he surrendered. It cannot give Sevrin back his last memory. And it cannot return Tobin.”

Juna was quiet for a beat. From the yard, the voices of the readers carried through the cold air, a dozen different registers overlapping, and a soldier at the door called in that the Pale had pulled back far enough to show a strip of mudflat below the wall.

“Still working, though,” Juna said.

“Yes. It is working.”

* * *

The shout came from the yard, and I ran.

Brother Rudd had broken from his House guards. He must have slipped their grip when Lorne's arrest drew every eye to the Archive door, and now he was running across the yard with his thin legs pumping under his robes. The readers scattered from his path. Juna's soldiers moved to cut him off, but he was not running for the gate.

He was running for the wall.

I saw him reach the parapet. I saw him haul himself up onto the stone, his robe snagging on the rough edge, and for one moment he stood balanced there with the Pale coiling below him and the lantern light catching the side of his face. His expression was careful, as it had always been careful, the expression of a man who had spent twenty-two years keeping records and had killed to keep one buried.

"Brother Rudd." My voice came out louder than I meant it to. "Step down."

He turned his head. His eyes met mine, and he opened his mouth as if to speak, and then he did not speak. He simply let go of the stone and pitched forward into the fog.

The Pale closed over him without a sound. One moment he was there, a dark shape against the white, and the next he was gone, and the fog rolled on against the wall as if nothing had disturbed it.

The yard was silent. The readers had stopped reading. The lanterns flickered in the wind off the bay, and no one moved, and the only sound was the low burn of the Ninth Lamp in its high window.

Juna reached the parapet beside me. She stared down into the fog, her hands braced on the stone, and her jaw worked once before she spoke. "He's gone."

"Yes."

"Into the Pale."

"Yes."

She turned her back on the wall. "Right. Readers, pick up your ledgers. The fog's still there and the night's still young. Keep speaking."

* * *

They kept speaking.

The net-maker's daughter read a memory of a wedding feast. The garrison clerk read a memory of a first snowfall. The soldier with the grey hair read the First Ledger to its final page, and when she reached the last line her voice did not waver. The Pale pulled back in thin bands and narrow curls, retreating from the wall in places where the words reached it, but it did not break. It crowded the Lampwall still, a white weight pressing against the light, and the Ninth Lamp burned on.

Hours remained until dawn. I knew it without checking the sky, the way I knew the cold in my fingers and the ache in my back from eight days of carrying ledgers. The reading was working, and it was not enough. The Pale had been fed by four hundred years of memories, and one night of speaking could not undo that. It could only hold the line.

And Davor was running out of old memories.

I left the yard and climbed the lamp stair. My satchel was heavy against my hip, the copy of Pell's pages inside it along with my private ledger and the recall order I had not looked at in nine days. The stone steps were cold even through my boots, and the light from the Lamp chamber above grew brighter as I climbed.

Hobb met me at the top. His face was grey with soot and something else, something that made his hands move restlessly on his apron. "He's burned nine since dusk, trifles every one, and none of them held the hour it should have. He's down to the last of his boyhood now."

"How much is that?"

"Three, he says. After that there's nothing old left in him." Hobb's voice was steady, but his fingers kept moving, rubbing soot from his knuckles the way they did when he was about to share a memory. "He's been writing in his ledger. I saw the page. He's trying to get it all down before he forgets."

I looked past him toward the lamp chamber. Its door stood ajar, and the light that came through the gap was thinner than it should have been. "I need to go in."

"I know." Hobb stepped aside. "I'll keep the bowl full."

I pushed the door wide.

The Last Light of Night

I pushed open the door and found Davor seated on Hobb's stool in the lamp chamber with his reading ledger open across his knees and the bowl of the Ninth Lamp burning in front of him. The flame was low, the oil deep and clear, and Hobb had not been exaggerating. The wick burned pale at the edges, the way a flame goes when it has been fed too many thin memories in too short a time. Davor looked up as I entered, and the recognition in his face was already a beat slower than it should have been.

"Hobb said you were coming." He closed the ledger and set it aside. "He says the wall is full of voices. How many did you find?"

"Enough to hold until dawn." I pulled the bench from the writing table and sat down facing him. My satchel went on the floor at my feet, and I took out my private ledger and my fair copy of Pell's pages and laid them on the table. "The garrison clerks, most of the fishing families from Gull's Rest, some of the household. Juna's people are read-

ing in relays. The Pale is thinning where the words reach it.”

He watched me arrange my papers without comment. His hands rested on his thighs, the scarred palms turned up, and I saw him flex them once, the way a man tests a joint that has been stiff too long. The burn scars caught the lamplight and held it, pale seams across darker skin.

“How many old memories do you have left?”

“Three.” He said it without inflection, the way he might have reported the hour. “My father teaching me to tie a sheepshank. The smell of the bakehouse on Fen Street where my aunt worked. And a winter morning when I was twelve, walking out onto the frozen bay with my cousin. We got as far as the channel marker before the ice started talking.” He paused. “I had forgotten I still had that one. I found it at the bottom of everything else, like a coin in an old coat.”

“Then we start there.” I opened my ledger to a blank page and dipped my pen. “Say it again, and I will write it down, and then you will burn it.”

He did not argue. He told me about the frozen bay, the way the ice had groaned under their feet like a living thing, the particular blue of the sky over the water in winter, his cousin’s red scarf and the way she had laughed when he slipped and landed on his back. I wrote it down in the shorthand the Quill House taught me, fast and clean, and when he finished I read it back to him. He listened with his head tilted, as though the words belonged to someone

else.

“That is how it happened,” he said. “I had forgotten the scarf.”

He stood and crossed to the bowl. His right hand went into the flame without hesitation, and I watched his face as the memory left him. The muscles around his mouth tightened once, and then the tension went out of his shoulders, and he stood looking at the bowl as though he had forgotten what he came to it for. He turned back to me, and it took him a moment to find what he had been doing.

“Was there a scarf,” he said. “You read me something about a scarf.”

“Your cousin’s. It was red.” My voice stayed steady. “Sit down. There are two more.”

He sat. The bowl flame had steadied after the feeding, burning a little brighter, a little whiter at the core. I could hear the voices from the wall below us, a low murmur of many people reading aloud, and the sound of it came through the stone the way the sea comes through a shell. I thought of the readers I had left on the wall, the garrison clerks with their ledgers, the fishermen’s wives who had never read aloud in their lives before tonight and were doing it now with their children beside them. I thought of the Pale thinning where their words reached it, and I opened my ledger to the next page.

“The bakehouse on Fen Street,” I said.

He told me about the smell of rye flour and burnt honey, about his aunt’s hands dusted white to the wrist, about the

heat of the ovens on a summer morning and the way the baker's boy would slip him a roll still too hot to hold. I wrote it down. He burned it. When he turned from the bowl this time, he looked at me for a long moment and said nothing.

"The sheepshank," I said. "Your father."

His father's hands had been rough and patient, the rope coarse and smelling of salt, the knot a thing he learned on a dock with the tide coming in and the gulls crying overhead. He had been seven, he thought, or maybe eight. His father had said a knot you tie wrong is a knot you tie twice. I wrote it down. He burned it.

The bowl flame leaped and steadied, and Davor stood with his back to me, his hands at his sides, and when he turned around I saw a man with no boyhood left in him at all. Everything he owned now began at nineteen, on this stair, and most of that was long since ash.

"That is the last of it," he said. "Everything old."

"I know."

"What I have left is you." He said it the way he reported the state of a wick. "Ninety days of you. It is the best fuel in this keep, and you know it, because you watched what one morning of it did."

"I watched."

He almost smiled. It was a smaller expression than the one I had learned to watch for, a ghost of the dry amusement I knew, but it was there. "Then you know where I start. The newest first. They burn brightest, and I would

rather lose the end of it before the beginning.”

“Sit down, Kindler.” I turned to a fresh page. “Say it, and I will write it.”

I had known this was coming. I had done the sum in my own ledger days ago, what Davor had left against what the night would ask of him, and the arithmetic had pointed here from the beginning. Knowing it did not make my hand steadier, but I kept it steady anyway. That was the work.

“The night you came back up the stair,” he said. “Nine nights ago. I was sitting with my ledger open at a page I had read until it meant nothing, and the door opened without a knock, and you put my own order down in front of me and asked me why I had signed it.” He spoke slowly, for my pen and for himself. “You told me I did not get to choose for you again. I wrote under my name that the Ninth Kindler asked for his Remembrancer back, and you entered it. I remember the ink on your fingers. I remember what you said into my shoulder afterward, and I am not going to say that part aloud, so write that there was more.”

I wrote that there was more. I read it back to him, and he nodded, and he stood and put his hand into the flame. The Lamp took the night I came back, and the light that went out through the arch toward the bay was the whitest I had ever seen it give.

While he stood there finding his breath, I carried the ledger to the arch and read the entry out over the parapet, to the fog, in his words. That was the bargain of the night: he said it, I wrote it, the fire had it, and I spoke it back

before it could gather out there with the rest. Below me the white drew off from the foot of the wall by another yard.

When I turned around he was looking at the recall order, which had slid half out of my satchel on the floor. "That is my signature," he said. "There is a line under it in my hand. I do not know when I wrote it."

"Nine nights ago."

"Was I right to?"

"Yes." I sat down and took up the pen. "The next one."

"The night after the breach." He was quicker now, as if he had learned how fast they went. "You brought Pell's pages to my room and read me the note at the foot of them, and then you read me the sea, a boy on a headland, and I knew it was mine the way a man knows a story he was told when he was small. You said you were staying, and that it was not because of the pages. You were very clear about that." The corner of his mouth moved. "You are always very clear."

I wrote it down. He burned it. I read it to the fog.

"The waystation," he said. "One cot. Rain on the roof. I said the cot had no respect for professional boundaries, and you laughed." He stopped, and looked at me as though the sound were still somewhere in the room. "Four inches of straw between us. It did not last till morning."

I wrote it down. He burned it. I read it to the fog, and my voice held, because a reader who falters hands the line to the next, and there was no next reader in that room.

“You, writing down the sea.” He had to look for this one, and I watched him find it. “I do not have the sea. I have you with the notebook on your knee and your hand going across the page as though nothing in the world could hurry it. I remember thinking that it was safe with you. That is all of it. It is very small.”

It was the smallest of them, and the Lamp burned on it for the better part of an hour. I wrote it down. He burned it. I read it to the fog.

Below us, the voices on the wall kept reading. I could hear them through the stone, a steady rise and fall like the tide coming in, and every voice was a memory being spoken back to the fog. The Pale was thinning. I had seen it from the arch each time I read, a little more dark water, a little less white. The words were working. They were not restoring anything. They were laying the memories to rest, giving them a witness, and the fog was retreating before them.

Davor sat on the stool with his hands loose in his lap, and he looked at me the way a man looks at someone he is trying to place. There was one memory of me left in him. I had counted them as we went, the old ones and the new ones, and I knew what the last one was.

“There is one more,” he said. “A woman at my gate with a commission in her hand, quoting the charter at me through the bars. Article twelve, section four. I told her I knew the charter.” He looked at his palms. “I do not know why I let her in. I only know that I did.”

I wrote it down. I read it back. He stood and went to the bowl, and his hand hovered over the flame, and for the first time all night he hesitated. He looked at me with the expression of a man about to close a door who cannot remember what is on the other side of it.

“Kindler.” Hobb’s voice came from the arch, and it cracked on the word. “Kindler, look.”

Davor looked. So did I. Beyond the arch the sky had gone the colour of pewter, and under it there was water, flat and dark and bare, all the way out. No white line. No bank. The voices on the wall had stopped, not one by one but all together, the way a crowd stops when it sees something it has no word for.

He took his hand back from the flame. He stood a moment longer with it held out over the bowl, as if the fire might still ask, and it did not ask. Then he turned to me, and Davor Kesh looked at me with the steady, courteous attention of a man meeting someone for the second time. He knew I was the Remembrancer. He knew I had argued the law with him at the gate. He knew nothing else.

“It is dawn,” he said. “The Lamp has held.”

I looked at the bowl. The flame was burning clean and strong, the oil deep and clear, and it had one memory fewer in it than the night had been willing to take. Outside there was only the sound of the wind and the distant cry of a gull.

“Yes,” I said. “It has held.”

I closed my ledger and put the pen away. My hand was

steady. I had been writing for hours, and my fingers were cramped, and the ink on my first two fingers had dried in layers, dark over dark. I stood and gathered my satchel and left the fair copy of Pell's pages on the table. The private ledger I kept in my hands.

"You should come down to the wall," I said. "The fog is gone. You should see what the reading did."

He nodded, a polite stranger accepting a reasonable suggestion, and followed me out of the chamber and down the lamp stair.

The yard was full of people. The readers had come down from the parapet and were standing in clusters, garrison clerks and fishermen's wives and children with the ledgers still in their hands, and they were all looking toward the wall. I walked through them, and Davor walked behind me, and the crowd parted for us without being asked.

Juna met me at the foot of the parapet stair. Her face was tired and her voice was hoarse from reading, but she was smiling, the wide unguarded smile I had not seen since the morning she turned her horse around. "It worked," she said. "The bay is clear. The mudflats are bare all the way to the channel. And there are people standing on them." She jerked her head toward the gatehouse. "Lorne's still under my guard. She lit that wick in front of half the keep, and the House will have her office for it. The ledgers stay where they are, in everybody's hands."

I climbed to the wall.

The Pale was gone. Morrow Bay stretched out below the

Lampwall in the grey light of dawn, the water flat and silver, the mudflats glistening where the tide had turned. And on the mudflats, standing in the first sun, were the Blank.

There were dozens of them. They stood in the shallow water and on the wet sand, their clothes unchanged from the moment the fog had taken them, their faces young and unaged and perfectly empty. A woman in a fisherman's apron. A man with a net mending hook still in his hand. Children, some of them small enough that the water came to their waists, blinking in the sunlight with no fear and no recognition. And nearer the wall than any of them, his House robe dark with seawater to the knee, Brother Rudd, with the same mild face as the rest and nothing careful left in it.

And among them, twenty yards out on the mudflats, standing exactly as he had stood for four winters in the fog at Saltreach, was Tobin. Saltreach was a long ride west. I will never know how the Pale carried what it kept; I only know that when it went, it set them all down here, under the last Lamp that had burned against it.

I went down the wall stair to the beach. The mud sucked at my boots, cold and thick, and the salt smell of the bay was sharp in my throat. I walked out onto the flats, past the woman in the apron and the man with the mending hook and the children who watched me pass with mild incurious eyes, and I stopped in front of my brother.

He was nineteen still. His face was the face I remembered, the same jaw and the same brow and the same

small scar on his chin where he had fallen off the net-maker's ladder when he was twelve. His hands were the hands of a net-maker, rough and capable, and they hung at his sides as though he had just set down his work and was waiting for someone to tell him what to do next. He looked at me without recognition, without curiosity, without anything but the simple animal awareness of a person who is alive and present and remembers nothing.

"Tobin," I said.

He did not answer. He did not know the name. He did not know me.

I had known this was coming. I had known it since the waystation, since I had spoken Davor's stolen-plum memory to the Pale and watched a ribbon of fog dissolve without returning anything to the man who had surrendered it. The practice of speaking back laid memories to rest. It did not restore them. The Blank would come out of the Pale exactly as they had gone in, alive and unchanged and empty, and nothing I could do would give them back what the fog had taken.

I had known it. Knowing it did not make it easier to stand in front of my brother and watch his eyes move over my face the way a stranger's eyes move over a landscape, taking it in without attaching anything to it.

But I had not come all this way to mourn him.

I reached out and took his hands. They were cold from the mudflats, cold and still, and they did not close around mine, but they did not pull away either. He let me hold

them. He looked at me with the same mild attention he would have given a door that had opened unexpectedly, waiting to see what came through it.

“Your name is Tobin Sayle,” I said. “You are nineteen years old. You are a net-maker, and you learned the trade from old Marten at Saltreach, and you were better at it than anyone in the town. You have a sister. Her name is Merrit. She is a Remembrancer, and she has been looking for you for four years, and she is going to tell you your life now, if you will let her.”

He did not answer. He did not know the words. But he stood there in the cold mud with the sun coming up over the bay, and he let me hold his hands, and that was enough. That was more than I had let myself hope for in four years. I had come to this coast looking for someone to blame, and then for a cure, and I had found neither, only the hard truth that what the Lamps took they kept. But I had found something else too. I had found a way to tell the story. I had found a voice that could speak the losses aloud and give them a witness, and if that could not restore what was gone, it could at least make sure the loss was not the last word.

I looked back toward the wall. Davor stood on the parapet with Juna beside him, a tall figure silhouetted against the lightening sky, and he was looking down at the mudflats with the careful attention of a man cataloguing something he knew he should understand. He did not know me. He did not know what we had been to each other, or what

he had given up in the long hours of the night, or why a Remembrancer he had argued with at the gate was standing in the mud holding the hands of a Blank net-maker. He knew only what I had told him, what I had written down and read back to him before the flame took it, and that was not enough to make him remember.

But it was enough to make a record. And a record was a thing you could give to someone, even if you could not give them back the memory itself.

I walked back up the beach with Tobin beside me, his hand still loose in mine, and I climbed the wall stair to the parapet. Juna stepped aside to make room for us, and I saw her look at Tobin and then at me, and she did not say anything. There was nothing to say.

Davor turned as I approached. He looked at me with the same polite blankness he had worn since the last memory burned, and then his gaze dropped to Tobin and stayed there for a moment.

"The Blank," he said. "They are alive."

"They are alive." I let go of Tobin's hand and reached into my satchel. The private ledger was there, the book I had written in every night since I came to Lastlight Keep, the record of everything that had happened between the gate and the dawn. I held it out to Davor.

"What is this?"

"It is a ledger of the last ninety days. I wrote it. It begins with the gate and ends with tonight. Everything that happened is in there. Everything you gave up." I put the book

into his hands. They closed around it automatically, the scarred palms pressing against the leather cover, and he looked down at it with the same careful attention he had given the mudflats. "I am not going to tell you what is in it. That is not my choice to make. But the record is yours. You can open it or not. That is your choice."

He looked at me. The stranger behind his eyes was still there, but something else was there too, something I had not seen before. He did not know me. He did not know what the book contained, or what it would cost him to open it, or whether he wanted to be the man the book described. But he held it carefully, the way a man holds a thing he knows is valuable even if he cannot remember why.

"You argued the law with me," he said. "At the gate."

"I did."

"And you stayed."

"I stayed."

He nodded once, a small precise movement, and then he looked down at the book in his hands. The sun was fully up now, the light spilling over the bay and turning the water gold, and the bay was empty of fog for the first winter in four hundred years. The Blank stood in the shallows, blinking in the daylight, and the readers on the wall had fallen silent, and the Ninth Lamp was still burning in its chamber, the flame clean and steady, the cost paid in full.

I turned back to Tobin. He was watching the gulls wheel over the bay, his face lifted to the light, and I took his hand

again and began to tell him his life.

Epilogue

The wall was crowded in a way it had never been when the Lamps were burning.

I stood near the western parapet with my hands flat on the cold stone and watched Morrow Bay stay dark. For the first time in four hundred years, on the Longest Night, not one Lamp was lit along the whole of the Lampwall. No white line on the water. No fog. The stars were out, sharp and numerous, and the sea stretched black and ordinary all the way to the horizon. Behind me the garrison families had built a bonfire on the stone, more for warmth than light, and the children of Gull's Rest were roasting chestnuts in a perforated iron pan. Someone had brought a fiddle. Someone else was singing off-key.

A year ago I would have found the noise unbearable. Now it seemed like the right kind of noise, the kind that belonged to people who were not afraid of what waited beyond the wall.

Juna stood a little way down the parapet, her elbows on the stone, watching the bay with the satisfaction of a woman who had spent twelve months enforcing a peace

no one had expected to hold. She caught my eye and lifted her chin in greeting, and I lifted mine back. She was laughing at something one of her soldiers had said, and the laugh carried above the bonfire crackle and the fiddle, loud and unmistakable.

Hobb was not on the wall. He was in the lamp chamber, I knew, wiping down the bowl of the Ninth Lamp with the same rag he had used every morning for fourteen years. The flame had been out since spring. He still kept the wicks trimmed.

Tobin sat on a folded blanket near the bonfire with a net across his knees. His hands moved through the mending with a rhythm that had come back before his memory did, the shuttle darting between the cords in a pattern his fingers remembered when he could not. He had corrected me twice that week, once about the name of our mother's cat and once about the year the roof blew off the boathouse. The corrections were still delivered with a slight hesitation, as if he were reading from a text he was not sure he had the right to interpret, but they were corrections nonetheless. He had begun adding days of his own in the last month, small ones, a morning he spent helping Hobb clean the bowl, an afternoon he walked to Gull's Rest and came back with a sack of mussels and a story about a fisherman who had fallen off the dock. When I asked him if he wanted me to write it down he had considered the question for a long moment and then said no, he thought he would keep that one for himself.

I left him to his net and walked to the far end of the wall, where the parapet looked out over the mudflats. The tide was out and the flats gleamed wet in the starlight, and somewhere below us the Blank of Saltreach had walked out of the shallows a year ago and begun the slow work of becoming people again. Some of them had stayed at the keep. Some had gone to Gull's Rest. Some had wandered inland and not come back, and no one knew what they had found or failed to find. The Pale had left them all the same way, empty and alive and unaged, and what they made of that was theirs to choose.

Footsteps on the stone behind me, unhurried and familiar.

I did not turn. "You are missing the bonfire."

"I was at the bonfire." Davor stopped beside me and rested his forearms on the parapet. He was not wearing a cloak, and the winter air had brought colour to his face. The white streak at his temple had grown a little wider in the past year, or perhaps I had simply stopped measuring it against the man I first met at the gate. "Someone is playing a fiddle very badly."

"It is the baker's son. He has been taking lessons."

"He should stop."

I laughed, and the sound of it surprised me. I had not laughed easily in the months after the Longest Night, when I was still telling Tobin his life and waiting for Davor to open the ledger and learn what he had lost. He had taken his time with it. I had watched him read it in the lamp

chamber over the course of a week, his face unreadable, his hands turning the pages with the same care Hobb used on the wicks. When he finished he had closed the book and set it on the table and gone to walk the wall alone, and I had let him go.

The next morning he found me in the archive and asked me, in his plain dry way, whether the Ninth Lamp still had a Remembrancer, now that it had so little use for a Kindler. I said it did. He asked for nothing else, and I offered nothing else, and that was how the year began.

Now he stood beside me in the dark and watched the bay with the same attention he had once given the flame, and I understood that he was working up to something.

“I have been thinking,” he said.

“A dangerous pastime.”

“You have told me that before.” He paused. “Or I read it. I cannot remember which.”

He said it without self-pity, the way he might note that the tide was out or the wind had shifted. The memories he had burned were gone, and he had made his peace with that, or as much peace as anyone could make with a ledger full of days he had lived and could not recall. He still did not remember the plums or the sea or the waystation cot or any night of the ninety. He had read the ledger I gave him, all of it, and then he had spent a year beside me, and he had fallen in love with me from the beginning, with nothing to go on but the woman in front of him.

“I would like it entered,” he said, “that this time it was

my own idea.”

He reached into his coat and drew out a book. It was bound in dark leather, the spine uncracked, the pages fresh-cut and even. He held it out to me, and I took it and opened it, and every page was blank.

I looked up at him. The bonfire light caught the edge of his jaw, the old burn scars on his palms where he held the parapet. He was watching me with the expression of a man who had made a decision and was prepared to be patient about it.

“It is for the two of us,” he said. “To fill.”

The old ledger was on the shelf in his room, where he had put it when he finished, the ninety days recorded in my own hand. It kept our past honest, and it would stay where it was, a record of what we had been and what we had lost. This was something else. This was a book that did not pretend love was recovered memory, and I understood, holding it, that he had understood me better than I had given him credit for.

I closed the book and tucked it under my arm. The bonfire crackled behind us, and the fiddle scraped on, and the bay lay dark and empty of fog all the way to the horizon. I uncapped the ink I still carried in my satchel, the habit of a year’s work, and balanced the book on the parapet with the first page open to the starlight.

“What do you want the first line to say?”