The Last Bearer

A novel by U.K. Raven

Read the opening chapters free.

Prelude

Ash

The world was ever, is now, and shall ever be an ever-living fire,
kindling in measures, and going out in measures.

Heraclitus

The fire had burned on this headland since before his grandfather was born.

Tonight Rian was going to lose it.

The wind came across the basin and put him a step sideways before he got his feet.

Rain drove across the headland in sheets, flattening itself against stone and skin. It struck the fire full on and tore at it, ripping the flame sideways into thin guttering strands.

The basin sat back from the cliff edge, far enough that a gust couldn't pitch a man into the dark, close enough that the glow reached out over the water. Tonight the glow barely reached the fog.

Half the wood in the basin was soaked through. What was left had collapsed inward, a blackened tangle sinking into its own ash. The flame clung low and uneven, breaking apart and reforming in weak bursts.

Rian dropped to one knee at the rim, fitted stone, worn smooth along the top where hands had gripped it through a hundred watches, and set his shoulder into the gusts.

No one else was fool enough to be out in it.

He dragged a half-burnt length of wood across the basin, trying to catch what flame was left and pull it into something that could live.

"Come on," he said to it, out loud, alone on a headland in the dark. "Come on, then." His voice cracked on the second one and he didn't care.

The heat came off it thin and scattered, and was gone before it reached his face. Every time the fire gathered, the wind opened it up again.

Below the cliff the waves went into the rock and came back up through the stone into his knee.

Between one crash and the next…

silence.

Too clean for weather.

Rian looked up.

Beyond the reach of the firelight the fog had pressed closer. Where the wind staggered him, the fog stood still.

Something shifted inside it. He saw the fog thicken in one place and then in another, the way water changes over something swimming under it.

High up in it, higher than a cottage eave, points of violet came and went, too many of them and in the wrong places. Something pale turned in the gray like a horse's skull drawn out long, and was gone.

The flame dipped to a line of red along the coals.

From the fog, a sound.

Close to a voice.

Rian went still on his knee at the rim.

He bent forward and breathed into the basin, pushing what heat he could back into the coals. Steam hissed where the rain struck. The wood gave nothing back.

The fire should have died already.

It hadn't.

Another gust hit harder than the last. The flame tore apart and went down into scattered embers under the ash.

The fog came closer, against the wind.

Rian didn't look at it again.

He got up, put one boot over the rim, and stepped down into the basin.

The coals took him to the ankles. They were hotter than they had any right to be for how little was left of them. He went down onto his knees in them. He felt the heat go into his shins and keep going, up through his thighs and into the small of his back and along his spine. He pushed against it. It was like leaning on a door that wasn't latched. The wood took what he gave it and asked for more, easily.

His trousers smoked and went. The skin over his knees tightened and split. He smelled it. He stayed where he was.

There was nothing down there that should've caught.

The coals brightened anyway. Then the wood around him, wet through, went up all at once with a sound like a sheet snapped out over a bed.

Flame came up past his chest. He felt it on his face and it did nothing to him.

It rose in a narrow ring, a hand's width in from the stone rim, and stood straight up in a wind that should have laid it flat. Rain came down into it and disappeared without a sound.

Rian knelt in the middle of it with the coals round his knees.

Out past the light, the fog stopped where it was.

* * *

"That's the one about the watchman," the guard said.

Vankeur turned the cup a quarter turn on the boards and didn't drink out of it.

"That's the one."

Outside the inn the wind came off the water and shoved at the walls and set the lanterns swinging on their hooks. The traveller had come in an hour ago with the rain still on their coat and had said almost nothing until the headland fire came up in the talk.

"Everyone's heard that one," the guard said.

"Depends who told it to you."

The innkeeper set down the mug he was wiping. "And that's the story, is it?"

"Half of it," Vankeur said. "There's a second man. A hundred years after. They never heard each other's names, and they ended up called the same thing."

"That's two stories, then," the guard said.

"It might be." Vankeur turned the cup another quarter. "The first one's in that basin yet. Black to the knee, last I was up there. The coast sends a man round every night to look in on him, and he's never yet had anything to write down."

The woman by the hearth didn't look up from her netting, but her hands had slowed.

"The second man," the guard said. "What's he got to do with the…"

"Go on, then," said a fisherman at the next table.

Vankeur looked at the black window long enough that the guard went back to his drink, and then turned back to the table.

"It starts in the rain," they said. "A long way inland, on a river you've not heard the name of. There was a doctor in it, and they sent for him."

Not a chair scraped. The innkeeper put another log on the fire unasked.

Chapter 1

Long Enough

They sent for the doctor first. Morrow was the one who came.

He heard it before he reached the door, a woman's voice going up and cracking and going up again, past words now, the shape a person makes after the words run out. The miller's back room smelled of blood in standing air, thick enough to sit on the tongue, and someone had cracked the window a hand's width. Outside, rain had been coming down since noon, the gutter over the door had choked, and it hammered on the sill as if it wanted in too.

Yenna, the girl's mother, and one of the mill hands had the girl pinned to the cot by the shoulders and one knee. Jonis had both hands buried in a wad of linen that had gone through white twice already and wasn't going to a third time.

"Where is he?" Yenna kept saying, to the room, to the door. "Where's the doctor? Where's the…"

"Here," Morrow said, and every head in the room swung on him at once, with the look people give a door when they've spent ten minutes deciding it's about to be someone specific and it isn't.

"You're not him," Jonis said.

"No," Morrow agreed, already on his knees at the cot, already reaching. "Let go. I've got it."

"She won't stop…"

"I know. Let go."

Jonis let go. Blood found the gap immediately, welling up dark between Morrow's fingers before he'd even clamped them flat, and it came in pulses, a push each time her heart went. Something in there was still open that shouldn't be.

"What happened?" he said, working the linen back a fold at a time.

"The mill wheel took her," Yenna said. "The drive gear. She reached for the sack before it cleared and it…"

The girl made a sound that wasn't a word either.

"Hey," Morrow said to her, close, quick. "Look at me. Not the ceiling. Me."

Her eyes found him and didn't quite hold him.

"Good," he said. "Now breathe with me. In four, out six. Can you count that high?"

"I'm not…" Her voice cracked. "I'm not a *child*…"

"No," Morrow said. "You're just bleeding on my knees. In four."

She breathed in. Ragged, but in.

"Out six."

She got to four and ran out.

"That's fine. Again."

He pressed his palm flat over the wound, not the linen now, past it, until he could feel the give of muscle and the harder line of bone underneath, and pushed, and it began to cost him almost straight away. The blood stopped coming in pushes and only welled.

By the second time the girl lost the count his forearm was cramping and he'd started sweating through his shirt, and he was breathing the way a man breathes carrying something up a flight of stairs.

"Talk to me," he said, to the room now, not looking up. "Somebody talk to me while I do this."

"Doctor's coming," a boy said from the doorway, out of breath, soaked to the collar. "I ran the whole way. I think I'm dying."

"You're not," Morrow said. "I'd notice."

"Ma's going to kill me for the boots."

"Add it to the list."

The girl's breathing had steadied to something almost like the four-and-six he'd given her. Morrow matched it without deciding to, in through the nose, hold, out slow, because his own hands had started to shake at the wrist and counting was the only thing he had to give them to do instead.

"Who was stitching before I got here?" he said.

Jonis's hand went up, small. "Me."

"Wash first?"

"Yes."

"Soap?"

"Yes…"

Something let go further up and the blood hit his hand in one hard shove.

"Hold her," Morrow said, sharper than he meant it, and two of the three at her shoulders threw their weight back down as the girl's spine came half off the cot. Morrow got his shoulder over the hand and bore down. The pain came up the arm and he stopped talking. The blood went back to welling and stayed at that.

"What was that?" Yenna said, in the voice of somebody who only wanted the answer.

"I don't know," Morrow said. "Talk. Please. Anybody."

"They're patching the sluices again," someone by the door said, grabbing at it. "Been saying it all week."

"River keeps climbing like this we'll be swimming to market," said another voice, and no laugh came, but a breath went round the room that was the start of one, thin and grateful for anywhere to go.

The girl's eyes had gone somewhere private. Her lips were still moving on the count, four, out, six, even when nothing was coming out with it.

"Stay with me," Morrow told her. "Not the ceiling."

She found him again. It took longer this time.

"Coats were in the yard when it happened," somebody said by the window, low, and the room let that one lie.

The door opened and two older men came in on a gust of rain, Herren and Voss, Herren with the council ledger buttoned inside his coat to keep it dry, Voss with nothing in his hands at all. Men who'd been around long enough that others went quiet when they talked.

Herren looked at the girl, at the blood, at the hand buried past the wrist in it, and then at Morrow.

"How long?" he said.

"Since I walked in," Morrow said, not looking up. "Which was three breaths after I should have."

"That's not what I'm…"

"I know what you're asking," Morrow said, and for the first time all day he had to work to keep his voice level. "Not now."

Voss crouched at the foot of the cot, close enough to see the wound, and looked at it.

"Does it feel different?" Voss asked. "From the last one?"

Morrow could have lied. He was tired enough that lying would've taken more than telling the truth.

"It doesn't feel like anything's stopping me," he said. "That's the part I don't like."

Voss stayed where he was. "Your grandfather said as much."

Yenna's head came up. "Not now."

"I know when," Voss said quietly. "I didn't bring it in. It was already in the room."

Morrow's arm had been cramping for a long while and his back had gone from the angle. He'd carried heavier things further. What bothered him was that the wound hadn't pushed back once, and that he could tell it wasn't going to.

"He's here," Jonis said, forehead against the window glass. "The doctor. He's running."

Somebody by the door let a breath go, and then the rest of the room did.

"Good," Yenna said, thin. "Then we can stop."

The doctor came in wet through and swearing, took one look, and was on his knees before his bag hit the floor.

"You kept her," he said to Morrow, in the same voice he'd been swearing in.

"Yes."

"Long enough. That's all I needed." He was already working. "Off. Now."

Morrow lifted his hand. Where his palm had been, the linen was dry. His hand had been still so long that now it wouldn't stop shaking.

The doctor took over.

Her father came off the wall and took Morrow's hand in both of his and shook it, and went on shaking it, well past the point where either of them knew what it was any more, saying thank you in a voice that had stopped working, and then he gave it up and put his forehead down on his daughter's hair and stayed there.

As people started drifting toward the front, somebody near the back said, low, "Engine's running hot again, they're saying."

"Better hope it holds," someone answered. "Pryor's had his crew on the east valve all week."

"Still running, though."

Voss lingered by the door while Morrow got his feet back under him, which took longer than it should have.

"You did well by her," Voss said.

"I always do," Morrow said. It came out thin.

Voss looked at him a moment too long. "That's what worries us."

He went. Morrow stayed sitting on the floor, listening to the room come back to itself, a chair scraping, someone in the front room asking, unbelievably, about supper, as if that were still a thing people did.

By the time he reached the front room his hand had stopped shaking. The arm ached from the shoulder down, and would go on aching into tomorrow, and he was glad of it.

* * *

Morrow didn't go to his mother's right away.

If he walked in fresh from using it, his mother would look at his hands as if she could read the day off the skin. If he waited, she'd know anyway, but at least he wouldn't be handing it to her.

Through the open door of the wheelhouse he could see the drive gear, stopped now, with a corner of the sack the girl had reached for still caught between two teeth. Iron as thick as his wrist, every tooth worn bright on the one face. Somebody had thrown a bucket of river water over it and the water had run off pink into the boards. A cat sat on the sill inside the wheelhouse door, mud-colored, a notch out of its left ear, looking down at the gear. The eaves dripped an inch from it. Its coat was dry.

"Nobody was on the wheel," the miller said. He'd come out onto the step behind him, wiping his hands on a cloth that was only making them worse. "Two coats had pulled the hands off it and stood them against the wall to be looked at. Wheel still going, and not a man let near the brake. Watching to see who'd reach for it when it went wrong." He looked at the gear. "She went to clear it before it jammed."

He went back inside.

The boards laid across the miller's yard were furred green along the edges and slick down the middle, and Morrow went over them flat-footed. He took the longer path along the river. The wind off the water made his eyes run, which suited him. The current was slow and heavy, thick with silt, riding higher up the reeds than it had a week ago. Somebody had driven a stick into the mud at the old waterline. The stick was under.

From this part of the bank you could see the upriver road where it came out past the last of the houses and went up over the shoulder of the hill and stopped being road. About a mile of it, on a clear day.

The rest of them were coming down it now. The two at the mill had only been the front of it.

A dozen, maybe more, two abreast, at the same pace the whole way, and three carts behind. The carts were empty, and riding high, and the drivers not pushing them.

A carter coming up the other way with a load of slate didn't get his mule off the road quick enough. The front two didn't stop. One of them took the mule by the bridle and walked it sideways into the ditch, cart and all, and the slate went over. When the carter got down shouting, the other one hit him in the face with something short and dark out of his sleeve, once, and again when he tried to get up, and they went on walking. They never changed pace. The ones behind stepped round the man in the road and didn't look down.

The people on the road let him lie. Morrow did too. He stood on the bank with his hands in his armpits and watched the carts come down past the first houses, and the shutters going to along the row as they passed, one after another.

He'd seen one of those carts going the other way when he was fourteen, full, with his mother's cousin Hettie sitting on the back of it with her hands in her lap, because she'd been out of the tannery eight months by then and the household sheet the council kept on every house only had the one column for that. There'd been a band of dark iron round one of her wrists, close as a bracelet, and she'd kept her hands in her lap as if she'd been told to. He'd asked his mother what it was for. His mother had said it was so Hettie wouldn't hurt herself, and walked faster. The family had walked her up as far as the turn and not past it. Nothing came back afterward, no letter, no word through anybody, and none had been expected. The upriver road went north, to the camps, people said, without ever having seen one. Her name stayed in the household about two years and then stopped being said at meals.

He had the whole conversation on the way over and then went in and had it again.

The house was lit when he opened the door. The lamp on the table was burning even though there was daylight left. His mother did that.

She sat with a cup of tea gone dark and cold and still in her hands. She didn't look up when he came in.

"You eaten?" she asked.

"No."

"That's a shame," she said. "There's soup on the hook and bread under the cloth, and you look like a shirt somebody wrung out and forgot on the line."

He sat across from her. The chair creaked. Somewhere over their heads the house creaked back.

His mother finally looked up. Her eyes went straight to his hands.

Morrow spread them on the table, palms down, as if he were presenting evidence.

"You fed it," she said.

"Yes."

"How long?"

"Long enough for the doctor."

"I asked you how long."

Morrow leaned back. "I didn't check the clock."

His mother's mouth tightened. "Someone did. They always do."

He didn't answer. They both knew that was why the elders had come.

She took a sip of her tea and made a face like it had offended her. "Who?"

"Herren and Voss showed up," Morrow said. "Voss put my grandfather up next to me like he was seeing if it still fit."

"And did it?" she asked.

Morrow looked down at the table. There was a knot in the wood just left of his hand that he'd traced as a child when conversations got too sharp. He traced it now without thinking.

"No," he said. "It didn't."

His mother watched him until he looked away, then stood and went to the cabinet. She took out a narrow wooden box, small and carved, the edges worn round.

She set it on the table between them.

Morrow left his hands where they were.

"I wasn't going to," she said, as if defending herself to the room. "I told myself I wouldn't. But then you walked in with that look."

She opened the box.

Inside were thin strips of wood bundled with twine gone soft with age. Names carved into them. Some deep. Some shallow. Some rubbed down nearly smooth.

She didn't take the first one she touched. Her fingers went down the bundle and came back up it twice.

Then she slid one strip out and set it in front of him, carefully, in a way Morrow didn't like.

His grandfather's name.

Morrow flinched before he could stop himself.

"I don't need that," he said quietly.

"You do," his mother replied. "Because you're starting to believe the wrong thing."

"And what's the wrong thing?"

"That keeping a person going is the same as saving them."

He let out a breath, sharp and humorless. "I didn't save anyone."

His mother's gaze didn't waver. "Good. Keep saying that."

Morrow's hand drifted toward the strip, then stopped short.

She sat again, folded her hands around her cup, and for a moment looked older than she was.

"It started with a fall," she said. "It was your great-uncle Marlen. Your grandfather's oldest friend, near enough a brother. Not blood, but family all the same. He was head of the mills then. Loud man. He took up space like it was owed to him. He came off the loft ladder onto the stones. Broke his hip. Caught fever after. And then infection. And then there was a day he stopped waking up properly. The doctor said it was a matter of hours." She looked at him now. "And your grandfather couldn't stand the idea of it ending like that."

"Because he loved him."

"Because he loved him," she agreed. "Because he was proud. Because he couldn't tolerate being helpless."

"He started feeding it that first night," she said. "Hand on Marlen's wrist. Then on his chest. Then just sitting there, like if he stayed still enough the ending would get bored and leave. At first, everyone was grateful. It gave people time to arrive. It gave family time to say what they wanted to say. It gave your grandmother time to stop shaking."

Morrow nodded. He could see it. He'd done a smaller version of it that day.

He got up, took the bread from under the cloth and tore the heel off it, because he hadn't eaten since morning and his hands wanted something to do. He ate it standing at the hearth while she talked.

"And then," his mother said, and her voice flattened, "it kept going. A day. Then another. Then a week. And your great-uncle didn't get better, Morrow. He didn't wake up and apologize for the trouble and tell us all to stop fussing."

She set the cup down and left her hands around it.

"He just stayed," she said. "Breathing, barely. Heart beating, barely. Not enough to live, not enough to die."

"How long?" Morrow said.

His mother looked at the strip, then at him.

"Forty-three days," she said. "People in and out of that room. Meals left untouched because the family couldn't decide if it was disrespectful to eat while he lingered. Arguments whispered in the hallway about inheritance and leadership and who was waiting for what."

She leaned forward slightly. "Do you know what happens to a town when a man won't finish dying?"

"It waits," Morrow said.

"It rots," she said.

Morrow looked down at his hands. They'd stopped shaking an hour ago.

"Your grandfather stopped needing to touch him," she said quietly. "At first he had to be right there, hand to skin, eyes open, refusing. Then it was enough to sit beside the bed. Then enough to sit in the room. Then he went out to eat and Marlen didn't die. Then he went home to sleep and Marlen didn't die. Then he walked to the mill and Marlen didn't die." She turned her cup. "That's when people started keeping track. Not because they wanted to accuse him. Because they needed to know what the rules were, and there weren't any."

Morrow stared at the strip with the carved name.

"And then Marlen died," he said, voice rough.

His mother took her time over it. "Eventually."

"Was it worse?"

"It was ugly," she said. "Quiet. It took him the best part of a day."

"And your grandfather?" he asked.

His mother looked away.

"He didn't talk for a week afterward," she said. "Not a word. Just sat on the step and stared at the road like he was waiting for someone to come explain what he'd done."

"So the town decided to blame him," Morrow said.

"The town decided to learn," she said.

Morrow thought of the one column on the sheet, and Hettie on the back of the cart with her hands in her lap.

Morrow came back to the table and sat. His fingers found the edge of the wooden strip. He turned it over. The back was worn smooth, a shallow dish where other people's thumbs had sat, over years.

"You think that's what's happening to me," he said.

His mother didn't flinch. "I think you're getting used to it."

"I sweated through a shirt," Morrow said.

"I know," she said, before he'd finished. "Morrow. That's the beginning of a habit."

"I'm not Grandfather," he said.

"No," she agreed. "You're worse, in a way. You sit like him. Quiet. Kind. Helpful. That's how it starts. That's how it gets called mercy."

Morrow sat back. "So what do you want me to do? Refuse when they…"

"No," she said. "Don't be dramatic. We don't have the luxury. You do the work. You keep them going until the doctor arrives. You keep them going until the bleeding stops on its own. You feed it until the decision gets made by someone who's paid to make it. And then you take your hand off."

"That's easy to say at a kitchen table."

"That's why I'm saying it at one," she replied. "So you've heard it somewhere warm before you need it somewhere that isn't."

"They'll want me at the engine again," Morrow said. "Pryor's been short-handed since the spring."

His mother's face didn't change. Her hand came off the cup and stopped on the table.

"Good," she said. "Go. Every day if they'll have you."

Morrow frowned. "You just spent an hour telling me not to touch anyone."

"I spent an hour telling you not to touch a *person*," she said. "A beam doesn't have a family standing in the doorway keeping count. It just holds, or it doesn't, and nobody's counted days over it since the world began." She wrapped both hands around her cold cup. "You want to feed something, feed the engine. It won't ask you to stop, and Nyr, who keeps the count of every one of us, has never once looked twice at a bridge. I'm drawing you a line, the way I used to chalk the floor by the door so you'd know where the mud stopped. Stay on the right side of it."

"Half the town stands on that engine," Morrow said. "That's a lot of people in a doorway."

His mother opened her mouth, and shut it, and didn't answer that.

He rubbed his thumb over the back of the wooden strip, over the worn place.

"And if I can't?" he asked.

His mother's gaze sharpened. "Then you come home," she said. "And you tell me. And we don't pretend."

Morrow exhaled, slow. "You'd stop me?"

"I'd try," she said.

His mother closed the box and slid it back toward the cabinet. She paused, hand on the lid.

"I loved him," she said, softer. "And I miss him. And I still think he did what he did because he couldn't bear to lose someone."

Morrow nodded, throat tight.

"And," she added, looking at him again, "I still think he was wrong."

Morrow didn't answer. His thumb found the knot in the table and went round it, as it had when he was small.

His mother stood. "Stay for supper," she said. "Or don't. But if you don't, I'm sending food with you anyway."

Morrow stood too.

As he moved toward the door he flexed his fingers, and the ache came with them.

His mother watched him from the table.

From the step he could hear the engine down at the river, running hot, a low note under the rain that came up through the wet planks into his boots.

Chapter 2

On-Site

The sound hit first, before the smell of it, before the heat, a pressure, dense and low and dead even, the kind of sound that made the inner ear tilt wrong.

The engine was already working when Morrow stepped through the south intake, and that alone wasn't unusual. But the floor buzzed underfoot in a way it usually didn't at this hour, and the steam hung crooked in the corridor air instead of rising straight, and both of those together were.

The corridor was familiar down in the body, past thinking about it. The air smelled of old metal and warm algae, river rot trapped in heat too long and gone sweetish with it.

He took the stairwell down to the control floor, hand grazing the guard rail out of habit. The whole space shook in slow rhythm, like a jaw working on its own.

Five techs moved through the chamber, each on some job that should've had three names behind it.

The board was already flipped to surge condition. One red. Two yellow. Margin line pulsing faint.

He found the notation scrawled on the glass in someone's ugly handwriting:

M

Feeding?

Prob. Need him.

When things went off-pattern his name got shorter. Just *him*. Pryor had left word he'd be back by fourth bell; that was two bells ago.

He crossed to the edge and gripped the descent ladder. The rungs were damp. They always were.

Five levels, intake down to the tunnels at river grade, and half the town standing on the engine's shoulders without thinking about it. Platform level was where the span crossed the six ribs, the piece everybody watched; the ribs met the brace below, in the sluice chamber.

He went down past platform level. The span was lit from underneath by the working lamps, a single blackened length of iron the width of a man's chest, its underside furred with sixty years of scale.

A cat lay along the top of the span, a rangy mud-colored tom stretched flat on the iron where the heat came up through it from the boiler side. The span ran warm enough to dry a wet glove laid on it in a minute, and the cat had found the warmest yard of it. It lifted its head as Morrow went past and watched him down to the next ladder.

He kept going, down into the sluice chamber.

The braces were old. The ribs older. Every tech who'd worked here long enough had a rib they watched, like a tooth that had started to ache.

* * *

The sluice junction wasn't locked. The left panel had slipped enough to show the inner ring, and mist was feathering out of a seam that shouldn't have had any pressure behind it at all, fine and constant as breath off cold water.

Morrow stepped over the rail trench, ducked under a hissing pipe, and crouched at the base of the junction, where the floor had gone slick with algae.

He set his hand against the brace, elbow grounded into the frame.

The hum behind the plate was running fast and shallow, like a dog panting.

He stayed on it through the better part of a quarter bell, and it cost what a quarter bell of that kind of work costs, the arm first, then the shoulder, then the back of the neck. He was sweating through his collar by the end of it.

The junction settled.

The sound kept grinding, but the vibration under his forearm dropped a half step and stayed there.

A voice floated down from the upper deck. "Sluice two's leveling."

Another: "Yeah, main catch is dropping. Still slow."

The hatch above scraped open. Someone leaned out.

"You doing something?" Kett, the valve man.

"Not really," Morrow said.

"'Cause it's working."

"Well. Maybe I'm lucky."

Kett came down the ladder and crouched on the grating beside Morrow, squinting at the seam.

"Looks better," he said. "Spitting less. Not stopped." He tipped his head at the ceiling, toward platform level. "Your cat's up on the span again."

"It's not my cat."

"Sleeps up there every shift you're on. Off shift, nobody sees it." He nodded at the rib nearest them. "Fourth's mine. Everybody down here's got one, and most of us it's the fourth."

He dug into his coat, pulled out a ration biscuit, unwrapped it halfway, then held it out.

"Eat. You look hollow. It's the last one I've got."

Morrow gave him a side glance. "That's just my personality."

"I've seen hollow. Man on the docks spent a whole winter on gull eggs and spite, and he had more color in him than you do right now."

"I'm upright," Morrow said.

"That's what he kept saying," Kett said.

Morrow took it and didn't eat it. Held it in one hand, thumb tapping the edge.

Kett leaned back against the rail. "Lost another one off the floor Tuesday. Didn't come in, room's cleared out. That's three this year. All of them fit. All of them between twenty and forty, near enough. Not one of them's sent word to anybody."

"People go."

"People write."

"That's not…"

"Somebody's putting an army together out of us," Kett said. "Out of everybody. Barge man at the bend says the kings upcountry quit fighting each other two winters back. All of them, the same season. Signed something. They're calling it the Kings' Peace."

"Good for them."

"When did you ever hear of a king quitting? They found something worse to fight. Now they want bodies for it."

"You don't know that."

"No," Kett said. "Neither do you."

He let that sit.

"So you should think about staying down here. You're on the engine's column. Long as you're on it, the carts go past you. I'm not the first one to think it."

"Yeah. I'll bring a cot."

"Could weld your name into the bulkhead. Brass letters, a hand high. People would come up from the bend on their day off to look at it."

"I'm flattered."

"You should be. We don't do that for just anyone."

Morrow smiled, barely.

The sluice gave one more slow groan, then eased.

Imrie leaned over the hatch rim above them. "Leave him," she said down to Kett. She'd been on the floor longer than Kett, and she said it the way she'd tell you not to touch a hot pipe. "He'll come up."

Kett stood, knees cracking.

"You want me to sit with you a while?" he asked.

Morrow gave a slight shake of the head. "Not yet."

"Right," Kett said. "Well. If you get stuck to it, somebody'll come down for you. Might be a while."

"Promise?" Morrow said. It was only a thing you said.

Kett looked at him a moment longer than it needed. "I'll come down," he said.

"Appreciated."

Kett stepped over a hose and went up into the corridor.

Morrow stayed. Hand on the metal, his forearm cramping.

Under the walkway, where the lamps didn't reach, two points of amber hung in the dark a foot off the floor. There was no lamp behind him for them to give back. He watched them until they shut, and then there was only the dark under the walkway.

Across the deck above, someone began calling off the checklist.

"Valve four?"

"Green." That was Oswin, an older hand somewhere up in the pipework, humming under the answer the way he hummed through every valve he checked.

"Mid catch?"

"Set."

Then: "Noting presence. Morrow: on-site, stable."

The pencil didn't pause over it and went on to the next line.

"I'm not…" Morrow said, to the grating.

Above, the voice was already reading off the next valve. He let it stand. There was nothing in it to correct.

* * *

Kett was back down the ladder before the list was done. "Come on," he said, tapping the pipe with two knuckles. "You should see what passes for maintenance out here now. Half of it I signed off on."

Morrow's legs were stiff from crouching. He stood slowly, pocketed the ration biscuit he hadn't eaten, and followed Kett along the lower trench.

A woman was lashing a split hose to the rail with packing rope, three turns and a knot. She pulled the knot down and let go, and the rope went hard as bar where it crossed itself, and the spray from the split stopped. She wiped her nose on the back of her wrist and it came away red. She turned sideways to let them past and went on to the next one.

"Alsen's girl turns sixteen in the spring," Kett said a few steps on.

"And?"

"He's putting her on the deliveries book. Two mornings a week."

"She's fifteen."

"She'll have a year on it by the time she isn't. You want a thing written down before you need it written down."

"There's no deliveries two mornings a week."

"There'll be," Kett said.

Morrow knew what for. He asked anyway. "Written down for what?"

Kett looked back at him as if he'd asked what the river was for. "Carts don't take off a trade column," he said, and went on up the walkway talking about the vent.

Further along, where the ribs came through the chamber wall, Gethin was down on one knee, two fingers flat on the third one, a stub of blue chalk in his other hand.

"Kett. Put your hand here."

Kett went over and put his hand where the fingers had been.

"Now here." Gethin moved him a foot along the stone. "Difference?"

"No."

"No," Gethin said. He drew a short line with the chalk and got up slowly, one hand at the small of his back. "It's dry through the joint and damp both sides of it. Water's getting in and not coming out. Give it two wet seasons and the load stops going through clean."

"You want it written up?"

"I've written it up." He knocked the chalk on the rib four times, short, in the beat of the call the barges gave at the bend, and put it away in his breast pocket. Then he went past them toward the stairs.

Kett watched him go. "He's right about most of them," he said. "We get to about one in five."

He turned and pointed toward the far duct where a long cable sagged across a wet patch of floor.

"That one was supposed to be fixed before the first thaw. They marked it priority. The mark's still on it."

"And?"

Kett stopped walking.

"Man who was supposed to patch it?" he said. "Said we didn't need to anymore. Said you were already here."

Morrow stopped. In his pocket the biscuit had gone to crumbs under his fingers, and he hadn't felt his hand close on it.

"Is he still on the book?"

"This month," Kett said, and went on ahead.

Morrow caught him up on the third landing of the central stairs. Kett had stopped next to a wall where someone had etched initials into the metal, four or five sets, some crossed out, some circled, one faded to nearly nothing.

Kett knocked the wall once with the heel of his hand. "You remember Delvin?"

Morrow gave a quiet nod.

Kett didn't look over. "Delvin stayed two years longer than he was supposed to. Didn't take rotation. Didn't leave the deck. Said he didn't trust anyone else to hear when the rails shifted."

"What happened?"

"Started sleeping in the dry zone behind the sluice board. Said the vibration helped his back. Someone brought him meals for a while. Then they stopped. Then he stopped asking."

"Is he still here?"

Kett tilted his head. "Maybe. Dry zone hasn't been checked in a while."

Morrow said, "That's the part that scares you?"

"No," Kett said. "The part that scares me is how long it took to notice he wasn't talking anymore. Three weeks, near enough, and I was down there every shift, and I'd say morning to him and he'd nod, and I took the nod for an answer, and one day it wasn't a nod anymore, it was just his head going with the judder of the board, down and up, down and up, and I'd been saying morning to that for I don't know how long."

Kett turned and started walking again.

Morrow stayed on the landing with his thumb on the deepest of the initials, feeling where the tool had skipped.

He walked the long way out, along the outer catwalk, and stopped at a lateral brace where two old flood valves rattled out of sync.

He set his palm to the metal.

The rattle went out of the valves, and the cost came up into his wrist as it always did, hot wire under the skin from the heel of his hand to the elbow.

He didn't flinch from it.

He used to.

He stepped away. The iron cooled the moment he lifted off it, already forgetting he'd been there.

His arm hadn't. Along the catwalk the rattle of the two valves went on in his forearm, faint and out of time with his steps. He shook the hand out at his side without slowing. It was still there at the stairs, and by the top of them it had climbed into his shoulder.

On his way out he passed the control floor, where the board had been rewritten for the next shift.

Somebody had already put him on it.

* * *

Next morning, by the time Morrow reached the river road, his trousers were wet to mid-calf.

The river had climbed its banks and kept going, under the first row of houses. People still walked the road, skirts lifted, trousers rolled. Cart wheels cut deep ruts that filled and refilled with brown water every time someone passed.

At the market steps the bottom stair had gone under and the one above it was dark to the edge. Ferna had her stall up at the top with the jars on a second crate, and she was going down the row taking lids off and putting them back.

"Wet gets into cloves and never comes out of them," she said.

"No," Morrow said.

"So I'll be here." She took off the next lid.

She had a string of dried figs from downriver hung off the end of the crate, the first he'd seen since autumn, and Morrow stood over them longer than he meant to. Give him one afternoon with no one sending for him and he'd sit on the bank with his boots off and eat the whole string. He bought two and ate them going up the steps, and got the seeds in his teeth.

Two people in coats were standing under the Weighhouse overhang at the head of the steps, out of the rain. He couldn't have told them from any of the ones on the upriver road.

They weren't selling and they weren't buying, and they weren't stopping anybody. They stood where the steps came up and watched who came up them, and then watched them go down again.

One of them had a paper folded over the back of his hand, out of the wet. He didn't open it while Morrow was there.

The other had a narrow case at his feet, about the length of a forearm, the leather gone dark with rain. He'd stood it on the one dry flag under the overhang, the way a man sets down something he's paid to carry and doesn't own.

Gethin's girl came up past them with a crate against her chest and her shoulders back under the weight of it, tipped so the jars wouldn't slide, and lowered it onto the top step beside Ferna's own, and went down for the second one. There were duckboards over the two steps that had gone under, and they shifted under her every time she crossed them. Her da was on the engine floor until the bells, so she had the errands.

"Orla. The third one's cracked and I like it," Ferna said.

"I know."

She was whistling through the gap in her front teeth, the same four notes over and over, the call the barges gave at the bend, and she didn't stop for the duckboards or for the two men under the overhang.

Neither of the two moved while she went by them. One of them watched her down the steps and then watched the road again.

Torrin from the cooperage was rolling an empty barrel up the duckboards on its rim, and lost it on the second board, and caught it with his knee, and called up to Ferna that he'd meant to do that. He told her his cellar would be dry by the end of the week. He'd been calling things that way since he was fifteen and been wrong about most of them, and it had never once slowed him down.

Morrow came up and went past. Neither of the coats looked at him.

From the top of the lane he could still see the pair of them under the overhang, and the paper was still folded over the back of the same hand.

Morrow passed his father's shop with the shutters still down. Through them he could hear his da swearing at the roof. Amos had lifted the hides off the floor and onto the high rack, first hard rain, every year, same order, and a bucket set under the place where the roof had always let water through.

His sister Ness was up on the ropewalk wall with two other girls, nearly sixteen and the loudest of the three by a distance, counting which of the marker stakes had gone under. Eleven, she called down, and then that it had been eight at breakfast, and then that he was walking on the low side like an idiot.

He moved to the high side.

Morrow stepped off the main track onto the narrow raised plank that passed for a walkway. It flexed under his weight.

At the bend the handstone, the old flat-topped stone in the shallows that people put a palm on going by, was under again, same as every year. Morrow set his palm on the top of the post beside it as he passed, because the post was what you touched when the stone wasn't there. So did the man behind him.

"You're Morrow," the man said.

"I am."

"Thought so." He shifted a coil of wet rope from one shoulder to the other. "You did my aunt's hip. Two winters back. She got another year out of it."

"Good."

"She's gone now. She was eighty-one." He said it flat, a number and nothing under it.

They walked on together at the same slow pace, the rope dripping a thin trail behind them and the rain finding its way under every collar on the road.

"My boy's wife went in the spring," he said, in the same voice. "Caught her hand on a bit of wire in the yard and said nothing about it for four days, because there was nothing to say about it. By the time it was worth saying it was up in her arm."

His voice went on the last word, just once, one note down and back, and he stopped walking, and closed his free hand on the rope coil on his shoulder, and stood there in the rain until it came steady again.

"Anyway," he said.

Morrow slowed.

"Nobody sent for me."

"Somebody did," the man said. "Third bell. Went up to the engine house and the girl on the door took the name and put it on the nail, and by the time anybody got to the nail it was the next morning."

Morrow stopped on the plank. His mouth had gone dry. He tried to think where he'd been at third bell that day and couldn't, and that was worse: some brace, some valve, a hundred days of them the same.

"That shouldn't happen," he said. It came out smaller than he meant.

"It's not a complaint," the man said. "You were where you were meant to be. It was all written down properly." He hitched the rope higher on his shoulder. "I only mention it because you had your hand on the post, and I thought, he'll not know."

The plank flexed under the two of them.

"What was her name?"

"Wenna," the man said. "You'd not have known her. She came from downriver."

Morrow's palm was still wet from the post. He didn't wipe it.

At the fork the man went left toward the ropewalk.

Ahead, the engine house hunched low against the sky.

Just inside the doors a girl of about fifteen sat on a stool with a book open on her knees and nothing written on the page for that day.

"Do people leave names here?" Morrow said. "For me?"

She tipped her head at the frame without answering. A nail had been driven up through a block of wood beside it. A fist of paper hung on the nail, the bottom sheets gone soft and brown along the edges.

"Who reads them?"

"Whoever's got a minute," she said.

She'd been on that stool since last spring. There were others like her in the building, a boy who logged deliveries that came twice a week, a woman who swept a corridor that went nowhere, every one of them in the station book with a name and a start date.

He put his thumb against the side of the stack and pushed. It gave, and came back.

"I could bring them up to you," she said. "If you want."

"No," Morrow said.

He left her there with the stack of names she wasn't reading and went in, past the frame and into the corridor's mouth, the light behind him narrowing to a wet gray line and then gone.

The control floor was full this time. Eight, nine bodies in a space meant for five.

Kett was leaning over the main board. He glanced up as Morrow came in.

"There he is," he said. "Our favorite bad idea."

"Morning," Morrow said. "What's broken?"

"Nothing," Kett said. "That's the problem."

Four yellows on the board. No red.

"Surge markers," Morrow said.

"Tomorrow, by what upriver's telling us," Kett said. "So, yesterday."

Morrow went to the observation slit over the main spill. Water churned in the concrete channel, white where it should've been brown, too close to the lip.

A junior tech, Lisle, short sleeves, ink stains on her fingers, came up with a clipboard. "We've got three freight barges asking clearance to come through on second bell," she said. "If we keep them on the east bank, we need to open two more sluices upstream to slow their drag."

"That bumps us over the safety line," Kett said. "Not far. Far enough that it goes in the log."

"Yeah," she said, as if she were talking about the cost of bread. "But Pryor came by personally this morning. Said if we start delaying shipments this early in the season, we'll never get them back. Didn't wait for an answer."

She tapped the board where she'd underlined a number twice.

"It's within limit," she said. "On paper."

The ink on her fingers carried onto the side of her hand, where she'd written the safety line in the same hard, level script, so she'd have it without hunting for paper. Morrow read her hand, then the board. The number on the board was over the line.

Morrow watched the water a moment longer.

"Past the line, I'm on the gates the whole time," he said. "No one in or out."

"Yeah," Kett said. "There's nobody to put beside you."

"And a second thing goes. A gate sticks, a rib gives…"

"We'll hope it doesn't," Lisle cut in. "And if it does, you'll be standing right there."

She said it the way she read out a flow rate.

"Look," Kett said. "They're going to do it with or without your blessing. The only difference is whether it's stupid or very stupid."

Morrow exhaled slowly. "And this one."

Kett gave him a tired smile. "This is stupid with supervision."

* * *

They began the stabilization an hour before the barges were due.

Morrow took his place in the sluice chamber, hand on the same junction brace he'd touched a dozen times before, the speaking tube from the control floor hanging by his ear. The pressure climbed, careful, careful, then faster.

It came up into the heel of his hand before he had his feet right, a dead weight with no shove in it, like a sack set down on his palm, and the burn came with it, and the vibration under his forearm eased.

Morrow kept his hand where it was and tried to remember the last time he'd said no down here.

The answer came up blank.

The freight whistles came faint through the rain, three low notes layered in echo. The first two went through, the second dragging hard along the far wall; Morrow felt it come down through the ribs and into the brace.

"The third?" Kett asked.

"Third's late," someone said.

Outside, the rain thickened. The level rose another half-hand.

Morrow's hand tightened on the brace.

"We should drop back to normal," he said. "Let the third wait. Bring it through when the crest passes."

Silence on the line.

"Say that again?" Kett asked.

"We ran two through over the line and nothing broke. Now that's what this load means to them. Tomorrow they'll send four. Today, we're done. Go back under the line before we bake it in."

A low murmur went round the tube. Morrow could picture the faces turning toward Kett, toward the board, toward a decision none of them had been hired to make.

Finally Kett said, "You heard him. Opinions?"

"If we dial down now, council will scream about playing favorites," Lisle said. "First two through, third stuck in the mud, and if we…"

"And if we drop while the third's in the bend and bring it back up after, we ride the line twice instead of once," someone else said. "That's worse math."

"It's stable," another voice said. Morrow didn't know whose. "We're not in the red. It's stable."

Two people repeated it further down the floor.

Kett sighed into the tube. "All right. We keep it until the third shows or we time out. I don't like it either. Morrow, you good?"

Morrow looked at his hand on the brace. Forty minutes of it were in his arm and his shoulder.

He lifted his palm a finger's width off the iron. The hum under it climbed straight away, and somewhere down the chamber a plate began to tick. He put the hand back.

"I'm here," he said.

The third came in crooked half an hour later, nose too high, stern dragging. Morrow felt the drag enter the controlled stretch and shifted his stance to meet it, and before he'd finished doing it the spike he'd braced for came and went somewhere under the floor. His hand hadn't moved yet.

The barge went along the near wall and the sound of it came up through the concrete.

Then the shouting changed, and it wasn't the shouting men do at a barge.

The reading didn't move for any of it. Whatever had happened up there had happened somewhere the engine didn't measure.

"Kett."

"Stay on what you've got." Kett's voice came from further off the mouthpiece than usual. "Stay on it."

"What happened?"

Nothing came back down the tube for long enough that Morrow counted it.

"Deckhand," Kett said. "Fending off. He had the pole braced and the stern came round on him."

"Is he out?"

"He's out."

"Kett…"

"He's out," Kett said, "and I'm not saying the rest of it into a tube."

Morrow put his forehead against the cold pipe beside the brace. It hummed against the bone over his eye, and he left it there.

The stretch had another two minutes in it. Morrow stood in the sluice chamber with his hand on a brace that hadn't needed him since the first barge, because Kett didn't trust it off his hand and neither did he, and listened to boots run on stone over his head.

Chapter 3

Ride It Out

It had been raining for twelve days, since the afternoon the girl went into the mill gear.

Annis caught him on the stairs at the end of the night shift, coming round on the rail with her weight on it so she could get a look at his right hand. She had her hair tied back in a strip of red flannel.

"Does it hurt?" she said.

"Only when people ask," Morrow said.

She laughed, and went on up.

Outside it was still coming down, a fine steady curtain that thickened and thinned while you weren't watching, slicking the cobbles and turning the gaps between houses into narrow shallow canals.

Morrow stepped over one of those canals now, testing a loose stone with his boot before trusting it with his weight. The water around it swirled higher than he liked. A bit more and it would go.

He shifted to Gran's doorway and rapped once, knuckles on damp wood.

The door didn't open.

It moved, slightly, inward and then back again.

"Gran?" he called.

A beat. Then a voice, thin but still sharp: "Come to stare, you can do it from out there. Come to help, get in."

A cat sat on the window sill beside the door, mud-colored, a notch out of one ear, the rain coming straight down on it. Its coat was dry. It watched his hand on the latch.

He pushed the door.

It resisted, then gave with a jar that traveled straight up his arm. He stepped into thick stale warmth. Boiled roots and old wool and a hint of mildew that didn't care how many times you chased it off.

His great-grandmother sat in her usual chair just inside, the one with the patched cushion and the arm chewed by some long-dead dog. The chair had sunk a little to the left over the years. So had she. Her shoulders were rounded, her hair mostly gone, her eyes sunk but bright.

Her right hand rested on the wall beside her.

On the exposed beam that ran in low over her chair from the doorframe, fingertips pressed into wood gone dark from age and weather.

The wall around it had cracked in a thin, jagged line. The crack stopped where her hand began.

"You're leaning," Morrow said.

"I'm working," she said. "Close the door. The draft distracts me."

He shut it behind him. The frame creaked. Her hand stayed where it was.

He stepped closer. "How long have you been sitting like that?"

"How long have you been not visiting?" she replied.

He sighed. "A while, then."

Her mouth twitched. "The ceiling wanted to come down last night. Picked a fine time. I was in the middle of a good dream."

He followed the line of the beam across the room. Water stained the far corner where the roof met wall, a darker patch that had spread with each wet day. A bucket sat underneath, already half full despite the cloth someone had wedged under the tiles above.

"You call anyone?" he asked.

"Called you," she said. "In my head. You didn't have the decency to show up until this morning, so I made do."

"You should've sent Jonis."

"He'd only yell at the beam," she said. "Then at me. I'm too old to be scolded."

He glanced at her hand again. Her fingers were crooked, knuckles swollen, skin so thin he could see the blue of the veins threading under it.

They weren't trembling.

"Does it hurt?" he asked.

She looked at him until he looked back. "You tell me."

He stepped closer to the frame, ducking under the low beam though he'd never hit it in his life. A thin line of damp traced the beam's grain where it met the wall.

"May I?" he asked.

"Don't be polite," she said. "You're not a guest."

He slid his hand up beside hers and pressed his palm flat to the beam.

He braced for the usual: that bite of resistance, the static prickle up the arm, the catch of something mid-fall.

The wood went quiet where he touched it. The burn came into the heel of his hand the moment his skin met it, same as ever, and nothing pushed back behind it.

Gran made a small noise in her throat.

"There it is," she said.

Morrow didn't look at her. "There what is?"

"You know," she said.

He did.

They stayed like that. Rain tapped the roof in uneven ticks. The bucket in the corner blooped whenever a drop made it past the cloth.

"Do you remember the first time you used it?" she asked.

He let out a slow breath. "Which one do you mean?"

"The first one that took," she said. "Properly. Not those childish tricks with spoons and dripping candles. The first real one, when something that wanted to get worse didn't."

He thought of a carter's leg in the mill backroom, years back, the linen, his hand flat on the wrapping.

"That was a body," he said. "Does that count?"

"Everything counts," she said. "But I mean before that. When you were small. Your da brought you here, if I remember right."

Morrow frowned, trying to pull the memory up through layers of other emergencies.

"Beam in the back room," she prompted. "Not this one. The one over the stove."

His feet not quite reaching the floor from the stool they'd sat him on. The beam over the stove at the height of his face. Smoke and stew. His father's hand on his shoulder, heavy and proud and frightened at once.

"I remember," he said.

"How did it feel?" she asked.

"Loud," he said. "Like the wood was shouting. And heavy, but not in my arms. Behind my eyes. I thought my teeth would crack."

She nodded, satisfied. "Good. You remember correctly. I couldn't move my wrist for a day after my first proper brace. Your grandfather…" Her voice stuttered there, then kept going. "He lost feeling in two fingers one winter keeping a staircase from collapsing. We all paid. That was the point."

She stopped there a moment, the way she stopped whenever she came up on his name, and Morrow waited it out.

"Say it for me," she said, when she'd got past it.

"Say what?"

"His name. You say it like a word." She turned her hand a little against the beam. "Put a name down wrong and it stops where it is."

He said it. She shut her eyes and nodded.

Morrow kept his hand on the beam.

"And this?" she said. "What does this one feel like?"

He moved his thumb along the grain and put it back where it had been.

"Nothing," he said. "Like it was waiting for me. Like I'm… late."

She sat back, her free hand flat on her knee.

"That's what I thought," she said.

He risked a glance at her.

"Is it the same for you?" he asked.

Her gaze flicked to the beam, then back to him. Her hand was still there, skin loose over bone.

"It used to feel like a fistfight," she said. "Now it feels like picking up a cup that's already in your hand."

She lifted one finger and set it down again, testing.

"I don't like it," she added.

"Nor I," he said.

She sniffed. "Did anyone ask us if we wanted to like it?"

Water guttered outside, a passing cart sending ripples through the flooded street. The house creaked. The beam under their hands didn't.

"How long has this one had you?" Morrow asked.

"Since it complained," she said. "Last night."

"You didn't sleep."

"I dozed," she said. "When it stopped needing me. I woke when it started again. Been sat with it since."

"Will it stay without me?" he said.

She gave him a sharp look. "That's a foolish question."

"I'm full of foolish questions lately."

"It'll stay as long as it stays," she said. "Same as always. Same as you. Don't pretend we ever had more say than that."

The skin at her knuckles had reddened. The hand still wasn't shaking.

"It doesn't cost you?" he pressed.

"Oh, it costs," she said. "Just not in the places you're hoping for."

"Does he mind?" Morrow asked. "Nyr. What we do."

"Of course he minds," she said. "That's not a reason."

"You still say the names every morning."

"I keep the count because it's mine to keep," she said. "And I keep my hand on the beam because it's my house. He can have the both of them out of me at the end, and welcome. He isn't having them early."

"You make it sound like plain stubbornness," he said.

She snorted. "Says the boy who spends his nights cuddling an angry engine. What would you call it, then?"

He didn't have a better word.

She watched him a long moment, then eased her hand back a fraction. The wood didn't move.

"Take it," she said.

"What?"

"Take it," she repeated. "I've kept up roofs and doors and ribs and rails longer than you've been breathing. I know when I'm being humored. Let's see if you can tell the difference between helping and being used."

He looked at the crack above her hand, and at her hand.

Then he shifted his grip, spreading his fingers, letting more of the beam find him.

She drew her hand away.

The crack in the plaster stayed exactly where it was.

His great-grandmother flexed her freed fingers, winced as old joints remembered they existed, and let her arm drop to the worn armrest. Off the wood the hand shook. Not the stiff knuckles, the whole hand, a fine quick tremor that didn't stop while he watched it. He'd have put it down to her age, but the same hand had been on the beam since last night and hadn't shaken once.

"Well?" she asked.

"It doesn't mind me," he said.

"That isn't what I asked."

He exhaled slowly. "It doesn't mind me. It doesn't… notice you're gone."

She nodded once.

"Then it's not you," she said. "Any hand of our blood would do it now. Mine. Yours. Your sister's."

His fingers had gone hard on the beam at that last word. He made them ease, and looked at her. "What do you mean?"

"It's the line," she said. "We've gone soft. Not in the arm." She tapped her chest. "In the blood. All of us. Too much of the same thing in the same blood for too long. It's not a fight anymore. It's a habit."

She took her hand off her chest and put it back on the beam. The tremor went out of it.

"And mind this, since nobody minded it at me. The work doesn't wait on you. You flinch from a thing that's asking. The asking doesn't stop. It goes along the blood till it finds hands that don't flinch, and it doesn't care whose they are or how old." She set her thumb along the grain. "That's how it came to your grandfather. I wouldn't sit with the dying by the end. I kept to my own yard while a neighbor sank behind a window not thirty feet off. Inside the year it was my boy doing the sitting, and he was younger than you are now. I never handed it to him. It went where it went."

"Ma says at the end he didn't need to touch Marlen at all."

"The hand starts it," she said. "Always has. The reach came at the end, and it was the end. You put your hands on things, boy. The day you stop needing to, you come and tell me."

Outside, the rain picked up. A thread of water forced past the cloth in the far corner and fell into the bucket with new insistence.

"You said once it was better when it was hard," he said.

"It was honest when it was hard," she said. "You knew when you'd reached your limit because the thing fought you. You knew when you were lying to yourself because you shook. Now?"

She nodded at his steady hand.

"Now you've got nothing to go by."

"It's easier at the engine," he confessed. "Every day. And the engine hasn't changed."

"That's not something to be proud of," she said.

"I'm not proud of it," he said. "I'm worried."

"Good," she said. "Be worried further away from my ceiling. I'm fond of it."

Despite himself, he smiled.

The house had stopped complaining. He might as well have had his hand on a stone lintel.

He didn't take his hand off.

Somebody knocked. This time the frame didn't shift. The knock was too sharp and too early.

Gran grimaced. "That'll be for you," she said. "No one comes knocking like that for old women and beams."

"Maybe it's a neighbor," he said.

"Knocking that hard, they're not bringing soup," she said. "Answer it."

"I can't…"

The knock came again, harder.

She clicked her tongue. "You think I can't mind my own roof for the space of a conversation? Take your hand off, boy. Let me feel where the edge is."

His fingers stayed where they were for a count of three.

Then, slowly, he drew his hand away.

The beam stayed.

It was a relief.

Then the crack in the plaster put out a new hairline and began to run. Morrow's breath caught high in his chest.

Gran spread her stiff fingers wider on the wood and leaned into the heel of her hand. The line stopped where it was.

"Go," she said. "Before they think you've dissolved."

He glanced at her. "Are you sure?"

"No," she said. "But you're going anyway."

She wasn't wrong.

Through the warped glass the cat was still on the sill, looking in. Gran didn't turn her head to it.

"Don't feed that from your hand," she said. "And don't ever tell it what you want."

"It's a cat, Gran."

"Then it won't mind."

He took it for an old woman's rule, like salt on the step, and let it go.

He crossed to the door, boots scuffing the warped floorboards, and pulled it open.

A runner stood there, soaked through, hair plastered to her head, eyes too wide.

"Morrow," she said, breathless. "They need you at the engine. Now. They said to say it like that."

Her chest heaved with the effort of the message. Behind her the street was ankle-deep from wall to wall.

"How bad?" he asked.

"They didn't say 'bad,'" she replied. "They said 'fast.' I thought that was worse."

He glanced back into the room.

Gran hadn't moved. Her hand was on the beam, her eyes on the crack.

"Don't stay longer than you have to," she said without looking at him.

"When do I ever?" he tried.

She smiled, humorless. "You're your grandfather's grandson."

The runner shifted from foot to foot, sending droplets flying from the ends of her sleeves.

"Morrow," she said. "Please."

He stepped out into the rain.

For a moment, standing in the doorway, he considered turning back. Sitting in the chair beside her. Keeping the beam with her until it failed or didn't.

Then he pictured the engine house, low and hunched against the river, and the board still lit up in his head from the last time he'd stood over it.

He closed the door gently behind him.

The frame creaked, then steadied.

He was already running, boots slapping through standing water, the rain coming into his collar and down his back in a cold thread.

* * *

The water on the street was higher than when he'd arrived.

It lapped over his boots as soon as he hit the road, cold finding every stitched seam. The rain had thickened, still not a storm, only more water than the drains had time for. It moved along the gutter in a slow stubborn current, carrying leaves, grit, and a broken spoon.

The runner took the lead, her shorter legs splashing hard to keep ahead. "They said lower channels," she called over her shoulder. "And that you'd know what that meant."

"I do," Morrow said.

His voice came out steadier than he felt.

They cut through the lane behind the market, where the barrels had been lashed together in nervous clusters. A Binding worker was going down the row tying them off, a turn and a knot and on to the next, and every cord she'd finished had gone hard as bar. The current shoved the barrels against them and the cords didn't give a hair.

"Sit down before you fall down," someone told her from a doorway.

"When they're tied," she said. Her nose had bled and dried on her lip, and she was shaking.

She didn't look up at Morrow as he passed.

"Can you do that?" the runner said at his elbow.

"No. Hers is in the knot. She ties it and walks off and it stays tied." He flexed his hand. "Mine wants my hand on it, and it wants feeding."

He and the runner pushed on, the lane narrowing to a chute of black water between shuttered stalls, the current dragging hard at his boots with every step, never slackening.

By the time they reached the river road, the planks meant to keep feet dry were under water. Morrow had to guess where they were by feel, boot soles sliding on old wood. The river was a broad brown muscle at his left, working harder than it should without coming over.

The engine house squatted ahead, a dark shape against the colorless sky. Steam leaked from the vents along its side, visible only when the wind shifted and gave it away.

The runner stopped at the door and braced her hands on her knees, sucking air. She waved a hand toward the interior. "They're inside. I'll…"

"Stay out of the low spots on your way back," he said. "They'll pretend to be shallow until they're not."

She gave him a faint, nervous grin. "Comforting."

He pushed the door open and stepped into the heat.

Condensation rolled down the walls in thick beads. The floor was slick. Every surface had a sheen on it.

The control floor was louder than he'd ever heard it.

Controlled, overlapping voices, all pitched just under alarm. Metal complained beneath it in a low register. The board was almost entirely lit.

"Finally," Kett said from the middle of the levers. "We were about to start making bad choices without you."

"You already have," Morrow said, and moved closer.

Lines he remembered as margins were colored over. Someone had drawn new ones, higher, in a different shade of grease. A cluster of markers sat crowded near the top of a column labelled RIVER CREST.

"How far over are we?" he asked.

"Depends which set of lies you like," Kett said. He looked older today. His stubble had gone silver in patches Morrow didn't remember from last month. "Gauge says a little. Gut says a lot."

"How long have we been over?"

Kett didn't answer straight away.

"Since the barges," Lisle said, from the side table. "Two points above conservative, every shift, per the policy a man invented out loud and kept off paper. We've been sitting on it for eleven days and it's been fine, so it kept being fine."

Morrow thought of the deckhand off the third barge, who'd gone in the ground on the fourth day with his chest stove in where the pole had taken it.

Lisle was bent over a flat board marked with squares and circles, small carved pieces scattered across it. She flicked one from one square to another, watched where it landed, frowned, and moved it back.

"Still ugly?" Kett asked her.

"If we close upstream gates now," she said, not looking up, "we overload the lateral runoffs and take out half the storage district. If we don't, we flirt with the fourth rib going."

"Margin?" Morrow asked.

"Thin," she said. "Thinner than last time. Growing thinner while we talk, so if you could stop asking for numbers…"

She looked at him then, eyes rimmed red.

Kett rapped the board with his knuckles. "We've got pressure building from the bend. They delayed a release up there because of some misread up at the gauge house. Now it's all arriving at once. They've corrected the misread. It doesn't move the water back. We either let it hit us and hope the engine doesn't pop a joint, or…"

"Or?" Morrow prompted.

"Or we open everything we can and drown the low quarter on purpose," Kett said.

Two people found something to look at on the far wall.

Pryor stood by the far levers, arms folded, in the place he'd stood through every high water this town had ever had.

"Opening fully is not on the table," he said. His voice was smooth in the way of people who'd had practice saying no. "We cannot justify deliberate inundation of property when the system is still responding."

Morrow turned his head. "Responding."

"The engine is turning," Pryor corrected. "Water is moving. It carries what it was built to carry."

Kett's mouth twisted. "It carried what it was built to carry three hands ago."

"Three hands ago it was carrying it," Pryor said. "I was standing here then too. We are dealing with now."

Lisle flicked another piece on her board. It knocked three others out of place before settling at the edge.

"That's not better," she muttered.

"Where do you need me?" Morrow asked.

Kett looked at the main board. A thin red line pulsed along the lower channels.

"Fourth rib, where it ties into the main brace," Kett said. "Same as last time. Worse than last time. We push everything through that and hope it doesn't notice how much we're asking."

"At this load, it notices," Morrow said.

"We're well past how machines work," Lisle replied.

Pryor cleared his throat. "Can you keep it from failing?" he asked Morrow directly for the first time.

Morrow let his gaze rest on the board, on the numbers that had been re-labelled until they meant nothing, on the drawn-on lines and the scribbled margins.

"No," he said.

Pryor blinked. "You cannot."

"I can buy you time," Morrow said.

"Say how much," Pryor pressed.

"That depends," Morrow said, and finally met his eyes. "On how much you're willing to lose."

Pryor didn't like that answer. There wasn't another one that fit.

Outside, the rain hammered against the narrow windows. A line of water traced down the glass, edging toward the sill.

Morrow could feel the engine through the soles of his boots, running faster and rougher than it should.

"I'll go down," he said.

Lisle gave him a brief, grim nod. Kett squeezed his shoulder once, quickly.

"Keep talking," Kett said. "You go quiet, I'll assume it's because you're busy saving our lives, and I'll be very resentful about it."

Pryor checked his watch.

Morrow headed for the stairs.

At the top of the first flight down, Lisle called after him, "Don't stay longer than you have to."

The words snagged against the ones his great-grandmother had said not half an hour earlier.

He didn't turn back.

"How long is that?" he asked.

She hesitated. "You'll know," she said. "I hope."

He didn't answer. His stomach had pulled up tight under his belt, and it was still there at the second landing.

He descended into the noise.

* * *

The air thickened with each level, heat clinging heavier, steam hanging at shoulder height and curling against the pipes. The engine's sound stopped being a hum and pressed on his ribs and sat on the back of his neck.

Water beaded on the metal and didn't run.

The fourth rib came in through the sluice chamber wall and met the main brace at a joint that had been patched a dozen times in a dozen ways, new bolts in old holes, plates laid over cracks, a line of weld that wandered. Up and to his right, two levels over his head, an access catwalk ran across the inspection vents, with the outflow churning below them. The control floor sat over all of it, and the speaking tube ran up the wall beside the joint to Kett and Lisle at the board.

He set his hand on the joint.

He put his weight into it and it took the weight and asked him for nothing he wasn't already giving. The surge came down the channels, arrived at the joint, and stopped there.

Inside a minute the burn was up past his elbow and sweat had started under the wet shirt. He'd expected that. The joint was what bothered him. It hadn't fought him for the surge, and with his palm on it he could feel it wasn't going to. A shove that size would've had him on one knee a year ago.

Above, Kett's voice came through the tube, muffled and casual. "You on?"

"Yes," Morrow said.

"How's she feel?"

Morrow looked at the joint, at his own unmoving hand, at the water standing on the plate around it.

"Wet," he said.

"We're opening upper three and five," Kett said. "It's more than I want to give you. Get ready for the shove."

The shove came. It never felt the way he expected. The metal stayed exactly where it was, and all of it simply got heavier. Just more. More water, more pressure, more of everything sliding down the line.

The joint flexed and took it.

His feet stayed where they'd started. It took him three breaths to get one that went all the way down.

Kett's voice again, farther away. "Pressure at junction?"

"Reads level," Lisle answered. "Level and holding, which I don't trust."

Then a different vibration came through the structure, higher and sharper than water.

"Kett," he said.

"Yeah?"

"Something's unhappy."

"You're gonna have to narrow that down, friend. I've got nothing on the board for it."

Morrow closed his eyes. The main channels were smooth now, too smooth.

The sound came from the catwalk over the vents. A place off every checklist, because it wasn't central to anything.

"Check the upper walk over vent four," he said.

"I've got three people up there," Kett said, voice tightening. "Annis, Ivy, Ambrose. Why?"

"Because that's where it's going," Morrow said. "The strain you're not seeing on the board. It's climbing the parts you didn't build for this."

He twisted off the joint to get his mouth right into the tube. The plate lurched under his palm, and he felt it go up through the ribs before he got his shoulder back behind it.

"Get them off it," he shouted. "All three, Kett. Now, while I've got this."

Something moved above. Shouts, sharp ones, with no panic in them yet. Someone calling names over the roar.

The joint eased for a moment as the river's push shifted. Morrow didn't move his hand.

The sound from above sharpened. A ping through the metal, like a nail being coaxed out of old wood.

Morrow opened his eyes. Up on the walk rail, at the end where the bracket was, the cat sat with its tail wrapped round its feet, looking down past the vents at the water.

Someone yelled, "Don't lean on that…"

The rest got swallowed by the engine's own voice.

"Kett," Morrow said again.

"I've got eyes on it," Kett replied, flattened by the tube. "Walkway's flexing, but it's…"

A crack. Short and bright.

Morrow felt it before he heard it, the joint shuddering through his fingers as the load went sideways into the wrong bones.

"What was that?" someone shouted above.

"Bracket," another voice answered, quick. "Just the bracket."

"Just," Lisle muttered. "Love that word."

"Get off the rail," Kett snapped. "Now. Shift to the far side, stay…"

The rest vanished under a long tearing shriek of metal.

The walkway support came free.

For a second the catwalk hung there. Three silhouettes on it, arms flung out, grabbing at air.

Then it dropped.

Morrow saw one of them in the second before the angle took her out of view, Annis, hair tied back, mouth open. He couldn't hear whether she was screaming or swearing or saying nothing at all.

The catwalk slammed against the vent housings. One of the figures snagged a pipe and hung on. Another was thrown back into the wall and hit the concrete with a sound Morrow felt in his stomach.

Annis went the other way.

Straight down, between the vents.

There was water there, churn off the outflow, black and white and gray folded together, hammering itself apart against the concrete.

She hit it feet first and was gone.

The water took her without a sound anyone afterwards agreed on.

"Shit," someone above said, too quietly.

Then everyone above the vent started screaming at once. The end of the rail where the cat had been was bent down into the vent housing, and there was nothing on it.

"Annis's down," a voice shouted into the tube. Morrow couldn't place it. "She fell. She… she went through vent four. I can't see her."

"Check the guards," Kett snapped. "Anyone on the outer channel? Get eyes down there."

"She won't be in one piece," someone else blurted.

"Shut up," Lisle said. Her voice had gone flat and small. "Shut up. Count who's still standing before you bury anyone."

His back foot had gone a half step toward the ladder before he'd told it to. He looked at the ladder, and at the water standing on the plate round his hand, and brought the foot back under him and put his shoulder behind the hand.

The joint bucked once as the weight redistributed, then settled back against his palm and took the new load without any change in the sound it was making.

"Do we cut power to that section?" Lisle asked. "Bleed it off somewhere else?"

"Bleed it where?" another tech demanded. "Everything else is full."

"Bleed it and it goes to the low quarter," Pryor said. He hadn't moved off the levers. "That is where it was always going to go. You have said as much yourselves."

"We drew that zone," Lisle said. "Three years ago. In this room. You were standing where you're standing."

"You want to drown them on purpose?" someone said.

"I am saying," Pryor replied, "that one life is a bad night. A quarter is the end of us."

"We've lost more than one," Lisle said.

"Morrow," Kett said. "Talk to me. Can you stabilize if we cut some channels?"

"Close too much and you'll spike the upper run," Morrow said. "You'll send it looking for the next weak place."

"Which is?"

"Whatever you forgot to worry about," he said.

"Helpful," Kett said.

Pryor cut in. "Keep it as it is, then. Nothing is opened and nothing is shut. Tell me whether you can stop it coming apart."

"For how long?" Morrow asked.

"It must be kept for as long as the surge takes to pass."

"How long is that?"

Pryor looked at Lisle.

Lisle let a beat pass. "Upstream says two hours."

"That's a lie," Kett said.

"Upstream always lies," she agreed. "So. Longer."

Morrow thought of his great-grandmother's hand against the beam. *It's not you. It's the line.*

The joint sat still under his hand. The ache had come out of his shoulder and gone down into his back and was still going down. He could stand here for hours. Days. However long he asked, and his back would pay for every hour of it.

Annis had been in the water three minutes. He had the count of it in his breathing, in four, out six, and couldn't remember starting it.

"What about shutting down?" he asked.

The room above went quiet.

"There is no shutting it," Pryor said. "There is nowhere for the water to go. We would lose the town."

"You're losing it now," Morrow said. "Piece at a time."

"There is nothing written that lets me…"

Kett cut him off. "We're not sitting a committee," he snapped. "The water won't wait for you to balance your books. You'll get your numbers when it's over."

"Then make a choice," Pryor said. "I made mine an hour ago. Keep it as it stands. Ride it out. That is my call."

"Kett," Morrow said slowly. "If I let go…"

"You let go right now," Kett said, "the spine twists, the outer walls blow, and everybody in the lower quarter dies in four minutes, near enough. That's the number off the model. We've never timed it."

"Somebody will," Morrow said.

Silence on the tube. It went on long enough that he could hear someone up there breathing.

"What do you want to do?" Kett asked him. Not Pryor. Not Lisle. Morrow.

He kept his hand where it was.

He saw the low quarter in his head, the raised walkways, the stacked barrels, the water already at the doors. The people without storm shutters or second floors.

He saw the board. The outer structures that would go first.

He saw Annis between the vents.

He swallowed, and his throat was dry enough to click.

"I can keep it from breaking right now," he said. "I can't keep it from breaking later."

"That is later's problem," Pryor said.

"I hate that man," Lisle muttered.

Kett blew out a breath. "Is there any point at which you'd say, 'No, I won't'?"

"Yes," Morrow said.

"When?"

"When there's nothing left to trade it for," he said.

"We're not there yet," Kett said, after a moment. "I couldn't tell you what it would look like."

"No," Morrow agreed. "We're not."

He worked his boots wider on the wet floor until they stopped sliding, and leaned in until his elbow locked.

"Leave it as it stands," he said up the tube. "I'm staying on it."

Pryor said, "Good," and somewhere up there a pencil started moving.

* * *

The surge crept on.

The numbers climbed. Water poured through channels that had never been meant to take it, arrived at the joint and stopped where his fingers were.

Above, the voices went on.

"Outer inspection port compromised…"

"Shut it. Can we shut it? Shut it."

"Loss of access on vent four walkway. Mark it unusable."

"Where's Annis supposed to be? Has anyone seen…"

"We saw. She… she went…"

"Then mark her off and move on."

That last voice was Kett's.

Morrow's back teeth came together hard enough that he heard them.

Morrow stopped taking in what came through the tube. What he had instead was his shoulder, and his back under the shoulder, and an hour of it that hadn't moved him an inch off the joint.

He tried for what he'd said to Annis on the stairs and got her hand on the rail, and her weight coming round on it, and her laugh going on up, and not the words.

"You're doing fine," Kett said into the tube a moment later. Softer, pitched for Morrow alone. "You're keeping us from tearing ourselves apart."

"Not all of us," Morrow said.

"No," Kett admitted. "Not all."

Lisle's voice cut in. "Pressure crest is starting to curve. Slowly. We've got some drop on the far east readouts. If the upriver bastards are telling even half the truth, we're through the worst in… I don't know. An hour?"

"An hour," Kett said. "I'll take it. First number I've had all day. The rest were bodies."

"It's better than 'eventually,'" she replied.

Pryor added, "We can withstand an hour. We have withstood one before."

"Not at these readings," Lisle snapped.

"Readings change," he said. "The need does not."

Morrow tuned them out and listened to the engine.

The worst of the shove had passed. This was the long heavy tail of it, when the water stopped announcing itself.

"Suggest gradual step-down on outer valves," he said.

"Starting to ease off?" Kett asked.

"Yes."

"Lisle?"

"If we step down too fast, we'll whiplash the lower channels," she said. "If we don't, we cook that joint. I say do it. Slow. No sudden moves. Like putting down a drunk uncle."

"Right," Kett said. "Drunk uncle it is. We won't know if it took until it's over."

One by one, small shifts went through the structure. The joint met each one ahead of him, before he'd registered the change.

He stayed until the readings dropped back below the line someone had decided was now acceptable.

Only then did Kett say, quietly, "You can let go."

Morrow did.

This time there was a little backlash, a whisper of strain returning to the metal as it took its own weight again. Not much.

He stepped back.

His shoulder seized when the load came out of it. He put his hand on the rail and stood and breathed until he could walk.

* * *

By the time he climbed back to the control floor, the noise had settled into a messy, exhausted quiet. People moved slowly, as if they'd only just remembered they had bodies.

Oswin sat on the floor with his head in his hands, Oswin, who hummed through every valve he'd ever checked, and the hum was gone out of him. Imrie stared at a smear of grease on her sleeve as if she'd never seen it before. She'd trained Annis. She'd signed her onto the floor.

Gethin stood at the upstream gauge with his coat already buttoned, reading a needle that hadn't moved in an hour. Each time the door let the rain in he looked round at it. Orla brought his supper up on flood nights, and he meant to send her home before she got to the bottom of the stairs and saw the walk.

Pryor was gone.

Lisle was at the board, marking something down in unsteady writing. Kett stood beside her, not correcting her numbers for once.

"Any word?" Morrow asked.

They both looked up.

"Annis?" Lisle asked.

He nodded.

Kett shook his head once.

"Water took her," he said. "We sent men along the outer channels, but…"

He didn't finish.

The shoulder that had been on the joint knotted up under the blade. Morrow didn't put a hand to it.

Lisle looked at the floor between them. "Family's being told she slipped," she said. "That's what we agreed."

"Slipped," Morrow repeated.

"We can't put 'we were riding two points over since the barges and we thought you'd handle it' in a notice," Lisle said. "Doesn't read well."

Morrow looked at her until she went back to the board.

Around them, the crew pretended not to listen and failed.

"We should've shut it," Morrow said.

"Yes," Kett said.

"We didn't."

"No," Kett agreed.

"Will we?" Morrow asked. "Next time?"

"Ask me when the water's down," Kett said.

Morrow looked at the board, at the lines that had stopped flashing.

"There were three of them up there," he said. "On the walk."

Kett had been waiting for that.

"Ambrose caught a pipe," he said. "We pulled him in. Dislocated shoulder, maybe a crack in the collarbone. He's swearing loud enough that I'm not worried about him yet. He's been through the board and the walkway and whoever bolted the walkway, and by the time they'd got

him up here he'd started on the river, and a man with that much breath in him I'm not sitting up with."

"And the other?" Morrow asked.

"Ivy Gale hit the wall," Lisle said quietly. "Hard. She's breathing. They took her to the clinic. Leg's wrong. Something in her back they don't like the look of."

"Conscious?" he asked.

"When they carried her out," Lisle said. "She asked if the board held." Her laugh was too sharp. "Didn't ask about herself."

Morrow closed his eyes briefly.

"So," he said. "One drowned. One broken. One hanging on."

"Plus everyone who watched it," Kett said. "They don't go on the form."

The steam thinned.

People left in ones and twos. Each time the door opened the rain came in loud, and the door shut on it.

By the time the lamps wanted doing it was Lisle at the board and Morrow at the table with the shift sheet, because the numbers had to go on the clean copy and the pencil was by his hand. She read them off. He wrote them down. Twice she read one wrong and corrected it without apologizing, and he crossed out and wrote it again.

Her sleeve lay along his forearm on the table. Neither of them moved. When the column was full she took the sheet, blew on it, and went up to the council room with it.

* * *

There was a new slate on the east wall when he came in the next morning, screwed into the concrete and ruled into columns in white chalk. FLOOD OPERATIONS: WEEK PLAN. INTAKE, SLUICES, WATCH, STABILIZATION. Down the left edge, in Lisle's upright hand, the floor by surname: LUDLOW. SALL. HOB. PIKE. WINTERS. ROOK had been written there too and rubbed out with a thumb, and the smear left where it was.

His name was under the last column three times down the day. Third bell. Fifth. Seventh. The letters were upright and finished, the tails closed, the same hand Lisle put on the sheets that went up to the council.

"You put my name on a wall," he said.

"Technically Lisle did," Kett said. "She's got better handwriting."

"I wasn't asked."

"We talked about it. In a kind of 'if he were here, he'd agree' way." Kett picked the rag up off the slate's rail. "Council noticed it's a system, so it gets a chart. It doesn't get us more of you. It just means I know which bell you're meant to be standing in, instead of sending runners into the rain to ask if you're vertical."

"It's chalk," Lisle said, to her probability board. "I write everything like that. We're all on there."

"My name's on there more than anybody's."

"Because there's one of you," Lisle said, and didn't soften it.

Kett held the rag out. "I'll rub it off. Right now. I don't think it changes anything. I'll do it anyway."

Morrow took the chalk instead. He didn't erase anything. He circled the seventh bell, today's, and drew a line through the note beside it, *outer districts*, and wrote underneath in small compressed letters: *home*.

"Seventh's when your da closes up," Kett said.

"It's when Ness gets home. She's sixteen. I'm not here at seventh. Take it off the slate."

"Then I've got nobody on seventh," Lisle said.

"Third and fifth. Fine. Seventh, no."

Kett looked at him a while. "That's the line you're drawing."

"For now."

Imrie came past behind them with a coil of hose on her shoulder, took the chalk out of Morrow's fingers without asking, and wrote IMRIE in the seventh-bell box under the struck line, in letters that leaned like they'd been drinking.

"You can't do what he does," Kett said.

"No." She gave the chalk back. "But there's a name in it."

She looked past them through the door, down toward the span, where the cat lay along the warm iron. "And somebody shift that cat before Gethin treads on it. It was asleep on that span the morning I started, and I've done thirty-four years." She said it like a joke. Kett didn't laugh, and she went off with her hose.

Gethin came past with his hammer, stopped at the slate, and drew a short blue line under her name, the mark he put on a rib he meant to come back to. He didn't say anything about it and went on down.

Hesk from the river merchants caught them coming off the stairs at the end of the third bell, mud up the backs of her legs, and told him without stopping that she'd moved a grain group off seventh. "They asked when you were on," she said over her shoulder. "I said third and fifth." She was gone down the stairs before he had a word ready.

Lisle was getting into her coat, one arm in, the folder of marked sheets under the other.

"Kett wants the river district marks read by eye before dark," she said. "The gauges down there have been reading low since the rain turned."

"That's my way. I'll walk you down."

"I know what way it is," she said. "I wrote the shift sheet."

He looked once more at the slate on his way past: the circles, and the two words in hands that didn't match the rest of the board.

The story continues.

The Last Bearer is coming. Get the rest of the book first, plus new chapters, new stories, and beta-reader invites.

ukravenauthor.com

see you in the dark