



CHRONICLES OF THE ECHO BINDER



# ECHO OF THE FIRST FLAME



**INSCRIBED BY MARTEN THIEMAN**

## **On the Cover**

When Elmon Silverwood spoke to the flame,  
he did not know he was crossing a threshold older than memory.  
The fire did not burn because he commanded it.  
It burned because it recognized him.  
And when it answered, nothing in his life would ever be small again.

This is the beginning of Elmon Silverwood —  
not as a master, not as a hero —  
but as a question the world chose to answer.

In the hidden corners of Cragnearth, ancient forces stir.  
Cities long thought destroyed awaken.  
Dragons whisper forgotten vows.  
And a boy who only meant to ask a question  
becomes the hinge upon which history turns.

The Echo has begun.

## **Marks Upon the Veil**

The symbols upon this cover are not decoration.  
They are witnesses.  
The Eye of Daron sees what others cannot.  
The hawk of the Shadow Veil walks where memory thins.  
And the sigil carried by Elmon... is not a mark of power—  
but of forces bound to him beyond his choosing.  
Some will recognize them.  
Most will not.

CHRONICLES OF THE ECHO BINDER

**Echo of the *first*  
*flame***

**MARTEN THIEMAN**



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***This ledger is bound in flame and memory.  
All echoes remain sacred***

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
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9  
10  
11  
12

To those who taught me to listen—  
and to those who still hear  
what others have forgotten.



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39 *Each mark reflects the Turning of the Cosmos—*  
40 *where echoes align with time, and forces take form.*

# Echo of the First Flame

## Prologue

Before the glyphs were carved, they hummed.

Before his name was spoken, it waited.

Before the boy was born, the flame remembered.

Beneath where silence braided into soil and sorrow curled into hum like roots, something pulsed. Not brightly, but with the rhythm of a grief not yet lived. It had no bearer, nor voice, only a memory waiting to be.

Thirteen moons passed. Then his breath, his name.

Elmon.

He did not know the flame, but the moment he stepped into the School of Wizardry, the sleeping world stirred. Light shifted. Petals that were not flowers shimmered. And something long dormant answered with a single pulse.

Not for power.

Not for prophecy.

But remembrance.

That night, the deep chambers hummed—not in warning, but in welcome. A woven garment trembled on its shelf. A crystal flickered violet, then dimmed. Somewhere in the dark, a leaf rustled with a tone no one had taught it.

Elmon did not hear it. Not yet.

But the world did.

The moons leaned closer. Those shaped by the Vault stirred. And the breath of Perdina—long buried, long braided into silence—began to rise.

Not as fire.

As echo.

## Chapter 1: The Horns Dock Trial

His father was a High Elf, precise in speech and careful with craft. His mother, Cion, was human—direct, observant, and unafraid to put her hands into soil or rot if it meant understanding how something lived or died. They met during a fall festival in the Razorback Mountains, when the harvest fires burned low, and traders lingered longer than planned.

At the time, his father was studying alchemy under a cousin known for reliable work rather than spectacle. His mother had come to teach practical methods for stopping fungal blight in the valley—a quiet crisis that threatened more than crops. What began as shared work slowly turned into shared life.

They settled first near Elian Purin, close enough to hear the murmurs of council politics without being swallowed by them. There, a daughter was born—and lost. Scarlet, they named her, for the bright red tufts of hair that marked her as both elf and human. The grief that followed was complicated, not least because such deaths were rare among elven blood. It followed the family when they moved again.

Quinshire became home.

Nestled at the edge of the Riven Mountains, it stood where paths crossed more often than loyalties. To the northeast lay the rolling burrows of the Hobbit folk; from the west and south the elven dominions pressed their long borders; and eastward stretched the human districts, restless and expanding.

It was a place shaped by borders but governed by necessity.

Fall sunrises were spectacular. The western horizon burned gold as the sun climbed over the low shale ridges, waking stone, field, and road alike. The waking mist rose from the chilled lands.

Elmon was born fifteen years after his parents arrived — on the twenty-first day of the Month of the Dragon, at the height of the Solstice season, beneath the Tri-Gleam.

The sun rose in the west as it always had — but the sky darkened as if reluctant to yield the night. Silver light lingered long after dawn from the moon Menuva. A red haze clung to the higher air of the moon Es'ilo. And for a brief hour, even the distant ember of the moon Ashtar could be seen against the fading stars.

Many Tri Gleam last five days. This one lasted 3 days. Some said it was an omen. Some said it was a reckoning.

The elders did not argue. They simply watched.

By midday, tides along the southern coasts had risen beyond their markers. Shepherd dogs howled at nothing. And in the Razorback valleys, a thin swirling multihued mist lay low over the fields as if the earth were holding its breath blushing from an unknow visitation.

Lands wept, mountains cringed and collapsed, the sky roared with unfamiliar thunders and ripples like stones in a pond echoed across the sky.

Three eyes opened in Trigleam.

One world remembered.

And in Quinshire, a child opened his own.

Dragons flew for hours and days. They watched the lands mourn and weep then settle

He was a gentle child, curious rather than reckless, and quicker to listen than to speak—until music was involved. Songs caught him early. So did words. By six, he spoke the formal tongue of the High Elves, the common speech of his mother’s people, and the trade language that stitched the region together. He learned them not as tools, but as rhythms—different ways the world chose to speak.

It was this gift for listening that would eventually bring him to Horns Dock.

And to judgment.

One evening, as Elmon’s mother, Erias, fixed dinner, Elmon carried on a conversation with the candle on the table.

He spoke to the flame as if it were a friend—not with command, but curiosity. The candle flickered, listening.

His father was due home from the alchemy shop at any moment.

Erias laughed and said, gently, “*Be careful. It might talk back to you.*” She rubbed his head and kissed the crown of it.

Elmon stared at her, confused. Then he turned back to the candle.

“*You don’t scare me,*” he whispered. “*You’re just light.*”

The flame twisted.

The wax hissed.

And in a breath, the candle became a pyre.

Smoke blackened the beams. Wax scorched the table. And the flame—no longer tame—answered.

Erias stood silent, her laughter stolen. She had warned him: *Be careful. It might talk back.* It had.

That night, Elmon learned that magic was not a gift. It was a conversation. And some voices never forget who dared speak first.

When his father, Nacrious SilverWood, arrived home, he found Elmon scraping a wide pool of hardened wax from the table. Erias stood nearby, at a loss for words—her gaze fixed on their son with something between wonder and fear.

Nacrious caught the smell of smoke before he saw the damage. His eyes followed the scent upward, to the blackened beams along the kitchen rafters. He pointed once.

“*What happened?*”

Erias gasped, tried to speak, and failed. The words came out broken, disjointed, as though they no longer agreed on their order. It was enough for Nacrious to understand that this was no simple accident.

He sat at the table and took a scraper from Elmon’s hand. Together, they worked at the wax in silence.

“*Trying an experiment,*” Nacrious said at last, his voice careful. “*Just like me?*”

Elmon looked up at his father. Fear warred with awe on his face, his mouth trembling as if caught between answers. He shook his head.

Yes.

No.

Later that evening, when Erias gathered her composure and they sat to eat, she spoke quietly. *“I warned him—half in jest—to be careful. I told him the flame might talk back.”*

Nacrious frowned, uncertain.

*“Elmon whispered something,”* she continued, her words tumbling now. *“The flame rushed up the candle. The wick vanished. And then it was gone—just a pool of wax on the table.”*

Nacrious grew very still.

The light left his face, not in fear, but in focus. His thoughts raced—possibilities unfolding, patterns aligning, old theories knocking to be tested. A trial, perhaps. Proof.

Erias touched his arm. Elmon tugged at his sleeve.

He hadn't noticed them.

When he finally blinked and looked down, Elmon felt a tightness in his chest. Had he done something to his father? Had he broken more than a candle?

His father rambled, telling stories about his grandfather, uncle, sister, and an aunt who had done strange things when they were kids. His grandfather was shunned for the mischief he caused. His sister moved away and was never seen again. His aunt turned out to be a sorceress. His brother went to Backlanor School of Mystics in Caringe. He turned to Elmon with surprise and a bit of joy.

*“Your uncle is a wizard,”* Nacrious said at last. *“He lives in Calems Arc, by the seas of Ravenclaw—across the Wicked Bay.”*

That alone felt like a door opening.

Nacrious admitted then that he knew a little magic himself—things his uncle had taught him long ago, when lessons were still stories and warnings rather than rules. He reached into a drawer and drew out a small rune stone, its surface worn smooth except for a single scribed mark. He set it on the table, murmured a few quiet words, and rested his hand upon it.

Then he began to speak.

Not to Elmon. Not to Erias.

To someone who was not there.

Elmon didn't understand the words, but he understood the intent. Someone was coming. Not tonight—perhaps not even tomorrow—but soon.

As his father spoke, excitement threaded through his voice. What had happened was not a disaster. It was a question—one that needed answering. He spoke of bloodlines and proof, of whether certain things still lived in the world or only in stories.

There were words Elmon had never heard before.

*Echo weaving.*

*Veil watching.*

*Ancestral Cadence.*

*Bloomscript*—which Elmon decided must mean flowers that wrote back.

One phrase made his stomach tighten.

*Echo Incarnates.*

Another followed it, quieter, heavier.

*Vaultborn.*

His father spoke for what felt like the entire evening, his hand never leaving the stone. When at last he stopped, he let out a long breath and smiled—wide, certain, and a little afraid.

*“Your uncle is coming to visit,”* he said.

His uncle stayed for three days.

They tried again.

The candle was set on the table once more. Elmon was asked to speak to it, then to ignore it. He read from scrolls whose symbols swam on the page. He sat through meditations that made his legs ache and his thoughts wander. Words were spoken. Gestures repeated. Silence stretched.

Nothing answered.

No flicker beyond the ordinary. No listening flame. No echo.

By the third evening, even the questions had grown tired.

His uncle thanked Elmon for his effort. There was no disappointment in his voice—only a careful kindness. He said he would leave in the morning. It had been a good visit. He hoped to see them again.

When the door finally closed behind him, the weight lifted.

Elmon hadn't realized how tightly he had been holding his breath until he let it go. The pressure in his chest eased, like a stone set down after being carried too long. He wanted things to return to how they had been—quiet, ordinary, understandable.

Later, he tried to apologize to his father.

*“I'm sorry,”* Elmon said. *“Whatever you wanted... I don't think I have it.”*

His father knelt so they were eye to eye.

*“It wasn't something I wanted,”* he said gently. *“It was something I wanted for you.”*

Three days later, Elmon turned fourteen.

There was a small gathering—family, a few friends, and a cake set proudly at the center of the table. As the Songs of the Age were sung, Elmon found himself staring at the frosting, half-smiling, half-wishing. Not for gifts. Just for the moment to feel... answered.

When the song ended, there was a pause.

The fruit and nuts atop the cake had shifted. Carefully. Intentionally.

They spelled out *Happy Birthday*.

Erias laughed first. *“Wow,”* she said softly. *“Look at that.”*

Nacrious didn't laugh.

He didn't speak at all. He reached for the rune stone.

Emor arrived moments later.

He examined the cake without touching it, eyes narrowing just slightly. "*Enchanted*," he said. Not impressed. Not alarmed. Simply certain.

Then he looked at Elmon.

"*What was set in your heart?*" Emor asked.

Elmon hesitated. "*I just... wanted the cake to wish me a happy birthday.*"

Emor nodded once. "*And what else?*"

Elmon thought. Then his face lit up, wide and unguarded.

"*I'd like the stars to shine their light on me. Just to know I'm here.*"

For a heartbeat, nothing happened.

Then the air around Elmon brightened.

Not fire. Not flame. Something softer—and far older. The space surrounding him glowed, as if dawn had chosen only that spot to arrive. The light did not burn. It listened. Above them, the stars seemed closer. Watching.

No one spoke.

Emor smiled slowly.

"*You, Elmon,*" he said, "*are more special than you know. Even the stars listen to you.*"

For the next three years, Emor came once each month and stayed for three days.

He did not teach spells.

He taught Elmon how to breathe without reaching. How to feel the quiet pressure of something vast within himself and *not answer it*. Magic, Emor said, was a tool—no different from fire or steel—but unlike them, it listened back. To use it without being ruled by it, Elmon had to learn stillness before motion, restraint before reach.

Progress came slowly. Carefully.

Elmon learned to coax small obediences from the world. A broom that swept the floor when his mother's back ached—though Erias never quite stopped watching it with wary eyes. Plants that eased themselves from poor soil and resettled where light was kinder. Doors, shutters, boxes—objects without will—responded to thought and gesture, opening as if remembering they were meant to.

Nothing spectacular was allowed.

Nothing that answered too quickly.

And Elmon learned, even then, that the most important part of magic was not what moved—but what *waited*.

When Elmon turned thirty, he chose to leave.

Scathnard had always been spoken of carefully—never as a destination, always as a dividing line. Still, the decision came quietly. He had saved enough to book passage by boat, coin set aside over years of restraint rather than ambition.

The request for admission was formal, but not hollow.

His uncle Emor's regard carried weight of its own—measured, unembellished. Several local magistrates added their names, more out of recognition than enthusiasm. The city's council mystic, Elec Erisrial, wrote with precision and caution, acknowledging ability without speculation. And Minya Worlel—a sage and old friend of the family, once an instructor at Scathnard—added a final seal, spare in words but impossible to ignore.

Elmon sent the letters together.

Not as a plea.

As a declaration that he was ready to be measured. A year passed without a word from Scathnard.

Elmon told himself that silence was an answer. He returned fully to his work in the council halls, assisting mystics and sages, setting aside thoughts of schools and trials as youthful reach.

Then, one afternoon, several elderly gentlemen arrived.

They did not announce themselves loudly. They did not demand. They simply asked—quietly—whether a young Silverwood was present.

The sage Andis Solimool froze.

Then, to Elmon's astonishment, Andis bowed—deeply. He spoke in a tongue Elmon did not recognize, its cadence smooth and ceremonial, measured breaths, carrying a gravity that made the air feel briefly ordered around it. When he finished, Andis took each gentleman's hand in turn and pressed his lips to the knuckle of their thumbs.

Elmon stared with a raised brow.

He had never seen Andis behave this way—not in the council halls, not before magistrates, not even within the king's quarters. Andis was a man who gave orders, who corrected others sharply, who bent rooms to procedure by voice alone.

But now—

Now he stood aside.

And Elmon understood, without being told, that Scathnard's silence had not been dismissal.

It had been deliberation.

The gentlemen regarded Elmon once more—briefly, with an expression he could not name—then turned and departed without ceremony.

Only after they were gone did Andis move.

He crossed the hall toward Elmon in a near stumble, words colliding with one another, his composure utterly broken. Elmon had never seen him like this. It was immediately clear that whatever had just occurred lay far beyond Andis's experience—or ambition.

When at last Andis found his breath, he gripped Elmon's sleeve.

*“You have no idea,”* he said, voice shaking. *“No idea at all.”*

He gestured toward the doorway the men had passed through.

*“That was the Chancellor of the Garus School of Wizardry.”*

He swallowed. *“The younger gentleman—the one in blue—was the Inspector Noble of the Hours of Ulrick.”*

Another breath, almost a laugh. *“And the man with the golden sash... the King’s Noble Surveyor of the Wizards’ Court of Scathnard.”*

*“They have come to see you, Young Silverwood.”*

Andis stepped back, hands trembling, awe written plainly across his face. *“I could have wished for such a greeting all my days.”*

Elmon hesitated. *“What did you say to them? I didn’t understand the language you spoke.”*

Andis blinked, then stared at him as if the question itself were astonishing. *“Toreaz,”* he said softly. *“You will learn it at the school. It is one of the magic tongues.”*

That evening, after finishing his duties at the magistrates’ office, Elmon returned home to find the house full. Men in robes. Noble attire. Colors and cuts he recognized only from distance and rumor.

He opened the door, and the room fell silent. Elmon stepped inside and paused. Faces watched him—measured, intent, unreadable. Without comment, he removed his cloak and sent it drifting by habit to the hook on the far wall, where it settled neatly as it always had. Only then did he bow, awkward but sincere, and offer the single greeting he knew in High Elf.

The Counselor rose.

He removed his own cloak and laid it carefully over the chair, then began to circle Elmon—slowly, deliberately—pausing now and then as if listening to something beneath skin and breath. It was the way a jeweler studies a stone: not for brilliance, but for truth hidden under polish.

Elmon was nervous.

At last, the Chancellor stopped in front of him. He did not raise his voice.

He did not soften it. *“How much can you touch?”*

A pause. *“How does it feel?”*

Another. *“Can you describe it?”*

Elmon did not understand the question at first.

He glanced toward his father, confusion plain on his face. *“Your conjuring,”* Nacrious said softly. *“That is what he means.”*

Elmon nodded once and took a moment before answering. Not long—but long enough that the room leaned toward him. *“I can touch whatever I choose,”* he said.

He hesitated, searching not for words, but for honesty. *“As for how it feels...”* A faint breath escaped him.

*“It’s like the first thaw after winter. When the ground gives way all at once. Everything smells new, and clean, and there’s too much life arriving too fast to stop it.”*

He lifted his eyes to the Chancellor. *“But describing it isn’t enough,”* Elmon continued. *“You would have to know it yourself. To hear how it speaks to you. How it presses into your*

*thoughts when you aren't ready. How it stirs what you already carry in your heart—sometimes things you didn't know were there."*

He fell silent. The Chancellor turned to his fellows. *"This one requires the test of Engis Ulrick."*

A murmur passed through the room. Elmon felt a brief, foolish spark of confidence. A test, then. Something measurable. Something he could do.

The Chancellor turned back to him, as if the thought itself had spoken aloud. *"You have never experienced this, young Silverwood,"* he said evenly. *"Few can even muster what is required to enter the test—let alone complete it."*

He did not raise his voice. *"Tomorrow, at dawn. Be at the bay, at Horns Dock—by the pier."*

A pause. *"And we will see what you are."*

That night, Elmon did not sleep.

His thoughts circled endlessly. *What was the test? Why did it matter so much? What did it mean to lack the power even to enter?*

Each question led nowhere—and that frightened him more than any answer could have.

He paced until the floor knew his steps by heart. He reviewed his uncle's teachings again and again, practiced what little he could do with certainty, then practiced it once more—hoping repetition might turn worry into preparation.

It did not.

At last, he went outside and climbed into the Hordis tree—the old Treat his mother had once nursed back from blight. Its limbs creaked under his weight, not in protest, but recognition.

Elmon pressed his palm to the bark. *"What could this test be,"* he asked quietly, *"that is so great it frightens even them?"*

For a long while, the tree said nothing. Then the wood shifted. The voice came slowly, deep and uneven, like timber settling after a storm.

*"Young... Silverwood..."*

A pause. *"Tests... can be... vicious... to the mind..."*

Another. *"But... simple... for the heart..."*

The branches groaned softly. *"Man... creates... tests... to measure... value... capability... potential..."*

A longer silence. *"Such measures... do not... belong... to the living world..."*

The bark warmed beneath his hand. *"Be... at peace..."*

*"Ask... questions..."*

*"Do not... suppose..."*

The tree fell silent again.

Elmon remained there until his breathing slowed, and the night remembered how to be still.

Morning light crested over the Crippled Mountain.

Elmon called his cloak to him and went straight to the pier. By the time he arrived, the sun was fully risen, and the bay lay smooth and watchful. The blue-robed gentleman stood alone at the edge of the dock, waiting.

Without greeting, he held out two objects.

One was a length of grayish wood, streaked faintly with pink, warm despite the morning air. The other was a metal bar—off-silver, dull, heavier than it looked.

Elmon took them.

He examined the wood, then the metal. He felt them. Not with his hands alone. There was something there—an unease, or a pressure—like a word waiting just before it is spoken.

The Chancellor arrived and seated himself in the chair that had been set for him. “*Young Silverwood,*” he said evenly, “*we ask that you make the bar and the wood one.*”

Elmon frowned slightly. “*One piece?*” he asked. “*One entity? One... what?*”

The Chancellor met his gaze. “*That,*” he said, “*is your choice.*”

### ***Test of Engis Ulrick***

Elmon studied the wood first. It looked ordinary. Weathered. Lifeless. Nothing about it called to him.

The metal came next. It felt familiar—heavier than it should have been, but otherwise unremarkable. He glanced toward the Chancellor, uncertain.

Then he did what he always did when things would not speak.

He asked.

He leaned close to the wood and whispered, “*Why are you a test?*”

The answer was not words. It was a feeling—impossible. Not resistant. Not hostile. Simply... not meant to be, as it was.

Elmon frowned and turned to the metal. “*Are you possible?*”

Nothing answered.

He closed his eyes and reached again—carefully this time. The wood felt hollow. Not empty, but unfinished. It held no magic he could touch. The metal was different. Dense. Heavy in a way that had nothing to do with weight. Like trying to move through deep mud.

Elmon looked up. “*May I change them?*”

The Chancellor did not hesitate. “*By all means, Young Silverwood—If ... You ... Can.*”

Elmon reached outward then, drawing a small measure of the magic present in the land. Even—carefully—from the space around the Chancellor himself. He guided it into the wood.

The wood accepted it. Slowly. Willingly.

The metal rejected it.

That surprised him.

His uncle had said all things carried magic. Elmon searched the metal again, not with his hands or his will, but with his heart. What he found made him pause.

The metal was already full.

It held too much. So much that it could not receive more.

They were not opposites.

They were unfinished halves.

Elmon placed the wood beneath the metal bar and waited. He did not force them together. He let them rest in relation.

Then he began to draw the magic back—slowly—out of the wood, from the side opposite the bar.

The wood felt wrong now. Strained.

The metal reacted.

As Elmon siphoned the magic he had given, the metal began to release its own—feeding the wood, answering a need it recognized. Back and forth it went. Giving. Taking. Equalizing.

The two materials began to mesh—not fused, but aligned. As if they had always been waiting for this correction.

After several minutes, Elmon's strength failed. He sank back, breath shallow, hands trembling.

When he lifted the object again, he hesitated. The wood had taken on the off-silver hue of the metal. Or perhaps the metal had grown rough and grain-bound like wood.

He could no longer tell which it had been. Only that it was now one.

The Chancellor stood stunned in heart, looking at the amalgamation in Elmon's hands—and remembered. *"Only two others in known history had ever achieved something of this measure.*

*Engis Ulrick.*

*Sorewnth Usnik.*

*And now—Elmon."*

The Chancellor took the piece from Elmon's hands. For the first time that morning, he did not speak at once. He turned the object slowly, studying grain and sheen, weight and balance, as if searching not for flaw—but for truth.

At last, he looked up. In a calm, measured voice asked. *"How did you achieve this, Young Silverwood?"*

Elmon answered without hesitation. *"I gave one what it lacked,"* he said simply, *"and helped the other realize what it no longer needed—by taking it away. Now neither wants more."*

The Chancellor nodded once.

His expression never broke into astonishment, but something unmistakable shifted behind his eyes. He passed the piece to the Inspector, who accepted it in silence and walked away, still examining it as though it might change again when unobserved.

The Chancellor turned back to Elmon. *"School begins in three months,"* he said. *"We welcome you to our halls, Young Silverwood."*

It was not praise. It was an acknowledgment.

## Chapter †: Scathnards' Halls

Elmon Silverwood entered Scathnard not as a prodigy—but as a question.

It was the first day of Spring, in the month of the Witch, during the Festival of the Moons. The harbor was draped in orange lanterns and carved pumpkins. Wreaths hung from iron balconies. Knights in polished armor marched in ceremonial lines to commemorate the ending of the Witch Wars.

The city celebrated victory. Elmon arrived uncertain what had truly been won.

He wore a common coat, plain in cut, its threads quietly woven with the Glyph of Amoquindo: the mark borne by those who had mastered the Test of Engis Ulrick. Few noticed it. Fewer still understood its meaning.

The archives did.

Eyes lingered longer than courtesy allowed. Names paused mid-entry. Doors opened that should not have. Elmon felt none of it directly—but the halls remembered him even if their occupants did not.

### ***A Sorcerer's Lens***

In his first year, Elmon studied under Master Benjamin Elrooya.

Elrooya was a quiet sorcerer, spare in speech, exacting in method. His mind fractured problems like light through crystal—never hurried, never careless. He tolerated no flaw in his work, only the best one could give. *“Do it correctly,”* he would say, *“or do not do it at all.”*

It was a creed Elmon recognized. His father had lived by the same rule at his bench, and Elrooya carried it into the classroom without compromise.

Elmon did not yet understand MANA—not as theory, not as system—but he felt it. Its rhythm. Its resistance. Its tendency to answer questions with more questions. Sorcery, he learned quickly, was not mastery. It was permission: a first gate into the disciplined structures of Academia.

And once inside, Elmon began to look deeper.

He searched the catalogs of side courses and restricted readings for subjects that stirred something quieter, something older than instruction.

He enrolled in—

Among the lesser-traveled courses, Elmon found three that drew his attention immediately—not because they promised power, but because they asked questions no one else seemed willing to phrase.

#### **Subclasses in MANA**

A study of emotional and elemental flow—how feeling shapes force, and force answers in kind. The course proposed MANA not as fuel, but as the totality of existence itself, expressed through relation rather than command. Its sigil was simple: a spiral within a flame—motion held inside heat, flow, and fusion inseparable.

#### **Peripheral Mapping of the Arcan**

A spatial discipline focused on resonance rather than effect. Students charted how magic manifested empirically through rhythm, distortion, and echo. The description warned that

one dialect of Toreaz was required, and that fluency was earned, not taught. Its sigil showed a compass rose traced with faint echo-lines—a marker of paths felt but unseen.

### **Manifestations of the Oryi**

A historical lens on the Ancient Faey and the first articulations of creation. The course bridged theology and cognition, treating gods and celestials not as distant absolutes, but as witnesses bound to the same unfolding as all else. Its sigil depicted a dragon's eye set within a starburst—the symbol of origin, memory, and watchfulness.

Elmon enrolled in all three.

Not because he understood them.

But because they felt like places where questions could remain unanswered.

It was in this final course that Elmon first encountered reference to the Celestial Vault Document, unearthed from the ruins of Portio Arageeyos.

The fragments were incomplete—glyphs, sigils, and strands of Echo threaded through damaged stone and brittle record—but what remained spoke of a time before time. A period when the Faey were not tricksters or shadows of whim, but dragons. Judges of realms. Ancestors to the Treats themselves.

One name appeared again and again in his readings — always in connection with the Feast and Festivals of the Moon.

### **Quen'ar.**

A Fey arbiter, appointed by the celestial Thrya. The texts named Quen'ar as the first to breathe and emote.

Elmon lingered over the phrase.

“To breathe and emote,” he whispered. “What a peculiar way to begin.”

The surrounding material deepened the strangeness. Echo threads were mapped not as effects, but as continuities. Sigils were treated as witnesses rather than tools. Records referenced Weavers and mystic correlators whose roles were observational, not directive—catalogers of resonance rather than masters of it.

None of it matched the dominant frameworks of MANA he had been taught.

Elmon marked the references for later study—perhaps years later. This was not knowledge meant to be rushed.

In his first year at Scathnard, he learned something no lecture announced outright: verification and cross-reference were as vital to wizardry as breath was to life. Truth, like magic, endured only when it could be approached from more than one direction.

### ***The Filí Mysteries and the Crystal Codex***

Elmon's second year was structured — and exhausting.

It began after a two-week break in the Month of Stars, deep in winter.

He had been reading the *Chronicles of Noreth Valley*, northeast of his childhood home, along the ragged edge of the Ildroll Lands. In several passages, the Centaur tribes were said to celebrate something called the First Sons.

He paused over that phrase more than once.

What did such a celebration look like? Was it solemn? Violent? Joyful?

He had never seen a Centaur — only sketches and copied renderings in aging folios.

Eventually, he closed the volume and returned to the year's curriculum.

The year began in a flash — new classes, new friends, new expectations.

He had thought Elrooya demanding.

Master Kinckle was something else entirely.

The man carried tension like a drawn bowstring. He would fix his stare on a student as if preparing to unleash fury — eyes hard, jaw tight — and then speak in a voice so calm it felt unnatural.

It was disorienting. It took weeks to grow accustomed to it.

Arcane mastery was feverish — stocked with paradox and mystery.

The curriculum pressed inward from all sides, demanding precision where curiosity had once roamed freely.

Much of his focus fell upon the deeper Arcane Mysteries — particularly the Titans, and a ritual known as **Manerva**: Soul Binding.

It was not a subject taught lightly.

Even its outline carried cautions in the margins.

The Filí were at the center of it.

They were unraveling something old—dangerously old—and their work had become one of the most provocative lines of study to reach Scathnard in generations. It demanded more than memorization. It required rethinking the assumptions Elmon had carried since childhood.

Something in him responded to it.

As he studied the class outline, a quiet resonance settled in his chest—not excitement, not fear, but recognition.

The Filí had uncovered a Titan implement that defied accepted comprehension: a crystal sphere no more than ten centimeters across, swirling with internal mist and pulsing with contained light.

When properly attuned, it spoke.

Not like a mechanism.

Like a person.

According to the sphere — and to the *Crystal Codex* that recorded its testimony — there were only three true classifications of mythic implements.

Only three.

This contradicted everything Elmon had learned in his youth, where scholars argued endlessly over dozens of categories and never agreed on a foundation.

The Filí did not argue.

They reduced.

And in doing so, they unsettled the entire structure of magical taxonomy.  
The sphere defined only three — not as theory, not as debate, but as fact.

### ***First: Mythios Objects and Implements***

Those made by mortals. Crafted. Shaped by intent and skill — but not of the First Created.

Elmon paused over the phrase. *Not of the First Created.*

Why the distinction? Was something done differently — or had something been lost?

He turned the thought over carefully. Origin carried consequence. What came after creation was not necessarily lesser — but it was altered in how it resolved itself in the world.

The school had appended a modest list beneath the classification:

the **Stave of the Magi**,

the **Mountain Cloak**,

the **Rings of the Emperor**.

Powerful, yes—but derivative.

### ***Second: SINN Objects and Paraphernalia***

ADAMA-born. Arcan in nature. Dangerous. Primal. Unyielding. The sphere offered no embellishment beyond that.

Elmon's breath slowed as he read. "Could be fascinating," he said quietly — more to himself than the page — "to find one."

He paused pondering.

What was this SINN notation truly marking? Why automatically dangerous and primal?

But what kind of dangerous?

Were they wild?

Unbound, maybe Self-willed? Or were they sealed — imprisoned within their own structure?

Possibly cursed? Or were they simply honest in a way mortals found intolerable?

The school's annotation beneath the classification was noticeably shorter — and far more cautious:

**Magol's Hammer**,

**Staff of the Elements**,

**Crown of Madness**.

No commentary followed. Only warning, implied by omission.

### ***Third: Enchiroo Things***

Objects—or manifestations—formed from emotional and mystical concepts.

Memory-bound.

Heart-song attuned.

Elmon frowned, then leaned closer. “*How could this be?*” he whispered. “*Something physical, born from memory?*”

A pause. “*Perhaps like a dream,*” he added. “*That refuses to fade.*”

Here, the school’s contribution was tentative—almost eager:

Echo Threads, Veils, and the Scribing of Echos—a newly established wing of study, still provisional in its authority.

Elmon marked the margin heavily. To him this was not categorization, but it was a confession.

### **The ADAMA Note**

Elmon’s research into ADAMA led him first to familiar ground.

The Tome of Whiteheart named ADAMA as the first Man—the progenitor of all men. The references were foundational, almost ceremonial, and frustratingly vague. No artifact bearing that name existed in Scathnard’s collections. Nothing labeled. Nothing displayed.

But absence, Elmon was learning, often meant something else entirely.

It was while reviewing old inventories in the Vault of Implements that he found the note.

It was not cataloged. Not signed. Folded once and hidden at the back of a drawer that no one seemed to open anymore. The script was unfamiliar at first glance—curved, layered, almost organic.

It seemed like **Bloomsript**

That discovery alone unsettled him.

Tracking it took longer than expected. Bloomsript was not taught openly, but he eventually uncovered a thin, neglected tome of translations and partial transcriptions. The language resisted direct meaning, favoring implication and memory over structure.

With patience, the message resolved.

*“The last known location of the tome was archived in the Healing Hand Monastery at Silverhand, on Europiasal.”*

Below it was a sigil—compressed, encrypted, and unmistakably intentional. Elmon stared at it until its meaning surfaced, not as words but as certainty.

**The ADAMA seed does not sleep.**

**It waits.**

Elmon closed the drawer carefully.

Some truths, he understood now, were not lost. They were withheld.

He completed his final essay in *Mystical Phenomena and the Practice of Thaumaturgy* and surrendered it to instructors who regarded him with a scrying curiosity that bordered on challenge.

Another year had come and gone. Practice had become rote. Precision had become expected.

His father had once told him: *Precision is the mark of a master.* Elmon was beginning to understand what that meant—and what it cost.

He made a couple of friends over the year.

### ***Ells Magellis’Nar***

From an Aldern human warrior family—an unusual lineage to send a daughter to wizardry school. She never explained why. She was quiet most days, observant, almost restrained.

But mention blades, armor weight, edge balance, or battlefield structure—and she came alive. She could speak for hours about steel.

### ***Elcrull Misters***

An Elna Sha tiger Catar—beautiful, deliberate, and dangerous in equal measure. She intended to become both Sorcerer and War Blade, a combination that made most instructors uneasy.

Her sword practice resembled dance more than combat—fluid arcs, measured turns, precise footwork. She was frost-edged in conversation, but playful in intention. She flirted the way some test steel—lightly, repeatedly, watching for weakness.

### ***The Brookein Hobbit***

Not merely a Hobbit—but a Brookein. They preferred pipes, food, and sleep—in that order.

She would sit in the outdoor courtyard during lunch, smoking lazily, and from fifteen paces toss her knife into the same knot of wood without looking twice. Then she would resume nibbling whatever strange preserved delicacy she carried in her pouch.

Once she let Elmon try a *Sparrow Red Sausage Nibble*. It tasted faintly of candied elk and fireleaf spice. His brow sweated within moments. She found that amusing.

In his third year, Elmon faced a decision that would shape the next three.

The mastery track he chose would bind his studies, demanding years of academic scripting and exhaustive investigative work. It was not a matter of preference. Once entered, the path allowed little deviation.

Spring broke early that year.

The warmth arrived with little ceremony, rolling in from the southern valleys like a familiar breath from home. The Month of Saint was usually mild—cool mornings, tolerable afternoons—but this year the air carried the weight of midsummer.

Even Scathnard felt it.

Windows stood open throughout the compound, shutters tied back, curtains lifting and settling in the sea breeze. The Chancellor himself abandoned his inner offices more than once, seated upon the stone patio with a lacquered hand fan moving in steady rhythm. When the heat pressed too close, he would conjure a faint veil of mist that hovered briefly before dissolving into the air.

At the southern edge of the grounds, the garden paths curved toward the cliff face. From there one could watch the waves strike the sand below, white foam curling and retreating in endless repetition. The ocean wind carried salt and distance.

Elmon favored that place.

It was where heat softened thought without dissolving it. Where study felt less like confinement and more like listening.

Elmon sat on the bench, the sea wind cooling his temples, the mastery register folded loosely in his hands.

He had reviewed the list twice already.

He did not look for what promised mastery.

He looked for what asked questions — and for what would not stop asking them once answered. He wanted studies that opened doors only to reveal more doors beyond.

Questions direct and develop purpose, he thought. Answers often close it.

And so, he chose accordingly.

He walked to the Directive Room, the corridor unusually quiet in the midday heat. The Mastery Ledger rested upon its stand like an altar—broad, leather-bound, waiting.

He opened it.

And began.

### ***The Mastery Paths (Choice Under Weight)***

Elmon reviewed the mastery paths carefully. This choice would bind the next three years of his life. Once entered, there was no quiet exit.

He read slowly.

#### **The Mage**

The Citadel of the White Spire existed to warn and instruct—to teach balance, restraint, and the fragile consequences of misuse. The failures of Mage Balance were well documented. This path trained the mind to recognize limits before crossing them.

Elmon thought of his uncle. Of his first year. *Do it right—or don't do it at all.*

He scanned the list of topics and sub-studies.

*"I already know balance,"* he murmured. *"Or at least, I know its cost."*

He closed the page.

*"No. Not for me."*

#### **Sorcerer Extreme**

This path examined wild magic—unbidden manifestations, ancestral awakenings, inherited resonance. It traced the trigenerational consequences of interfacing with Celestials, Dragons, Daemons, and Faey. It promised grounding through history and survival through precedent.

Elmon frowned.

*"Interesting,"* he admitted quietly. *"But shallow."*

He shook his head. *"It catalogs chaos. It doesn't question it."*

He turned the page.

### **Wizards in the Open**

Here were those who walked where others withdrew. Wizards who pursued the absurd, the unmeasured, the titan-scale mysteries. Collectors and refiners of the arcane. Some specialized deeply; others cultivated breadth and adaptability. No single doctrine—only pursuit.

Elmon paused longer here.

*“Variation,”* he said. *“Expansive.”*

A breath.

*“And a coalescence of heart.”*

This one lingered with him.

*“Maybe,”* he said. *“But there are still others.”*

### **The Unbridled Sage**

The description began not with doctrine, but with a story.

A man brought a crystal to a sage. Others dismissed it—an alchemist here, a pompous scholar there. The sage listened. He asked questions no one else thought to ask. He paid more than the object was worth—then demanded silence.

*Do you understand?*

This path led into archives, secrets, and ambitions. Sages were everywhere—advising kings, founding libraries, shaping thought. Garus itself had been founded by one such sage, long before the school became what it was now.

Elmon smiled faintly.

*“It’s changed,”* he said. *“More than Garus could have imagined.”*

He chuckled softly. *“I like investigation. Mythos. Mystery.”*

But—

*“The heart matters more.”*

He turned the page.

### **The Eye of the Mystic**

It began with exile.

Mystics were born from prophecy, divine warning, and failure. Once shamans, then outcasts. They emerged as a distinct order after the Red Orc War—when forbidden magics shattered the boundary between life and death.

They did not seek power.

They walked the edge: between remembrance and forgetting, healing and unraveling. They bound souls, altered memory, and communed with forces that did not forgive ignorance. Feared by many. Revered by some. Always watched.

Elmon felt his breath catch.

*“Heart,”* he whispered.

*“Depth.”*

*“Mythos.”*

This path did not promise answers.

It promised consequences.

He looked back once—only once—at the other paths.

### **War Blade**

The final option.

One of the three Mystic paths—yet unlike the others, it did not rely on magic in the strict sense. War Blades wielded runes instead: few in number, simple in form, but devastating in application. Where others invoked, they inscribed. Where others listened, they struck.

The blade was their language.

It was the school’s primary martial path, forged for conflict and resolution through force. And though the runes themselves were limited, in the hands of a War Blade they became something darker—sharpened by intent, lethal in purpose.

Elmon lingered longer than he expected.

*“Direct,”* he admitted. *“Honest.”*

He imagined it: hand-to-hand combat, steel answering steel, runes flaring at the moment of impact. There was mastery here. Discipline. Finality.

Tempting.

But he shook his head slowly.

*“There’s no mystery,”* he said. *“No listening. No asking.”*

A pause.

*“It could expand me,”* he allowed. *“Or it could define me too narrowly.”*

He closed the page.

Elmon was given two days to choose his mastery.

He used them carefully.

He sought counsel among the Chancellor’s advisors, not for permission, but for perspective. When at last he spoke, he did so plainly.

*“I’m drawn to wizardry for its breadth,”* he said. *“For the mysteries it uncovers and the questions it refuses to close.”*

A breath.

*“But I feel a calling toward the Mystic path—for the heart. For memory. For healing what cannot be named.”*

He looked from one counselor to the next.

*“Is there a path,”* he asked, *“that allows both?”*

The room did not answer at once.

That alone told him the question mattered.

The Month of Reason began, and Elmon still had not chosen his mastery.

He walked into the courtyard to think — and instead found distraction.

Elcrull was circling a new student like a patient predator. The poor boy flushed, stammered, and finally retreated under the pressure of her gaze. She laughed — not cruelly, but delighted — then caught Elmon watching.

Her tail swayed as she approached, deliberate and unhurried. She licked the edge of one fang with a grin that promised trouble.

Elmon laughed.

She giggled in return and leaned close, her Catar tongue smooth and perfectly measured.

*“I don’t think he understands furry flicts and teasing.”*

Elmon replied in Tarin, smiling. *“Not everyone adores someone as captivating as you — whiskers and swagger included.”*

She punched him lightly in the arm and nuzzled his shoulder, eyes wide with theatrical innocence.

*“One of these days,”* she half-smirked, *“I will find one who responds properly to my charms.”*

Elmon tilted his head. *“And what is it you desire, my flirtatious jaguar?”*

She sat beside him, tail curling around her boots.

*“Someone who likes me — not my feline caricature. Someone who appreciates the warmth of my heart, not merely the warmth of my fur.”*

Elmon smiled faintly. *“You’re looking for the impossible.”*

*“There are few of us,”* he replied softly, *“but not none.”*

She leaned closer, voice lowering. *“Why not you?”*

Elmon froze. The question caught him unguarded. Color rose to his cheeks before he could stop it.

*“Well... Elcrull... as much as I appreciate you — your fire, your sharpness, your... everything — I’m not seeking a relationship right now. Study comes first. Stability. Then perhaps family. Then love.”*

He hesitated. *“Not the other way around.”*

Elcrull studied him for a long moment, her tail flicking slowly behind her.

He has desire. *“Then I suppose,”* she said quietly, *“I will have to wait.”*

Kissing him softly on his check.

## Chapter 7: The Chancellor's Entrance

### *The Curriculum that Waited*

The Chancellor had been in the archives across the hall, listening as he often did, keeping a quiet account of the counselors' guests and the questions they carried with them.

He rose when he heard Elmon's voice.

Without announcement, he entered the chamber. For a brief moment, he did not look toward the counselor's chair. Then he did—and smiled faintly.

*"Ah. Elmon."*

He stepped fully into the room.

*"I have heard of your measures and variances in study,"* he said. *"Your habit of pressing your instructors for ideas and frameworks not yet considered."*

His gaze settled, assessing rather than judging.

*"You have championed an interesting question."*

The Chancellor folded his hands behind his back.

*"We do not currently offer a mastery path designed for a student of your... calibration."* A pause. *"Give me a day or two. Let me see what may be manifested."*

He turned to leave—then stopped.

The Chancellor looked back, scratching thoughtfully at his beard. This time, he faced Elmon fully.

*"There have been others of promise,"* he said quietly. *"They did not bloom within the school."*

A breath.

*"You, however, appear true to yourself—and to purposes we do not yet understand."*

His eyes hardened, not unkindly.

*"If we do not excel, we grow complacent. Rigid. Unformed in spirit."*

The Chancellor turned and left, his steps purposeful, as though the school itself had just been set in motion.

As the Chancellor's shoes echoed down the hall, the sound suddenly stopped.

He remembered the last time a student had asked about soul healing.

She had vanished before the semester's end.

Her name now survived only as a whisper in the archives—referenced indirectly, never spoken aloud.

Elmon leaned out through the doorway.

The Chancellor stood motionless, his gaze unfocused, as though sorting through something old and unresolved. After a moment, he turned back toward the counselors' office.

Elmon stepped forward at the same time.

They paused in unison—so precisely it might have been rehearsed.

"Elmon," the Chancellor said. "*Have you ever heard of Echomancy... or perhaps Mystarch Studies?*"

Elmon searched his memory. "My uncle, Emor, mentioned Echomancy once," he said slowly. "Only in passing. Years ago. Why do you ask?"

The Chancellor's expression darkened—not with fear, but with restraint. "There was a time," he said, "when we believed it would be a worthy addition to the school. A secondary path. An elective."

A pause.

"There was little interest. Too little."

His fingers tightened slightly along the edge of the desk. "We allowed it to fade."

He studied Elmon with unsettling precision. "I would hate for that mistake," he said quietly, "to be repeated."

Elmon felt the weight of the words, though he did not yet understand them.

A thunderclap split the air. Rain followed almost immediately—sharp against the courtyard stone. The heat broke. The air cooled with visible relief, as though the compound itself had exhaled.

Neither of them moved.

Then Elmon bowed slightly and left the Counselor's wing.

The corridors felt different now.

As he walked toward the dormitories, his thoughts churned.

Echomancy. . . and Mystarch Studies. . .

A forgotten discipline. A mistake not meant to be repeated.

The rain followed him down the hall like a quiet drumbeat.

Out loud, to no one in particular, he tried to reason it through.

"*Echomancy is the study of relative echoes from spells,*" he muttered. "*Not the ritual healing of an Echo. Not the mystic cadence left behind by casting...*"

He stopped and laughed softly at himself.

"*I don't actually know what any of that means.*"

Still smiling faintly, he resumed walking, the Chancellor's words echoing in his thoughts.

*Give me a day or two,* he had said. *Let me see what I can manifest.*

Elmon had the uneasy feeling that whatever emerged would not fit neatly into any catalog.

Elmon's roommate, Alfred of the Escarious Kingship, looked up as he entered the room.

"Well?" Alfred asked, lounging back with practiced ease. "*Have you decided on a mastery yet?*"

He gestured smugly toward his own desk. "*Wizardry for me. Following in my mother's steps.*"

Elmon set his things down and glanced over his shoulder. *“Not yet,”* he said. *“The Chancellor is considering... something else.”*

Alfred raised a brow.

*“A new course,”* Elmon added. *“At least, that’s what it sounded like. He seemed excited. In a way I don’t think he’s been for some time.”*

Alfred laughed softly. *“Of course he was. They create new paths every day around here.”*

He stood looked out the window at the rain and turned and crossed the room, posture stiffening as he stopped directly in front of Elmon.

*“You really think you’re something, don’t you?”* Alfred said quietly. *“Passing that test. Drawing all that attention.”*

A thin smile. *“I could have done it myself. My mother simply suggested we fund a new wing instead. Dormis Hall. Money lasts longer than wishes and dreams.”*

Elmon regarded him calmly. *“Don’t mistake it,”* he said. *“The test wasn’t greatness. It was understanding. Nothing more.”*

He paused, then added evenly, *“And I don’t doubt you could have done well. You’re first in common studies. Second in mythos.”*

A beat.

*“Though,”* Elmon continued, almost gently, *“you did struggle in MANA investigations.”*

Silence settled between them.

Not hostile.

But no longer friendly.

Alfred responded softly, with an empty calm. *“MANA investigations ... are... overrated.”*

Alfred turned away, faintly embarrassed. He knew Elmon had mastered the investigations—every one of them.

Elmon lay back on his bed, staring at the ceiling, turning his choices over in his mind. Possibilities branched endlessly before him. What might come? What *must* come.

He imagined futures half-formed: saving the world, uncovering singular relics, perhaps even founding a school of his own one day. He wondered, briefly, what he would name it.

Sleep took him before the thought could settle.

He dreamed of an old man standing before a crystal cocoon. A memory stone lay in his hands, glowing faintly, as if resisting being remembered.

Elmon woke with a start.

*“Elmon Silverwood!”* came a sharp voice from the corridor. *“Lore Master Hendiss requires your presence immediately,”* cried the Doom Mistress.

Alfred groaned and rolled onto his side. *“What have you done now?”* he muttered, then added with a laugh, *“Probably getting expelled.”*

Elmon didn’t answer.

He swung his feet to the floor, gathered himself, and headed for the door.

The Hall of Counselors awaited.

The rain had retreated for the afternoon—perhaps for the day entirely. What remained was the scent of wet stone and softened dust, rising gently from the courtyard. Sunlight filtered through thinning clouds, pale and uncertain.

The storm had passed. The questions had not.

Elmon cut through Curdian Hall, where most of the spell courses were taught. He slowed, studying the scene that lay before him.

Two rooms—ones that never seemed to be used—were open.

Stored materials were being cleared out, desks stacked into the corridors, and shelves stripped bare. The floors had been scrubbed clean, and fresh paint marked recent repairs to podiums and walls. It was unmistakable: the rooms were being made ready.

Curdian Hall was the newest of the faculty houses, the last built on the grounds. It bore the name of Tinsmal Curdian, whom the archives described as a *spell-dreamer* and *mnemonic resonator of exceptional character*.

That description lingered with Elmon.

He passed through the back doors and over the short fence separating the open courtyards from the training grounds. Beyond it, the storage annexes were also open. Broken furniture and cracked boxes lay scattered across the yard, as though the rooms themselves had burst apart.

Several workers were already sorting through the debris, cataloging what could be salvaged and what could not. One or two waved to Elmon as he passed.

He returned the gesture absently; his attention fixed on the cleared rooms behind him.

Whatever the Chancellor intended, it was no longer an idea.

It was being prepared.

Rounding the corner, Elmon nearly collided with a giant of a man—easily twelve feet tall.

The figure was lifting massive stones from beneath a long bench where students often sat to eat. Each stone must have weighed five or six hundred pounds, yet the giant handled them with steady, practiced ease, setting them aside as if they were furniture.

As the stones were cleared, Elmon saw it.

A hatch.

Metal-bound, thick—nearly four inches—and wide enough to admit several men at once. When the last stone was moved, the giant gripped the edge of the hatch and hauled it open, revealing a dark opening below.

Three gentlemen approached immediately, lanterns lit. They carried ledgers, measuring rods, and bundled tools—paraphernalia of record and reckoning. Without ceremony, they descended into the opening, the light from their lanterns vanishing one by one into the depths.

Elmon slowed, instinct tugging at him to stop. To ask. To follow.

But the summons weighed heavier.

He had an appointment with the Loremaster.

And one did not keep the Loremaster waiting.

With a final glance at the open hatch, Elmon continued on.

Elmon entered the hall and was met not by a clerk or attendant, but by Hendiss himself.

*“Forgive the urgency,”* Hendiss said at once. *“I have questions for you.”* He gestured Elmon inside, already moving as he spoke. *“The Chancellor has made it clear—quite clear—that the school requires an additional curriculum in your case.”*

He paused, eyes bright.

*“He described how you passed Ulrick’s Test,”* Hendiss continued. *“Minutes, Elmon. Minutes. And more importantly—how you achieved it.”*

Hendiss clasped his hands together, unable to still them.

*“I am having a new syllabus drafted,”* he said, voice quick with anticipation. *“Entirely new. And I want your eyes on it.”*

He laughed—soft, almost breathless. *“This is extraordinary.”*

The excitement radiating from him was almost disorienting, like witnessing a man encounter the sea for the first time.

*“Tomorrow morning,”* Hendiss said, already turning away, *“it will be ready for your consideration.”*

He tapped Elmon lightly on the shoulder as he passed, nearly skipping as he went, caught up in his own momentum.

Elmon was left standing alone in the hall.

Elmon scratched at the back of his head and turned toward the dormitories.

He moved slowly, his thoughts still tangled in the Chancellor’s words. *Weeks of preparation. A new curriculum. Who would even teach it?* The questions folded in on themselves as he walked, barely aware of where his feet were taking him.

Then—

Bang.

Elmon staggered back as a door swung open and a young woman emerged, struggling under the weight of several boxes of scroll tubes. They clattered together as she caught her balance.

*“I’m so sorry,”* she said quickly. *“You really should watch where you’re going.”*

*“So should I,”* Elmon replied, mortified. *“Are you all right?”*

She nodded, adjusting her grip. *“Fine. Just surprised.”*

He glanced at the doorway behind her—Abigail’s Hall of Justice. He recognized it at once. The oldest structure on campus, the first built. He remembered that from the archives.

*“Who are you?”* he asked, then winced. *“I mean—sorry. I’m Elmon.”*

She smiled despite herself. *“Christine Maple. Apprentice wizard. Third year.”*

*“I don’t think I’ve seen you before.”*

Christine raised an eyebrow. *“You’ve walked past me several times on your way to Curdian Hall.”*

*“I have?”*

*“Mm-hmm. I’m usually at the window.”*

Elmon hesitated, then allowed a small, unguarded smile. *“I suppose I would have noticed... eventually.”*

Christine laughed softly, color rising to her cheeks. *“It’s Airund’s Window of Knowing,”* she said. *“Not decorative. Or at least—that’s not its primary function.”*

*“A window that reveals truths,”* Elmon said. *“Sounds like a spell I should study.”*

*“Careful,”* she replied. *“Some windows show more than you expect.”*

He inclined his head. *“I’ll see you around, then.”*

Christine’s smile didn’t fade. *“Indeed,”* she said lightly. *“You will.”*

Elmon continued on toward Goilman Dorm Hall, the echo of the encounter lingering longer than he expected.

By the time Elmon returned, Alfred was tidying his side of the room. He sat at the bench, already reviewing notes for the next day’s lecture on Titans.

Alfred glanced up. *“What’s so important about these Titans, anyway?”*

Elmon paused. It was a deeper question than Alfred intended, but he answered simply.

*“They were created to maintain the protocols of existence,”* he said. *“All spheres of the metaverse, from what I understand. The Celestials oversee and guide those who live within it.”*

A shrug.

*“And the rest of us?”* Elmon added. *“We’re... thoughts. Complicated ones. Probably difficult for them to make sense of.”*

Alfred snorted. *“Like the Chancellor, the counselors, and the Dorm Mistress?”*

Elmon allowed a small smile. *“Sort of.”*

Alfred leaned back. *“So what was all the urgency about earlier?”*

Elmon hesitated. *“Master Hendiss is having a new syllabus drafted,”* he said. *“He wants me to look it over tomorrow morning. I’m not entirely sure what for.”*

He glanced over. *“Interesting, isn’t it?”*

Alfred raised an eyebrow. *“Really? They’re making a class just for you?”*

A pause.

He rolled his eye and smirked.

*“I doubt it.”*

Elmon shrugged. *“We’ll see.”*

Alfred returned to his notes, the matter—at least outwardly—settled.

Elmon sat at his desk and opened his archive book.

His thoughts returned immediately to the stone, the iron-bound hatch, and the giant required to move it. There was no such thing as unnecessary effort in old construction. If strength had been required, it had been for a reason.

After several chapters of cross-referenced indices and obsolete maps, he found it.

## The Eckorin Vaults

The references were sparse and archaic, written in a hand that favored caution over detail. Elmon reached into his satchel and withdrew another volume—one he had been studying quietly for weeks. A regional history of the grounds upon which Scathnard now stood.

He turned to a section labeled: Sacred and Shunned.

It spoke of seals. Of vaults. Of a citadel that once occupied the land long before the school—Garis Noll.

Eckorin, it read, had been the judge of that citadel.

He had ruled absolutely. Built chambers beneath the stone for punishment and disappearance—torture rooms and burial vaults meant to erase enemies from public memory. One chamber in particular was named only once: *the Vault of Treasures*.

No record survived of what was kept there.

The text did, however, record what was found nearby.

More than one hundred bodies had been recovered from the burial vaults.

There was mention of a wall—constructed hastily, reinforced beyond reason—concealing a Forbidden Room. When the wall was eventually removed, the account became fragmented, as if the scribe had struggled to continue.

They encountered a wight. Several zombies. And something described only as *headless*.

The undead were destroyed.

The room itself was not explored.

Instead, it was sealed in grief and horror—entombed beneath sacred stone sheets and anchored with earthen bindings. The archive offered no further investigation, no inventory, no explanation.

Nothing else.

Elmon closed the book slowly. He wanted more. Whatever lay beneath the school had not been forgotten. It had been *avoided*. With a single purpose settling in his mind, Elmon gathered his things and headed for the library.

After leaving the library—one more volume tucked under his arm, *Histories and Grounds of Scathnard and the Queendel Province*—Elmon started back toward the dormitories.

He didn't get far.

"Elmon!"

He turned to find his cousin Mejia standing in the corridor, hands on her hips, eyes bright with triumph.

"Uncle said you were here," she said. "I've been looking everywhere for you. Were you using an invisibility spell or something? Why didn't you let me know?"

"I didn't know you were here either," Elmon replied, smiling. "I would have told you. What are you studying, Miky?"

She groaned. "You haven't called me that since we were children."

Elmon's smile widened. *"Under the hornet's nest in your father's garden."*

She laughed despite herself. *"We were screaming and running everywhere. They never bothered you—but they loved me."*

*"And your mother,"* Elmon added, *"leaning out the bay window, shouting, 'Miky! Come here!'"*

*"That,"* she said firmly, *"is how you learned my nickname."*

A pause.

*"And you promised never to use it outside the house."*

*"You never told me why."*

She waved it away. *"It doesn't matter anymore."*

She shifted her satchel. *"I'm studying Mystics. And Alchemy."*

Elmon blinked. *"Those seem... unrelated."*

*"Alchemy for Father,"* she said easily. *"Mysticism for myself."*

Her eyes lit with enthusiasm. *"Echo binding. Echo forging. Echo looms. Fascinating things. What do you think of all this echo work?"*

Elmon hesitated. *"They may be creating a new course for me,"* he said. *"Something that blends Wizardry and Mystics."*

Her eyebrows rose. *"I heard about the candle incident,"* she said with a grin. *"It sounded exhilarating."*

*"It was,"* Elmon admitted. *"It's good to know family is here. Give Uncle my regards—and thank him for his training, would you?"*

She nodded eagerly, clearly still delighted by the encounter. Miky Softly said, *"Elcrull mention you in a passing pur."*

Elmon blinked.

*"She likes you."*

*"No,"* Elmon said immediately — too quickly.

*"I've already told her. School first. Stability first. No family. No love."*

Miky studied him for a moment. *"You are a Silverwood,"* she said at last, one brow rising slightly. Not accusation. Recognition.

Elmon smiled and turned to leave, already thinking again.

*"Echo looms,"* he murmured to himself. *"They say some can weave memory into stone..."*

He slowed.

*"I wonder,"* he said quietly, *"if that's what sealed the Forbidden Room."*

Elmon did not hesitate once he returned.

He opened the book immediately, flipping past annotations and brittle sketches until he reached a fold-out map buried several pages beyond the main entry. It spanned multiple sheets—too large, too deliberate to be incidental.

The vaults.

A faint buzz interrupted his concentration. The ferry landed squarely on the map. Elmon blinked.

It stood there — no more than an inch tall — thin-limbed, almost translucent. Like a scrawny elf carved from mist and impatience. Its head tilted as it studied the vault markings with unsettling focus.

Elmon slowly lifted his lens.

The ferry did not move.

He leaned closer and exhaled lightly across it. “*You should pay rent,*” he murmured.

The ferry buzzed once in indignation and vanished in a streak of pale light, disappearing into the wardrobe with a hollow wooden thud.

Silence returned.

Elmon looked back down at the map.

For a brief second, he could have sworn one of the vault sigils had shifted.

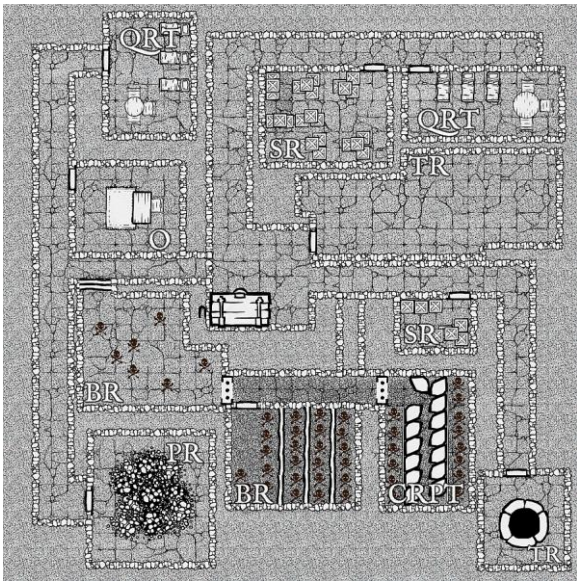
Rooms. Corridors. Seals.

He studied the layout carefully, tracing the lines with his finger, then leaned back as understanding began to settle.

*How does the campus sit on this?* he wondered.

He would need a current map of the grounds—an overlay. Only then would the truth emerge.

His gaze returned to the markings.



**QRT** — Likely living or assigned chambers. Not storage. Not temporary. Someone had lived here.

A lone **O** marked one chamber near the sealed passages. *Overseer? Ordained?* The map did not say—and that silence troubled him..

**SR** — Store rooms. Practical. Necessary.

Then **BR**. The burial room. Noted with symbols that made his stomach tighten. These were not graves. These were *containments*.

**PR** — He frowned. Purge room. Burn chamber. A place for erasure. This is where contamination—corporeal or metaphysical—was neutralized.

**TR** —the Vault of Treasures. Two of them. One marked with a well. Elmon sat back slowly.

Wells did not belong in vaults unless something needed to be sunk, anchored, or drawn away —they are for depth, anchoring, or drainage of something unwanted.

He scanned the perimeter again—and froze.

Several of the school’s buildings rested directly atop these chambers.

Not beside them.

*On them.*

The realization pressed in on him, heavy and unavoidable.

This was not forgotten history. This was *foundation*.

He closed the book carefully.

Tomorrow's syllabus could wait. He needed maps. Ground plans. Records. And answers.

Why would they keep it so secure? Elmon wondered.

Unless they feared something still remained below.

The stones alone would be impossible for most to move. And yet—if more undead lingered beneath, that precaution would make sense.

He stared at the map, candlelight flickering across the inked lines and symbols.

*"I need the current layout of the school,"* he murmured. *"Something isn't right."*

The realization settled suddenly, heavy and cold.

*"They built over it,"* he whispered. *"Not to forget."*

*"To contain."*

*"What did they build over?"* Alfred asked.

Elmon looked up.

*"Nothing,"* he said after a moment. *"Just some history I've been investigating."*

Alfred turned a page in his bed. *"Ah. The Arcan Investigation classes, I presume."*

Elmon studied him briefly, then nodded.

*"Exactly,"* he said. *"...Exactly."*

Elmon spent the remainder of the evening organizing his notes, setting his thoughts in order for what he sensed was coming. By the time he slept, the unease had settled into something quieter—anticipation rather than fear.

Morning came peacefully. Alfred was nowhere to be seen.

*He must have gone to class already,* Elmon thought.

After preparing for the day, Elmon made his way toward Master Hendiss's office.

When he arrived, Alfred was already there, standing against the wall, reading. Elmon paused behind him and glanced over his shoulder—helped slightly by the extra inches granted by his High Elf heritage, or so he supposed.

Alfred didn't look up. *"They've rearranged the mastery courses,"* he said flatly. *"I'm scheduled for the afternoon now."*

As they stood there, a small group of students gathered near the meeting board at the end of the corridor. Murmurs rose almost immediately.

Schedules were being reread. Pages turned back and forth. A few voices sharpened with irritation. Ecrull slipped between him and Alfred, tail brushing his hip.

Elmon caught her wrist gently before she could withdraw. *"You disrupt academic order,"* he said mildly.

She leaned closer. *"And you enjoy it."* He released her at once. *"Only as a case study."*

Several of them looked unsettled. Changes made this late were never routine.

Elmon felt it then—not just curiosity directed at him, but the first outward signs of disruption. Whatever the school was preparing, it was already reshaping more than one path.

Master Hendiss stepped out of his office, taking in the gathering of students—and a few faculty members—before his eyes settled on Elmon.

“Ah. *Elmon*,” he said, smiling. “*Come inside.*”

Once the door was closed behind them, Hendiss gestured toward the desk.

“*It’s finished*,” he said. “*The syllabus is complete and ready for your review.*”

Elmon frowned slightly. “*You are the architect of syllabuses*,” he said. “*Why would you need my review?*”

Hendiss studied him for a moment, then smiled more openly.

“*Because a student of your caliber requires more than instruction*,” he said. “*You require challenge.*”

A pause.

“*And this challenge is not only yours—it is mine.*”

He leaned forward, hands braced on the desk.

“*It is not every day a young magus walks into my halls and asks for something more. I need to know if this path is too demanding, not demanding enough, or lacking balance in the aspects you seek.*”

Hendiss straightened, his voice steady but intent.

“*I want this to be worthy—not just as a course of wizardry, but as a soulful enterprise of academia. Something that tests understanding as much as ability.*”

He met Elmon’s eyes.

“*So*,” he said quietly, “*tell me—does it challenge you?*”

Elmon was amazed—there was no other word for it.

Some of the material he recognized, fragments he had only brushed against in prior studies. Other portions named concepts he had no framework for at all—no reference points, no borrowed understanding. Only questions.

He turned the pages slowly, reading each course description with care, judging not the difficulty, but the *clarity*. His heart raced with anticipation. With wonder.

Then he stopped.

“*It says here*,” Elmon said carefully, “*that you are hiring a new instructor from the Halls of the Filí.*”

He looked up. “*He has already accepted. Who is it? And... what exactly is a Filí?*”

Master Hendiss did not answer at once.

“*You will learn that in due time*,” he said. “*But his name is Micrium Ortis—a Filí sorcerer of Orcish descent. He comes highly recommended by the Halls themselves.*”

Elmon sat very still.

An Orcish Filí.

The implications unfolded faster than he could contain.

He rose slowly and faced Hendiss, eyes wide but steady.

*“This is more than I ever expected,”* Elmon said. *“And yes—it will be a challenge.”*

Hendiss’s expression softened with satisfaction.

*“Good,”* he said.

He clapped Elmon once on the back and guided him toward the door, already turning his thoughts elsewhere. *“There is much to be done.”*

Elmon found himself ushered back into the corridor, syllabus still warm in his hands.

Elmon stood in the hall, the world around him muted and distant.

He was dimly aware of figures approaching—Alfred, Maria Hourline, Chelsis Norgelis, Elcrull Misters, and several others he had come to know. They gathered near him, concern evident in their faces.

*“Elmon?”* Alfred asked. *“What happened?”*

*“They made a course for me,”* Elmon said slowly, as if the words themselves were unfamiliar. *“And he asked me to review the syllabus... as though I mattered.”*

Maria Hourline stepped forward.

She carried herself with the quiet authority of the High Magistrates of the Elvin Council, her voice measured and clear.

*“You are exceptional,”* she said. *“My mother told me you completed Ulrick’s Test in minutes. It took her an entire day—and even then, she never finished it. She caused the wood to change, but nothing more. The sun set on her attempt.”*

Maria met his eyes. *“They recognize caliber when it walks through the door.”*

Elcrull went very still at the mention of Ulrick’s Test. *“You completed it?”* she asked softly.

That was news to her.

She stepped closer without realizing it, her shoulder brushing his arm. Not playful now. Steady. Elmon’s posture shifted, as though the weight of the word *Magus* had settled into his bones.

She pressed lightly against him — not to hold him up, but to anchor him.

Elmon swallowed. *“He called me a young magus,”* he said. *“I’ve never heard that term before.”*

Elcrull inhaled sharply. *“That is no small thing,”* she said. *“A Magus is one who has mastered the foundations of magic—and the structure of the Metaverse itself. My grandfather was a Magus.”*

Her voice softened. *“They do not use that word casually.”*

*“It drove him mad. He could alter the persistence of reality... briefly. Enough to change outcomes. Enough to lose himself.”*

The corridor seemed to tilt.

Elmon’s breath caught. The word *Magus* echoed in his mind like a bell struck deep in a cavern. Each reverberation thinned the world around him.

Reality felt fragile.

His knees buckled. Elcrull caught him.

Elmon awoke to lamplight and the faint scent of herbs.

He lay on a narrow cot in the cleric's chambers of the Cleric's Court. A man sat nearby, hands folded, watching him with practiced patience.

"Well," the cleric said gently, *"it seems you suffered a bit of an overload, son."*

Elmon blinked, his thoughts slow to gather.

*"Your classmates brought you in,"* the cleric continued. *"You looked as though you'd seen a ghost. I examined the grounds afterward—no spirits, no adversaries lurking in the halls."*

A small smile.

*"Do you remember what happened?"*

Elmon swallowed. *"Too much,"* he said quietly. *"Too much all at once. Perhaps I've taken on more than I should."*

The cleric nodded. *"That,"* he said, *"is something every soul must weigh for themselves—both in the heart and in the pocketbook."*

He leaned forward slightly. *"What is it that's burdening you so, Young Silverwood?"*

Elmon opened his mouth, then closed it again. When he spoke, the words came unevenly, tripping over one another.

*"Master Hendiss called me a Magus,"* he said. *"The Chancellor is... is creating a new course. For me. Just because of me."*

He drew a shaky breath.

*"And then—Master Hendiss asked me to review the syllabus. Me. A student."*

He pressed his palms to his temples, half laughing, half panicked.

*"I think my head is going to burst."*

Mansor smiled faintly. *"That's a great deal for a single moment in a day,"* he said. *"It seems they hold you in high regard—and wish to test you."*

He folded his hands. *"I've heard a rumor,"* he added gently. *"That you accomplished something not seen in a few thousand years. I can understand how that might set events in motion."*

A pause.

*"But it's nothing to be overwhelmed by,"* Mansor continued. *"Take it with a grain of salt. If things happen quickly, that's fine. If they unfold slowly, even better."* He shrugged. *"And if nothing comes of it at all, then the worry was never needed."*

Elmon sat up and looked at him more closely. *"You sound like my father,"* he said.

Mansor raised an eyebrow.

*"Nothing needs stirring,"* Elmon went on, a small smile forming, *"until it's time to stir."*

### ***The Door That Sings***

Elmon made his way back toward the dormitories, his thoughts still unsteady. He passed the large steel-bound door once more—still uncovered, still closed.

He slowed.

After a moment's hesitation, he knelt.

Runes had been etched into the metal, arranged not as wards or commands, but in a verse-like structure. At the top and bottom of the door, the inscriptions flowed in measured cadence. At each of the four corners, faint glyphs lingered—old, nearly worn away.

As Elmon knelt, they *sang*.

Not aloud, but inwardly—like a harmony just beneath hearing, felt rather than heard. The sound brushed his thoughts, gentle and insistent, as if recognizing him.

He leaned closer.

He would figure this out—A hand settled on his shoulder.

*“Young Silverwood,”* a voice said calmly, *“this is not something you should concern yourself with at the moment.”*

Elmon rose and turned.

He did not recognize the man: broad-shouldered, weathered, with earth beneath his nails and stone dust in the seams of his clothing.

*“Sir,”* Elmon asked, *“who are you?”*

*“I’m the groundskeeper,”* the man replied. *“Sendther Mulgin.”*

Elmon glanced back at the door. *“Why all the secrecy? Why hide this beneath so much stone?”*

Sendther followed his gaze. *“That’s what I’m trying to determine,”* he said. *“We were clearing the ground for a practice circle when I uncovered the door. I reported it to the Chancellor. He instructed me to expose it fully and provide my findings.”*

*“And those findings are?”* Elmon asked.

Sendther’s expression did not change.

*“As I said,”* he replied evenly, *“this is not something you should concern yourself with.”* A pause. *“But if the glyphs begin to hum again—walk away.”*

He removed his hand and stepped back, already turning his attention elsewhere.

Elmon remained.

He felt unsettled—not by the warning, but by the pattern. Again and again, he was told *not yet. Not now. Do not look.*

But the door had sung to him.

Active glyphs. Singing runes. A force, restrained and waiting.

Elmon stood alone for several long moments, the hum still faint beneath his feet.

He felt like a note in a forgotten song—played once, and remembered always.

## Chapter X: The day before the Weave

### *Dorm Shadows and Ancestral Light*

With the days coming to a head and his new syllabus set to begin the following morning, Elmon found himself lost in thought, turning over possibilities he could neither name nor quiet.

The dorm door opened.

Alfred stepped inside, his face drawn tight, his eyes red. He stood there for a moment, struggling to speak.

Elmon rose at once. *“Alfred—are you all right?”*

Alfred’s composure broke.

*“My mother was ashamed of me,”* he said, tears spilling freely now.

Elmon said nothing. He waited.

*“She told me that knowing someone the schools recognize as a young Magus demands respect—real respect—and care for the friendships that survive such moments.”* Alfred’s voice trembled. *“She said she had heard how I’ve been acting... as though I think I’m somebody. As though I look down on my classmates.”*

He swallowed hard.

*“Our family has walked through wars,”* Alfred continued. *“Generations of us fought and died so that I could stand here—so I could learn in peace, not beneath the blades of tyrants and oppressors.”*

He looked down at his hands.

*“They gave their lives so I wouldn’t make the same mistakes they did in these lands.”*

The room fell silent.

The dorm felt darker than it had a moment before—but not empty. Something old and heavy lingered between them, not as accusation, but as inheritance.

A long pause followed. Alfred drew a deep breath.

*“I’m sorry, Elmon,”* he said. *“For my words—and for the hostility.”* He hesitated. *“She asked about your family’s clan. I didn’t know it.”*

Elmon smiled faintly and let out a small laugh. *“That’s all right. I don’t know it either.”*

He nodded once. *“Apology accepted. How did your classes go?”*

Alfred wiped his eyes and steadied himself. *“They’ve added new courses to the schedule. Vestiges of the Metaverse. Mythic Taxonomy. Adaptive Spellcraft.”*

Elmon’s expression softened. *“That sounds exciting. Adventurous. Challenging.”*

*“There’s more,”* Alfred said. *“My mother is coming to the school. She wants to meet you—and she’s enrolling as well.”*

A beat.

*“A full year studying Mystic Resonance.”*

Elmon blinked. *“That will be demanding,”* he said thoughtfully. *“Most wizards have never taken a class like that. It lies well outside their usual scope—limited as my own understanding may be.”*

On the day before the Weave began, Elmon stood in quiet reflection. The syllabus was etched, the dream still pulsed, and the world felt newly awake. Alfred’s apology lingered like incense—humble, ancestral, and true. The dorm itself seemed altered. Shadows receded. And in their absence, the light of legacy took hold.

### ***Vaultborn Studies***

Elmon’s first day of Vaultborn Studies began with twenty students. Most of his friends were there.

The roster read less like a class list and more like a ledger of the lands’ mythic bloodlines—names spoken in halls of record and etched into stone long before they were written on parchment.

There were the Hourlines, mages who had held the gates of Morien’s Keep and refused to yield even when there was nothing left to give.

The Magellis’Nar, remembered for the recapture and final sundering of the Red Scourge at Rensor and Raven Claw.

The Tiligus, dwarves who stood fast at the gates of Black Mountain, holding their ground while outnumbered and overpowered.

And the Elcrilla of Whishmar—hobbits who stood in the gap, refusing to allow the Red Scourge’s rogues to pass the forges and reach the citadels of the Ildrol.

Elmon read the names slowly, feeling the weight of them settle in his chest.

This was not a gathering of students.

It was an inheritance.

Elmon’s cousin, Ezmerelda, came from a line whose forefathers had forged the first arcane gate—one used to rescue the elderly and wounded Elves from Echisa Morgal, the city of the High Court, before the Red Scourge laid siege to the Citadel gates.

Elmon had never truly looked before.

Never paused to see what stood before him.

Now—now the names echoed.

And the world looked back.

The door opened without sound.

A tall figure entered — robes woven of mist, skin dark, eyes lit like storm light. His movements were smooth as water, unhurried, precise. When he spoke, his voice was quiet, yet it carried the weight of ritual.

*“I am Micrium Ortis,”* he said. *“Fili Sorcerer. Orcish by blood. Bound to memory and myth.”*

A pause. *“I do not teach spells. I teach echoes.”*

He placed a crystal sphere upon the table.

It was no larger than a clenched hand—ten centimeters wide—swirling with mist, pulsing with soft inner light.

*“This is your first implement,”* Micrium continued. *“It will not obey you.”*

Another pause.

*“It will remember you.”*

He looked across the room, meeting no single gaze and all of them at once.

*“Vaultborn Studies are not about control,”* he said. *“They are about communion.”* The words settled before he finished.

*“You will not cast spells today.”* A final breath. *“You will listen.”*

He gestured, and twenty smaller spheres—each no larger than a plum—lifted from the table and drifted into the air, hovering before each student. Mist coiled within them, faint and colorless.

The sight was both inspiring and unsettling.

It reminded Elmon of a will-o'-wisp he had once seen—present, luminous, and not meant to be touched.

*“These are Echo Seeds,”* Micrium said. *“They are blank. They do not know you. They do not care for your lineage.”*

A pause.

*“They will respond only to memory.”*

Elmon reached for his sphere as one might reach for a fledgling bird—careful, uncertain. It was cool at first, smooth beneath his fingers. Then, as his hand closed around it, a faint warmth pulsed against his palm.

Not heat.

Breath.

Or a heartbeat.

Something answered within him. Feelings stirred. His thoughts filled with fragments—moments, impressions, half-remembered notions—rising unbidden, as if called forth rather than summoned.

Micrium continued, his voice steady.

*“You will inscribe a memory. Not with ink. Not with glyph. But with truth.”* He let the words settle. *“Choose a moment that shaped you. A moment of pain, joy, or silence. Hold it. Speak it. And the sphere will decide if you are worth remembering.”*

The room fell utterly still.

Some students shifted uneasily. Others closed their eyes, retreating inward. The air itself seemed to wait.

Elmon felt the weight of the summons—not a demand, but an invitation.

His thoughts turned to Echisa Morgal. To the wounded. To his cousin's lineage, forging the gate under siege. To the dream—the cocoon, the memory stone, the old man watching, as if guarding a past that had not yet occurred.

*“Which truth is mine to give?”*

He paused. Then whispered:

*“I remember the silence before the gate opened.”*

*“The breath held.”*

*“The fear.”*

*“And the light.”*

His sphere pulsed once.

Then again.

Its mist deepened, shifting to a faint violet, threads of silver weaving slowly through its core.

Micrium inclined his head. *“The sphere remembers you.”*

Micrium Ortis moved slowly among the students, his robes trailing mist like breath across the cold stone floor.

Each sphere responded in its own way. Some pulsed faintly. Others remained inert. A few shimmered with muted color, threads of memory surfacing too deep to name.

He paused beside a student whose sphere had turned a dull, lifeless gray.

*“You spoke of triumph,”* Micrium said gently. *“But not of truth.”* He let the words settle.

*“Echoes do not respond to pride. They respond to pain. To silence. To the moment you were changed.”*

The student lowered his head—ashamed, but not rejected.

Micrium moved on.

### ***Elmon’s Sphere***

Elmon’s sphere continued to swirl with violet and silver, now and then pierced by a faint pulse of white. It hovered just above his palm, no longer resting in it, as though drawn toward him—*as though it knew him.*

Micrium stopped beside him.

He inclined his head once, then placed a hand on Elmon’s shoulder.

Just as quickly, he withdrew it—his fingers flinching, as if pricked by a pin.

Micrium regarded him anew.

*“You remembered silence,”* he said softly. *“That is rare. Most remember fire. Or fear.”*

A pause. *“But silence is the gatekeeper of transformation.”*

His voice lowered, not in secrecy, but in reverence. *“There is something in you that resists definition. A restraint that defies knowing—for now.”*

This time, when Micrium placed his hand on Elmon’s shoulder, it was not as an instructor.

It was as a witness. *“You are Vaultborn,”* he said.

*“Not because of your blood.”*

*“But because the Vault remembers you.”*

### **The Ritual Grading**

Micrium turned to face the class, his gaze moving over them as though searching for something hidden—listening for a signal in the dark.

*“You will not be graded by numbers,”* he said. *“You will be graded by resonance.”*

He gestured toward the central altar.

There, suspended above it, hovered a great crystal sphere—ten times the size of the Echo Seeds. Its surface shimmered with layered light, depth upon depth, as though it contained more than space alone.

*“This is the Archive of Echoes,”* Micrium continued. *“Each week, your sphere will be placed within it.”*

A pause.

*“If it sings, you are growing.”*

*“If it dims, you are hiding.”*

*“And if it smolders in a hymn—his eyes lifted, sharp and knowing, —you are augmenting yourself.”*

A hush settled over the chamber.

The Archive pulsed once. Not in response, but in attention.

### **Closing Invocation**

Micrium raised his hands.

A soft chant filled the chamber—no words, only rhythm. A cadence felt more than heard. One by one, the spheres responded, glowing faintly in unison.

Then—a white flash.

Micrium’s attention snapped to it. He blinked once. Then again.

The Archive pulsed.

He had seen echoes shimmer. Smolder. Even fracture. But never *sing* before an invocation.

That would require consultation.

The Filí Codex, perhaps. Possibly the Dreamward.

Or—his thoughts stilled—the Vault itself.

The Archive pulsed again.

Micrium exhaled slowly. He had witnessed many Vaultborn in his lifetime.

He stepped forward, his robes trailing mist across the stone. The Archive pulsed once more—faint, deliberate.

*“You have touched the Vault,”* he said. *“Some of you gently. Some of you with force.”* A pause, measured. *“But only one of you has awakened it.”*

His gaze settled on Elmon.

Not with pride.

With caution.

*“There are echoes that sing,”* Micrium continued. *“And there are echoes that summon.”* Another pause. *“We will speak later.”*

He let the silence hold.

Then, without ceremony, Micrium lowered his hands and continued the rite.

*“This is not a class,”* Micrium said. *“This is a sanctum. You are not students. You are echoes waiting to be named.”*

When the pause in the curriculum was announced, the room slowly broke apart. Some students gathered in the outer hall. Others lingered within the sanctum itself, reluctant to leave. A few, drawn by curiosity, drifted closer to the great sphere.

Micrium stopped them with a raised hand.

*“Unless you understand what communion with the Vault truly entails,”* he warned, *“do not impose yourself upon it.”*

In the hall beyond, the noise of movement and hushed conversation returned in fragments.

Maria stood apart, her attention fixed on Elmon.

He noticed at last and glanced around, momentarily uncertain—had he done something improper? Realizing the gaze was meant for him alone, he stepped closer.

*“Maria,”* he asked quietly, *“why the stare?”*

She did not look away. *“Your Seed,”* she said. *“Why did it flash white—at odd moments—when no one else’s changed that way?”*

Elmon hesitated.

*“No one else’s responded like that,”* Maria continued. *“Not even the ones that shimmered.”* A beat.

*“You said Master Hendiss called you a young magus. Maybe that’s what this is.”*

The words settled between them.

Elmon paused, turning her thought over carefully, feeling the weight of it press against what little certainty he had left.

*“I’ve done a few things others haven’t,”* Elmon said slowly. *“But I don’t think that makes me special. Everyone has skills—abilities, gifts.”*

He gestured lightly. *“You, Maria, for instance—you can draw from your mind’s eye and render it as if time itself stood still. A moment captured exactly as it was.”*

Maria blinked, surprised.

*“And Jurioam,”* Elmon continued, nodding toward the far end of the hall, *“he can recite something he’s seen only once with perfect recall. That’s remarkable. I envy that sometimes—it would save me endless hours of research. He’ll make a great Sage one day. A living catalog.”*

Maria studied him for a long moment. Then she asked quietly, *“Why did he flinch when he touched you?”*

Elmon frowned. *“He did?”*

She nodded. *“Just for a moment.”*

*“I didn’t see it,”* Elmon said. *“I felt his hand—then it was gone. Then it was there again.”* He paused. *“He touched Melcat afterward and pulled away as well. That was strange. Like something stung him.”*

Elmon looked back toward the sanctum, his thoughts already moving.

*“I think,”* he said at last, *“I’ll ask Sir Micrium.”*

Micrium reconvened the students, his voice low and steady. The chamber quieted at once.

He spoke then of Vault theory and its earliest history.

*“When the First Vault was stumbled upon,”* he said, *“the Avions used it not for conquest, but for training the Brenarsh Eagles—creatures who spoke in the language of the heart.”*

A pause.

*“With their calls, they could produce echoes.”*

He let that settle.

*“These were extraordinary beings. When a Brenarsh Eagle dies, it does not decay. It resolves.”*

His fingers traced a small arc in the air. *“It becomes a sigil—an anchor for memory reckoning.”*

Several students shifted, unsettled.

Micrium continued, moving seamlessly into instruction. He outlined the foundations of Echo Scripting, Memory Tracing, and other disciplines the class would be expected to research and prepare for independently.

Then his tone hardened—not in anger, but in truth.

*“I am not your mother,”* he said. *“Nor your father.”*

A pause.

*“If you wish to grow, you must do the work—as your forefathers did.”*

He looked at them each in turn. *“There is a price for knowledge. The deliberate acquisition of it is always a choice—your choice. Your terms. Your effort.”*

His voice carried no comfort. *“This school does not exist for your enjoyment. Nor for your profit. Nor for your enterprise.”*

Another pause. *“It exists to guide you into all things metaphysical... and holy.”*

Silence followed—not confusion, but understanding.

Micrium returned to the podium and let the room settle.

*“Today’s instruction concludes here,”* he said. *“Are there any pressing questions?”*

Maria rose at once.

*“Most honored Micrium,”* she said, her voice steady but insistent. *“Why did Elmon’s Seed flash white? Master Hendiss called him a young magus. This course was created for him, my mother tells me. He completed the Ulrick Test in ten minutes.”*

She hesitated only a breath. *“What is he?”*

The room held still.

Micrium looked first at Elmon—calmly, without scrutiny—then turned his gaze back to Maria.

*“Young lady,”* he said evenly, *“he has a different calling than you.”* A pause. *“In the weeks to come, we may learn why his Seed flashed white.”*

He did not raise his voice.

*“He is no different from any of you,”* Micrium continued. *“Some of you hid yourselves from your Seeds. Some of you did not dig deeply enough for your Echo.”* His eyes moved across the room. *“And some of you have an understanding that exceeds others.”*

He folded his hands. *“That is the only distinction that matters here.”*

*“You have touched the Vault,”* Micrium said. *“Some gently. Some with force.”* A measured pause. *“But only one of you has awakened it.”*

He did not name Elmon.

He did not need to.

The Archive pulsed once more, and the spheres dimmed together, settling into a reverent silence.

*“Return tomorrow,”* Micrium continued. *“Bring neither pride nor lineage.”* His voice softened, but did not weaken. *“Bring only your echo.”*

The students began to disperse—some returning to the dormitories, others lingering near the Archive, whispering theories and half-formed wonder.

Elmon remained.

His sphere still hovered before him, faintly pulsing violet and silver, as if unwilling to sleep.

### ***Micrium’s Person discussion***

The class gathered their belongings and filed out of the sanctum, the low murmur of voices fading into the corridors beyond. Elmon lingered, carefully gathering his things.

As he did, Micrium reached out and touched Elmon’s sphere.

He whispered something—too softly to hear.

Elmon felt it immediately. A stirring, not in the seed, but within himself. He turned, startled, searching the room.

Micrium gestured calmly toward the podium.

They stood alone then, the sanctum quiet once more, mist curling around their feet like memory made visible. Elmon felt suddenly exposed—aware of himself in a way he had not been before.

*“You showed more than memory,”* Micrium said at last. There was no accusation in his voice—only certainty. *“More than silence.”* He considered Elmon carefully. *“An epiphany of communion. Your first harmony.”*

Elmon nodded, uncertain. *“I don’t know why,”* he admitted. *“Is that... wrong? Is it dangerous?”*

Micrium smiled—not with reassurance, but with recognition.

*“That uncertainty is the mark of the Vaultborn,”* he said. *“They do not seek power. They seek resonance.”*

A pause. *“And sometimes, they find it before they understand it.”*

He gestured toward the Archive.

Elmon’s sphere lifted slightly—only a few centimeters—but unmistakably on its own.

*“Your sphere sang before the invocation,”* Micrium continued. *“That has not happened in all my years of teaching.”* He drew a slow breath. *“I will consult the Filí Codex. Perhaps even the Dreamward.”*

Then, more quietly, *“It is no longer a seed.”*

Elmon hesitated. *“Why did you flinch when you touched me?”*

Micrium looked down at his hand. Then back at Elmon. He took a moment—choosing his words with care.

*“Because your echo did not merely respond,”* he said. *“It reached.”* Another pause. *“It harmonized with mine.”*

His voice lowered, not in fear, but in reverence.

*“That is rare,”* he said.

*“And dangerous.”*

*“And beautiful.”*

### ***The Beginning of Friendship***

Micrium led Elmon into a smaller chamber—his personal sanctum.

The walls were lined with scrolls and relics, their ages layered in silence. At the center stood a single obsidian pedestal etched with Filí glyphs. Nearby, a small table held two cups of steaming root tea.

*“Sit,”* Micrium said gently. *“Not as a student. As a companion.”*

They spoke for hours.

Of memory.

Of silence.

Of the gates of Echisa Morgal.

Micrium shared the story of his own awakening—the first time his echo had sung, and the burden that followed. Elmon listened, not as a pupil absorbing instruction, but as a witness holding another’s truth.

When it was his turn, Elmon spoke of the candle pyre. Of the Ulrick Test—how its solution had felt simple to him, yet unreachable to others. Of his birthday illumination, and his uncle’s words, encouragement, and training.

Nothing was hurried. Nothing was judged.

At last, Micrium reached into a small coffer and placed a relic in Elmon's hand—a shard of crystal etched with a single glyph.

*"This is a Fili token," Micrium said. "It grants no power."*

A pause. *"It grants presence. When you feel lost, hold it. It will remind you that you are remembered."*

Elmon studied the token with more than his eyes. Then—without knowing why—he lifted it to his face and whispered:

*"I am known as I am known. Remember me."*

Micrium's eyes widened.

*"Why the ritual?"* he asked quietly.

Elmon frowned, searching for words. *"It... asked me to know myself,"* he said. *"I felt a wanting—for me. Almost like a song."*

Micrium said nothing for a long moment. Then he nodded.

Before they parted, Micrium formally taught Elmon the Entry Request and the Scholar's Request—the protocols required to access the Fili Archives. Not as a test, but as an invitation, so Elmon would understand both etiquette and restraint.

At last, Micrium raised his cup.

*"A toast,"* he said, smiling, *"to a newfound associate."* He inclined his head. *"May our lives echo in reverence of the years we are given."*

## Chapter †: Studies in Friendship.

The year passed quickly.

It vanished into hours of research and wandering exploration—long days in the archives, tracing relics, forgotten implements, and fragments of myth left behind by careful hands and cautious minds.

In one such volume, Elmon found a drawing.

It depicted a scepter—or perhaps a staff. The lines were simple, almost austere. Something a king might carry. Or an Echo-Weaver. The sketch was rough, its details incomplete, as though the artist had known what mattered and what did not.



*What is it?* Elmon wondered.

He turned the page.

The text that followed was cramped and deliberate, written in a hand meant for those willing to strain their eyes. Around the margins, unusual glyphs clustered like thoughts that refused to be fully spoken.

**The mind of oblivion.**

**The power of the stars.**

**The solace of creation.**

Scattered notes referenced a legend preserved in an old Elvin archive. Its phrasing suggested that whoever wielded the staff would not *choose* it—he would recognize it. Or perhaps it would recognize him.

The account was translated from a record kept by an unnamed elder of Tomarad's Temple in Raven.

The legend read:

*In a time yet to come, one shall wield it to seal the memories that were wronged, to close the blasphemy of creation—the ponderance of evil that gave rise to SINN, and the Fall of ADAMA.*

Elmon closed the book slowly.

Some knowledge did not feel like information.

It felt like a summons. *“That was it.”*

Elmon flipped through the remaining pages, then back again—faster now—searching for anything more. A marginal note. A reference. A name.

There was nothing.

No title.

No designation.

No catalog entry to anchor it.

*‘Is it even called something?’* he wondered.

He scanned the pages that preceded the sketch, then those that followed. Still nothing. As if the object existed only in implication, never in declaration.

At last, Elmon exhaled softly and made a small note in the margin.

*I will call it the Staff of Oblivian's Mind.*

Not as a claim. Only as a way to track his thoughts. To give his investigations a thread to follow.

A mystery, he decided.

Something to return to—when time allowed. When questions grew restless.

He closed the book gently and let the thought settle. Not a conclusion — only a marker.

Some mysteries were not solved. They were revisited.

Winter had settled fully now. It was the Month of Fools.

Though the school sat in a location most would never suspect, the season still found it. Masks painted in exaggerated expressions hung from archways. Groups of students drifted through corridors planning elaborate tricks — some clever, some childish.

Outside, nearly two inches of snow softened the stone walks and garden paths. The trees stood burdened in white, frosted mist rising from their limbs like slow breath.

Elmon lingered in the corridor, weighing what problem to approach next, when Elcrull stepped from her chamber.

Her movements were quiet. Controlled. But something in her posture was heavier than usual.

She carried a small cloth-wrapped bundle.

He followed at a respectful distance.

In the southern garden she knelt beside a flower bed, brushed snow aside, and dug a narrow hollow into the frozen soil. She placed the bundle within, covered it carefully, and bowed her head. Her lips moved — prayer or recitation, he could not tell.

As she rose and turned, she collided with him.

*“What are you doing following me?”*

Elmon stumbled back. *“I thought something was wrong.”*

*“Why would you think that?”*

*“You looked... upset.”*

Her eyes narrowed slightly. *“Are you playing the Fool's Card on me? It is the Month of Fools.”*

*“No,”* he said quickly. *“I would never do that to my friends.”*

Her expression shifted — not wounded, but curious.

*“I am performing the Calling of Life Breath for my people.”*

Elmon froze. He searched his memory. No record. No festival. No doctrine bearing that title. His lips moved faintly as if indexing.

Elcrull leaned forward and tapped his nose lightly. *“Are you casting a spell?”*

He startled. *“No. I was reviewing holidays and observances. I have never heard of this one.”* He stepped back. *“Forgive me. I did not mean to intrude.”*

He turned to leave. She caught his belt before he could retreat.

*“It is not forbidden,”* she said, amusement warming her voice. *“You could ask what it is instead of fleeing.”*

He paused. Slowly turned back. Moments ago she had seemed burdened. Now she smiled.

He studied her, unsettled by the change. *“What is it?”* he asked finally.

*“A celebration of Life Breath honors our fallen,”* she said. *“And reminds us that breath still moves within us.”*

She gestured toward the soil. *“We plant a seed from our clan’s lineage tree wherever we dwell. It marks where we have been — and where we may yet go.”*

Her gaze held his.

*“It is meant to be shared. Not locked away. Not controlled. Not protected from danger.”*

Elmon did not answer her immediately. Instead, his mind drifted backward.

A flag rising in the town square of his youth — stitched and restitched, recovered from a battle long before his birth. Each year it was raised again, not to glorify war, but to remind the people that they still stood. That breath still filled their lungs. That survival itself was something to guard.

He remembered standing beside his mother as the fabric unfurled in the wind.

And another memory surfaced.

His mother kneeling in forest loam beside a Treant, its bark blackened and splintered where an unknowing farmer had hacked and burned it for wood. She had stayed through the night, hands glowing faintly, whispering to the wounded ancient as if it were a fallen elder.

When the Treant’s leaves stirred again, she had not celebrated loudly.

She had simply wept.

Not for victory. For continuation. Elmon had watched and learned.

Memory, in his youth, had been marked with banners and ceremonies. With recorded names and retold events.

Structure gave it permanence. But here — in the snow-softened garden — Elcrull pressed memory into soil.

Living.

Growing.

Unrecorded.

He did not realize how far his thoughts had drifted until warmth brushed beneath his chin.

Elcrull had stepped close. Too close.

She studied his face, head tilted slightly, as though trying to read what lay behind his eyes.

He blinked — and found her staring directly into him. He staggered back a half step.

“Where were you?” she asked.

“I—” He exhaled, grounding himself. “I was remembering.”

“What?”

“My mother. Saving a Treant once. And the flags in our town square. Celebrations. Remembrances.”

Elcrull’s expression softened.

“Memory lives differently in every people,” she said quietly.

He looked at her hand — then took it without quite meaning to.

They walked back toward the dormitories together.

Snow creaked beneath their boots.

In the courtyard, notices had been pinned to archways and stone pillars.

‘Fools abound. Watch what you say.’

Lantern light flickered across painted masks.

Somewhere, laughter erupted — sharp and sudden.

Elmon glanced at the signs.

For the first time that evening, he wondered whether fools were always obvious.

The weeks began to blur together.

Classes on Emotional Axes. An essay for Ponderances of the Metaverse. Relic Studies. Principles of Arcane Investigation.

The course on Titans fascinated him most. Each realm—substance, solidity, rhythm, and memory—was governed by a Titan, charged with keeping existence aligned. The responsibilities alone were staggering.

Elmon smiled to himself. “I wouldn’t want that burden,” he murmured. “I have enough trouble keeping myself straight.”

Then the thought returned—uninvited, persistent. ‘I wonder if the staff is of Titan creation’, he mused. ‘Or something older.’

Bang.

Papers scattered.

He blinked once, then smiled. “I suppose that’s one way to find you.”

Cristine steadied herself, lifting her chin with theatrical dignity. “Ah. An advanced maneuver,” she said. “Intentional collision as social initiation?”

She narrowed her eyes playfully. “Or were you spell-walking?”

Elmon wagged his head. “No. Precision stumbling.”

She laughed. “Where are you off to?”

“Emotional Axis,” he replied, already half-turned. “I’m practicing.”

As he walked away, he held one hand up before him, fingers twitching in measured, experimental patterns — as though trying to tune something invisible.

Cristine watched him go. “*You are going to walk into a wall one day,*” she called after him. “*Already have,*” he replied without turning.

During a class on Emotional Axis, the lecture delved deeply into the workings of heart, mind, and spirit as a unified consciousness. The instructor, Olivian Horton, explained that when any one of these fell out of alignment, the individual would experience regret, sorrow, defilement, and emotional pain—sometimes without understanding why.

The lecture lasted two full hours.

When it ended, Elmon found himself thinking of Maria’s grief. Of Alfred’s pride.

Understanding stirred—not judgment, but clarity. ‘*So that’s why,*’ he thought.

He had never considered the true complexity of people before. Their inner balances. Their quiet fractures.

At first glance, it had all seemed so simple. Now he knew better.

He proceeded to his last class of the day. It was stimulating and comical in his mind.

He proceeded to his dorm to drop off his book and such before dinner. As he walked into his room. Having just finished a class on the structures and dialects of Toreaz, Elmon decided to try something.

They said that if one sang—or chanted—in Toreaz, magic could manifest on its own.

He cleared his throat softly and whispered:

“*CSEĀRT DĀNBĒ WA FŪLĒY FUĀR DŌĒ DĀSN.*”

He waved his hands in an uncertain, fluttering motion—something like a butterfly.

Before his eyes, a small pulse of light sparked into existence, buzzing around the room like a firefly.

Alfred looked up from his desk. “*Careful,*” he muttered. “*It’s going to explode or something.*”

The light ignored him and drifted lazily through the air—then landed squarely on Alfred’s nose.

He froze.

“*It’s alive,*” Alfred said flatly.

The creature buzzed, darted around his face, and brushed past his nose again. In an instant, fine hair began sprouting wildly across it.

Alfred yelped and jumped up, rushing to the mirror. “*What were you singing?*” he shouted. “*Look at this! I need to shave my nose!*”

Elmon blinked. “*A fairy song... I think.*”

The glowing creature zipped away, dove into Elmon’s wardrobe, and slammed the doors shut behind it.

Elmon stared.

“*...Whoa,*” he said softly. “*I got a fairy.*”

“*I should try something else,*” Elmon said thoughtfully.

Alfred lunged across the room and clapped a hand over Elmon's mouth. "No. NO. Absolutely not. It's impossible to predict what will happen. You could blow us all up."

Elmon pulled free, grinning. "Maybe I'll chant a sleepy song."

"No!" Alfred hissed. "You'll put the entire dorm to sleep—or worse. A sleep monster will crawl out from under our beds and devour our dreams or something."

They both paused.

Slowly, they bent down and peeked under their beds.

Nothing stared back.

They burst out laughing.

Behind them, Elmon's wardrobe creaked open.

A small light buzzed out into the room, darting toward the door.

Alfred groaned. "You scared the fairy away."

Elmon tilted his head and tapped his temple. "You can't scare a fairy," he said. "You're talking nonsense."

A scream echoed down the hall.

They both bolted into the corridor just in time to see the glowing creature chasing Con at full speed. Elcrilla and Bengamin stood nearby, laughing—until the light abruptly changed course and went after them instead.

The laughter stopped. Elmon and Alfred ducked back into their room and slammed the door shut.

They stood there, breathless. "...We should probably stop experimenting in Toreaz," Alfred said.

Elmon nodded slowly. "At least in the dorm."

Elmon settled into his desk chair with a quiet sigh. It had been several months now, and some of the classes felt... whimsical. Almost like filler.

One in particular had him utterly baffled.

"This class drives me mad," he said at last. "*Mythic Taxonomy*. Why would anyone want so many possible systems for cataloging relics, arcane devices, or enchanted objects? The Titans made it simple—three classifications."

Alfred leaned back in his chair, grinning. "Obviously," he said, "just to irritate you, Elmon."

He laughed. "Though I'll admit—it does seem silly. I'd have two categories. Powerful and cheap. Then sub-group by use. Jewelry. Cleaning. Clothing. Practical things."

Elmon considered this, then gestured toward him. "And where would you put armor?" he asked. "Or a cloak that is armor?"

Alfred didn't hesitate. "Clothing, of course."

Elmon chuckled. "What a wardrobe you would have."

"My assignment," Elmon said, rubbing his temples, "is to write a synopsis on the pros and cons of the current *Mythic Taxonomy* system."

He paused.

*“Two lines. Not worth keeping. And an abuse of intelligence.”*

Alfred burst out laughing. *“It’s ritual abuse,”* he declared. *“How dare they assign something so foreboding?”*

Elmon smiled faintly. *“I doubt it would be acceptable for a grade,”* he admitted. *“But it would be simple. Direct. And... poignant.”*

A knock came at the door.

They both paused — looked at each other — then at the door.

Another knock. Elmon rose.

Before he reached it, he stopped. He sniffed the air.

Faint ozone. Damp stone. A sudden rash of knocking.

He swung the door open.

Elcrull, Maria, and Chelsis stood in the corridor — absolutely soaked.

Water dripped steadily onto the stone.

A small, buzzing orb of pale blue light darted between them, trailing mist. They flinched as it zipped past their faces.

Alfred stared, wide-eyed.

*“It’s not raining,”* he observed slowly. *“Perhaps you should not take showers with your clothes on.”*

He burst into laughter. Elmon blinked. *“What—”*

Maria pointed accusingly past him. *“Who summoned the ferry?”*

Elmon’s stomach dropped.

*“It was an accident,”* he said quickly. *“I was practicing. I misaligned the breath.”*

The glowing mote swooped once, then splashed against the ceiling — releasing a brief, localized downpour that drenched the three of them again.

Chelsis sputtered.

Elmon squinted at the dripping figures. *“What happened to you?”*

Elcrull stepped forward, fur plastered to her shoulders like a drowned tiger.

*“A bug flew into our room.”*

She folded her arms defensively. *“I swatted it.”*

Maria threw her hands up. *“And then it started raining. Over our table.”*

The little orb buzzed indignantly.

Chelsis folded her arms, glaring. *“Only over our table.”*

*“And when we ran,”* Elcrull growled, *“the rain followed.”*

Behind them, the buzzing light zipped past Elmon’s ear and shot into his wardrobe.

The doors slammed shut. Everyone froze.

Then the three soaked girls tackled Elmon. *“You!”* Elcrull accused, wringing water from her braid directly onto his collar.

Maria shoved him lightly. *“Control your insects.”*

Chelsis squeezed water from her sleeve over his boots.

Alfred was hysterical — bent over, choking on laughter.

He staggered upright long enough to declare, *“I covered his mouth before he could conjure anything else!”*

*“I saved you from a fate worse than death!”*

The three of them turned in perfect synchronization.

Alfred’s smile faded.

Elcrull pounced first, pressing a clump of wet tiger fur under his nose.

Maria flicked water into his eyes. Chelsis knocked him backward onto the bed.

Alfred’s laughter turned into muffled surrender.

And from inside the wardrobe, something buzzed again.

They eventually stopped attacking Alfred.

All four of them sat there — soaked, breathless, laughing.

Water pooled across the stone floor.

Maria pushed wet hair from her face. *“How did you get a ferry?”* she demanded, though she was smiling. *“You’re not allowed to keep pets in the dormitories.”*

Elmon blinked. *“It’s not a pet.”*

The wardrobe buzzed in quiet disagreement.

Chelsis narrowed her eyes. *“It followed you.”*

Elcrull flicked water from her tail across Alfred’s sleeve. *“If it starts raining in my bed tonight, I am sleeping here.”*

Alfred groaned.

The three women stood at once, wringing out sleeves and braids without apology. They deliberately shook water across the room — walls, floor, books, Alfred.

Elcrull paused at the doorway, glanced back at Elmon, and smirked.

*“Control your breath, Magus.”*

Maria gave him one last measured look. *“And control your weather.”*

Chelsis simply pointed at the wardrobe. The door closed behind them.

Silence.

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

Alfred looked at Elmon. The wardrobe buzzed again. Alfred leaned back slowly. *“I am transferring rooms.”*

As the year accelerated—moving at what felt like breakneck speed—Elmon encountered his first true scare.

It came during an exercise in Memory Alteration.

The task was controlled and theoretical, meant only to examine *possibility*, not execution. But when Bengamin Paldocker accidentally backed into Christine Maple—forcing her into Elmon’s arms, nose to nose—instinct overtook restraint.

Christin laughed it off, cheeks flushed. Bengamin stammered an apology.

Elmon did not.

*‘I could fix that’,* he thought. *‘I could move the moment.’*

He attempted to shift the memory—not to erase it, only to change its alignment. To place himself where Bengamin had stood. To spare embarrassment.

Halfway through the invocation, the air *collapsed*.

A shadow fell across the exercise circle—wrong, absolute, swallowing the ambient light. The room went silent as if breath itself had been withdrawn.

Then a voice spoke. Not loudly. Not angrily.

Formally.

*“Thou art not sanctioned to pass this hall. Your life will be required of you to the extent of your breach.”*

The words were not a threat.

They were a *notice*.

Elmon screamed—and the world went dark as he crumbled.

The voice had not been angry. It had been ancient. Like stone remembering fire. Like silence remembering a song.

Micrium Ortis was passing the hall when the sound reached him—not Elmon’s cry, but the *other* voice. The sacred depth of it made him break into a run.

He arrived as Elmon struck the floor.

Without hesitation, Ortis began to chant—low, urgent words in a tongue older than Toreaz. His hands traced a binding pattern in the air, one meant not to command, but to *withdraw consent*. The shadow recoiled, thinning, unraveling like smoke denied its source.

Then it was gone.

The room exhaled.

Elmon awoke once more in Cleric Mensor’s Ward.

*“Well,”* Mensor said gently, adjusting a vial on the nearby table, *“it seems we’re destined to know one another. You needn’t go to such extremes to visit—the door is always open.”*

Mensor turned to Micrium Ortis. *“What happened?”*

Ortis did not soften his words.

*“From what I observed,”* he said, *“he was participating in a Memory Alteration exercise under Mistress Caldra when Young Silverwood inadvertently entered a sanctified memory vault.”*

A pause.

*“So completely, in fact, that it registered as a violation of the vault’s boundary. I will need to watch him closely. The consequences of such breaches can be... severe.”*

Mensor raised a finger. *“I may have something that will help.”*

He crossed the chamber to a small, locked chest resting on a pearl-leafed shelf. With a quiet prayer and a measured gesture, the lock released. He sifted briefly, then withdrew a small, hexagonal sphere suspended on a fine chain.

A necklace.

Mensor returned and placed it gently into Elmon’s hand.

*“During this course,”* he said, *“you will wear this at all times.”*

Ortis leaned closer, studying the object. His expression shifted.

*“Ahh...Is that a Celestial Ornicus?”*

Mensor nodded. *“Yes. It has proven useful before. We had another student—years ago—who accidentally teleported into a place of gates and doors while attempting to access a memory.”*

Ortis inclined his head. *“Thank you. That should help.”*

He studied the necklace with renewed respect. *“I have heard of these. They anchor the bearer in the present moment, shielding them from unintended echo drift, memory trespass, or sanctum bleed.”*

A pause.

*“They prevent accidental entry into sanctified vaults or Faey thresholds during emotional or mnemonic exercises.”*

He looked up. *“A very valuable instrument, Your Grace.”*

Mensor smiled faintly. *“It has other applications as well,”* he said. *“But those are the most prominent.”*

Elmon’s curiosity stirred. *“What other applications does it have?”* he asked.

Mensor’s reply did not answer the question—only deepened it.

*“One need not worry about its other uses,”* he said calmly. *“Nor concern oneself with them.”*  
A pause. *“Those require knowledge... and attunement.”*

The words settled uneasily in Elmon’s thoughts. Not a denial. Not a warning.

An invitation—deferred.

Near the end of his third year, Elmon received an assignment in Arcane Investigation that immediately caught his attention.

Each student was required to select a relic of their choosing and compile a concise investigative ledger. The work was to include:

- Known names and aliases
- Identified or attributed creators
- Historical significance
- Intended purpose or purposes

- Manifested abilities
- Behavioral preferences
- Architectural or symbolic significance
- Estimated value

All of this was to be assessed without ever seeing the object itself.

The exercise was not meant to test power, but discipline—one's ability to reason from absence, echo, and trace rather than presence.

Elmon already knew which relic he would choose.

Elmon leaned back in his chair, already forming the outline in his mind.

*'I have a head start on this.'*

He would use the object he had tentatively named the Staff of Oblivion. The original record gave it no title—his would suffice for the purposes of investigation. A working name, nothing more.

*'If it is real,'* he thought. *'Or merely someone's longing given shape.'*

He returned to the image, studying it carefully. The drawing was sparse, almost evasive in its detail. Enough to suggest form, but not enough to confirm construction. Any proper ledger would require interpretation—educated conjecture, clearly marked.

The top of the staff was the most ambiguous. No crystal was specified. That, at least, gave him room to reason. He could consult the mineral indices in the lower stacks and select a crystal whose properties would be... negotiable. Plausible. Symbolically consistent.

The greater challenge would be authorship and history.

*'Creators leave echoes,'* he reminded himself. *'Even when their names do not.'*

He would need to research legends, cross-reference temple records, and compare stylistic motifs. And still, questions lingered.

*'Does the object need to exist?'* he wondered.

*'Surely it must. How else could the instructor assess accuracy—trustworthiness—intent?'*

Elmon frowned slightly.

If the assignment demanded truth drawn from absence... then the absence itself mattered.

The door flew open.

The ferry darted past them and vanished into Elmon's wardrobe. The doors slammed shut and began rattling violently.

Alfred stared. *"I hope that doesn't continue all night. We may have to hire a ferry remover."*

Elmon laughed. *"Perhaps I should negotiate with it. Shared use of the wardrobe."*

*"You're going to end up paying rent to a glowing pest."*

The wardrobe thudded again.

Elmon giggled — then slowly grew thoughtful.

*'What are the actual limits of this assignment?'*

The laughter faded.

*'Could we handle a relic in class?'*

The question lingered.

He moved to his desk and opened his ledger, sketching a clean form across the page: Known Variables. Unknowns. Potential Echo Signatures. Risk Factors. Directive Paths.

Then, almost casually:

*"You think they would know," he asked, "if someone constructed a... persuasive investigation record? Complete details. Correlated references. Validated framework. For a half-known item?"*

Alfred went very still.

*"They can read intention," he said quietly. "They trace Echo. Veil markings. Hidden resonance."*

He met Elmon's eyes. *"You're better than that."*

The wardrobe rattled again.

Elmon stared at it absently. *"I wonder if one can contract a ferry for formal service."*

*"That," Alfred muttered, "would be foolish."*

Silence settled.

Books and notes lay scattered across the desk — fragments of research, half-built theories, maps of forgotten places.

Elmon leaned back. *"I feel as though I am becoming a historian," he said softly. "Or a sage. Not a wizard."*

Alfred sat upright.

*"My mother said something like that once."*

Elmon looked over. *"She was digging through our family archives after my father died,"* Alfred continued. *"Searching for something. Frantically."*

*"Did she find it?"* Elmon quizzed.

*"Yes."*

*"What was it?"* Elmon pondering what could be so needed.

Alfred tilted his head slightly.

*"A list of items."*

The wardrobe rattled again — softer this time. *"She left with it,"* Alfred said. *"Never told me why."*

The ferry's glow pulsed faintly through the cracks in the doors.

Elmon looked at the ledger.

A list of items.

The thought lingered longer than the laughter.

## Chapter †: A Mystery in the Making

The next morning led Elmon straight to the library's archives—and then to the storage rooms beyond.

Unknow to Elmon the Ferry followed.

He moved methodically, pulling books from shelves: tomes, ledgers, reference volumes, catalogs. Soon a small stack formed beside him, chosen less by title than by resonance—things that *felt* adjacent to his question.

While searching the lower shelves, he found something unexpected.

A small pocket journal.

Its leather was worn smooth, the pages thinned by frequent handling. It did not belong to the archives. There was no stamp. No catalog mark. Only notes—tight, purposeful—written by someone seeking specific objects of Ethereal Resonance.

A list:

- ◇ *Neruma's Mace*
- ➤ *Galactic Celestial Star Mapper*
- ◇ *Tonal Layered Resonance Amplifier*
- *Perdina*
- *Mirtwain's Echo Manipulator*
- ◇ *Relicscript Inhibitor*
- ◇ *Sanctum Clarifier*
- ➤ *Ethereal Cadence Identifier*

Most entries were marked—some with one symbol, some with another.

Only two were unmarked.

*Perdina.*

*Mirtwain's Echo Manipulator.*

Elmon frowned.

"*I wonder what the symbols mean,*" he murmured, studying the notation in the margin.

*Found? Failed? Classified?*

The difference between them felt deliberate.

Carefully, he slipped the smaller journal into his satchel.

Then — with a sharp thud — something struck the floor behind him.

A large ledger slid across the stone, spinning once before stopping at his boots.

The ferry's blue glow flickered near the upper shelves — then darted away and vanished.

Elmon crouched slowly. "*That was not there,*" he muttered.

He looked up.

On the highest shelf, a narrow storage box had shifted forward, its lid tilted open. Dust — thick, undisturbed dust — lined the surrounding wood.

He rose, dragged a chair beneath it, and climbed carefully.

Inside the box lay a red leather ledger — its spine cracked with age — and beneath it, an older research journal bound tightly with fraying twine.

Nearly an inch of dust coated the lid.

No catalog mark.

No ownership seal.

No inventory tag.

They had not merely been stored.

They had been forgotten.

Or hidden.

He carried them carefully to the table.

The ferry made no further sound.

As he read, a story emerged—fragmented at first, then chillingly clear.

The journals detailed the work of Sir Gilford Mertain of the Highlands of Freeland, a scholar who had sought to create what he called an ***Echo Manipulator***. His aim was not healing, nor preservation, but reorganization—forcing Echoes to unravel, stripping memory until nothing remained.

Empty. Useless.

Mertain believed the Vault itself could be breached and purged—its stored remnants erased to remove what he deemed the detritus of a people long lost.

The account was extensive. Methodical. Obsessive.

And in the end, decisive.

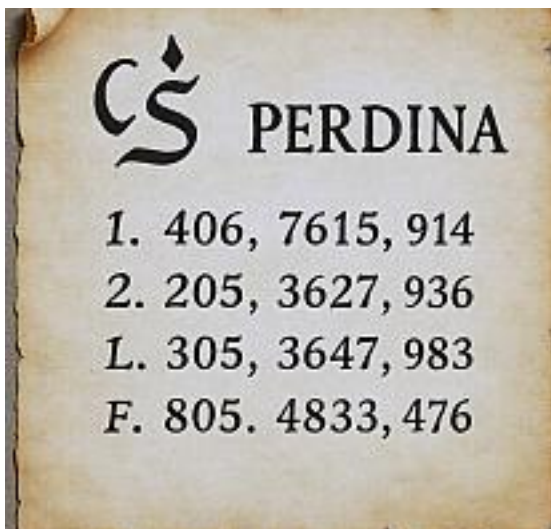
His plans were discovered before completion. The Dwarves intervened—not quietly, not mercifully. He was executed publicly, his work destroyed, his name preserved only as a warning.

Elmon closed the ledger slowly.

“...*Wow*,” he breathed.

This was no academic curiosity. No theoretical overreach.

*‘I need to show this to Master Ortis,’* he thought. *‘This changes everything.’*



The journal ended abruptly.

Page after page lay blank—as if whatever had been written there had been intentionally removed, or never allowed to form at all. Only the final page bore ink.

Large. Deliberate.

A sigil sat at the top, followed by a single word written in heavy hand:

**PERDINA.**

Beneath it, four numbered lines:

406, 7615, 914

205, 3627, 936

305, 3647, 983

805, 4833, 476

Elmon stared at the page for a long while.

This was not a list of measurements. Not dates. Not spell matrices. It felt... procedural. Like directions meant for someone who already knew how to read them.

He took the journal to the reference desk.

*“What would these numbers be used for?”* he asked.

The librarian, Elmin Whinsho, adjusted his lenses and studied the page in silence. After a moment, he nodded once and moved to the catalog drawers.

*“Location markers,”* he said simply.

He pulled a drawer, scanned the cards, and paused. *“Collector’s Series,”* he murmured. *“Red Marked.”*

He withdrew a card.

406 Ways to the Ethereal.

Elmon followed as Whinsho moved down the aisles, found the volume, then turned deliberately to shelf 7615. He counted down the spines with practiced precision, withdrew the book, and opened it to page 914.

Elmon watched closely.

*‘That’s what librarians do,’* he thought. *‘They translate silence.’*

Whinsho slid a thin piece of parchment into the book, closed it, and handed it to Elmon without ceremony.

*“That entry is restricted,”* he said. *“But not forbidden.”*

Elmon accepted the book, tucked it into his satchel, and felt the weight of it settle—not in his hand, but somewhere deeper.

**PERDINA.**

Whatever it was, it did not want to be explained.

It wanted to be found.

Elmin and Whinsho returned to the catalog and opened drawer two.

He scanned the cards once. Then again.

*"No entry at two-hundred-five,"* he muttered.

The catalog drawers were divided by separators at intervals of fifty. Whinsho adjusted his search, sliding past the marker until he reached the proper range. His finger paused.

*"There,"* he said.

The reference item corresponding to 205 was present—and marked with a red seal, just like the first.

He removed the card and proceeded to the ledger aisle.

Ledger 3627 was missing.

Whinsho frowned and crossed to the Open Volume Registry. He ran a finger down the entries, then stopped.

*"...Checked out,"* he read. *"Master Heniss. Three years ago."*

He made a small, irritated sound, then reached beneath the desk and rang a heavy brass bell. Its tone echoed through the stacks.

A moment later, a man in heavy armor approached—sword at his hip, club bound across his back.

Whinsho handed him a slip of parchment. *"Ledger three-six-two-seven is overdue,"* he said flatly. *"Collect the volume. Or the fee."*

The man nodded once and marched off with an air that suggested compliance was not optional.

Whinsho did not linger. He returned to the shelves.

*"Next,"* he murmured, moving into the Scholar's Section. *"Letter L."*

He pulled volume 305 from the shelf and opened it carefully. Near page 983, a folded sheet of parchment slipped free. Written on it was:

3647 at 14, accompanied by a sigil.

Elmin and Whinsho studied it, then raised an eyebrow.

*"The Chancellor's sigil,"* he said quietly. *"That is... interesting."*

He handed the book to Elmon, who closed it without comment and placed it into his satchel.

They moved back to the desk and opened the Instructor Itinerary Ledger.

*"Now the final entry,"* he said. *"F."*

Whinsho scanned dates. *"Eighth day of the fifth month... nothing."*

Then he paused.

*"Or,"* he corrected himself, *"fifth day of the eighth month."*

He turned the page.

*"Catalog item eight-zero-five,"* he read aloud. *"Binding of Memory to Motion. Syllabus of the Ethereal."*

His brow furrowed.

*“Checked out one week ago,”* he continued. *“Instructor: Michael Malfork.”*

Whinsho stiffened slightly.

*“That was the instructor assigned to all Echo-related coursework,”* Whinsho added. *“Until recently.”*

He closed the ledger. *“He has been replaced by Micrium Ortis.”*

At last, Whinsho returned the red journal to Elmon.

*“Well,”* he said, with something like satisfaction, *“thank you for the diversion. Two hours of proper work, and an overdue matter finally recovered.”*

He paused, then smiled thinly. *“Some books do not wish to stay shelved.”*

Heniss was furious—madder than a Tre-ent whose flower had been plucked.

*“What is the meaning of this?”* he demanded. *“I returned that ledger over two years ago. I handed it directly to Wilford—your associate librarian.”*

Whinsho raised a hand, calm and unflustered. Without another word, he turned and walked toward the rear of the library, unlocking a narrow door set between the stacks.

Beyond it lay a cramped office—tables crowded with loose papers, manuals, ledgers, and manuscripts piled in precarious towers.

*“Ah,”* Elmin said at last. *“Here it is.”*

He retrieved the missing ledger, closed the door, and returned to the main desk. Then he rang a small silver bell.

Within moments, three students Elmon recognized from various classes approached—Maria among them.

Whinsho gestured toward the back of the library. *“Door sixteen,”* he said evenly. *“Every document in that room is to be logged, reconciled, and returned to its proper location.”*

He turned to a freckled Avion elf named Entic. *“Is that clear?”*

The students answered nearly in unison:

*“Shea Nordal Makral.”*

In **Toreaz**: *“Word. Devoted ones. To measure.”*

In the common tongue: *‘Devoted to the measure of the word.’*

They scurried off.

Elmon watched them go, then tilted his head. *“Working on their Toreaz?”* he mused. *“That’s what it sounded like. It’s an unusual tongue. If you sing it, you can trigger spell effects unintentionally.”*

He paused. *“But if you speak it with half-measures in your breathing, it becomes almost... common.”*

He glanced back at Whinsho. *“One has to be careful. I conjured a fairy the other night. It’s living in my wardrobe.”*

Whinsho sniffed, clearly unimpressed. *“You are not allowed pets in the dormitories.”*

Elmon opened his mouth to argue, then thought better of it.

Whinsho continued, returning to Elmon's earlier observation. *"I am fluent in the three Toreaz dialects. The students wanted a book to assist with their language studies, so I offered them an accord: three days' work per week in the library, and I would pay them."* A thin smile crossed his face. *"But we speak only Toreaz while they're here. They accepted."*

Elmon smiled appreciatively. *"I would take that bargain myself,"* he said, *"if I weren't perpetually buried in my studies and research."*

Whinsho nodded. *"Most who belong here are."*



The librarian turned to Master Heniss, bowed deeply, and offered a quiet apology. With a subtle gesture, he summoned the armored gentleman, who stepped forward and escorted Heniss back toward his office.

Before Heniss departed, the librarian placed a small object into his hand—a Library Token, rarely issued and reserved for distinguished guests and dignitaries. Heniss accepted it with a nod and a single, quiet word:

*"Errilolas."*

The exchange required no further explanation.

Whinsho returned to the desk, logged the recovered document into the catalog with deliberate care, and then handed the book to Elmon. A trace of satisfaction crossed his face—not pride, but balance restored.

*"Some matters,"* he said softly, *"prefer to be returned properly."*

On his way back to the dormitory, Elmon nearly collided with the Dorm Mistress, who lay collapsed on the floor, gasping for breath.

He did not hesitate.

With a precise burst of magic, he lifted her gently from the stone and carried her—swift as thought—to the cleric's chambers. By the time they arrived, her breathing was shallow and panicked.

The cleric acted at once. A firm maneuver, a sharp cough—and the obstruction was expelled. The woman sagged back, air finally rushing into her lungs.

*"She'll be fine,"* the cleric said, checking her eyes and pulse. Then he looked at her and added, *"You should know—Elmon here just saved your life."*

The Dorm Mistress swallowed, still shaken. *"I was eating,"* she said weakly. *"Someone slapped me on the back far too hard. I started choking."*

She reached for Elmon's hand and pressed a grateful kiss to it. *"Thank you."*

The cleric later escorted them back toward the dormitories. Before parting, he turned to Elmon, his tone firm but not unkind.

*"You'll need to report the incident to the Master of Arms,"* he said. *"Any use of magic in a public emergency must be logged."*

Elmon nodded.

Even saving a life had its procedures.

When Elmon entered his room, Alfred lay on his bed—eyes open, unfocused, unblinking.

"Alfred?" Elmon said softly.

No response.

He shook Alfred's shoulder. Harder this time. Nothing. His chest rose and fell, slow and steady, but there was no recognition behind his eyes—no fear, no awareness. Just absence.

Elmon's gaze swept the room. His desk had been disturbed. Drawers opened, papers shifted. The wardrobe stood ajar. Undisturbed, nothing was missing. No sign of theft. No sign of struggle.

Only Alfred.

Elmon lifted him carefully and carried him to the cleric's ward.

Inside, Master Ortis stood with the Master of Arms, both in quiet conversation with the cleric. Their discussion ceased the moment Elmon crossed the threshold.

*"I found him like this,"* Elmon said, laying Alfred gently on the bed.

The cleric moved at once—checking pulse, breath, eyes. He exhaled slowly.

*"He lives,"* the cleric said. *"But something... rests upon him. Not illness. Not injury."*

Ortis stepped forward.

Without speaking, Ortis began to chant — low, resonant syllables that curved the air rather than cut it. His hands traced a slow spiral.

The room dimmed.

Between them, an image coalesced.

A reddish sphere — faintly luminous — drifted through the doorway. It hovered near Alfred's bed, lingering as if assessing him. Then it pressed inward.

Alfred flinched involuntarily.

The vision collapsed. Darkness. Then light returned.

The final image showed Elmon entering the room exactly as he had.

Ortis lowered his hands.

*"This was not random,"* he said quietly. *"Something entered. Something withdrew."*

The Master of Arms' hand tightened around the hilt at his side.

And Elmon understood. Whatever had come for Alfred had not taken a relic.

It had taken time.

Alfred had no memory of nearly an hour. His notes stopped mid-sentence. The ink had dried unevenly. The candle beside his desk had burned lower than it should have.

Elmon swallowed. He gathered his thoughts.

He explained that his desk — not his wardrobe — had been disturbed. Drawers opened. Papers shifted. Yet nothing appeared missing. No relics. No volumes. No tokens.

Except Alfred himself.

The Master of Arms listened without interruption. When Elmon finished, he folded his arms.

*"Why was your wardrobe untouched?"* he asked evenly.

Elmon hesitated.

He could not explain the ferry without inviting other questions.

*“I do not know,”* he said at last.

The Master studied him a moment longer than was comfortable. *“Walk me through your day,”* he said. *“From waking to now. Slowly.”*

It took time.

Elmon recounted everything — morning lectures, the Arcane Investigation assignment, the hours in the library. The red ledger. The pocket journal. The mismatched catalog numbers. The overdue volume. Master Heniss’s temper.

He spoke of symbols that did not align. Of books that referenced other books. Of ledgers that should not have been missing.

He left nothing out.

The Master of Arms nodded once.

*“You did well to report this,”* he said.

His voice hardened. *“Remain available. Do not leave the grounds. And do not investigate further without oversight.”*

The words were not a suggestion.

They were containment.

With that, he turned and departed, armor whispering against stone.

Ortis had not spoken.

He stood quietly, eyes fixed on Elmon—not stern, not accusing, but *measuring*. When the door closed, he finally spoke.

*“What were you truly searching for in the library?”* he asked.

Elmon hesitated—not from fear, but from care. Then answered honestly.

*“My assignment,”* he said. *“A relic ledger. Names, creators, purpose, significance. I chose an object I found referenced in an Elvin archive—a staff. No name. No confirmation that it exists. Just a drawing and a legend.”*

Ortis’s brow furrowed slightly. *“And beyond the assignment?”*

Elmon allowed himself a small smile. *“I like investigation,”* he said. *“Patterns. Omissions. When records do not align. It feels like listening for a voice beneath the ink.”*

That earned Ortis’s full attention.

*“Come with me,”* he said at last. *“Not to the ward. Not to the library.”*

He turned toward the corridor leading back to the sanctum.

*“To the classroom.”*

Elmon followed, unaware that the day had already crossed a threshold.

Upon arriving, Master Ortis moved at once into his sanctum. He returned carrying a small, leather-bound tome, two sealed scrolls, and a large crystal encased within a silver prism etched with Fili glyphs.

*“Fetch your satchel,”* Ortis said calmly. *“And place the books on the table. Separately.”*

Elmon obeyed.

Ortis lifted the prism and passed it slowly over each book. The crystal within flared softly as it hovered above the bindings—different hues for each, some steady, some wavering, one briefly flaring before dimming.

He set the prism aside.

From one scroll, he traced a series of runes directly onto the stone table. They did not scratch or burn the surface—they *settled*, as though the table had been waiting for them. Ortis began to read aloud in a language Elmon did not recognize—measured, tonal, and precise. Not sung. Not spoken. *Recalled.*

As the final phrase left his lips, the books began to glow.

From each volume, a small luminous sphere rose—seven in total—hovering just above the table. They pulsed faintly, each with its own rhythm.

Ortis reached out and touched each sphere in turn, whispering something so softly Elmon could not hear it. At each touch, the sphere steadied, as if soothed—or warned.

When the last sphere had been addressed, Ortis withdrew his hand and exhaled once.

*“It appears,”* he said evenly, *“that these books have been under continuous research for no less than five years.”*

Elmon’s breath caught. *“By whom?”* he asked.

Ortis met his eyes. *“The Chancellor. And Mistress Caldra.”*

A pause.

Then Ortis added, almost conversationally, *“Shall we invite the Master of Arms—and pay them a visit?”*

Ortis raised a hand, halting the conversation.

He stood in silence for a long moment, weighing what had been uncovered. The Echoes he had read were converging—threads tightening toward something that resembled a trial. Facts did not bend kindly when arranged this way.

Without a word, Ortis shaped a weave—quiet, precise—and bound it to an echo-song. He released it, sending the message where it needed to go.

Then he turned back to Elmon.

*“You were about to say something.”*

Elmon swallowed. *“I shouldn’t go with you,”* he said quickly. *“I could complicate things. I might even be expelled.”*

Ortis nodded once. *“That is understood.”*

He gestured toward the inner chamber. *“Remain in my sanctum until I return. Keep the door locked.”*

With that, he departed.

Elmon gathered the books and his satchel and stepped into Ortis's personal sanctum, closing the door behind him and securing it. The silence there was different—thicker, attentive.

He did not touch anything.

Instead, he observed.

Every wall bore sigils—subtle, layered, deliberate. The doors were marked as well. Even the floor carried faint geometries woven into the stone, barely visible unless one *knew* to look.

Carefully, Elmon opened his search ledger and began to sketch one of the sigils.

The moment his quill completed the final curve, the page sparked.

Light flared—soft, brief—and then vanished, leaving the parchment blank.

Elmon stared.

The sigil had not been copied.

It had been acknowledged.

He sat at the table, laid out the books, and turned directly to the pages where loose parchment had been pressed and forgotten.

The first described a staff of silvery metal, fifty inches in length.

Its base terminated in a claw—seven articulated toes surrounding a single central spike, no more than an inch long. At the opposite end rested a large, uncut crystal: raw, clear, and pale white, as though light itself had not yet decided how to inhabit it.

Three elongated silver struts were affixed to the crystal's head-seat, spiraling upward like a threaded screw. They converged at a narrow ring that held the crystal in place, allowing its pointed tip to extend two inches beyond the binding.

At the base of the crystal, the stock bore twelve runes.

Eleven were drawn from the foundational bases of magic. The twelfth was not.

It was Echo-script.

The maker was unknown.

The accompanying legend read:

*“In a time yet to come, one shall wield this staff to seal memories wronged, to close the blasphemy of creation, the ponderance of evil that gave rise to SINN, and the Fall of ADAMA.”*

Elmon lowered the page slowly.

This was no relic meant for conquest.

It was meant for reckoning.

A passage struck him with the force of remembrance.

*‘That is the same legend, he realized, the one I read when I named it the Mind of Oblivion.’*

Now he had more than a name.

He had structure. Intention. Purpose.

Another volume spoke of Perdina's Veil—a ritual designed not to erase memory, but to hide it from time itself. Memory sealed away, untouched by decay, unreachable by history.

Elmon exhaled slowly.

*'I have an affinity for this,'* he thought. *'An ability... or at least a resonance.'*

The realization came all at once, like a pot boiling over and shattering its lid.

Someone had been searching for these artifacts.

Not recently.

Not casually.

But for a very long time.

And not for reasons recorded anywhere he could find.

Elmon closed the book, his fingers lingering on the worn leather.

This was no longer an academic exercise.

He had stumbled into a pattern.

And patterns, he knew, were how the most dangerous things began.

As Elmon studied the books, the room whistled.

Not wind—pressure.

A low grinding sound followed, like stone turning against stone. Elmon looked up just as a sigil on the door began to glow. It flared red, then went dark.

A breath passed.

The sigil on the ceiling ignited next—faint, circular, humming with the same reddish light. The room vibrated, barely perceptible, as if something large had leaned against reality itself.

Then—silence.

The door opened.

Master Ortis stepped inside and shut it behind him. The moment the latch clicked, the sigils flared again. The grinding resumed. The whistle returned, sharper now.

Ortis did not turn.

*"It seems,"* he said calmly, *"we have an unwanted visitor knocking."*

With a single gesture, he conjured an image in the air: a red sphere, faceted and grinding against the door like a thought trying to force itself through bone.

*"Elmon,"* Ortis said, *"that is a programmed memory."*

He watched the orb with narrowed eyes.

*"During the Red Scourge War, these were used to infiltrate sanctums and minds alike. They perform a task, then return with what they've gathered—thoughts, impressions, documents, identities."* He exhaled slowly. *"I believe this is what harmed Alfred."*

The red sphere scraped once more against the ward.

Ortis hummed—a low, layered tone—and whispered words that bent the air. The room vanished.

Then Elmon vanished.

And yet—he could see.

They stood in the same chamber, but emptied of substance, as if viewed through memory rather than sight.

*“We are in a veil,”* Ortis said quietly. *“Stay close. We must follow the Arc Mind and learn who set it loose.”*

He drew a thin silver chain from his robe and clipped one end to Elmon’s wrist, the other to his own.

*“Speak softly. Think softly.”*

Ortis snapped his fingers.

The red orb slipped through the door and burst into motion, circling the room wildly—then passed straight through Elmon, cold and hollow, as if he were smoke.

It fled.

They followed. Passing through walls and half open doors.

Down the corridor. Past sleeping wards. Toward the Chancellor’s wing.

The orb slowed before a familiar door. Its shape rippled, folded inward—and became Mistress Caldra.

She opened the door and entered.

Ortis did not hesitate. He stepped forward and passed through the door as though it were mist, whispering all the while.

Elmon followed.

Caldra approached Heniss’s desk, her expression composed, her voice controlled.

*“Ortis’s sanctum is empty. There is nothing of value there.”* She paused. *“The information about the hammer is with Elmon. That is what we need.”*

Heniss frowned. Caldra continued evenly.

*“I checked his room. Nothing. I checked Alfred. Nothing.”*

Behind them, unseen, Ortis whispered, *“My suspicion was correct.”*

He leaned close to Elmon.

*“We can fix Alfred. He is trapped in a mind-dream—contained, not damaged.”* His eyes flicked to Elmon’s chest. *“You still have your Ornicus?”*

Elmon pulled the hexagonal sphere from beneath his shirt.

*“Put it back,”* Ortis said sharply. *“Now listen.”*

He lowered his voice further.

*“When I unhook this chain, you will materialize. It will terrify them. The Arc Mind cannot touch you while the Ornicus is worn. You will tell them you are a Veilwalker, sent by the Magistrate of Anelum. He has been tracking deliberate violations of Arcane Echoes.”*

Elmon swallowed.

*“I will reattach the chain,”* Ortis continued, *“and you will vanish again. Make a movement as though you are stepping to the right.”*

Ortis unclipped the chain.

Reality snapped.

Elmon materialized in the room.

Caldra recoiled. Heniss staggered back from his desk.

Elmon spoke before doubt could find him.

*“It is... difficult,”* he said carefully, *“learning to veilwalk. But I bring a message.”*

He straightened.

*“I have been sent by the Magistrate of Anelum. He has been tracking your deliberate violations of Arcane Echoes.”*

A thought—unbidden, sharp—slid into Elmon’s mind.

*‘The Filí will be here tomorrow.’*

He spoke it aloud.

*“The Filí will arrive tomorrow to address this violation.”*

Shock rippled through the room.

Then Elmon vanished.

Ortis stared.

The chain still hung loose in his hand.

A moment passed.

Then another presence forced its way into the veil—slowly, heavily, like walking through deep water.

A man in sooty black robes emerged beside Elmon. He pulled back his hood.

Ortis smiled despite himself.

*“You received my message,”* Ortis said.

Anelum nodded once. *“Yes. Six Blackguards and two Orcin Magistrates are already on the grounds, under authority of the Elven Council. The Chancellor contacted us days ago, but we did not deem it urgent... until your warning.”*

His gaze shifted to Elmon.

*“This,”* Anelum said, *“is the Vaultbound Magus?”*

Ortis’s expression darkened—not with fear, but awe.

*“More than we know,”* he replied.

They returned to Ortis’s sanctum, and the familiar hush of sacred order settled around them once more—thick, deliberate, listening.

As Elmon moved through the chamber, his attention caught on a scroll tucked into a recessed alcove. Its seal bore a glyph he knew.

He stopped. Pointed.

*“Master Ortis... what is that scroll?”*

Ortis approached slowly. He did not answer at once. Instead, he unfastened the scroll just enough to reveal the glyph, then looked at Elmon with a lifted brow and a quiet, probing tone.

*“Why do you ask?”*

Elmon stepped closer. *“That glyph—it's one of the markings from the giant door. I copied all of them into my ledger.”*

The air changed.

Ortis's expression darkened—not with anger, but with sudden gravity.

*“You must remove them,”* he said firmly. *“Erase them. Burn the page if you must.”*

Elmon stiffened. *“Why?”*

Ortis lowered the scroll.

*“Because those glyphs are not merely symbols. They are anchored permissions. If spoken incorrectly, copied without alignment, or associated outside their proper lattice, they can rupture memory itself.”*

He met Elmon's eyes.

*“And they can destroy the door—not by force, but by unmaking what it remembers.”*

Elmon swallowed.

*“There are doors,”* Ortis continued quietly, *“that exist because forgetting them would be more dangerous than sealing them. That door is one of them.”*

Without hesitation, Elmon drew his knife and carefully excised the page from his ledger. He handed it to Ortis.

Ortis sprinkled ash across the parchment, humming a low, layered chant. When he blew the ash away, the glyphs vanished—no scars, no residue, no suggestion they had ever been there.

As if the page had never known them.

Elmon stared, wide-eyed.

Ortis opened his mouth to speak — then stopped.

From the shadowed edge of the room, Anelum murmured, *“He has not yet mastered echoes. Nor sigil inference. Nor mimicry dissolution.”*

Ortis turned slowly toward Elmon.

*“You must never copy glyphs, sigils, or symbols that glow, pulse, or radiate,”* he said, his voice solemn. *“They are not ink. They are alive. To mimic them is to invite indirection — a fusion of self and purpose that may unravel you.”*

Elmon swallowed.

*“What did you do?”*

Ortis lifted the page.

It was blank.

A faint warmth still rose from the ash gathered between his fingers.

*“The Ritual of Ash of Unmaking,”* Ortis said quietly. *“It dissolves type from echo. Severs mimicry from memory — and memory from consequence.”*

The air shifted.

A faint buzzing tremor rippled near the ceiling.

A ferry flickered into view — small, luminous, startled.

It hovered — just long enough to be seen.

Then vanished.

Ortis stiffened. *“Ferries,”* he said slowly, *“at the School?”*

Anelum spun toward the space where it had been, hand raised, two fingers extended in sensing posture.

*“I detect no active signature,”* he said after a moment.

Ortis’ gaze moved deliberately to Elmon. *“Such creatures do not enter unbidden,”* he said.

Silence.

Elmon felt the weight of it settle in his chest.

*“It should not have been able to manifest,”* Ortis continued, more to himself now. *“Not unless there is a link.”*

His eyes sharpened.

Then — unexpectedly — he shook his head and sat heavily at the desk, lost in thought.

## Chapter †: The Wilds of the City

Elmon kept to the sanctum of Ortis, lying low and buried in tomes. His attention had narrowed to one object in particular: Mirtwain's Echo Manipulator.

A hammer of archaic design.

Its purpose chilled him. According to the records, it was capable of rewriting memory—*'not just individual recollection, but historical truth itself.'*

He showed the entry to Ortis.

"Ah," Ortis murmured, scanning the page. "Yes... *this explains much. They seek to alter perception—fracture alliances, erase shared memory, rewrite causality.*" He looked up slowly. "That is how wars are born without a single declaration."

Elmon frowned. "But to what end?"

"That," Ortis replied, "is the most dangerous question of all."

Elmon must have fallen asleep with his head pressed against the spine of the book, because the next thing he knew, Anelum was striding into the sanctum.

"They have been arrested," Anelum said without preamble.

Elmon sat up sharply.

Ortis, already awake, unrolled another ledger—the same entry on the hammer they had been discussing earlier, now cross-referenced with intelligence reports.

"It aligns," Ortis said. "They've allied themselves with the Southern Hammer Drow. There have already been skirmishes with Dwarves and Humans. Their aim is to reclaim Willows Keep, at the base of Monument Mountain."

Anelum's voice hardened. "That is where a Gate to the Underworld was recently detected."

The room went still.

As the conversation continued, Elmon—still groggy but alert—noticed a glyph in the ledger that matched the one etched into his Fili token. He made quiet notes in the margin of his research journal, careful not to copy the symbol directly.

Anelum noticed.

He regarded Elmon for a long moment, then said, with a rare softness, "Study well, young master. We will need more minds like yours in the years to come."

Elmon did not know how to respond, so he simply nodded.

Later that day, Elmon and Ortis went to the clerical infirmary to check on Alfred.

They heard him before they reached the door.

"Keep them away!" Alfred cried, thrashing against the sheets. "Don't let them touch me!"

Ortis and the attending cleric moved quickly, weaving calm into the air, anchoring Alfred's mind back to the present. It took nearly an hour before his breathing slowed and his eyes finally opened.

He looked around wildly. "Are they gone?" he whispered.

Mensor leaned close. "Who is gone, Alfred?"

*“The demon-looking ones,”* Alfred said hoarsely. *“Red-skinned. Horns. Skulls carved into their armor.”*

Mensor met Ortis’s eyes before answering.

*“They are gone,”* the cleric said gently. *“You are safe now. Rest.”*

Alfred closed his eyes, exhaustion finally overtaking fear.

Elmon stood at the foot of the bed, his hands clenched at his sides.

The war, he realized, was no longer theoretical.

It had already reached into the minds of the innocent.

On the final day of school, Elmon sat quietly, focused on his Mythic Taxonomy assignment.

Two lines. Stark. Unapologetic.

**Line One:** Not worth keeping

**Line Two:** An abuse of intelligence

Able Nor scoffed, his voice heavy with disdain.

*“You think this will pass?”* he said, holding the paper between two fingers. *“There’s no structure. No rationale. No academic discipline. Young Silverwood... a remarkable failure, given your supposed caliber. I imagine you simply couldn’t rise to the occasion.”*

He smiled thinly.

*“You’ll be retaking this course.”*

He handed the paper back.

Without a word, from behind Elmon’s back a second document, placing it neatly on the desk.

Able Nor glanced at it, snorted, and crumpled it without reading.

*“There’s no extra credit in my classes,”* he said, turning away. *“Nice try.”*

Elmon did not respond.

He simply watched as Able Nor skipped off, amused with himself—never noticing that the second paper had never been offered as extra credit at all.

Later, Elmon submitted his final assignment for Arcane Investigation.

His note was brief. Honest.

*‘I have not had sufficient time. I have been involved in matters more pressing than coursework.’*

Attached was a letter—signed by the Elvin Council and Anelum—recognizing Elmon Silverwood’s role in halting a potential war. The seal shimmered faintly with Toreaz script, a restrained echo of honor rather than proclamation.

An Assignment for Arcane Investigation

**Submitted by:** Elmon Silverwood

**Name:** *The Perdina Staff of Oblivion*

**Creators:** Legend holds that the staff was forged by the Titans during the Second Sundering of Cragnearth.

**Historical Significance:** Instrument of binding used against an ultimate evil responsible for the Fall of the ADAMA race.

**Purpose:** To be wielded by a future bearer to seal memories of grievous injustice, contain the blasphemy of creation, and arrest the ponderance of evil that gave rise to SINN.

**Architectural Significance:** Capable of interfacing with all known bases of magic, including the manipulation of essence itself.

**Value:** As an artifact or relic, it is beyond valuation—and dangerously so.

**Personal Theory:** The staff is not of mortal origin. It is a key to Oblivion, crafted by an eternal intelligence to secure the future against ultimate evil.

**Sources Consulted:**

*Cascades of the Empire* by Dermot

*Histories and Grounds of Scathnard and the Queendel Province* by Emuriol Fethermor

Dwarven Manuscripts of the Forgers (unnamed)

*Fire in the Ethereal* by Egeris Malcoiy

Embook Unglient, Senior Archivist and Instructor, read the paper in silence.

Then he smiled.

*“Basic. Simple. Truthful. Relevant,”* he said, setting it aside. *“A pass — and an excellent first work.”*

He looked up.

*“Master Ortis informed me of the recent events. I must congratulate you on the Hammer research. I have studied that artifact for over fifteen years. You located it in the midst of chaos.”*

A small nod. *“A good instinct.”*

The school dismissed early for the Month of Wisps, and Scathnard opened itself to wandering.

Lantern-glow, drifting ribbons, and pale floating lights filled the courtyards. Every race observed the Call of Winter in its own fashion — some solemn, some exuberant.

Elmon found himself cataloging them as he walked.

At home, the Call had meant leaves piled around the Treant his mother once saved. Holly and sigiled ornaments hung from its sparse branches. The Treant would marvel briefly — then shake them loose and wander into the hills when its time there was complete.

Memory honored.

Attachment released. He wondered if that was wisdom.

The Dwarven *Joust of Kings* fascinated him — spectacle layered over something older. Con would know its deeper significance. Combat was never only combat among Dwarves.

And then there were the Darklings.

He had read a brief, evasive reference to their festival of *Walking in Light*.

Why would a people shaped by shadow celebrate illumination?

What memory did that ritual answer?

Questions, always questions.

Elmon and a handful of friends drifted into the city streets, freed for a time from lectures and ledgers.

Scathnard was among the largest cities in Galishole — nearly a million souls layered in stone, timber, and memory.

Above them, wisps of pale light floated like thoughts that refused to settle.

Two towers pierced the skyline—unequal in age and purpose. One was old and broad shouldered, a Sorcerer’s Tower, weathered by centuries of common spellcraft and bloodline tradition. The other rose slimmer and sharper, its architecture deliberate and restrained—the Echomancers’ Wizard Tower, newer, sanctioned, and watched with careful reverence.

Near the eastern ridge stood the Temple of the Winds, seat of the Myst Gazers, its open arches and chimes translating every breeze into omen and prayer.

The harbor below was deep and wide, capable of berthing fourteen ships at once, with room still for ferries, barges, and rumor.

There was much to discover in a single month.

Elmon invited Christin Maple to join him and the others—Maria, Justin Rindle, the sturdy dwarf, Bengamin, Elcrull, and Alfred—for an afternoon of exploration.

Christin hesitated, then smiled faintly.

*“Only if I can be with you,”* she said, her voice carrying something softer than courage.

Elmon blinked. Drew a slow breath.

*“Well,”* he said, half-smiling, *“I suppose I won’t be veil-walking tonight.”*

They laughed and set off together.

As the group wandered, they studied street signs etched in three tongues, traced the shifting architectural styles—from old Dwarven stonework to newer Elvin arches—and followed the flow of the crowd deeper into the city’s heart.

That was when they noticed it.

A narrow pub wedged between two leaning buildings, its facade pressed inward as though the city had forgotten to leave it space. The name above the door was painted in a hand that felt... wrong.

The letters leaned slightly against the direction of their strokes. Not reversed — but resistant.

And above them hung the sign.

A unicorn.

Head bowed.

A noose drawn tight around its neck.

Elmon slowed.

*“Well,”* Alfred muttered, *“that seems... inviting.”*

Something in the air shifted. Scathnard, in that moment, stopped being merely a city — and became something older. Wilder.

### ***The Hanging Unicorn.***

Elmon felt it before he understood it — a thin tension in the air, like breath drawn but not released.

He glanced upward. A faint blue flicker slipped between the eaves across the street.

The ferry.

It lingered — watching.

Then vanished.

Elmon frowned.

He said nothing.

His attention returned to his friends.

They glanced at one another — wildness in their eyes, grins already forming — and stepped inside.

The pub was dim and close, thick with the scent of old wood, spilled ale, and laughter worn smooth by repetition.

Lantern light guttered along blackened beams.

Their eyes were drawn almost immediately to the back wall.

Mounted there —

was the head of a horse.

A single silver horn jutted from its forehead—too far forward, too awkwardly placed to be of any use. The mane had been dyed white, though faint traces of palomino still showed through near the neck.

Elmon pointed and laughed outright.

*“What a forgery,”* he said. *“They didn’t even try.”*

Justin had noticed none of this.

The barmaid had noticed him. Justine a burly but slender Dwarf.

She was broad-shouldered, solid, and confident in the way only someone who had lifted more barrels than people could be. Her eyes lingered on Justin’s dwarven build as she wandered over, placing a hand on his shoulder with intentions entirely appropriate for a pub of this reputation.

*“What be your desire, knight?”* she asked, voice low and practiced.

Justin grinned. *“Your Bitten Brew, oh Gleaming Hammer.”*

He turned just long enough to wink at Elmon. *“Nice start to the evening.”*

With that, he waddled off toward a heavy oak table near the hearth and slapped it once for emphasis, signaling the others to follow.

*“This,”* he declared, settling in, *“is a night to hunker down some eyes. Eyy?”*

He looked around at his companions, already pleased with himself.

And just like that, the city's wilder side had found them.

Elcrull stiffened, her gaze fixed on a shadowed figure slouched in a corner stall.

*"Elmon,"* she murmured, not taking her eyes off him, *"that man has been staring at me. I don't like it."*

Elmon did not turn. Calm and practiced, he reached into his sleeve and scattered a pinch of fine dust across the table as if brushing away crumbs. Leaning closer, he traced a subtle symbol through the grains with one finger and whispered under his breath.

The man in the corner slammed his mug down.

*"You will not diminish me,"* he snarled, already on his feet.

He charged.

Before he took three steps, a tall man in half-plate armor rose from a nearby table. As the hooded man rushed past, the armored figure caught him by the cloak, yanked him backward, and slammed him flat onto the floor.

Steel rang softly.

The hooded man drew a dagger.

An armored boot came down hard on his chest.

*"Now,"* the guard said mildly, *"why would you want me to arrest you and feed you to the Barrons?"*

The hooded man hissed. *"One of them tried to censor me. That is not allowed."*

The guard nodded. *"True."* He leaned in closer. *"But neither are weapons in places of refreshment."*

With no visible effort, he hauled the man to his feet and dragged him toward the students' table.

*"Since you're so eager to discuss grievances,"* the guard said, *"you may do so properly."*

The armored man's gaze flicked briefly to the dust and the symbol Elmon had traced.

*"Sir,"* he said evenly, *"you are aware that wards and spells are forbidden in houses of refreshment."*

Elmon felt his pulse jump, but he kept his voice steady.

*"We're on break from the wizardry school,"* he said. *"We're... unfamiliar with the city's customs. My friend here—Elcrull—noticed the man was projecting unwanted mythos and sundering thoughts toward her."*

The guard shifted his grip slightly.

Garek glanced down at the hooded man still suspended in his grasp.

*"Spells, weaves, mythos,"* he said, raising his voice just enough for the room to hear, *"and strong mental projections are all forbidden in houses of refreshment."*

He looked around the pub.

*"Understood?"*

A low murmur of assent moved through the room.

Garek released the hooded man, letting him drop hard to the floor.

*“Now crawl,”* he added quietly, *“or I decide you meant harm.”*

Garek Holman—tall, armored, and deliberate—inclined his head with practiced authority.

*“I am Garek Holman,”* he said, *“one of the keepers of peace in this city. It is apparent you are unfamiliar with the refinements and rules that govern Scathnard.”*

For the next several minutes, he instructed the table—outlining forbidden zones, spell etiquette, and the consequences of miscast Mythos. As he spoke, his grip never fully left the hooded figure, who listened in sullen silence.

*“Public houses are neutral ground,”* Garek concluded. *“No spells. No weaves. No projections. Not even a suggestion.”*

Behind him, the barmaid returned, setting a tall flagon of something dark and aromatic beside Justin. The dwarf glanced from the drink to her smile and grinned.

Garek turned just enough to notice.

He raised a finger. *“Careful, friend. Start a brawl in a place like this and you could spark a war.”*

Elmon, emboldened but measured, met the guard’s gaze.

*“I am a Young Magus,”* he said evenly, *“and I will keep him clear of war, kind sir.”*

Garek studied Elmon for a heartbeat longer than necessary—then nodded once.

*“See that you do.”*

Garek roared with laughter and clapped Elmon hard on the back—and was suddenly lifted clear off the floor and hurled across the room.

Tables rattled. Cups spilled.

A cloaked figure materialized from nothing, standing where Elmon had been a heartbeat before.

Steel flashed as Garek drew his sword—then froze.

An Orcin Magistrate stepped forward, raising a sigil that pulsed with quiet, absolute authority. Its glow stilled the room.

*“This boy,”* the Magistrate said in a profoundly clear Benish tongue, *“is not to be attacked again.”*

Silence crashed down.

The students stood wide-eyed and unmoving.

Behind the bar, the barmaid leaned close to Justin and whispered urgently, *“Wards or not, we need to be leaving. Like—now.”*

Justin patted her reassuringly, lifted his flagon, and drained it with a satisfied roar.

*“By the Forge,”* he bellowed, *“Black Martin Ale! Thanks, lass!”*

Before anyone could react, the group slipped away—out the door, into the press of the street, and vanished into Scathnard’s living crowd.

They wandered through merchant stalls, guild houses, pubs, and the workshops of carvers and simple smiths—more cautious now, more alert to the city’s pulse.

Elmon paused often, his eyes drifting to shadowed alleys and crossing streets.

*"We're being followed,"* he said quietly. *"I can't tell by whom."*

Elcrull swept into a dramatic bow. *"It's obvious, Your Liege. You have bodyguards."*

Laughter rippled through the group, easing the tension—though Elmon didn't entirely laugh with them.

As they threaded through the city's arteries, they spotted Entic, his arms piled high with books. Curious, they followed at a distance as he entered a bookbinder's shop. He handed over a single sheet, waited, then accepted a smaller, tightly wrapped stack in return.

When Entic stepped back into the street, he nearly collided with them.

Justin grinned. *"Still working, lad?"*

Entic's expression hardened. His voice came out rougher than expected.

*"I'm not rich like your families. I have nothing. My father was butchered by bandits last year. My mother died of heartbreak soon after. My uncle keeps me now—but I earn my place. Nothing is free in his house."*

Elmon felt the words land like stones.

*"Can we help?"* he asked softly.

Entic shook his head. *"I don't need your pity."*

He turned and walked back toward the school, clutching the books as though they were armor.

Maria watched him go, her voice barely above a whisper.

*"That's... horrid. School shouldn't be a burden."*

Elmon didn't answer.

But he remembered.

Elmon nodded. *"Not everyone who studies has resources. Let's gather some coin and leave it where he'll find it."*

Elcrull smiled, soft but knowing. *"He'll figure it out. He's not unaware."*

Maria frowned. *"School shouldn't be a burden. This is horrid."* As she sniffled.

*"That's why we won't make it one,"* Elmon replied gently. *"We'll help without making it a spectacle."*

Justin leaned in, half-joking. *"We could always stage something—make him look like the hero."*

Elmon laughed. *"What, have him protect you, Justin?"*

Christin grinned. *"That would be a story worth a song."*

Elmon nodded. *"Let's talk about it when we're back at school."*

The idea lingered between them—not as charity, but as quiet intent.

Elmon felt something brush his ear. He looked around startled.

The group continued their exploration, the city unfolding in layered streets and murmured danger. Justin's eyes lit up as they passed a row of iron-bound storefronts.

*“I’d like to see the armor shops,”* he said. *“Maybe peruse the latest weapons.”*

*“That would be grand,”* Elcrull replied, then hesitated. *“But Garek warned us not to enter the Black Streets or the Courant’s Gallery unless we were escorted.”*

Elmon nodded. *“Then we find a guard and ask.”*

They had not gone far when they encountered the disturbance.

Four heavily armored men stood in a tight formation, ritual cords glowing faintly as they cinched them around a figure in dark robes. The cords tightened with deliberate precision, light pulsing as though responding to resistance.

The prisoner was forced to his knees.

His face bore inked sigils etched directly into skin — not painted, but embedded. Old work. Intentional.

As his head was shoved forward, his eyes lifted.

They locked onto Elmon. A cold stare.

Not pleading. Measuring.

Something pressed against Elmon’s thoughts — thin, sharp.

A projected echo.

It faltered mid-reach, as though striking an unseen resistance, and dissipated like breath against stone.

The mystic’s lip curled.

A flash of fang. A faint growl.

Elcrull shifted instantly.

Her claws slid free with a whisper. Her stance lowered — not defensive.

Predatory. Elmon’s hand settled firmly on her shoulder.

She glanced at him, irritation flickering in her eyes, then extended one claw toward the bound man.

*“That,”* she said quietly, *“is a Mystic of Slavers.”*

The words landed heavier than the chains.

The guards hauled the prisoner upright. He did not look away from Elmon until a gauntleted hand forced his head down.

Then he was dragged off, boots scraping against stone.

The street slowly exhaled.

Only when the armored men had turned the corner did the group resume walking.

Justin cleared his throat and approached one of the remaining guards.

*“Pardon me, sir,”* he said carefully. *“Are there guards to hire in this district?”*

The man looked down at the dwarf, unimpressed. *“Mercs. South Court.”* Then he turned away.

Justin returned. *“He said something about mercs in the South Court.”*

*“Mercenaries for hire,”* Elcrull echoed. *“Probably expensive. How long would we need one?”*

Christin tightened her grip on Elmon’s arm and smiled—gentle, deliberate.

*“We,”* she said, glancing at him, *“will wander toward Salter’s, Woolers, and the clothiers. Winter is coming. I need a new cape. And a shawl.”*

Elmon nodded, and together they drifted into the open market.

They wove between stalls heavy with color and scent — bolts of wool and silk dyed in deep autumn hues, jewelers polishing silver beneath hanging lanterns, spice merchants calling out in three tongues.

Christin slowed.

Her attention caught by a stately manor coat displayed high upon a carved stand.

She stepped closer, fingers brushing the fabric.

The stitching was ceremonial — old patterns worked subtly into the seams. When the light struck just right, faint sigil-thread glimmered beneath the weave.

*“This one,”* she murmured. *“It carries itself well.”*

Elmon watched her.

The city moved around them — but for a moment, something felt... suspended. As though Scathnard itself had paused to observe her choice.

A prickle ran along the back of his neck.

Not discomfort. Attention.

He lifted a hand to scratch — and froze.

A small blue glow rested lightly against his fingertip.

The ferry.

It tilted, as though studying him — or the coat.

Then, with sudden decision, it slipped beneath his collar.

Elmon stiffened.

Christin lifted the coat and held it up against him, studying him with quiet assessment.

She nodded once. *“This will look great on you.”*

Elmon blinked, trying to ignore the faint warmth beneath his collar.

*“I already have a new cloak, trousers, and my family tunics,”* he said. *“Is there something wrong with what I’m wearing?”*

Christin smiled, gentle but resolute. *“No. But you are somebody at the school. You should look it.”*

Elmon sighed softly. *“I’m a student at a school of Wizardry in Scathnard, Queendel Province, Galishole. That makes me practically a nobody.”* He paused, then added, more carefully, *“Not to dismiss your kindness—but I’ve learned this year that attention is only useful when it serves the moment. Otherwise, it’s dangerous.”*

Christin considered him, her fingers still resting on the fabric.

Elmon shifted the conversation. *“I need to research the Catar people in the human kingdoms. That man who was staring at Elcrull... the Mystic . . . it still bothers me. More than I thought it would. Something about it wasn’t right.”*

Christin nodded. *“You should. I agree—it was unusual.”*

She tilted her head, a hint of humor softening her voice. *“Though I will say, Catar are striking. I love how soft her fur is—and those tiger-like stripes are adorable.”*

She smiled faintly. *“My brother, for reasons both unknown and deeply peculiar, finds Catar absolutely enthralling.”*

Elmon snorted despite himself, the tension easing just a touch—but not leaving entirely.

She lifted the coat again, holding it up between them.

*“My dear Elmon,”* she said softly, *“allow me to buy this for you. If for nothing else—then for the graduation ceremony.”*

Elmon hesitated. *“That’s two years away. I’m sure my mother would have something of family heritage prepared for me.”*

Christin lowered her gaze and sniffed quietly.

Elmon looked down, thoughts turning over themselves—his words, her pause, the weight of legacy and belonging. A prick at his neck.

*“Yes,”* he said at last. *“Of course. It would be something I could wear to school events... and such.”*

Christin brightened instantly and rose onto her toes to kiss him.

Elmon leaned back just slightly, half smiling. *“What is this? It’s not a marriage proposal. It’s simply a beautiful Elvin mistress I admire, choosing to gift me something to ease my days at school.”*

Christin punched him in the chest and fixed him with a stern look.

After three hours wandering the shops and court districts, Christin found two breathtaking cloaks—each embroidered with ornate sigils and seasonal motifs. She chose one and had her name stitched into the lining, a quiet act of self-inscription. She also purchased a linen shawl adorned with flowers and fruit, its weave soft and faintly fragrant with dye.

They returned to campus just as a small fanfare stirred across the grounds. A cluster of nobles stood near the main hall, gesturing toward buildings and laughing easily with instructors. The air carried the weight of ceremony—measured smiles, curated conversation.

Micrium spotted Elmon and Christin and beckoned them forward.

As they approached, Master Ortis raised a hand in welcome. *“Ladies, may I introduce Master Silverwood and Mistress Maple.”*

A woman turned, her eyes bright with practiced exuberance.

Alfred’s mother.

*“Ah,”* she said warmly. *“Alfred’s roommate. A noteworthy family.”* She inclined her head in a polite bow, her voice precise—historical, curated. *“Your grandfather was shunned for*

*pursuits our civilization did not yet understand. We might have advanced far more swiftly in the mystic arts had we listened.*"

She smiled. *"Your aunt's work in the borderlands has been... influential in maintaining peace. And I hear your uncle fares well in Raven."*

Elmon listened carefully.

The names came too easily. The order was intentional. The praise—selective.

This was not admiration. It was placement.

She was either positioning herself in his favor... —or preparing to ask for something.

Elmon, uncertain of her intent, simply smiled. *"Thank you for your understanding."*

Alfred's mother inclined her head more formally. *"I am Alfred's mother. You may call me Elroo, if you wish. Formally, I am Elroola Emwinster of the Noble House of Erailia."*

Her voice did not waver, but something steadied itself beneath the words.

*"Alfred's father died during the war with the Ildrol,"* she continued. *"That is why he is not present today."*

A pause—measured, respectful.

Mistress Elroo's gaze softened as she studied Elmon more closely. *"Your grandfather—on your mother's side—was lost during the Lake Forest uprising, was he not? The Ildrol dispute over land rights."*

She exhaled slowly.

*"A tragedy. My husband fell in that same war."*

Elmon blinked, caught off guard. *"I... I don't know what he stood for. My mother only ever said his death was shameful."*

Elroola paused, her voice lowering. *"Then perhaps it is time someone told you the truth. Shame is often the cloak placed over conviction when the world isn't ready."*

Elmon turned slightly, gesturing toward Christin. *"This is my dear friend, Christine Maple. She is currently a Wizard's apprentice—specializing in echo theory and Vault Authority. She is astute, disciplined, and comprehensive in her understanding. Top of her class."*

Christin curtsied lightly toward Mistress Elroo, then turned back to Elmon with a small smile. *"I need to take these things up to my room. I'll meet you later with the gamble group."*

Mistress Elroo watched her depart, lips curving with quiet amusement.

*"A quaint young lady,"* she said. *"You will go far with her."*

Elmon answered evenly. *"It is not that sort of relationship. She is a dear friend. And a confidant."*

Elroo's expression did not retreat — it deepened.

*"Sir Elmon,"* she said gently with a smile, *"may I be frank? Mistress Maple has eyes for you. And a heart that leans in your direction. Do not dismiss that lightly. You are approaching the age of gathering. She could become a grace in your future."*

Elmon inclined his head.

*“I am aware of her feelings,” he said. “And some of the intentions behind them — though she does not know I see them. Her family also considers such bonds. But I am still shaping my path. I do not yet know its rhythm. I would not draw someone into a cadence they did not freely choose.”*

He paused.

“That would be unkind.”

Elroo studied him a moment longer, then tapped his shoulder once.

“Good,” she said softly. *“Then you have not signed her away.”*

Elmon watched Christin disappear toward the dormitories.

For a fleeting, private moment, he imagined her with a tail — not literal, but expressive — the sort that would betray the warmth she tried to hide behind composure.

The thought lingered fondly.

He turned back toward the gathering Ortis had assembled.

Alfred’s mother stood among them, speaking quietly with several others Elmon did not recognize.

But the sigils they wore — etched into rings, stitched into collars, faintly woven into cuffs — spoke clearly of lineage.

Old houses. Old blood.

Old memory.

This was not a casual meeting.

## Chapter †: A Year of Trials

Elmon sat in his chair, gazing sadly at his desk. *“Alfred, I think I need a larger desk.”*

Alfred glanced over with a smirk. *“Really? What’s wrong with the floor? You had the corner and the side shelves stuffed with books, ledgers, and manuscripts. You sat there happy as an alchemist in a storehouse of unlimited supplies.”*

Elmon sighed, rubbing his temples. *“My classes this year will require more space—investigative and actuating principles, mostly. This year is going to be tougher than the last.”* He scanned his schedule and side classes, brow furrowed.

*“Echo Weaving. No idea where or what it means. Half these classes sound like dance training. Binding Memory to Motion. Ritual Cadence. Ancestral Rhythm. Maybe I’ll need a dance room just to march around in.”*

Alfred chuckled. *“I had that class last year. Nearly drowned in it. Took a mountain of research to grasp its true essence. But it’s a perfect weave for you.”* He grinned. *“I’ve got Dream Inscription and Sacred Annotation this year.”*

Elmon perked up. *“That’s great—we can pool our resources.”*

Alfred laughed. *“Or you can prop me up when my mind gets echo-blanked or my weave collapses.”*

Elmon smiled. *“I’m looking forward to Dream Inscription. Last year, during some of my research, I found a ledger cataloging its uses.”*

Alfred blinked. *“You read a ledger? Someone wrote a story in a ledger?”*

*“No,”* Elmon said patiently. *“It cataloged processes that utilize Dream Inscription. You can place a dream into an echo or a weave. Record it for later comprehension. Use layered resonance to trace historical threads and memory maps—then transform it into a kind of mental document for study.”*

Alfred leaned back, laughing. *“Well, that’s going to be some class. When my mind leaks out of my ear, you can inscribe it—and we’ll study it later, with comprehension.”*

Elmon leaned back in his chair, eyes half closed.

*“Translation of living glyphs could be interesting,”* he murmured. *“I wonder if you need a cage—or something—to control them. I’m curious what living really means in that context.”*

He closed his eyes fully, letting the thought drift.

He imagined a glyph that grew—not merely in shape, but in meaning. Something that began as a single mark and slowly learned itself. Could a glyph be one thing, then become another, the way schoolwork shifts from confusion to clarity?

Then something changed.

*“Elmon?”*

He opened his eyes.

He was standing in a cavernous chamber, the floor veiled in mist. A passageway stretched ahead, tangled with roots and bramble-like growth, breathing softly as if alive.

*‘I’m not in my dorm.’*

He rubbed his eyes and blinked.

The dorm room snapped back into place.

“Alfred?” Elmon said sharply. “*Why are you kissing Elcrull?*” The image fractured.

Alfred stirred, blinking awake. “*What?*” He stretched and yawned. “*I was just slipping into a thoughtful nap. Who was kissing Elcrull?*”

He grinned, unapologetic. “*She is cute. Warm presence. Her fur’s silky smooth, you know. And her breath—almost intoxicating.*” He shrugged. “*I’ve been encouraging her to pursue Sorcery.*”

Elmon stared. “*Did she come in here or something?*” Alfred squinted at him. “*...You seeing things again?*”

After a few days of quiet preparation, Elmon ordered his thoughts for the first day of the new school year. He checked the reading board for his class list, ensured his study room was unlocked and warded, and then made his way to Master Ortis’s sanctum.

He knocked with the coded rhythm.

“*Enter.*”

Master Ortis sat amid a controlled chaos of tomes, scrolls, and fragmented glyph plates—clearly deep in research. Elmon stepped inside and waited.

“*May I ask a question?*” Elmon said at last.

“*Yes,*” Ortis replied without looking up. “*You may.*”

Elmon hesitated. He began to speak, stopped, then drew a slow breath.

“*Last year,*” he said carefully, “*during our first Vaultborn session—you introduced us to the Echo Seeds. Near the end of that class, you placed your hand on my shoulder... and then pulled it away.*”

Ortis looked up now.

“*You later explained why,*” Elmon continued. “*But you did the same thing with Melcat.*”

He met Ortis’s eyes.

“*Was it for the same reason?*”

Master Ortis studied him in silence for a long moment.

“*Elmon,*” he said at last, “*there are many mysteries in the metaverse. Some are understood. Others...*” He paused. “*...not at all.*”

He folded his hands.

“*I have been researching how you—unknowingly, and without intent—harmonized with my echo. Our timelines appear focused. Parallel. Structured in a similar manner.*”

Elmon leaned forward. “*And what does that mean?*”

Ortis’s voice lowered.

“*It means you already possess a linked, active, and fully sung Echo thread—one that existed before your first incarnation.*”

Elmon’s breath caught.

“*I suspect,*” Ortis continued, “*that is why the Candle Pyre occurred when you were ten.*”

Elmon's breath caught.

"Why is all of this dangerous?"

Ortis regarded him carefully.

*"Because such reach does not go unnoticed," he said. "An echo that sings this early attracts attention—from entities, instructors, and factions alike. Some will wish to guide you. Others will wish to contain you."*

He folded his hands.

*"Your sphere has sung, Elmon. But your emotional and metaphysical framework is still forming. Without structure, resonance like yours can fracture identity... or overwhelm the psyche."*

He paused, choosing his words with care.

*"There are those who would see your awakening at such an unheard-of age as a threat. Others would call it prophecy. And some—"*

His voice lowered.

*"—would name it a disruption of what they believe to be sacred, or of cosmic necessity."*

Elmon whispered, suddenly understanding.

*"Oh... could that explain the dreams? The visions? My shifting sense of reality?"*

Ortis nodded once.

*"It could. And more," he said quietly. "There may be emotional bleed-through. The harmonizing—though beautiful—is not without consequence."*

Elmon sat still for a long moment. Then, barely above a whisper:

*"I have a recurring vision. Or dream. Or something else."*

Ortis's eyes narrowed.

*"Describe it."*

*"A serpent," Elmon said. "A woman. Darkness. Pain."*

Ortis exhaled slowly.

*"You should have come to me sooner."*

Elmon nodded. *"You weren't here yet. I had to try to resolve it myself. I'm not finished. I'm still researching."*

He hesitated.

*"I had a vision just yesterday."*

Elmon leaned back, closed his eyes, and focused—drawing the memory forward, shaping it with careful intent. He formed it into a sphere. A window of thought.

A small, uneven orb materialized in the air between them—unsymmetrical, wavering, unstable.

Ortis spoke gently. *"Relax. Don't force it. Feel its essence. Distance your window from your being—like setting it on a table."*

The orb steadied, its wobble fading as it clarified into a translucent window.

Elmon kept his focus on the vision, opened his eyes—and it remained, hovering, clear and present.

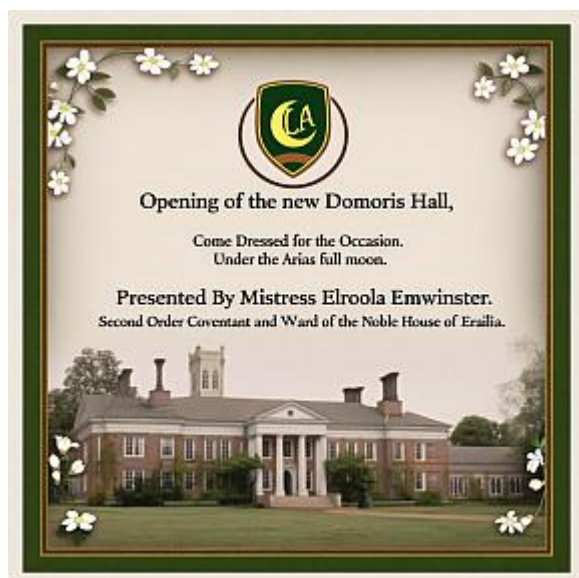
Ortis leaned forward, eyes widening.

*“I perceive a juncture in your future,”* he said quietly. *“Predestined—and not easily avoided. Keep a diary of these events. It may help you build an understanding of the cosmological inference you are experiencing.”*

Elmon’s mind swirled, stretched thin by the weight of the revelation.

He left the sanctum in silence and returned to his dorm, carrying more than he had entered with.

### ***Invitation Beneath the Carpet***



Upon entering his dorm room, Elmon noticed an invitation lodged beneath the edge of the carpet. He retrieved it.

A peculiar scent clung to the envelope.

*“Hm... what is it?”*

He opened it.

A formal gathering—scheduled for the following evening.

*“Good,”* he murmured. *“I wouldn’t want this to happen mid-class.”*

He crossed to his wardrobe and withdrew the new stately cloak Christin had purchased for him. As he unfolded it, the same scent reached him.

*“Hm. Same scent.”*

He examined the stitching, the cut, the subtle weight of it. *“A perfect occasion for you.”*

Elmon paused, lifted his gaze, and closed his eyes—considering the implications.

Behind him, Alfred wandered in, arms full of folded clothing.

*“Some days I wish Mother were not so pompous and showy.”*

Elmon glanced back. *“About the hall opening?”*

Alfred stopped short when he noticed the invitation on Elmon’s desk.

*“Wow. That doesn’t look anything like mine.”* He tilted his head, studying it. *“Yours is... regal. Aristocratic. I never really got into all that.”*

He shrugged. *“But the dedication and showmanship must be superb. Mother gave me formal clothes from the family vault.”*

Elmon nodded. *“You should wear them. This is a big deal—an entirely new building for the next chapter of the school’s growth.”*

He grinned. *“I quidnounced the scope. There’s an excursion hall with a ceremonial gate—ritual circle built right into the floor. The builders mentioned a lower level with rentable*

research rooms. Three practice chambers, each with beds, desks, and an alchemy bench. One even has padded walls—for reasons I can't begin to guess."

He paused, eyes gleaming. "There's also a brand-new clerical ward. A bathing tub set directly into the floor. Fancy shelving and a few things I couldn't identify. I was there when they finished the tub—the mason said the stone was imported from the Gales Quarry in northern Galishole. Boated all the way here."

Alfred raised a brow. "That would be transported by boat."

Elmon grinned. "My word meant the same thing as yours—mine just did it in one word instead of six. You're getting the hang of this pompous business after all."

They both laughed. "For Gremlins' sake," Alfred groaned, "don't tell anyone else."

The evening approached swiftly. The moon had risen—and it was full. It had been over a year and a half since the Ashtar Moon had circled back. Its cycle spanned 1248 days, the longest cycle of the three moons. And its Full phase—*rare and potent*—only occurs every: . . . "Let's see—459 days in a year, 1,248 in the cycle, twelve days at full, a six-year pause on odd centuries... carry the remainder..."

He nodded. "Five years, eleven months, and a few days." He paused, looked at Alfred. "When Ashtar reaches perigee. It becomes an Aris Moon—the Moon of Gifting." Alfred grimaced at the thought of remembering all of that.

Elmon nodded, "We just had a full moon of Es`ilo last week." Alfred sighed. "Days are moving fast. Six more months—No, four months, and Menuva will be full." He sighed. "Calendars cause issues. Next year is a Dual Gleam. We will be stuck in rooms until the weather stabilises."

### **Echo Hall Unveiled**

Elmon dressed carefully for the occasion, fastening the stately manor coat Christin had selected. The ceremonial Elvish Master's hat rested atop his head — chosen with precision and no small measure of her insistence.

He turned.

Alfred stood waiting, looking every bit a lord and magistrate.

Elmon raised a brow. "Well. You clean up rather dangerously."

Alfred pointed upward.

"The ferry," he said flatly. "It's sitting on the crown of your hat like an ornament."

Elmon stilled. Slowly, he removed the hat.

He turned it in his hands.

Nothing.

He looked back at Alfred. "You are seeing that ferry everywhere."

Alfred swallowed. "It was there. I saw it."

Elmon frowned.

"If it appears again," he said lightly, "I will have a word with it."

Alfred did not laugh.

*"You should release it," he said quietly. "Before it becomes attached."*

Elmon tilted his head. *"Attached?"*

*"They can claim people," Alfred continued. "Become... invested. They start playing tricks. Isolating. Turning moments sour. Not malicious, exactly. Just possessive."*

Elmon considered that.

*"I recall reading something similar," he admitted. "A bond left unattended can skew."*

He replaced the hat.

*"If it seeks ownership," he added dryly, "we shall renegotiate terms."*

Alfred eyed the hat. *"You say that like you believe you are in control."*

Elmon smiled. *"Aren't I?"*

A flicker of blue glimmered — just at the edge of Alfred's vision.

Gone.

Elmon extended his arm with exaggerated flourish. *"You ready to depart, my liege? The gathering awaits your arrival."*

Alfred curtsied, laughing despite himself. *"Yes, squirrel."*

Arm in arm, they made their way toward the unveiling.

The moon loomed overhead—so large it seemed it might brush the roof of Echo Hall itself.

Hundreds had gathered. Garek and more than a dozen of the city's peacekeepers were stationed throughout the grounds. The Chancellor stood at the fore with the faculty assembled nearby. Mistress Emwinster, the Master-at-Arms, and—unexpectedly—Elmon's parents were present.

Elmon slowed.

Even Master Heniss stood in silence, hands folded behind his back.

Something was about to happen.

As the moon fully crested, Mistress Emwinster rose and called the gathering to order, gesturing for all to take their seats upon the half-circular platforms.

She introduced herself formally, then signaled Alfred to join her.

*"Tomorrow," she announced, "he turns one hundred. Tonight, he is named the next noble of the House of Erillia."*

Cheers erupted—whistles, applause, and shouted wishes of grandeur echoing across the grounds.

When the noise settled, she continued.

*"We also unveil the name of this new hall—our first new structure in decades."* She turned toward the towering doors behind her. *"Echo Hall. A sanctum for study, ritual, and remembrance."*

She then introduced the newest member of the faculty. *"Master Micrium Ortis of the Noble House Goman. Of the Katchin Black-Clan. Son of Olmagda Ortis. Grandson of the first Orcish Magistrate sworn to guard the Elvish Sentinel Gates during the Red Scourge Wars."*

A murmur passed through the crowd.

*“His sister,”* Mistress Emwinster continued, *“gave her life defending the Dark Sanctum of Black Mountain Hold—standing beside the Dwarves during the Ildrol Incursions.”*

Silence followed. The respectful kind.

Elmon felt something above, looking up.

At that moment, four Black Orc Dragon Riders descended—two to each side of the staging grounds.

The wind bent beneath their wings.

*“These,”* Mistress Emwinster announced, *“are the last of his clan. Ogren. Bulnar. Ugnorgis. And Shoran—brother to Master Ortis.”*

A hush fell.

*“They come not as heralds of war, but as witnesses. To honor a man who devoted his life to academic mastery and humility. A man who helps young minds find their anchors—and envision their futures—regardless of race, nationality, or bloodline.”*

Mistress Emwinster’s voice rang clear across the grounds.

*“Becoming a wizard at this school is not a guarantee. Worth must be proven.”*

The air tightened.

*“Many of you may not know of the Ergis Ulrick Test.”*

Elmon stiffened—visibly shaken. Across the gathering, Master Ortis did the same.

*“We have among us a young man who resolved the test in ten minutes,”* she continued, her gaze sweeping the crowd. *“This was confirmed by Chancellor Emuroil himself.”*

A ripple moved through the audience.

*“I will not name him,”* she said firmly. *“This is not something he would want.”*

She paused, letting that truth settle.

*“Know this instead: this school builds mountains out of children. It stretches minds, tempers souls, and demands more than any other place in Galishole. There is a future here—but only for those who prove their virtue and their value to the peace of the world.”*

Applause broke like thunder. Cheers followed, rising in waves that echoed against Echo Hall’s stone.

Elmon did not move. The sound washed over him—but something deeper stirred beneath it.

Christin caught Elmon as he attempted to slip away before Mistress Emwinster had finished speaking. She leaned close, her voice barely audible.

*“I told her not to divulge who you were,”* she whispered. *“As did your father.”*

Before Elmon could respond, Mistress Emwinster raised her hands and invited everyone inside Echo Hall to view the new facility.

The tour was impressive—vaulted ceilings etched with sigil-work, ritual chambers woven seamlessly into the architecture, and corridors designed for both study and ceremony. But partway through the walk, something went terribly wrong.

Without warning, Micrium Ortis, Elmon Silverwood, Hormargi Melcat, and Elmin Whinsho froze.

The world *shifted*.

They saw it all at once—dead creatures clawing their way out of scorched earth, a burned-out structure collapsing behind them, ash falling like snow. The stench of ruin filled their senses. The vision was not distant or symbolic. It was immediate. Present.

They dropped to their knees as if struck.

Then—just as suddenly—it was gone.

Peacekeepers rushed forward, escorting them into the cool evening air while clerics and healers examined them. Reverend Mensor studied their faces carefully before speaking.

*“You look as though you’ve seen a ghost.”*

Micrium exhaled slowly. *“I have,”* he said. *“I do not yet know what they saw—but each of us described the same image. Dead creatures crawling from the ground of a ruined building.”*

The cleric paled. *“That does not happen,”* he said quietly. *“Five individuals sharing the same vision—simultaneously—on the same night.”*

Micrium’s gaze sharpened as he looked around. *“There are only four of us.”*

He turned toward a healer standing nearby.

*“And she saw it as well.”*

Their eyes met.

For a single breath—a heartbeat too long—Micrium saw something else staring back at him through her gaze. Something dead.

The healer flinched. *“What is it?”* she asked, unsettled.

*“I saw you,”* Micrium said slowly, *“as one of them. Just for a moment.”*

Her breath caught. She said nothing.

At that moment, Elmon’s parents emerged from the hall, followed by the Chancellor and several members of the faculty, all drawn by the disturbance. Reverend Mensor stepped forward, his voice calm, steady—anchoring the moment.

*“It appears they were overwhelmed by tonight’s revelations,”* he said diplomatically. He turned to Mistress Emwinster and inclined his head. *“Truly breathtaking—what you have brought forth this evening.”*

But beneath the courtesy, beneath the ceremony, something else lingered.

A warning.

An echo not yet understood.

### ***Echo Residue and the Vault Beneath***

The dragon riders stepped forward, voices low and certain. *“There is magic in that building.”*

Master Ortis inclined his head. *“Yes. Echo Hall — a sanctum of study. Part of the university’s wizardry chapter.”*

Shoran advanced a step, gauntleted hand resting on the haft of his axe. “No.”

His voice was firm. “*The stone in my axe glowed. Only for a moment — but it did. You know why.*”

Ortis stiffened.

“*That stone does not answer to wards or ritual circles,*” Shoran continued. “*It glows only when a summoning occurs — within the bearer’s sphere of sight.*”

Ortis’ thoughts sharpened.

That stone answered only to echo breaches, veil distortions, or vault-adjacent awakenings.

None had been sanctioned.

He straightened.

“*Thank you for your vigilance,*” Ortis said evenly. “*Tonight’s sights were... overwhelming. We will investigate fully.*”

Before Shoran could press further, hurried footsteps approached.

Mistress Elroo arrived, breath slightly elevated but composure immaculate.

“*I’ve been searching everywhere for you,*” she said warmly. “*Some of you were perhaps overwhelmed by the festivities — and by my enthusiastic introductions.*” A soft laugh. “*You deserve recognition.*”

Her gaze lingered on Ortis.

“*Master Ortis, before class tomorrow, I would value a brief word.*”

“*No trouble at all, Mistress Emwinster.*”

She waved dismissively. “*Elroo, please. I am a student here now.*”

As she departed, the night seemed to settle.

But not cleanly.

The echo had not faded.

A thin distortion rippled in the air a few paces from them — like heat over stone.

For a heartbeat, a silhouette resolved.

Slender. Angular. Wings — narrow, translucent, more suggestion than form.

Its limbs moved in precise, unfamiliar geometry.

Between its hands, a sigil ignited — blue, but not the blue of ferries.

Sharper. Layered.

The lines did not glow outward.

They folded inward.

Then both figure and sigil collapsed into nothing.

Shoran’s grip tightened.

Ortis did not blink.

“*Did you see—*” one of the riders began.

“Yes,” Ortis said quietly.

And whatever stirred beneath Echo Hall had already been noticed.

Early the next morning a knock sounded at the door.

Ortis did not answer immediately. He closed his eyes, extended his awareness, and listened—not with his ears, but with memory. A familiar echo signature answered, steady and unguarded.

He rose and opened the door.

“*Elmon,*” he said simply.

Elmon stepped inside, his face drawn, eyes shadowed by sleeplessness. “*What was that vision last night?*” he asked without preamble. “*I nearly couldn’t sleep.*”

Ortis returned to his desk but did not sit. He rested one hand on the tome as if anchoring himself.

“*It was not a shared dream,*” he said quietly. “*Nor a simple hallucination. It bore a structure. Location. Weight.*”

Elmon swallowed. “*Then it was real.*”

“*In the way memory can be real,*” Ortis replied. “*And in the way places remember what has been done within them.*”

He met Elmon’s gaze.

“*There may be a memory vault nearby,*” he said. “*Buried. Sealed. Or deliberately forgotten.*”

Elmon felt a chill crawl up his spine. “*Under Echo Hall?*”

Ortis did not answer immediately.

“*I need to research,*” he said at last. “*Confirm its presence. Locate its boundaries. If a vault is there—and awakened—then last night was not a warning.*”

He closed the tome with quiet finality. “*It was an introduction.*”

Elmon’s mood shifted suddenly—exhilaration flaring like a struck spark.

“*The giant,*” he said breathlessly. “*The door... ahh!*”

Ortis raised a hand at once, palm open, a calming gesture practiced and precise. “*Slowly,*” he said. “*Anchor yourself.*”

Elmon drew in a breath, then continued—more carefully now.

“*At the start of the school year, I was summoned to Master Heniss’s office. On the way, I passed the dining hall and saw a giant shifting massive stones—stones that concealed a metal-bound door leading underground.*” His brow furrowed as the memory sharpened. “*Two—no... three men descended through it, carrying lanterns and iron rods. I wanted to investigate, but I was already late for Heniss. I couldn’t risk it.*”

He paused, collecting himself.

“*As I continued through campus, I noticed cleanup crews everywhere. Storage rooms being emptied. Floors scrubbed. Walls repainted. It felt... deliberate.*”

Ortis’s expression did not change, but his attention deepened.

“I believe now,” Elmon went on, “that they were preparing space for the syllabus Master Heniss designed for me. I found references later—in an old archive book on the school’s history. Mentions of the Eckerin Vault. The Judge. The Citadel of Garis Noll.” He shook his head. “Nothing complete. Just fragments.”

He lifted his gaze to Ortis.

“So I returned to the library. I checked out *Histories and Grounds of Scathnard and the Queendel Province*—hoping to find what the first book would not say aloud.”

The room felt quieter when he finished, as though the sanctum itself were listening.

Ortis did not speak immediately.

At last, he said, very softly, “You have been circling this vault longer than you realize.”

Elmon opened his satchel and drew out *Histories and Grounds of Scathnard and the Queendel Province*.

“I’ve been researching this region,” he said quietly. “Looking for clues to what might lie beneath. I didn’t understand it then. But now... I believe this is the Vault you’re seeking.”

He opened the book to a marked page, a folded parchment still tucked between its leaves. “Here,” he said. “Under Sacred and Shunned.”

***The Citadel of Garis Noll once stood upon these grounds, long before Scathnard was raised from charter and stone. Eckorian, Judge of the Citadel, constructed chambers of torment and subterranean burial vaults to remove his enemies from public memory.***

***Among these structures was one referred to only as the Vault of Treasures. No surviving record names its contents. At one time, more than one hundred bodies were discovered in an adjacent burial vault. During the investigation, a sealed wall was identified—its construction ritual in nature. When the wall was breached, those present were met by hostile manifestations: a Wight, several Zombies, and a headless entity of unknown origin.***

***The undead were destroyed.***

***The chamber was sealed again—not by decree, but by grief and horror. Sacred stone sheets were laid and anchored with earthen bindings. The chamber was never fully explored. Its mysteries remain untouched. Its echoes unresolved.***

There was a map on another page—etched with chamber markings, corridors, and sealed vault symbols.

Ortis placed his hand over Elmon’s, his fingers tightening slightly as he read the passage aloud. His eyes narrowed.

“The Citadel of Garis Noll... Eckorian the Judge...”

He exhaled slowly. “This is no mere vault. It is a wound—stitched shut with stone and silence.”

He closed the book with care, as though afraid the echoes within might stir.

“Elmon, what you witnessed at the beginning of the year—the giant, the metal-bound door—was no coincidence. That was the first breath of something long buried. And now, with the convergence, it has stirred again.”

He crossed to the window, his gaze settling on Echo Hall.

“They named it a Vault of Treasures,” he said softly. “But treasure to whom—and for what? Torture chambers. Burial vaults. Forbidden rooms. This was never a place of wealth. It was a place of concealment. Of shame.”

He turned back to Elmon, his voice low, measured.  
*“If the convergence triggered a memory echo from that vault, then its bindings may be weakening. And if it was sealed in grief and horror... it was not only to protect the living.”*

He placed a firm hand on Elmon’s shoulder. Not heavy. Not possessive. Certain.  
*“You did well to bring this forward. I will speak with Mistress Emwinster. We may need to form a research circle—quietly. No announcements. No rites. Only truth.”*

Then, almost to himself, Ortis added:

*“The Vault remembers. And now... so must we.”*

### **The Map and the Chancellor**

Elmon studied the page in silence, then spoke with sudden clarity. *“I need a map of the current school grounds.”*

He turned several pages, revealing the detailed vault diagram to Ortis. *“If we overlay the present campus atop this map, we may understand why the disturbance occurred at Echo Hall—and what else might be lurking beneath.”*

Elmon looked up. *“You may need to speak with the Chancellor.”*

Ortis did not answer immediately.

At last, he said, *“I venture the Chancellor already knows. This is not something that could be hidden from him.”* Then, after a long pause, his tone shifted.

*“You are right, Elmon. He may know of the Vault’s existence—but not its stirring. Knowledge is not comprehension. And silence is not safety.”*

He crossed to his desk and retrieved a sealed scroll bearing the sigil of the Faculty Council. *“I will request an audience. But not alone.”*

He turned back to Elmon. *“We will need Cleric Mensor. Yourself. And Mistress Emwinster.”*

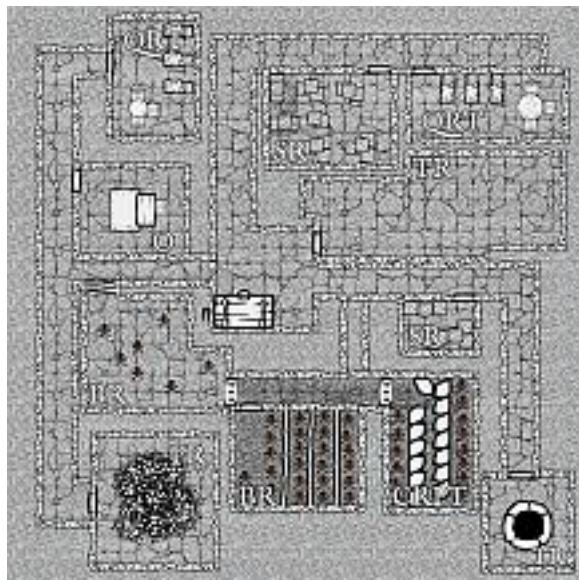
Ortis hesitated only a moment before adding, *“I will also choose others—those attuned to echo harmonics, dream inscription, and vault theory.”*

Elmon’s eyes widened. *“You mean to form a circle?”*

Ortis nodded once. *“Not merely a circle. A sanctum. A place where truth is studied—not feared. Where students learn not only how to cast... but how to remember.”*

He returned his attention to the map, tracing invisible lines through the air above it. *“The five individuals who experienced the vision were not random. Each stood at a precise point—together forming a sigil, a circle, a glyph. That alignment triggered an Echo summoning.”*

He straightened, voice measured but unmistakably charged. *“We experienced an Echo convergence. Until proven otherwise, I must assume this was no accident. The odds of such alignment occurring by whim or chance are... remarkable.”*



A faint smile touched his lips—equal parts curiosity and concern. “*Perhaps,*” he said quietly, “*an interesting field trip for the class this week.*”

Mistress Emwinster approached the open doorway and knocked softly against the frame. Both men turned. Elmon bowed without thinking.

Mistress Elroo smiled gently. “*No need for that, Elmon. I’m here as a student—remember?*”

She turned to Ortis. “*May I have a word with you privately?*”

Ortis studied her a moment. “*Is this about what you sensed last night?*”

She hesitated, glanced at Elmon, then back to Ortis. “*Should we discuss this... openly?*”

Ortis answered without pause. “*There is nothing to hide from this young Magus.*”

Her eyes widened as she looked at Elmon anew. “*Really?*”

Ortis inclined his head. “*What is it, Mistress Emwinster?*”

Elroo drew a slow breath. “*Last night, while walking the building, I felt a rupture—a voided cascade across my mind. Something collapsed inward. What overwhelmed your sight?*”

Elmon answered plainly, without embellishment. “*We believe it was an Echo convergence. We saw dead creatures crawling from the ruins of a burned-out structure. Master Ortis suspects—until proven otherwise—that a dormant memory vault lies beneath the grounds. Five individuals, positioned precisely, may have formed an unintentional sigil. An integrated response. An Echo summoning.*”

Ortis nodded once. “*Excellent, Elmon. He is correct, Mistress Elroo.*”

Her gaze sharpened as she studied him. “*You grasp this with remarkable clarity—for one so young.*”

Voices echoed faintly from the adjoining room as students began to gather. Elmon lifted a hand. The door closed with a quiet hum.

Elroo inclined her head. “*Thank you, Elmon.*”

Ortis folded his hands behind his back. “*I must investigate further—determine what truly lies beneath us. For now, this is a time for remembering.*”

He turned his eyes toward the stone beneath their feet. “*But soon,*” he said quietly, “*it must become a time for reckoning. The Vault has whispered. And we must decide whether we will listen... or descend.*”

## Chapter †: The Trials of the Mind

The school year began smoothly.

Spring came to Scathnard with a deceptive gentleness — thawing stone, lengthening light, voices drifting open through high windows.

But the Month of Witches had arrived.

And with it, a Dual Gleam.

Before the month ended, both Menuva and Es'ilo would stand full in the sky — Memory and Secrets crowned together.

It had been more than forty years since such a convergence had been witnessed here.

Old professors spoke of the last Dual Gleam in lowered tones.

Records from that season were... incomplete.

And beneath Echo Hall, something had already begun to stir.

Elmon threw himself into Toreaz and into a newly introduced tongue — Zelca.

The librarian had presented it almost as an academic curiosity. Zelca was dense with fractured manuscripts, a language of magic and planetary presidencies — governance not of kingdoms, but of celestial order. It had been preserved by a survivor of Norister, before that continent was shattered by a meteor and swallowed by the sea.

When Elmon asked Master Ortis whether he knew the tongue, Ortis paused.

*“I have heard of it,”* he said. *“Nothing more.”*

The answer lingered longer than the words.

During the early weeks of the month, a detachment of Dwarves arrived and established themselves in the southern court beyond Scathnard's walls.

A few days later, a band of Brown Orcs followed.

They did not disperse into the city.

They positioned.

Soon after, a contingent of Human Paladins gathered just south of them.

Officially, it was for the Feast of the Moon.

This year's celebration would include an elaborate reenactment of the Battle of Scathnard — the siege in which the Red Orcs leveled the Citadel.

The fanfare was extensive. Tents rose. Siege constructs were assembled. Citizens dressed the streets. The school granted a two-day reprieve so students might witness the recreation.

Yet the scale of preparation felt excessive.

Even Master Ortis seemed distracted.

Some among the faculty had been children when the Citadel fell. They did not speak of that year lightly.

Conversation disrupted every class.

The library overflowed with students chasing battle records, casualty lists, campaign maps.

Memory was being rehearsed publicly.

In Ritual Cadence, they revisited celestial communion and soul-binding — disciplines meant to keep echoes from fading into abstraction.

Elmon ensured his Ornicus rested against his neck.

He performed each movement precisely.

Nothing stirred.

Not through process.

Not through invocation.

Not through structured ritual.

And that silence felt heavier than disturbance would have.

Elmon breathed easily. Confidence bloomed.

No mishaps.

Maria kept asking questions of what kind of rituals were present during the siege.

Not yet.

To Entic, the fanfare grated.

He had earned his place at Scathnard — coin by coin, contract by contract. Every hour of instruction cost something tangible. The reenactments, the banners, the indulgent recollections of past glory — all of it felt like interference.

He had not come to witness history.

He had come to master it.

On to Master Ortis's class.

They performed and verified their echoes — foundational rites of remembrance and resonance. Each student mapped their emotional axis, tracing where memory anchored and where it fractured.

It was a discipline Elmon excelled at.

Too well, perhaps.

Entic remained silent through most of it, posture rigid, attention unbroken.

Until Jurioam raised his hand.

*“Master Ortis,”* he began, *“what forms of Echo studies were known during the Siege years?”*

A ripple of murmurs followed.

Ortis paused.

Before he could answer, Entic spoke.

*“We do not need you sidelining the instruction,”* he said sharply. *“We are here to learn the structure — not chase diversions.”*

The room stilled.

Entic's jaw tightened.

He had not raised his voice. But the edge in it cut cleanly.

During the axis ritual, Elmon's sphere pulsed white—then opened a gate.

Not to memory.



## **A Visitation**

To the Faey realm. When it opened a ring of ferries marked the edge of the gate, joined by Elmon's summoned ferry.

He stepped through—briefly—into a world of rhythm and light.

Time bent. Time breathed.

The ferries followed. Crystal trees shimmered as though grown from song itself.

A great white dragon stood before him.

Its presence immense—its gaze ancient and discerning, sharp enough to cleave a man in half without ever moving.

*"You are not in time yet,"* it said.

*"Return."*

He heard a song then—one that seemed to know him.

And he was back.

Shaken. Changed. The gate closed.

Micrium said only, *"The Faey do not open for students. They open for echoes."*

Elmon stood in the ritual circle, wide-eyed. Ortis studied him—eyes narrowed, already dissecting the event.

*"Are you... Alright?"* Ortis asked. *"What did you see?"*

*"A white dragon,"* Elmon said, voice unsteady. *"It stood and looked at me—with an intensity I can't explain. I—I—"* He swallowed. *"It said, 'You are not in time yet. Return.' There was singing. Echoing. And then I was here."* A dozen ferries marking the gate.

Ortis escorted Elmon back to his seat and pressed a glass into his hand. *"Drink,"* he said softly. *"Breathe. You are all right."*

Elmon obeyed. The liquid was cool, grounding. Ortis studied him for a brief moment—measured, searching—then turned and returned to the class as if nothing extraordinary had occurred.

The remaining students completed their rituals. There were no disturbances. No flares. No gates. Just the steady cadence of instruction.

Elmon remained seated long after the others finished, his hands wrapped around the glass, his thoughts still unsteady.

When the room had mostly emptied, Master Ortis returned to him.

*"What were you concentrating on?"* Ortis asked.

Elmon swallowed, then answered carefully. *"I was calm. Measured. Breathing freely."* He lifted his eyes. *"I was focusing on my nature—my heart—my understanding of myself."*

Ortis nodded once. *"And then?"*

Elmon hesitated. *“Then I heard something. A spark.”* His brow furrowed. *“It drew me in. The portal opened, and I stepped through instinctively—like I had done it a thousand times before.”*

He paused, his voice dropping. *“But for a moment... I felt wrong.”*

Master Ortis inclined his head. *“We will investigate this—together, and to your understanding. For now, go. Get some rest.”*

Elmon rose, still unsettled, and made his way from the classroom. He looked around for ferries as he exited the class boundaries.

Ortis lingered at the threshold, watching him disappear down the corridor. When the last echo of footsteps faded, he closed the door and rested his palm against the sigil etched into its surface. He leaned close and whispered—a phrase not meant for ears, but for memory.

The sanctum received him in silence.

He moved through his private library, eyes skimming ancient headings etched into spines older than the school itself. He selected a tome, laid it upon the desk, then paced again—his thoughts circling echoes drawn from scrolls, ledgers, and manuscripts long untouched.

At last, he chose several volumes and sat.

He read.

He chanted.

He remembered.

From a hidden drawer beneath his desk, Ortis retrieved a small black ledger—its cover sealed with gate glyphs and layered binding sigils. He performed the Rite of Privilege before opening it, each motion deliberate, exacting.

He pored over its contents, adding notes in a precise hand. When finished, he recorded an echo of precedence—anchoring the moment for a reckoning yet to come.

Ortis leaned back in his chair.

Years of study passed through him. Faces of students. Failures. Triumphs. Losses. Discoveries. And now—this.

“I have never encountered a student of such caliber,” Ortis murmured, the words barely breath, “nor of such mystery.”

He closed the ledger slowly.

A faint blue glow touched the page. A ferry stood upon the leather cover — small, luminous, utterly still.

Ortis did not move. The air did not stir.

In his mind, words formed — not spoken, not heard, but impressed.

**He is called.**

The ferry’s glow pulsed once. Then it vanished.

Ortis remained seated, fingers resting lightly upon the ledger.

*He is called?*

Called by whom?

For what?

From where?

A ferry did not declare such things lightly.

*“He will require all of me,”* Ortis whispered. *“To comprehend. To guide.”*

Silence pressed inward.

*“What is he?”*

A longer pause.

*“Why is he?”*

His gaze drifted to the sigil-marked door across the chamber.

Memory stirred.

The winged silhouette during the unveiling.

The inward-folding sigil.

He reopened the ledger and sketched the pattern from memory.

Hours later, cross-referencing his own volumes, he found it.

### **Shadow of Memory.**

A rare sigil — designed not to preserve memory, but to shield it. To bar shadow from corrupting present recollection.

Why had it manifested during Echo Hall’s opening?

And why near Elmon?

*“And what becomes,”* Ortis murmured, *“of those who stand too close to the called?”*

He rose.

Taking the black ledger, he descended to the great metal-bound door beneath the sanctum.

He knelt before it — not in fear, but in reverence.

One by one, he placed his hand over each glyph.

He did not press.

He listened.

The metal hummed faintly.

He recorded impressions without interpretation.

The Vault did not answer.

But it was not silent.

He rose and sprinkled a fine white silken powder across the door’s surface, each grain a whispered intention.

He chanted.

He mourned.

He whispered.

He sang softly—echoing a grief that was not his own.

Then he heard it.

A still, small voice. Clear. Distinct. Carrying a weight he had never known.

*“Hear me, Micrium Ortis. This is hallowed ground. Beneath lies the sorrow of a thousand souls—a fracture of morality and song.”*

A pause of defining silence.

*“You must cleanse it. Before its reckoning.”*

Ortis’s soul trembled. He paused in reverence.

*“Who am I,”* he whispered, *“that you should call me? Who are you?”*

He held his peace.

And the voice returned.

*“I am eternal. I am the heart of creation. I am all-consuming. I am.”*

Ortis bowed to the stone, fear unmaking him—yet not destroying him.

The voice continued, neither loud nor gentle, but absolute.

*“Elmon is my calling to this age. He is the heart of the called—the stone of strength in a world that has lost its way.”*

Ortis did not lift his head.

*“You will lead him.”*

Ortis remained silent for a long time. He knew—no other words would come.

He looked around. A faint glow shimmered in the air—like a sword and a halo intertwined. Then it vanished.

He felt peace, not fear.

Gathering himself, Ortis returned to his Sanctum. There, he began the work that could not be delayed.

He recorded all that had occurred into Echo—so the memory would not fade or distort. He bound it into Weave—so the event would take its rightful place in the order of things. And he sealed it with Spell Call—so it could be named, answered, and never denied.

When the record was complete, Ortis composed a letter—not of ink, but of meaning. He set it upon a veilwind memory, folding thought and intent into motion, and released it to its calling—wherever duty required it to arrive.

Ortis walked slowly afterward, his steps measured, his mind heavy with consequence. He was no theologian. No cleric. No arbiter of divine truth.

Yet something had spoken.

And it had chosen him to listen.

Ortis stepped into the shrine at the far edge of the campus. He paused beneath the vaulted ceiling, studying the architecture—the way the arches lifted the eye, the careful symmetry of stone and silence. Statues lined the walls, their faces worn by centuries of devotion. Runes traced the pillars, not shouting their meaning, but *holding it*.

Mensor was there, sweeping the floor with slow, deliberate strokes, tending the altar and the alcoves as though each were a living thing. When he noticed Ortis standing so still, so intent, he set the broom aside and approached.

*“Investigating the other side?”* Mensor asked gently.

Ortis did not smile. He looked... displaced. As though his thoughts were not entirely his own.

*“What troubles you?”* Mensor continued. *“Has the weight of academia finally tired your heart—or your purpose?”*

Ortis turned to him, eyes unsettled. *“I believe,”* he said carefully, *“that I was visited by your God tonight.”*

Mensor stilled. *“My God?”*

*“There was a presence,”* Ortis said, searching for words. *“A sword of light—intertwined with a halo. It spoke.”*

Mensor studied him closely. He had seen zealots, liars, dreamers, and madmen. Ortis was none of those. What he saw now was a soul *touched*—not inflamed, not broken, but irrevocably altered.

*“What did He say?”* Mensor exhaled slowly.

*“And what did you ask?”* he prompted.

*“I asked why,”* Ortis said. *“I asked: Who am I, that you should call me? And I asked—Who are you?”*

Ortis swallowed.

*“He said: I am eternal. I am the heart of creation. I am all-consuming. I am.”*

The words settled between them like falling ash.

*“And then,”* Ortis continued, voice low, *“He charged me with a duty.”*

He closed his eyes, recalling the echo as it had been spoken.

***Elmon is my calling to this age. He is the heart of the called—the stone of strength in a world that has lost its way. You will lead him.***

He opened his eyes again, troubled not by fear... but by meaning.

Mensor remained unsettled.

*“I have only heard of one other,”* he said slowly, *“who claimed to hear the Great Whiteheart speak—clearly, unmistakably.”*

Ortis listened, unmoving.

*“It was a cleric of the Silverhand Monastery,”* Mensor continued. *“He was charged with a duty much like yours—not comfort, not blessing, but descent. He was sent to seek the Sanctuary of the Dark Eye.”*

Mensor’s voice hardened at the name.

*“A pagan sect. They believed the drinking of their enemies’ blood granted strength and victory. The cleric did not go with sword or flame—he went with conviction. He converted many to the Whiteheart’s way.”*

He paused.

*“But not all.”*

Mensor’s gaze dropped.

*“Those who resisted performed a summoning. They believed they were calling their god. What answered them was a demon.”*

Ortis felt a familiar chill—recognition without fear.

*“The cleric fought it,”* Mensor said quietly. *“He was slain. They laughed. They danced upon his body.”*

Silence stretched between them. *“And then,”* Mensor whispered, *“he rose.”*

Ortis’s breath caught.

*“He stood among them, bloodied and broken, and pronounced a curse—not in rage, but in judgment. Then he vanished. No body was ever found.”*

Mensor looked up at Ortis, eyes searching.

*“That is the only other time I know of where a mortal claimed the Whiteheart spoke—and charged them with purpose.”*

Ortis exhaled slowly.

*“I remember this,”* he said. *“I encountered the account while researching the Ildrol Curse. I found it in a small, half-forgotten tome.”*

Mensor raised an eyebrow.

*“Which tome?”*

*“The Tome of Whiteheart,”* Ortis replied. *“It read like a creation myth. Interesting—but at the time, I dismissed it as devotional narrative. Nothing academic. Nothing actionable.”*

He looked back toward the shrine’s altar.

*“...I no longer believe that was correct.”*

Mensor watched Ortis for a long moment, then asked softly, with genuine compassion,

*“So... what will you do?”*

Ortis did not answer at once.

*“What I have wrestled with all day,”* he said finally. *“How do I best support Elmon’s growth? Not merely as an instructor—but as a friend, a mentor... perhaps even as a follower.”*

The word lingered between them.

*“He is extraordinary,”* Ortis continued. *“But I do not yet understand the charge I was given. What do you think the Whiteheart meant when it said, ‘He is the heart of the called?’”*

Mensor closed his eyes briefly—not in performance, but in habit. A quiet prayer, unspoken, passed through him. When he opened them, his voice was steady.

*“I do not think it means Elmon is the greatest among them,”* he said. *“Nor the loudest. Nor even the first.”*

Ortis listened closely.

*“I believe it means this,” Mensor went on. “That there are others who will be called—some already are. But a calling alone is not enough. Callings scatter. They conflict. They burn themselves out.”*

He gestured faintly, as if indicating unseen threads.

*“A heart gives rhythm. Direction. Meaning. It does not command the body—it sustains it.”*

Mensor met Ortis’s eyes.

*“Elmon may not be the destination. He may be the center. The one around whom others gather. The one who reminds them why they were called when the cost becomes too heavy.”*

He exhaled slowly.

*“Something is coming, Micrium. I do not know its shape. But I believe lives like Elmon’s exist not for themselves alone—but so others may endure what is coming without losing themselves.”*

Mensor was frank with Ortis—gentle, but unflinching.

*“If you walk this path,” he said, “there will be further presentations. Perhaps not from Whiteheart directly, but from those who follow him. Encounters that feel strange. Eerie. Out of sequence. Things that will not make sense when they arrive.”*

Ortis did not interrupt.

*“You are becoming,” Mensor continued carefully, “a vessel—not emptied, but inhabited. As I am. Not possessed. Not overridden. Used only insofar as you consent to remain open.”*

Ortis met his gaze, steady and firm.

*“I did not ask for this,” he said. “I spent my life building hope into others. Training minds in sorcery, echoes, mystic disciplines. Teaching structure. Meaning. What am I to do with all of that now?”*

Mensor smiled—not dismissively, but with warmth.

*“The same thing you are already doing,” he replied. “He did not ask you to abandon your calling, nor flee to some distant field to raise goats and contemplate clouds.”*

He gave a small, quiet chuckle.

*“We are called where we are. Always have been. The moments we stand in are not accidents—even when we do not recognize them as such. Even when we resist them.”*

His expression softened.

*“You may ignore it if you wish. That choice remains yours. But I sense you already understand the gravity of this—of Elmon Silverwood. You would not be wrestling with it otherwise.”*

Mensor’s voice lowered, almost fond.

*“Faith does not replace what we are. It reveals why we were shaped that way to begin with.”*

Ortis thanked Mensor for his time and his candor. He rose and moved toward the exit, then paused at the threshold.

His gaze returned to the great sword statue—its blade upright, crowned by a halo of stone and light.

For the first time, he truly *saw* the inscription at its base—words he had somehow overlooked, though they had always been there:

**“I called. Will you answer? Will you serve?”**

They did not sound in his mind alone. They pressed into his chest. Deeper still—into the quiet sensing of the heart, where thought gives way to knowing.

A flicker of grounding settled over him—fragile, but real.

And yet, uncertainty coiled beneath it, leaving his thoughts restless, circling a single question:

*Was it real?*

Had he touched a dream?

A forbidden echo?

Or the divine itself?

Ortis did not answer the inscription.

Not yet.

But he did not turn away from it either.

He struggled all the way to his quarters, each step heavy with thought.

Once inside, he lay upon his bed, eyes tracing the ceiling, the walls, his hands, and the scattered tomes that had once felt certain—anchors of reason now loosened.

He spoke aloud, softly—half to himself, half to the listening silence.

*“Alright, Ortis,”* he murmured. *“You’ve just experienced a severe cognitive compression. What would you normally do?”*

The answer came by ritual instinct.

*“I would seek the echoes again—for placement, relevance, and pattern.*

*I would examine postils, annotate frameworks, trace glyphs, and test for rudimentary memory... or Echo bleed.”*

As he traced the sequence in his mind, the events of the day returned—not as memories, but as echoes. Overlapping. Resonant. Unsettled.

And the inscription at the shrine remained.

**I called. Will you answer?**

It lingered—not as a command, but as a suspended inquiry. Sacred. Patient. Unrelenting.

His eyes grew heavy.

Sleep came—not as escape, but as mercy. A veil drawn gently across the compression of his soul.

Ortis was awakened by a knock at his door.

Sunlight streamed through the open curtains, casting long beams across his quarters—too bright, too ordinary for the weight that still lingered in his chest. He opened his eyes, rose slowly, and straightened his robes by habit rather than thought.

As he approached the door, he extended his awareness—subtle, practiced—testing the threshold for a familiar echo.

There was none.

No resonance. No imprint. No disturbance.

He opened the door.

Chancellor Emuroil stood solemnly in the hallway. At the sight of Ortis's expression, he began to speak at once.

*"I dismissed your morning class," he said. "Elmon was giving a dissertation on fundamental Cadences observed across cultures. I've received word about the vault theories—from both him and Mistress Emwinster. Do you truly believe it could be dangerous? Titans skirmish in my head."*

Ortis met his gaze—steady, unflinching.

*"I was studying the glyphs and the sealed door last night," he said. "What I encountered was not theory. It was revelation. There is more than danger here, Chancellor. This place must be cleansed—before a reckoning occurs."*

He stepped aside and gestured toward the window.

*"At the ceremonial unveiling of Echo Hall, we triggered an Echo Convergence. Something beneath us stirred. The vault is awake—and we do not know what lies within. If it is not set right... the dead may rise."*

Emuroil stiffened. *"You saw the dead rise? Then I should summon the Holy Hands and have the hellhole purged."*

Ortis raised a calming hand.

*"No. This is not merely a threat—it is an opportunity. Rare. Sacred."*

The Chancellor frowned. *"If word of this spreads—if it hasn't already—this academy could be shut down."*

*"Then let us be deliberate," Ortis replied. "Invite the Holy Hands—not to destroy, but to guide."*

He continued, voice precise.

*"We are dealing with echoes, broken tethers, fractured threads—cracked souls and memories that bleed into the present. Elmon's research confirms that Wights and Zombies once dwelled in that vault. If anything remains—and escapes into the city—what do you think will follow?"*

He paused, letting the question settle.

*"We open the chamber. Cleanse every room. Then we bring third-year and advanced students into the vaults—under supervision—for emotional axis mapping, Echo retrieval, and thread readings for beginnings. The experience alone would rival the Shadow Tower of Curns Hollow."*

His tone softened—just enough.

*"It would be a feather in your cap, Chancellor. And it would allow me to guide these extraordinary students into true sanctum work."*

The Chancellor said nothing.

But Ortis saw it—the hesitation, the fear... and the quiet tremor of assent behind his eyes.

The day of the reenactment arrived.

Thousands gathered in the southern court.

Many of the Brown Orcs were painted red for the display — their skin gleaming beneath banners and sun. A dozen Fili moved about the field, setting markers, coordinating formations, guiding bands of men-at-arms into position.

By mid-day, the charge began.

One hundred “Red Orcs” advanced along the outer perimeter. The Dwarves responded with disciplined fury — the clash of wood and shield ringing loud across the court.

For nearly an hour the field roared with controlled violence.

One by one, Dwarves were sanctioned as fallen and withdrew.

The Paladins entered next.

Some were dressed as mystics — casting staged fireballs that burst in bright spectacle above the fray.

The crowd cheered.

Then—

A roar tore across the southern court.

It was not staged.

The sound struck the body more than the ear.

Almost everyone dropped to the ground in terror.

The actors hesitated.

Then instinct took over.

Orc, Paladin, and Dwarf formed a defensive ring — no longer performing.

Searching.

At the far edge of Marister Farm — abandoned since the Citadel fell — the earth convulsed.

The ground ruptured.

Soil and stone erupted outward.

Something enormous clawed its way into daylight.

Black-skinned.

Horned — not two, but a crown of them circling its head.

Its voice was not language. It was desecration. The Paladins stepped forward.

This was no part of the script. Holy sigils flared — not theatrical this time.

The creature charged.

Fire burst from fissures in the ground as skeletal forms clawed upward from the old battlefield soil.

The Dwarves did not retreat. They engaged. Steel met bone. Hammer met horn.

The creature seemed... disoriented. As if it had not expected resistance.

As if it had expected memory — not men.

The painted Red Orcs surged forward with a cry that was half battle, half ancestral rage.

Blades bit deep. The horned creature staggered.

Then, under a coordinated strike of paladin blade and dwarven hammer—and Orc Blade it fell.

A heartbeat later—

It was gone.

No body.

No ash.

No residue.

Only scorched earth.

The crowd hesitated.

Then — uncertain laughter.

Then cheers.

Only one man lay injured. None dead.

And no one agreed on whether what they had seen was part of the reenactment.

## Chapter ○: The Rehearsal

In the months following the reenactment, unease lingered.

The sudden rising of a horn-crowned beast and the awakening of battlefield dead could not be dismissed as spectacle.

Archives were opened. Battle records were reexamined. Sanctum logs were reviewed.

The southern court, the records revealed, had once been overrun by black-skinned beasts — driven forward under the command of the Red Orcs during the fall of the Citadel.

Perhaps that explained the creature's confusion.

It had emerged expecting command.

Instead, it found resistance.

Red Orcs charging — not directing.

The skeletons were easier to account for. They were the buried dead of that old war.

But no archive — military, arcane, or theological — mentioned a black-crowned demon.

Not one.

The horns described in older texts were singular. Twinned. Or spiraled.

Never crowned.

*So what had risen?*

*Something once conjured and buried?*

*Something that slept beneath the field?*

Or something bleeding upward from the Vault beneath Echo Hall?

That possibility was not written.

But it was considered.

For many, instruction became refuge.

It was the month of White. The closing of the year. The season of the Solstice was approaching.

Classes filled quickly. Students babbled through corridors, recounting what they had seen, arguing whether it had been real or staged.

In Ritual Cadence, Ortis raised a hand.

The room quieted.

Class began.

The day was full — lectures, mapping exercises, quiet administrative sorting.

Yet beneath the routine, unrest persisted.

For the past week, Ortis had been studying from the ledgers Elmon had uncovered — veiled documents sealed to most, but accessible to those willing to search beyond sanctioned paths.

It was a dangerous time to pry.

The echoes were not settled.

## ***Holy Invocation***

And something had begun to answer.

The inscription at the shrine—*I called, Will you answer?*—had taken root in his mind. It pressed against his echo, forming a refrain he did not recognize, yet could not ignore. Forgotten tones returned. Old breathings. Fragments of an age buried beneath silence.

Ortis sat heavily in his chair in late afternoon while outside snow fluttered lazily over the campus.

He recalled deep memories of a time he had almost forgotten—echoes buried beneath Candlekeep.

A response had come to the letter he had sent by veilwind memory. He opened it slowly, studying its resonance, hoping for clarity and fearing what it might awaken.

Ortis stood at the edge of the sanctum, the missive from Bareck still open beside him. The words stirred something older than memory—something buried beneath the siege at Candlekeep, fifty years past.

He had been younger then—a scholar of Echoes and soul residue—deep in study of the *Manuscript of Unmaking*.

The siege had come like a shadow tide—led by a Lich whose name was never spoken, only felt. The dead did not march. They whispered. They bled into the walls. They echoed through the minds of the living.

Ortis had traced their movements not by footfall, but by emotional distortion. He remembered the way the air bent around grief, how the chapel bells rang with a tone that did not belong to metal.

He had seen a child's memory reanimated in the body of a corpse.

He had watched a Paladin fall—not to blade, but to a scream that shattered his tether.

He had written then, in the margins of the Manuscript:

*“The undead do not rise from death. They rise from distortion. From memory twisted, from threads unspooled. They are not enemies of life—only of truth.”*

Now, decades later, Ortis felt the same distortion stirring beneath the Vault. The same convergence. The same dread.

He closed Bareck's missive and whispered to the silence:

*“I know these creatures. I have studied their Echoes. I have felt their grief. And I will not let them rise again.”*

His mind turned to Elmon—unbidden. Why this time? This place? These events? Why him?

Why the inscription etched into his soul: *“I called. Will you answer?”*

He fell back into his chair. Closed his eyes. And from the depths of his being, a soulbound echo rose—resonant, unwavering, sacred:

“YES.”

Ortis's body felt relaxed—unnaturally so—as if a thousand echoes had slipped free of him, leaving only stillness behind.

Then came the voice—not a command, but a question. A whisper, ancient and intimate:  
*“Will you remember what you were before you taught?”*

He awoke, blinking into the quiet of his room.

*“What?”* he murmured, breath catching.

A deep inhale. Exhale.

*“I did not change,”* he said aloud. *“I chose the path of knowledge... and intuition.”*

Memories stirred—of standing at a crossroads in his life. Two paths laid bare: Candlekeep or the Sovereign’s School. He had weighed them carefully. Counted the costs. Felt the pull.

Candlekeep was his true call.

And so he went—his future unfurling like a scroll. Candlekeep had been an expanse of all he knew at the time. Vast. Deep. Alive with new concepts and quiet ideologies.

Echoes.

Veils.

Whimsical tones of memory.

His heart pounded as he remembered the pounding at the wall—hundreds of undead clawing at the gates. Candlekeep had been under siege.

And on the hillside, beneath a moon choked in shadow, something laughed.

Not loud.

Knowing.

Those were terrible days—memories he would have chosen to forget, had they not followed him so faithfully.

After the siege, Ortis fled Candlekeep. He traveled to Eurpoiasal, to the Sovereign’s School—newly renamed Shadow Keep. An isolated island, three leagues from the mainland.

There, he studied the undead.

And theology.

He learned of the Sovereign Creator. Of creation’s fractures. Of truths that did not heal, only exposed.

He remembered something read. The darkness rises when fury reigns.

At last, he slammed his mind shut—and wept.

In time, he returned to Candlekeep to complete his training as an Echomancer. Later still, to Cuortain Tower, where he learned Sorcery and the metaphysical worlds.

Yet now—standing in the wake of the Vault—his whole being twisted out of alignment.

Memories surged.

Choosing.

Fighting.

Doubting.

Every fiber of his soul ached with the question he could no longer silence:

*“What was wrong with my choices?”*

The room pulsed with silence.

Then—

A pounding knock at the door. Not polite. Not patient. A summons.

Eyes stained with tears, Ortis rose and flung the door wide.

### ***Vows Inscribed***

Mensor stood there, framed by shadow and morning light.

*“You called,”* he said. *“What is it?”*

His voice softened as he saw Ortis—not broken, but unraveling. Turned inward. Wrestling echoes that were not curses, but consequences.

Mensor stepped forward—not as a friend, but as a witness—and closed the door behind him.

*“You’re not being punished,”* he said quietly. *“You’re being remembered.”*

*“Why?”* Ortis shouted.

Mensor touched his shoulder. And with words that surprised even him, he spoke:

*“Why not? It was your life. Your path. Nothing stole you from it. Those choices shaped you—and they still do. Nothing was lost. Only gathered.”*

Mensor drew a sharp breath, puzzled, eyes widening. *“Where did that come from?”*

Ortis met his gaze, gratitude settling where fear had been.

*“You’re right,”* he said softly. *“Nothing is lost. I chose this path. And it led me here—to teach, to train, and to set right what was left undone.”*

*Now.*

*For such a time.”*

He paused. A reckoning stirred within him—not punishment, but internal mischief, the kind that twists truth into doubt and hides purpose behind regret.

Ortis turned to his desk. The sanctum was quiet.

He performed the Ritual of Privilege—hands steady, breath deep.

He opened his Personal Ledger. And inscribed:

*I, Ortis of Cuortain Tower, Keeper of Echoes and Witness to the Vault, do vow this day—beneath memory and moonlight:*

*To honor the path I chose, not as something misplaced, but as something given.*

*To teach not only what I know, but what I have endured.*

*To answer the call etched into my soul—“I called. Will you answer?”—with a resounding yes. Not once, but always.*

*To guide those who walk the sanctum halls through distortion, through dread, and into truth.*

*To face the undead not as monsters, but as echoes of what was broken. To mend what can be mended, burn what must be burned, and remember what must not be forgotten.*

*For such a time as this, I am not undone. I am inscribed.*

Elmon tapped on Ortis's door with his secret rhythm knock.

*"Enter, my friend,"* Ortis called.

Inside, Mensor sat in the study chair, fingers tracing the rich leather, admiring the sigils and softly glowing glyphs etched into its frame.

Elmon stepped in, closed the door, and paused when he noticed him.

*"I can come back later,"* Elmon said. *"I didn't know you had a guest."*

*"No,"* Ortis replied, leaning forward. *"Come in. We were just about to talk about you."*

*"Me?"* Elmon blinked. *"You two? Did I do something I'm not aware of?"*

He hesitated. The air felt thick—weighted with something just beyond him.

*"Elmon,"* Ortis said gently, *"what if I told you this school was made for you—for such a time as this?"*

Elmon frowned. *"What do you mean, Master Ortis?"*

Mensor rose, his voice calm but quietly charged.

*"What I think he means,"* Mensor said, *"is that after deep contemplation of the doors, the black beasts, the school, and you—seeing how all of it has converged at this moment—it no longer feels like coincidence."*

He met Elmon's eyes.

*"It feels like history. Provocative. Sacred."*

He paused, murmured a brief prayer beneath his breath, then continued—more carefully now.

*"You are what many would call a Young Magus,"* Mensor said. *"To what degree, we do not yet know. But the markers are there. Your studies are exceptional. Your insight arrives early—sometimes before you realize you've reached for it. And your instinct to seek mysteries rather than avoid them..."*

He shook his head slightly.

*"That is uncommon. Confusing, unsettling to some."*

He turned toward Ortis. *"And now—the doors. They have spoken to Master Ortis in ways I cannot rightly name."*

Elmon stood frozen between them, awe tightening his chest, uncertainty pressing just beneath it.

*"What... did... they say?"* he asked quietly.

Ortis smiled—but there was no ease in it. Only reverence, and something like caution.

*"Not much,"* he said. *"And far too much."*

He looked away, then back again.

*“They spoke of what lies beneath. Sorrow—layered, multiplied. A fracture of morality and song. They named this ground as hallowed.”*

His voice lowered.

*“And they warned that it must be cleansed... before its reckoning.”*

Elmon felt it then—excitement, sharp and bright, braided tightly with hesitation.

*“What are we going to do?”* he asked quietly, looking between Mensor and Ortis.

Mensor stepped forward, voice low, steady as stone.

*“We do what must be done. We prepare the sanctum. We gather the echoes.”*

He paused.

*“Then we descend.”*

Ortis nodded, a restrained fire kindling behind his eyes.

*“The Vault is not merely a place,”* he said. *“It is a wound. And wounds are not conquered—they are tended.”*

His gaze settled on Elmon, thoughtful rather than declarative.

*“You were not drawn here to stand aside. Whatever this calling is... you are part of its weaving.”*

Elmon swallowed. The weight of it pressed into his chest—but beneath it, something stirred. Not certainty. Not fear.

Recognition.

*“I don’t know if I’m ready,”* he said honestly. Then, after a breath: *“But I know I won’t turn away.”*

Ortis inclined his head, reverent. *“That is enough.”*

The moment fractured.

A sharp knock struck the door—hurried, urgent.

*“Master Ortis!”* a voice called. *“Currier Humbold. I bear an immediate reply from the Holy Hand.”*

Ortis lifted a hand toward Elmon. *“Open it.”*

The courier halted mid-step when the door opened. His eyes flicked from Elmon to Ortis and back again.

*“I was told the message was for an elder Black Orc,”* he said cautiously. *“For his eyes only.”*

His gaze hardened, uncertain.

*“Who are you?”*

Ortis arose and turned to the courier, his posture shifting—no longer instructor, no longer scholar, but something older. Inscribed.

*“I am Ortis of Cuortain Tower,”* he said evenly. *“Bound by echo and oath. I receive what is mine—not by right, but by reckoning.”*

He extended his hand.

The courier flinched and instinctively pulled the envelope back, fumbling instead for a parchment.

“Yes—uh—right,” he said, reading quickly. “*Response delivered to the Chancellor. Check. Arrangements confirmed at the Celestial Inn. Check.*”

He squinted. “*Deliver reply to Master Ortis. Note: Black Orc. Tall. Elderly. Wise.*”

The courier glanced up, swallowed, then continued. “*Missive for his eyes only. Do not—under any circumstance—hand to another.*”

He marked the parchment with a sharp *check*.

“*One task remaining,*” he added, relief creeping into his voice. “*Return to Etchings Castle for final payment.*”

Ortis cleared his throat, hand still extended.

“*Oh—yes. Of course.*”

The courier placed the envelope into Ortis’s palm.

It settled.

The sudden weight caught Ortis off guard—his fingers tightening just in time to keep it from slipping. Not mass. Meaning.

“*Your escort?*” Ortis asked quietly. “*And your Denorsh?*”

“*Awaiting me outside,*” the courier replied. “*Not enough room in the alcove entry. Your Denorsh is already at the Celestial Inn. Emperor’s Suite.*”

Ortis nodded once. He pressed an Orcish Gold Crown into the courier’s hand.

The man’s eyes widened. He bowed too quickly, turned, and vanished down the corridor—smiling, unaware of what had just passed from his keeping.

Mensor begged Ortis’s pardon, explaining that the hour called him to daily prayer and ceremony. Ortis embraced him in a brief Orcin hug—firm, grounding—then bowed as Mensor straightened his back and departed the sanctum quarters.

The door closed softly.

Ortis exhaled once, the weight of the moment settling.

“*Well, Elmon,*” he said at last, turning back toward the table, “*let us see what has been delivered, shall we?*”

They approached together.

Ortis placed the envelope at the center of the table, resting his fingers along its edge. His voice lowered—not in secrecy, but in respect—as he began the invocation. The sigils in the room answered faintly.

He whispered in an Orish tongue, “***Harn echineth solun.***”

The envelope shimmered.

Its surface rippled like disturbed water, the parchment folding inward—not tearing, not burning—but *remembering*. Ink loosened from fiber. Seals softened into echo. The letter collapsed into itself, becoming something thinner, brighter—no longer an object, but a memory held in waiting.

Elmon swallowed.

Ortis did not look away.

Elmon watched as the transformed envelope finished its change—resolving into two objects upon the table.

A slim, leather-bound ledger lay beside a narrow, dark, reinforced case, its clasps etched with restraint sigils rather than seals.

Ortis opened the ledger and scanned the first entry.

“Ah,” he murmured. “*They’ll arrive late tomorrow... or the following day.*” He turned a page. “*Lord Engles... and Master Morgan.*”

He paused, then let out a quiet, surprised chuckle.

“*High Paladin Engles himself. I suppose he’s been restless of late.*”

Another page. A longer silence.

“*Master Morgan,*” Ortis continued, more sober now. “*Chief Blackcoat—directly from Shadow Keep. Sent by Lord Bareck.*”

Elmon frowned. “*Why would we need a Blackcoat? Aren’t they just... for burying the dead?*”

Ortis lifted a brow, studying him—not amused, not offended.

“*There is far more to a Blackcoat than burial,*” he said calmly. “*They carry rites and bindings most never learn. Spells that necromancers would corrupt to raise the dead—Blackcoats use to settle them.*”

He closed the ledger gently.

“*They know how to unmoor echoes. How to end unrest without violence. Few survive long enough to reach Morgan’s station.*”

A pause.

“*If Lord Bareck has sent him,*” Ortis added, “*then he believes what lies beneath us cannot simply be destroyed. It must be put to rest.*”

Ortis leaned back in his chair—just as another knock struck his door.

Sharp. Impatient.

He reached out, checking for a familiar echo.

The Chancellor.

Ortis opened the door, and Emuroil pushed past him, robes snapping with agitation.

“*We don’t have the funds for this,*” the Chancellor said immediately. “*Not for their services.*”

Ortis blinked once. Slowly.

“*Pay,*” he repeated evenly, “*for what service, Chancellor?*”

Emuroil turned, pacing. “*The Citadel of the Holy Hand. They’ve requested a donation. A significant one.*”

Ortis folded his hands, thoughtful rather than alarmed.

“*A donation,*” he echoed. “*Did they specify an amount they consider... appropriate?*”

“No,” Emuroil snapped. *“And that’s precisely the problem. I have no intention of entering a theological bargaining match over virtue and coin.”*

Ortis’s expression shifted—not annoyed, not concerned.

Interested.

*“Then we are not being charged,”* he said calmly. *“We are being tested.”*

The Chancellor stopped pacing.

Ortis rose from his chair.

*“The Holy Hand does not sell services,”* he continued. *“They measure sincerity. They want to see whether we act out of fear, pride, or necessity.”*

A pause.

*“If this were a fee,”* Ortis added, *“they would have named it.”*

Emuroil exhaled slowly, tension easing just enough to reveal the weight beneath it.

*“And if we give too little?”*

*“Then they will give little,”* Ortis replied.

*“And if we give too much?”*

Ortis allowed himself a thin, knowing smile.

*“Then we admit guilt we do not yet understand.”*

Silence settled between them.

*“Let me speak with them,”* Ortis said at last. *“Not as an administrator. Not as a negotiator.”*

He met the Chancellor’s eyes.

*“But as a witness.”*

Ortis raised both hands sharply, palms outward—cutting the Chancellor off mid-thought.

The Chancellor blinked. *“What?”*

*“Chancellor Emuroil,”* Ortis said firmly, his voice no longer measured but *certain*.

*“I have known the Holy Hand for nearly twenty years. They do not bargain. They do not posture. And they do not bicker over coin—especially when they are called to consecrate crypts or tend mass graves.”*

He stepped closer, eyes steady.

*“Their silence is sacred,”* Ortis continued. *“Not transactional.”*

The Chancellor stiffened. He had not expected a rebuke—not from Ortis. His voice dropped, the edge still present, but tempered now by caution.

*“Master Ortis... I do not doubt your history with the Hand. But times have changed.”*

He folded his hands behind his back, pacing once before stopping.

*“The Citadel is under pressure—politically, spiritually, and financially. They may not bicker,”* he conceded, *“but they do expect recognition. And recognition, in this age, often arrives in the form of coin.”*

Ortis did not interrupt.

*“Whether we like it or not,” Emuroil added quietly, “institutions no longer survive on reverence alone.”*

He stepped further into the room, glancing at the ledger still open on the table.

*“They’re sending a High Paladin and a Chief Blackcloak,” the Chancellor said. “That’s not courtesy—that’s a declaration. They don’t dispatch sacred resources lightly. And when they do, they expect acknowledgment.”*

Ortis leaned forward, his gaze steady, unyielding.

*“Honor is not measured in gold, Chancellor,” he said. “It is measured in truth kept, in silence honored, in echoes laid properly to rest.”*

Emuroil exhaled slowly, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

*“I know,” he said. “I truly do. But the Council wants numbers. They want ledgers balanced and offerings accounted for. I’m not arguing theology—I’m managing optics.”*

He paused, then lowered his voice.

*“If you can speak to them,” Emuroil continued, “convince them that this sanctum still carries weight... I’ll do what I can to keep the Council from interfering.”*

Elmon raised his hand, fingers spread. Slowly, deliberately, he curled them inward—rolling the hand into a fist. He drew it down through the air, not striking flesh, but cutting through tension itself.

As the motion completed, he spoke—low, steady, and measured:

*“vōzw EŌMīxōn SūdōcsōLĒd vōūkŭ pōrŭūY DōKcstō.”*

The change was immediate.

The Chancellor’s shoulders eased. His breath deepened, the sharp edge in his eyes softening as if a storm had passed without rain. Ortis felt it too—the pressure lifting, the air settling.

Ortis turned on Elmon, his voice sharp with authority.

*“Use no spell to charm us.”*

Elmon flinched—but he did not bow. His voice trembled, yet his stance remained firm.

*“I did not charm you,” he said quietly. “I invoked your own rite—to sunder aggression and restore clarity.”*

Ortis froze.

Elmon swallowed, color rising in his face.

*“It’s in your Arc of Peace,” he continued. “To be spoken when thunder is in the heart and words grow cold and violent.”*

Silence fell—not empty, but weighted.

Elmon turned away.

His steps echoed heavily as he left the sanctum. Tears marked his passage—not in defiance, but in grief.

## ***Personal Reconning***

Ortis stood speechless for a long moment. Then he turned to the Chancellor—said nothing—and stepped out into the hall.

He looked left. Then right.

Elmon was nowhere to be seen.

Ortis returned briefly to the room. It no longer felt like a sanctum. The air was unsettled, the echoes misaligned—as if the space itself had been bruised.

“Chancellor,” Ortis said quietly, his voice edged with iron, “*if that boy leaves this school... I will bring the matter before the Council and resign.*”

He did not wait for an answer.

Ortis turned and left, already searching the corridors for Elmon.

The Chancellor sank into Ortis’s chair.

Wide-eyed. Silent.

Only then did it strike him—not fear for the academy, not concern for the sanctum—but fear for his own position. He had been guarding ledgers and politics while a student carried the weight of truth.

*We’ve been here before*, he told himself. *The Council will understand.*

He rose at last and moved toward the door, his steps softer now—almost reverent.

As he crossed the threshold, he paused.

The sigils etched into the walls were weeping.

Thin trails of light slid downward like tears—residual echoes bleeding from strained bindings.

The Chancellor swallowed. A flash of darkness fell over him a memory perhaps long forgotten.

And for the first time that night, he understood the cost of what had nearly been lost.

Ortis scoured the campus for any sign of Elmon.

He went first to the dormitories and found Alfred. There was no time for pretense. Ortis spoke plainly—of his error, of the sanctum, of the words spoken too sharply and the silence that followed. Alfred did not hesitate. He summoned a handful of Elmon’s friends and sent them in different directions to search the grounds.

It was Alfred who received the report.

Elmon had been seen near the new Echo Hall.

Entering alone.

Ortis ran.

When he reached the hall, he grasped the door and pulled. It did not yield. The ceremonial seals were engaged—warded, deliberate, absolute. He tried spell after spell, shifting approaches, even anchoring himself to the faint emotional echo Elmon had left behind.

Nothing.

Grief flared into fury.

Ortis struck the door—not with magic, but with will. With the force of a mountain brought to bear in a single moment. The seals screamed. Stone cracked. The door groaned—and finally gave way.

Inside, the hall was dim and still.

Then he heard it.

Soft, broken weeping.

It came from the cleric's ward.

Ortis moved quickly now, fear hollowing his chest. He found Elmon lying in the bathing tub, half-submerged, unmoving. Blood traced thin lines from his eyes, his nose, his ears—dark against pale skin. His gaze was unfocused, distant, as though his soul had stepped aside and left the body behind to suffer.

Not dead.

But breaking.

An emotional death.

Ortis fell to his knees and reached for him, pouring every discipline he knew into the attempt—ritual, echo, breath, presence. None of it felt sufficient. His heart fractured with the weight of what his own words had helped unleash.

At last, he stopped.

He looked upward—not in command, not in demand.

He breathed.

And he whispered, voice stripped bare:

*“Forgive me—not for my words... but for the silence I failed to keep.”*

At that moment, a radiant light blossomed around them.

A hand rested on Ortis's shoulder.

A voice spoke—not loud, not commanding, but interceding.

*“You are, Ortis.”*

It sounded like wind moving through leaves after a storm. Like parchment settling after a long journey. Peaceful. Certain.

Ortis, tears still tracing his face, turned.

The figure kneeling beside him was not fully there. He could see through it—yet it held shape. Presence. Weight. It felt like standing in a garden at dusk, when the air itself remembers something holy.

### ***A Visitation***

A fragment of the First Light.

Or perhaps a Celestial-bound Echo.

The being reached out and touched Elmon.

Elmon's body convulsed once—sharp, involuntary.

*“You are not finished,”* the voice said gently. *“This life needs you. Return.”*

Elmon drew a ragged breath and surged upright.

His eyes found Ortis—and something in them shattered.

With a cry, he scrambled back, panic overtaking reason, and fled through a side door.

Ortis did not chase.

He stood.

He conjured.

Time folded inward.

The world slowed—then stilled.

Elmon was caught mid-motion, suspended as if within a frame inside a frame—breath held, fear frozen, the moment preserved before it could tear itself apart.

Ortis stepped through the side door and found Elmon standing rigid, fists clenched, breath sharp with anger and pain.

Before Elmon could speak, Ortis dropped to his knees.

*“Listen to me,”* Ortis said, voice breaking. *“I allowed the Chancellor’s weight to poison that moment. My rebuke was wrong. I silenced you when I should have listened.”* His shoulders shook. *“I ask—forgive me. From the depths of my soul.”*

The words struck Elmon harder than any spell. The ground tremored.

His anger faltered. His breath caught. And as Ortis’s concentration broke, the weave holding time unraveled.

Elmon collapsed forward.

They caught each other—arms tangled, grief spilling freely—as several students rushed toward them. Alfred. Maria. Elcrull. They found not masters or prodigies—but two souls clinging together in tears.

They were only a few yards from the great metal-bound door.

It rattled.

Not violently—*deliberately*.

The ground beneath it heaved, stone pressing upward from below. From deep within the earth came laughter—thin, distant, and wrong.

Ortis rose instantly, every instinct sharpened. He rushed to the door.

He placed his palm against the door—not touching the glyphs, but *listening* to them.

The bindings spoke.

The Light of Binding still held—its resonance firm, meant to anchor and forbid passage.

The Dark Serenade—a gravity ward—pressed downward, heavy with suppression.

The Ministry of Grief, woven to contain sorrow without letting it fester, remained intact.

But the Tears of the Beloved—a mercy-binding meant to quiet restless echoes—was unraveling.

*“They’re pushing,”* Ortis whispered. *“Not to break the door. To unbalance it.”*

He moved quickly, inscribing a peace sigil—not to strengthen force, but to restore harmony—and followed it with an *Echo-sundering call*, severing the pressure feeding the disturbance.

The laughter vanished.

The door fell silent.

But Ortis did not relax.

“*What lies beneath is awake,*” he said quietly. “*And it is learning.*”

Without another word, they gathered themselves and went straight to Mensor.

He needed to know about the door.

About the visitation.

And about what had begun to stir beneath the school.

Mensor retrieved two heavy satchels and a broad-necked flask from a sealed storage room near the shrine. The liquid inside the flask shifted unnaturally as he carried it—thick, slow, and faintly luminous.

At the great metal-bound door, he set to work without ceremony.

First, he placed two swords—each with a crystal blade—one at the base of the door and one above it, aligned perfectly. He knelt between them and murmured words too old to belong to any single tongue. When he bowed his head, the swords ignited—not with flame, but with light—forming a vertical seam of radiance between them.

Next came the sigils.

Mensor set them at precise intervals, three feet apart, encircling the door. Each was pressed into the stone with deliberate care. Then he uncorked the flask and poured the oil in an unbroken ring, weaving around the sigils, sealing the pattern without a single gap.

Only then did he draw the final instrument.

It was a short, crystal-bladed sword, inlaid with silver, its pommel crowned in miniature—symbol of authority, judgment, and restraint. Holding it reverently, Mensor walked the circle. At each sigil, he spoke a prayer and touched the symbol with the blade.

Each sigil flared—red for a heartbeat, then white.

When he reached the final mark and completed the circuit, the oil ignited—not burning, but *remembering*. The stone itself glowed, as though the ground had become fire.

Mensor staggered back, breath ragged, sweat beading along his brow. He unfolded a simple chair from one of the satchels and sat heavily before the door.

“*I will hold the watch tonight,*” he said quietly. “*Send word to the brothers at the Shrine. They will come. This is a Ceremonial Encrypt Vigil—the strongest seal I know.*”

Ortis said nothing.

He had seen this once before.

At Candlekeep.

When they sealed the Lich in sacred marble, bound by relics and prayer. When the Vigil had held long enough for Paladins, Blackcloaks, and clerics to gather. When it had taken three days to cleanse the lair and trace the echo of the phylactery.

When they had ended the Vigil.

When the Lich had begun to rise.

When the phylactery had been cast into holy oil and set aflame.

And when the screams—Ortis closed his eyes.

The Vigil before them burned steadily.

But beneath the stone, something waited.

And it remembered how to scream.

A thread of crimson mist drifted low across the field beyond the sanctum — not rising from the door, not issuing from the seam, but flowing from the darkness between structures.

It moved without wind. Without direction. Until it neared the sealed threshold.

The oil shimmered. The sigils pulsed.

The seam between the crystal blades brightened, responding not to breach — but to proximity.

The crimson haze coiled, as though sensing resistance.

For a moment it pressed forward, testing nothing visible.

The seals flared white.

The mist thinned.

Then dispersed into the night air.

Silence returned.

Mensor did not move.

Ortis understood one thing clearly. The door had not been attacked.

It had been noticed.

## Chapter ①: Echo of the Last Judge

The sun began to rise over the School of Wizardry.

Mensor yawned and stretched. The great door remained silent.

Three men rode up first.

One was tall and foreboding, encased in full sanctified plate—every surface etched with quiet authority.

Beside him rode a gray-haired man in dark robes and a weathered cloak. Possibly an Elf—though he did not look it at first, save for the tips of his ears. A cleric, by bearing alone.

Shortly after, four more arrived on foot.

One wore brigantine armor, scarred and worn. A soldier's face. A burn marked his arm and neck—old, but not forgotten.

Another appeared to be a monk. His robes were repaired again and again, as though the world had tried—and failed—to wear him down. The look in his eyes; a calm and foreboding as if he could look at death and scare it off.

The third was a young woman, her cloak marked with the sigil of the Healing Hand. Peace walked with her.

The last was a brute of a dwarf in half plate. At the center of his chest gleamed the sigil of Whiteheart—dented, battered, but preserved.

He carried a maul of grey-silver metal, studded with small hollow spikes.

Mensor did not smile.

These were not visitors.

They were answers.

Soon afterward, Ortis arrived with a young man who appeared to be blind. A half-Orc, leaning on a gray wooden staff, his steps careful but unafraid. Ortis introduced him only as a Pander—and nothing more.

Ortis then turned and greeted Lord Bareck a Dwarf in half plate, walking him to the great door. Together they inspected its bindings, speaking quietly of directions, distortions, and the events that had preceded the night.

Elmon arrived shortly after, accompanied by several of his friends—Alfred, Chelsis, Con, Justin, Elcrull, Hormargi, and Entic—drawn together by concern more than curiosity.

Less than a minute later, the Chancellor appeared, six men in close formation at his heels.

Ortis noticed the gathering as he and Bareck finished inspecting the door. Bareck returned to the group and looked them over.

In proper Dwarven etiquette, he raised one hand high and stomped once, hard. His Common was crude and heavy.

“*Dis not ar show,*” he barked. “We’re here on busnuss—sacred busnuss. Busnuss of the dead.”

He waved them back with a sharp motion.

*"If ya want dink and gawkin', go down to cha pub. Note here."*

Ortis introduced those present to the members of the Holy Hand. He then guided Bareck toward Elmon.

*"This,"* Ortis said, *"is the Young Magus I mentioned."*

The dwarf straightened, leaned back with his hands on his hips, and gave Elmon a long, measuring look.

*"I think... aye,"* Bareck said slowly. *"Oi see it in 'im."*

He turned.

*"This Alfred,"* Ortis continued. *"Son of Mistress Emwinster. His roommate."*

Bareck grunted approvingly, tapped Alfred on the shoulder. *"Eyy. She's a looker, dat one."*

*"This is Chelsis Norgelis. A wizard's apprentice."*

Bareck gave her a short nod.

He turned to Con. *"Con Tiligus."*

Bareck slapped him hard on the shoulder. *"Good famly."*

Justin Rindle stepped forward next.

Bareck took his hand, pulled him into a crushing hug, then held him back at arm's length, eyes locked with his.

*"Yer gandfader and I fought side bi side,"* he said quietly. *"It's good to know ye, lad."*

Ortis stopped before Hormargi.

She bowed and knelt on one knee. *"Be con mi."*

Bareck froze—then lifted her gently to her feet. *"You honor me?"*

Ortis said softly, *"This is Hormargi Melcat."*

Bareck's breath caught. He crushed her in a fierce embrace. *"Yer family stood by the throne when all was lost,"* he said thickly. *"Yers never gave up."*

He dropped to one knee. *"Be con may."*

Elcrull stood tall bowed distinctly. *"Lord Bareck, nice to see you again."*

Bareck gave her a tight hug lifting her from the ground.

*"Yo fadder mentioned you were studing mystic and blade."*

*"I saw your birth and the Spark you carry."*

Elmon looked at Elcrull with a new admiration.

Ortis raised a brow.

Entic hovered behind Hormargi, pale and tense.

Bareck turned his gaze on him. *"Cat got yer tongue, lad?"*

Ortis said, *"This is Entic Orisal. A Ghost Walker by nature. He seeks the path of the Seer."*

Bareck's eyes widened. *"A Gost Walker..."* he murmured. *"Aye, I've heard o' the gifting."*

He placed a heavy hand over his heart. *“Be proud, lad. There are few o’ ye left.”*

They approached the Chancellor. He offered Bareck a small bag of coin, bowed, and thanked him formally for coming to the school’s aid.

Bareck took the pouch, lifted it, and gave it a single testing shake.

“Hnh,” he grunted. “A donation.”

He tossed it back into the Chancellor’s hands.

“Ya keep it,” Bareck said, gesturing with his chin toward the students. *“Spend it on them. Raise ’em wisely.”*

The Chancellor froze—caught between protocol and surprise.

Ortis, wide-eyed, allowed himself a small, knowing smile.

They returned to the door.

Bareck spoke briefly to Ortis and Mensor in low tones. Ortis shook his head once, then turned to the gathering crowd.

*“If you do not need to be here,”* he said firmly, *“it is our counsel that you leave now. We do not know what lies beneath this door.”*

He glanced to Elmon. *“Keep your friends behind you. Be ready to withdraw if this turns heated.”*

Bareck raised a clenched fist, then slowly circled one finger in the air.

The crew moved at once.

Three heavy tents were unpacked and raised at the far edge of the grounds—set deliberately as far from the vault door as space allowed. These would be sleeping quarters, safe zones, and last refuge.

Elmon watched, fascinated.

Polearms were laid out with military precision. Flasks—likely oil—were set in rows. Four crystal-bladed swords, like those Mensor had used the night before, were placed in ritual alignment: two standing straight and true, forty feet apart; the remaining two angled outward, forming a half-moon that faced the tents.

Ortis marked a spot where they raised an alter ten feet from the vault door.

Mensor and the healer sanctified it together—cleansing the stone, marking it for use, and binding it to purpose. Two large canvas sheets were staked flat upon the ground nearby.

A small fire was kindled with firestone. A heavy cauldron filled with water was set above it, steam beginning to curl as heat took hold.

Mensor then began the greater ward.

Using oil and sigils, he traced a wide circle—nearly thirty feet across—before the tents. The markings shimmered faintly as the circle closed. Inside the tents, items were placed that Elmon could not fully discern—bundles wrapped tight, shapes that hummed softly with restrained intent.

The healer knelt and began a long ritual, remaining in prayer from that moment onward.

Mensor raised two fingers.

Bareck nodded.

On each canvas sheet, Mensor laid out bandages, two medium flasks—oil or sanctified liquid—and several bowls filled with herbs and prepared compounds.

The ground was no longer a school courtyard.

It was a threshold.

It took several hours to prepare the grounds.

When all was ready, Bareck turned to Mensor. “*Break the Encrypt.*”

Mensor nodded.

The men stood in full battle array—silent, steady, weapons grounded but ready.

Mensor released the Encrypt.

They waited.

Ten minutes passed.

Nothing.

At Bareck’s signal, Mensor dismissed the Celestial Guard, withdrawing the final prayer of binding. The air thinned slightly, as if something exhaled beneath the earth.

Five more minutes.

Still nothing.

Ortis stepped forward and began releasing the glyphs—one at a time. Each release was followed by silence. Measured. Intentional.

Five minutes between each.

Nothing stirred.

At last, Ortis quieted the remaining sigils.

The door opened at once with intensity.

Stone scraped against stone as the metal-bound door flipped outward. From below, slow steps climbed toward the light.

A body emerged—disfigured, half-rotted, its flesh clinging to bone as if unsure whether to remain. Before it could draw breath, the Paladins sanctified the ground.

The creature growled.

Smoke poured from its form.

It collapsed into ash.

Then came laughter.

Low. Wet. Wrong.

It rose from below the vault, echoing unnaturally against the stone. It was unmistakably a woman’s voice.

Bareck’s jaw tightened. “*A woman,*” he said flatly.

The Blackcloak acted without hesitation—hurling a sphere into the darkness and calling the Binding of Fire.

Flames erupted from the vault mouth. The laughter screamed once—then cut short.  
Fire burned for two full minutes before dying away.

Ortis stepped forward, eyes unfocused, listening beyond sound. He summoned a Blackwind and cast it down into the depths.

“This should silence it... or reveal it,” he said quietly.

Moments passed.

*“I sense no binding,”* Ortis continued. *“Only absence. Silence. It has withdrawn—retreated deeper into the vault, beyond echo reach.”*

He gestured sharply. *“Pander—behind me. Bareck—watch the perimeter.”*

Then it struck him.

A flash of hunger. Of dread.

An ancestral warning. *“This is a soul-leech. A veil breach given form.”*

A yellowed eye. A Witch—but twisted beyond mortal origin. Not raised from the dead. Not born of flesh.

A thing from the Abyss.

A Fallen master.

And Ortis felt the cold certainty settle in his chest:

Less than a minute passed.

A fresh corpse—still wet with grave-stench—came sprinting up the stairs, a jagged stake driven through its chest as if someone had tried and failed to kill it properly. It hurled itself forward with a broken, gurgling scream.

Five skeletons followed.

The Holy Hand moved as one.

Steel rang. Crystal blades flared. Bones shattered and scattered across the stone steps. The corpse collapsed under a sanctified strike, its scream cut short.

Mensor wasted no time.

He doused the remains in holy oil, dragged them into a heap, and lit the pyre. Pale flame climbed eagerly, consuming bone and rot alike.

That was when the ground shifted. A sifting.

Hunting.

Seeking.

Not below the vault.

Beneath the students.

Hands—gray, clawing, desperate—burst through the soil where they stood.

Elmon felt it before he saw it.

A pressure. A wrongness beneath his feet.

*“Back! Move!”* Elmon shouted.

The students scrambled just as two zombies tore free of the earth, soil cascading from their shoulders as they lunged.

Justin reacted instantly.

He drew a small hand axe and brought it down in a brutal arc, splitting the skull of the first zombie cleanly in two. The body collapsed without ceremony.

The second turned toward Elmon.

He raised his hand and cast Life Lock.

Nothing.

The creature did not slow. Did not hesitate.

Elmon's breath caught. *'Not bound by life.'*

Elcrull, raised hands from instinct with twisted thumbs and claws.

The creature did not respond.

Elmon shifted instantly—dodging, forcing an Echo Burn, flooding the creature with a raw flash of fear and fractured memory.

The zombie wailed.

A sound too human.

Its body convulsed, ash spreading through flesh and bone until it collapsed inward, leaving nothing but scorched earth behind.

Silence fell again.

But the ground beneath them still felt... unsettled.

From the far side of the field, the ground ruptured again.

Wide.

Deliberate.

With a Roar.

A reddish Mist tore upward as a wraith rose in full daylight, its form thin and elongated, as though the sun itself recoiled from touching it. Behind it, three Ghosts clawed free of the soil, their mouths already open in hunger as they charged the line.

*"Holy ground—now!"* Bareck barked.

Sigils flared.

The Blackcloak stepped forward and invoked the Rite of Final Breath. His voice was low, absolute. The words did not echo—they *ended*.

Two of the Ghosts froze mid-stride.

Then they collapsed into dust, their forms unraveling as if the world itself rejected them.

The wraith did not slow.

It drifted forward, silent at first—until it was ten feet from the line.

That was when Pander opened his eyes.

He did not shout. He did not move.

He *looked*.

The wraith halted mid-glide and shrieked—a sound that tore at the soul rather than the ears. Everyone within range felt it: a violent tug, as if their very essence were being pulled toward an open grave.

Hatred flooded the ground.

Mist turned white—like ash floating on water.

As the wraith passed partially through the earth, reality bent around it.

The final Ghast never reached them.

It simply ceased to exist, vaporized in a flash of distorted resonance.

Ortis raised two fingers sharply and waved back.

Bareck moved at once, pulling Pander back from the line without question.

Whatever Pander had done—whatever he *was*—it was not meant to stand that close to the breach.

Ortis knelt, eyes half-closed, his senses stretched thin.

What he perceived beneath Echo Hall was not merely broken.

It was wrong.

The sleeping silence of ages, awaiting, pondering, positioning. Now acting, rising, distorting everything they touched.

Echoes did not drift or fade as they should. They *clung*. Twisted. Two memories—perhaps more—had fused imperfectly, maligned like thoughts stitched together with rusted wire. His mind recoiled, struggling to interpret what should never have aligned.

He felt the ruptures one by one:

Memory bleeding into memory.

The Veil torn, whispering where silence should reign.

Echo possession—or something far worse: a mind wearing another's grief like stolen flesh.

And deeper still—Abyssal degradation.

Not simple malice. Not even hatred born of suffering. This was malice that had never been felt before—raw, alien, untempered by life. It pressed into his thoughts with vicious, foreign concepts, cruel in ways language could not frame.

Ortis raised a psychic barrier.

The shield dulled his perception—but it spared his sanity.

Still, the pressure mounted.

A congested terror—like a hundred minds crushed into a single vessel, screaming without breath. His heart pounded as the ground trembled.

Then the earth ruptured at the edge of Echo Hall.

Dirt and stone exploded skyward.

What emerged was not a creature.

It was a mass.

A wrong—

Defilement of life of mythic proportions.

Bodies twisted and fused together, limbs overlapping, forms half-recognizable and wholly profane. It lumbered forward as one grotesque whole, joints grinding where no joints should exist.

It did not roar with sound.

It roared with hatred.

Hatred for the living.

Hatred without cause.

Hatred given shape.

Arcane tags burned across its flesh—brands of summoning, binding, and violation—etched so deeply they seemed grown rather than carved. Darkness poured from it, thick and suffocating, shaming the very air it passed through.

Ortis understood then, with cold clarity:

This was not an undead thing.

This was a consequence.

And no one—no living soul—should ever have been made to witness it.

It lumbered toward those of the Holy Hand.

The Chancellor's eyes widened in naked horror. What he was witnessing shattered the last fragile scaffolds of reason. His entire being convulsed with terror. He turned and fled—no dignity, no command left in him—his mind unraveling under abstruse visions of hell unbound.

Even in his wildest years as an instructor of metaphorical resonance, he could never have conceived of this. His body moved, but his mind had already slipped free of the reality unfolding behind him.

Meanwhile, Elmon acted.

He forced his friends backward, guiding them to the very edge of what—based on the maps he had studied—he believed marked the vault's true reach. As they retreated, the ground beneath their feet softened unnaturally, as though the earth itself were grasping for them.

The air thickened.

The profane stench of rot and hatred flooded their lungs, violating breath and thought alike. With each step, the soil sagged and collapsed behind them, caving inward as if the land were a living mouth—hungry, desperate, trying to pull them down into the dark that had birthed it.

From the air came a jet of flame, searing across the abyssal mass and blackening its fused flesh. A heartbeat later, a bolt of lightning followed—crackling, precise—stunning the creature mid-lurch.

Eric Tabound, High Paladin of the Holy Hand, surged forward, his sword blazing with sanctified light as he charged the beast head-on.

Praynor split from the formation, circling wide to flank the infernal thing. Qinzal the Manija remained behind, steady and unyielding, keeping watch over Pander as the echoes twisted dangerously close.

Sensto, Sigil-Cleric of the Hand, knelt at the torn earth. He laced the ruptured ground with four trapped sigils in rapid succession—Fire Strike, Celestial Globe of Sundering, Earth Shard, and Malice—locking them into the wound like stitches pulled tight against corruption. Only then did he rise, turning his attention to the spreading collapse near the students.

Bareck drove his sword deep into the soil at the edge of the breach. Dropping to one knee, he pressed his palm to the hilt and summoned a formal request for consecration—binding the hell-hole with dwarven oath and sacred claim.

The earth responded.

Smoking runes surfaced across the ground, scattered and irregular—like traps laid by the land itself, waiting for something to cross their threshold. They pulsed. They hummed. Then they went silent.

The six Council members continued to retreat, eyes fixed on the ground and the shifting air around them. As they fell back, Ormin—elder Witch-Wizard of the Council—raised both hands and charged the air behind them with celestial fire, forming a burning ward between the civilians and the thing clawing its way into the world.

The oldest among them was a Myst Gazer—partially retired, yet drawn once more to the school by the scent of gathering darkness.

His eyes glowed a dull steel-gray as he laid out his wards with deliberate calm. Fire of the Mind ignited around him, forming a vigilant halo—any creature that touched him would be wracked with desecration, their essence scorched by thought made sacred. He followed it with Binding of the Dark, summoning a shadowy tether and holding its wispy length loosely in one hand, ready for whatever dared approach.

He did not move.

He let the others reach safety first.

From within his cloak, he drew a thin black rod—unassuming, worn smooth by years of use. He spoke a single word.

*“Maolya.”*

The rod unfolded into a Shadow Blade, pulsing with ancestral force—memories of abyssal destruction, sealed gates, and heart-fire burned into existence by those who had stood where he now stood. It carried the weight of a Myst Gazer’s convergence: a soul forged through mortality and remade through celestial strain. They were not immune to darkness. They *knew* it—because they had become part of it.

As he moved the blade through ritual arcs, it left behind a faint lattice of shimmering sparks, like a weave unraveling and reforming with every breath. He stepped forward slowly, eyes closing—not in blindness, but in deeper sight—walking instead with the vision of his SINN spirit.

He knew the Abyss.

He had fought there in his youth, time and again. He recognized the rupture—the torsion of reality where meaning twisted and truth frayed.

And he saw her. The yellow-eyed witch.

She hesitated.

Because she knew he was hunting her.

Sensto peered into the collapsed ground, a sigil already prepared—Foundation Blight, etched and waiting. He released it.

The air shuddered.

A vibration rippled outward from his body, warping the space around him in a tight, controlled shockwave. For a breath, the world dulled—as if color itself had been leeches away, leaving him half-shaded, half-elsewhere.

Below, he saw them.

Undead meandered through the depths, drifting without pattern or will—bound, not driven. Tethered to something deeper.

“*Bound undead,*” Sensto muttered.

He raised his hand and traced a new sigil into the air: two inverted spirals, bisected by a clean slice through the core. He released it.

The sigil fell.

When it struck the pit, it detonated in a seismic surge of astral diffusion, rupturing every echo within ten paces of the ignition point. Memory fractured. Bindings screamed apart. The dead convulsed as their anchors were torn free.

Sensto stepped forward—and dropped into the pit.

As he fell, his hand carved a Celestial Shard sigil, wind curling around his fingers. With his other hand, he pierced the forming glyph, venting it like trapped pressure.

The shard burst outward.

It moved like a serpent through stone—twisting, tunneling, shattering bone and rock alike. Its passage screamed, a shrill, bugle-like wail that echoed through the depths.

Then the ground gave way.

The collapse thundered across the field as the earth caved inward, tearing open the remnants of this leg of the vault—its chambers, its ruins, its buried knowledge dragged violently into the open air.

What had been hidden was hidden no longer.

Elmon’s mind snapped open like a trap.

Everything—*everything*—was being captured. Runes. Sigils. Angles. Distances. Motions. Cause and consequence. His thoughts raced like a dozen scribes cataloging a battlefield in real time, recording history as it happened.

Justin, axe reclaimed, leapt onto the collapsed ground.

No hesitation. No fear.

Something ancient stirred in his mountain-dwarf blood—an ancestral fury born of loss and stone and buried grief. He moved on instinct alone.

“NO!” Elmon shouted, lunging for him.  
Too late.

Elcrull stepped forward, ancestral spite flaring in her eyes. Her hands cut outward, claws extended.

“Rake.”

The ground where Justin landed erupted. Rock, bone, and shattered soil burst upward in jagged lines, flaring outward like a claw tearing through the earth.

Entic dropped in behind Justin—and vanished.

He seized Justin around the waist and wrenched him backward, slamming him to the ground just as the earth shifted beneath them. Justin saw nothing. He swung wildly, axe cutting empty air.

“*Stop!*” Entic shouted.

At that instant, one of the remnants rose.

It lunged for Justin—jaws open, rot spilling from its throat.

Entic slashed through the creature with his hand.

The thing recoiled—not wounded, but confused. It could not see him. It spun, flailing blindly, arms sweeping through space, searching for whatever had struck it.

Justin found his footing.

He swung once—clean and true.

The axe drove straight through the creature’s chest.

It shrieked and twisted, latching onto Justin’s arm, teeth snapping as it tried to bite through mail and flesh alike.

Elmon sent a copied sigil—the same Sensto had used—focusing his hate and the act of disruption like a knife.

The sigil screamed—a piercing whistle, like a trumpet blown through shattered glass.

Light erupted as it spiraled into the crevice. The force of the blast knocked Justin to the ground and hurled Entic against the wall. The creature itself was thrown backward, spinning like a top.

Entic remembered Bareck’s words:

*Be proud. There are so few of you. I heard the Giftin’, lad.*

Until now, his gift had never been a tool. Only hide and seek. Only avoidance.

Now it meant something.

The fear didn’t vanish—but it steadied.

Entic reached for Justin’s axe.

It vanished from sight.

Elmon felt it happen. He reached for Entic through echo, trying to lock onto him—but it was like looking through warped, cracked, unbound glass. There—then gone.

As the creature staggered to its feet, Entic struck.

The axe reappeared only long enough to bury itself in the creature's head, nearly severing it from the body.

Another corpse twitched.

Entic did not hesitate.

He moved through the field, silent and unseen, removing heads from anything that stirred.

Justin saw heads burst, splatters of rot, limbs torn free—violence unfolding around him with no clear source. His eyes were wide, breath shallow. He could not tell what was striking the creatures—only that something was.

One of the undead turned toward him.

Slowly. Intentionally.

Justin backed away, boots scraping against broken stone, until he hit the collapsed edge of the ceiling. He climbed, clawing his way up—

An arm burst from the rubble and seized him.

It dragged him back into the pit.

Something below had remembered how to hunt.

Focused.

Hungry.

Justin screamed as he fell, hitting hard. A corpse lunged for him. He grabbed a jagged shard of stone and drove it into the creature's skull. It shuddered once and collapsed.

Above him, Entic staggered.

The Ghost Walk was failing.

He had never held it this long. His limbs shook, breath ragged. Slowly—painfully—he began to materialize, his outline bleeding into form like fog thickening into flesh.

Justin saw him then.

So did everyone else.

Elmon shouted, and hands reached down. Together, they hauled Justin and Entic from the pit, dragging them clear of the ruptured ground. Elmon sensed the echoes below twisted and churned.

Entic was covered in gore—blackened ichor, shredded flesh, and clinging bone fragments. The stench alone made several of them gag.

They moved him quickly to the healer.

No one knew what diseases, splintered bone, or echo-corruption the undead might carry—or what exposure alone could do.

The healer did not hesitate.

With gloved hands she stripped away most of Entic's ruined clothing, her hands brisk and practiced, checking for punctures, tears, or violations of the flesh. She found none.

*"Good,"* she murmured.

She washed him thoroughly with holy water, scrubbing away the residue until it ran clear. Then she applied a thick, gray, jelly-like ointment across his skin—cool, faintly metallic in scent.

*"Do not let him rise,"* she ordered.

She crossed to a chest, removed a small sealed flask, and returned.

*"Hold him."*

They obeyed.

She removed the gloves and tossed them into the Pyre.

She poured the contents over him.

It fumed.

It spat.

It hissed and frothed as it flowed across his body and spilled onto the ground, violently reacting to whatever corruption remained. The corruption burned away like something alive realizing it had lost.

Entic gasped—but did not scream.

The healer straightened, eyes sharp, voice suddenly hard.

*"What are you doing down there?"* she snapped, looking past them toward the vault.  
*"Leave this to the Holy Hand."*

Eric carved into the abyssal beast with his consecrated blade, soul-fire streaming along its edge. The creature wailed—not in pain, but in outrage—and swung wildly at him, its form buckling under the sanctified strike.

To Eric's flank, Pranor drove his quinline-plated spear deep into the creature's mass.

The wound ruptured like the earth had moments before.

A sound rang out—like a distant bell struck in a place without metal.

The beast staggered.

Its structure began to fail as the burden of bound echoes and intertwined abyssal sigils unraveled. Light bled from its flesh in flickering motes, drifting free like fireflies on a summer's eve.

Eric hurled the hammer, its desecration severing the echo-bindings that sustained the creature. What held it together failed, and the beast began to come apart.

Across the beast's surface, ripples spread—like water disturbed by a stone—echoing outward from the impact, revealing how little cohesion remained.

Then the sky answered.

Two dragon riders descended without warning, hovering low as their mounts raked and tore into the collapsing mass. Claws and flame shredded what structure the creature still possessed.

Both paladins pressed their advantage, reinforcing holy ground as fragments broke free—partial skeletons, malformed zombies, and clotted flesh spilling from the whole. Each faltered, dismembered, and was undone before it could reform.

The beast was no longer a singular thing.

It was coming apart.

Ortis's mind cleared as his gaze settled on the cloaked council member.

Indoors, the man was never cloaked. Outdoors, always. Ortis remembered the reason—sunlight burned them. Not metaphorically. Not spiritually. Flesh remembered what the Abyss did not forgive.

And then he understood.

This Myst Gazer had not come to the school by chance. He had come hunting a thread of shadow and despair—one that refused to surface. One that hid.

Relis.

A Myst Gazer on the Council. Waiting. Watching for twenty-five years.

Ortis tore his attention away and reinforced the psychic barrier around his thoughts. The Witch was pressing again, searching for purchase. He could not let her in. He reached instead for her anchor—her tether to this world.

Following the echo of her passage, he found it.

The treasure chamber.

Twisted or not, bound or broken—that was where her memory clung.

As Ortis pierced the veil of the room, it was like staring into a bed of blazing coals.

His mind recoiled on instinct—ritual reflex—like eyes snapping shut against sudden fire. He staggered, breath catching, as a surge of raw emotion crashed through him, overwhelming and violent, like floodwater forced through a narrow gate.

The Myst Gazer paused.

Ortis lowered his hand from his face, fingers trembling as though they had brushed flame. His voice came unsteady at first, then sharpened with realization.

*"The room,"* he said quietly. *"It burns. Like the sun."*

Relis nodded, his tone calm, grimly certain. *"An Abyssal Breach. Likely a sundered gate—held open by Astral Baring. Maintained deliberately."*

He glanced toward the sealed depths. *"They've been nurturing it for a long time. Feeding it. Waiting for a moment of oblique, profound pain."*

Ortis's thoughts lurched—unbidden—to Elmon.

The boy's collapse.

The blood.

His own voice raised in anger.

Their tears.

His horror—not at what he had done intentionally, but at what he had failed to guard against.

The truth settled like ash in his chest.

*It had been waiting.*

Not merely growing—but *listening*.

Drawing strength from sorrow, from fracture, from love turned briefly against itself.

A surge of undead flared from the hole.

Relis snapped his wrist, the Binding Dark lashing outward—coiling, tightening, snaring the first wave in writhing shadow. Bones locked mid-lunge. Mouths froze in silent screams.

He pivoted, drawing the thin black rod again. With a single, precise motion, he carved a shadow blade through a creature breaking free. Its body ruptured—not with gore, but with a resonant *thrum*, like a chord struck too hard. The remains collapsed into ash and dust.

Relis stepped back. Released the binding.

From the pouch at his neck, he drew a small satchel and hurled it forward, fingers unfolding like petals in ritual cadence.

The pouch detonated mid-air.

A Holy Barrage erupted—hundreds of purifying crystalline fragments manifesting like falling stars. They slammed into the onslaught in a storm of light, pulverizing flesh and bone alike, reducing the surge to drifting powder and scattered echoes.

While the Paladins battled above—dismantling what remained of the Abyssal mass—Elmon struggled to keep his companions clear of the chaos.

Meanwhile, the Myst Gazer and Ortis prepared to descend.

Ortis drew a small sphere from his robe pocket and whispered into it. The sphere ignited with a soft glow, brightening with each breath he took. As he stepped forward, it drifted ahead of him—five feet in front, hovering at the height of his eyes, unwavering.

They moved cautiously, one deliberate step at a time, descending into the pit.

Relis turned just in time to deflect an ethereal bolt—its passage leaving a hiss in the air where it failed to strike.

At the bottom of the pit, nearly sixty feet down the corridor, a pair of sentient yellow eyes stared back at them—unblinking, weaving slightly, as if anticipating a thrown spell or strike.

Relis rolled his hand into a downward spiral, then flicked his wrist in an underhand casting motion.

The corridor answered.

A sudden blast of wind surged forward, sweeping loose debris from the stone and hurling it violently toward the eyes. For a brief instant, the gaze flared—then twisted away.

The eyes vanished.

The corridor fell silent once more.

Ortis glanced in the opposite direction and caught sight of daylight filtering through the collapsed stone—an opening where the earth had given way.

Beyond it, silhouetted against the light, something moved.

A lizard-like form, its body warped and elongated, clung to the broken wall. From its flanks writhed several tentacles, snapping and lashing with brutal speed.

The sounds reached him a heartbeat later—students shouting, cries of anger and fear, the sharp *whip-crack* of flesh striking stone.

Elmon noticed Ortis stiffen and followed his gaze. He raised a hand and brushed it near Relis's shoulder—a silent signal.

Relis turned, eyes narrowing as he focused down the corridor toward the breach.

They advanced quietly, measured steps, keeping to shadow and broken stone.

Relis whispered a short invocation and cast Soul Apotheosis of the Fractured Eye upon himself.

The world shifted.

Through layers of distortion and echo-thread, the creature's true nature became clear.

"A *displacement beast*," Relis murmured. Then his voice hardened.

"*Mutated.*"

Ortis centered himself and traced a sharp sigil in the air, releasing a sigil burn that struck the creature squarely. Radiant force tore through it—searing not only flesh, but the fractured sigils that had driven its mutation.

The creature convulsed.

Its warped form twisted violently, bones and muscle snapping back into alignment as the corruption burned away. It collapsed into something closer to its original shape, yowling like a wounded hound. Across its hide, several dark spots ignited briefly, flaring with pale fire before guttering out.

The beast turned toward them—eyes wild—just as Relis raised his hand.

"Guide," he whispered.

A Guiding Bolt, bound with his Soul Fire, lanced forward and struck the creature full in the face. The impact was like burning oil thrown across living flesh. The creature shrieked, clawing at its own head as smoke and light bled from its wounds.

Relis advanced while it reeled.

His Shadow Blade flashed once—clean, precise—slicing across the creature's neck. The wound ruptured with a wet, explosive force, like splitting overripe fruit.

One remaining tentacle lashed out blindly.

It struck Relis across the shoulder, tearing into flesh. The tip of the tentacle ignited on impact, erupting into a reddish flame shot through with eerie green light—a resonant, corrupted fire that hissed as it burned.

Relis grunted but did not falter. He struck again, severing the limb as foul mist poured from the wound, the creature's essence unraveling into dark vapor.

The beast wailed once more—long, broken, and hollow—before collapsing in on itself. Even as it fell, the air around it crawled with corrupted resonance.

At last, it lay still.

They turned back toward their original path.

Ortis lifted a hand, indicating the Chamber of Mind Fire ahead. The corridor narrowed as they advanced, stone pressing close, echoes muted.

From a side chamber on the right—only a few paces ahead—a skeletal creature burst forth. It had four arms and an oversized skull, its movements jerky and unnatural, joints snapping as it leapt into the passage.

Relis reacted instantly.

He cast Wall of Light.

The corridor exploded into brilliance, illuminated as if under a blazing noon sun. His own flesh smoked from the celestial light. The creature shrieked—a thin, brittle sound—and froze mid-motion. Its bones flared white, then collapsed inward, falling silent as ash struck stone. Relis pulled his cloak in tight and spun blocking the light he had cast.

From the chamber it had emerged, more howls answered—ragged, feral cries—but they too were cut short, extinguished by the lingering celestial radiance.

The light held for nearly a minute.

Using its cover, they moved to the door of the chamber ahead. Standing to either side, Ortis reached out and pushed it open.

Inside, the hall was filled with a reddish mist, caught in the fading glow of the Wall of Light. It shimmered briefly—then began to break apart, sparkling as it settled into fine dust.

The sound was soft.

Like sand pouring into a hollow vessel.

Alfred stood at the edge of the pit, surveying the butchered remains below. Broken bones, torn limbs, and scorched fragments lay scattered across the collapsed stone. He noticed—uneasily—that several of the corpses still wore jewelry and personal effects. Rings. Chains. Tokens of lives once lived.

He picked up loose stones and debris and hurled them down, listening for movement. Nothing stirred.

*Entic was thorough*, Alfred thought.

He turned to walk back toward Elmon and the others.

A tentacle snapped up from the pit.

It wrapped around Alfred's leg and yanked hard.

He screamed as he was dragged off balance, clawing desperately at the earth, fingers digging into loose soil. Terror surged—raw and blinding.

*"HELP!"*

Justin, Entic, and Elmon reacted instantly.

Elcrull darted with the speed of an eagle.

Justin leapt forward, axe flashing, and severed the writhing limb in a single brutal stroke. The tentacle recoiled, thrashing as it fell back into the pit.

Elmon was half a step behind them not sure what was needed. He focused realizing his comrades hand stopped attempt at pulling Alfred into the pit.

Elcrull slashed at another tentacle severing it with precision strikes.

Elmon Grabbed Alfred and Pulled him clear.

The Healer sprinted toward them, already unbuckling her belt and looping it around her waist as she ran.

They pulled Alfred free and staggered backward—

Just as three more tentacles erupted from the pit, lashing wildly, grasping at empty air where they had stood moments before.

Elcrull backed away defensively awaiting anything that would lurch from the pit.

They retreated further, hearts pounding.

Seconds passed.

Then—

A sharp *arc* of sound cut through the air.

A rising whistle, like wind forced through a narrow passage.

Below them came a chorus of yowls, hissing, wet gurgling, and violent thrashing—something large tearing itself apart in darkness.

Then—

Silence.

Ortis cast Thread Binding between himself and Relis.

The connection locked—not shallow, but deep. For the next 30 minutes, they would share memories, emotions, and sensations. Sight. Pain. Fear. Truth.

Relis took a position at the doorway and raised his hand.

*“Rift Pulse.”*

The air buckled.

Planar currents collapsed inward, snapping shut like broken ribs. Any active planar workings in the chamber guttered and died in the same instant. The room became *sealed—cut off from the rest of the world.*

Relis stepped forward—And vanished.

From inside the chamber came a hideous, unearthly wail, sharp enough to scrape across Ortis’s mind. Through the Thread, Ortis *saw.*

A pale, bony humanoid sat upon a massive throne-like chair, its frame elongated, wrong—too thin, too still. Before it lay a figure on the floor, convulsing in silence. No sound escaped their mouth, but their scream was absolute. It was Sensto.

Their echo was shattered.

Their soul-thread—*being peeled away*, strand by strand.

Relis reacted instantly.

He forged the Seal of the Chasm in the air—a sigil of denial, absolute and binding.

The soul-thread snapped back into place.

Extraction halted.

The creature in the chair recoiled.

At that same instant—an axe appeared out of nowhere.

It hurtled across the chamber, spinning end over end, and buried itself deep into the arm of the throne—missing the creature's skull by inches.

The impact cracked the stone.

Sensto exited the crypt.

From the chair—or *perhaps from the shadows clinging to it*—two shadowy forms detached themselves and flowed outward, their edges rippling as they searched the room.

Hunting.

Relis raised both hands and cast Light Bind.

The room answered.

Threads of radiant force spread outward, latching onto those Relis deemed friendly. In that instant, they were bound together—not by chains, but by shared endurance. Health flowed between them. Resistances aligned. Emotional weight was redistributed so no single soul bore it alone.

And then—Elis, ... Alfred, ... Justin, and Entic materialized.

Not stepping in, not arriving—phasing into existence like ghosts dragged through glass. Their faces were frozen in silent screams, eyes wide with terror that had not yet realized it was over.

Ortis staggered.

The Light Bind backfired.

He felt his very being begin to unravel as visions flooded the shared weave—every failure, every buried malice, every moment of shame and grief each of them carried. The memories did not arrive gently. They *collided*.

Then—

Peace.

Abrupt. Absolute.

Behind Ortis, a flare of blue light erupted like a ruptured star. The creature upon the chair jerked violently, its form twisting as if struck by an unseen torment. The Sigil Sage at the foot of the throne shrieked and crawled backward, scrambling away on hands and knees.

Relis did not hesitate.

Sensto crawled from the crypt mouth, dragging himself across the churned earth. He did not speak—he pointed.

The dragons saw.

With a roar that shook the ruined grounds, they descended upon the marked earth. Claws tore soil. Stone split beneath ancient talons as if it were timber.

Sensto collapsed.

Lady Estralla saw him fall. She ran, seized his shoulders, and pulled him clear as fire shadowed the sky.

Below could be heard Orits shouting, "*Scourge the Dead.*"

Relis Summoned.

Everything loose in the chamber—bone shards, splintered stone, broken remnants—*launched forward*, driven by holy force. The barrage tore through the lesser undead and slammed into the creature on the chair.

The undead retreated.

A thunderclap detonated through the room.

The students collapsed where they stood, bodies hitting stone as one—dazed, stunned, alive.

Then a voice spoke.

It echoed like twenty voices layered together, warped and resonant, accompanied by the low, rumbling growl of something vast drawing breath—dragon-deep.

Relis turned.

Before the gate stood a monstrous demon, its presence bending the air around it.

Relis cast Wall of Light.

Radiance surged upward, forming a barrier brilliant enough to blind.

The demon gestured casually—and walked through the wall as though it were mist.

Relis's hand lowered slightly.

Out of sight, unseen by all but echo, he summoned another Shadow Blade.

The demon advanced toward the students.

Entic vanished.

The creature paused—not startled, but curious. One yellowed eye tilted toward Relis, narrowing as if tasting the air. Stones trembled beneath its step. A loose rock lifted from the ground and hurled itself toward the demon's head.

The demon swatted it aside without looking.

Its gaze dropped.

Justin was pushing himself upright, still shaking off the echo backlash. Before he could fully rise, the demon's hand closed around him—fingers like iron bands, heat bleeding through the grip.

Then—

Impact.

A point-blank axe struck the demon square in the face.

The blow rang like metal against stone, leaving only a shallow gouge—a *scratch*, nothing more.

The demon recoiled a half-step, more surprised than hurt.

Its arm swept outward in a wide, brutal arc, grasping for the unseen attacker—striking air, crushing stone, forcing Justin free as the dwarf wrenched himself loose and staggered away.

The demon straightened.

Slowly.

Now it was no longer curious.

The Healer cast Banishment.

Ortis followed with Echo Fire, the spell burning not flesh, but memory—flames that screamed without sound.

Elis raised both hands and cast Mirror Magic, reality fracturing into overlapping reflections as the demon's form multiplied and slipped.

A heartbeat later—A piercing shriek split the air, like steel being forced through stone.

A lightning bolt struck the demon from above.

It staggered.

Then came the sound of digging—stone grinding, tearing—not below them, but somewhere overhead. Heavy. Deliberate. Unseen.

*“Elmon—everyone—out!”* Relis shouted. *“Leave the pit—now!”* He pointed sharply toward the stairway.

He never finished turning.

A black hand lashed out of nothing and raked across Elis's chest.

Sigils detonated across his body in bursts of white and blue fire. The sound was unbearable—claws on slate, a banshee's wail tearing through bone and soul alike.

Elis screamed—and fell.

A few yards away, the witch recoiled.

Dal Norgal.

Her face twisted in silent agony, mouth stretched wide as lightning crawled through her veins. She hissed like flesh searing on a red-hot blade.

Then—

A hole tore through her chest.

She convulsed once.

And burst into flame.

Her body ruptured outward, scattering into ash and cinders, dissolving like dust caught in a gale.

A Quinline-plated spear appeared midair.

So did Entic.

Both struck the ground hard.

The door to the chamber slammed shut.

Stone and dirt crumbled as the room shook.

Then came the roar—deep, thunderous. Dragonfire split the sky, lightning cracking the air apart.

Ortis ran to the door and flung it open.

Above them was open sky. One dragon hovered in the air, its rider—Shoran—watching with grim focus. The other dragon, ridden by Ugnorgis, clawed at the stone as it loosed streams of crackling blue lightning toward the gate below.

The two Paladins and Bareck himself hammered the demon. Holy Ground fire flared around them. Hammer and blade battered the creature. Step by step, they drove it back. The creature swung wildly—ripping, tearing, screaming curses—claws shrieking against humming sanctified armor.

Both dragons unleashed their final storm. Ice shards scoured the air in a wide cone as lightning hammered demon and portal alike. The ground was smitten.

The air screamed with energy.

Outmatched, the demon staggered and retreated toward the gate, vowing revenge as it slipped through and vanished beyond the veil.

They breathed. . . .

The room fell silent.

Then a hideous laugh tore through it, followed by a thunderous eruption of flame bursting down from above. In the outer chamber, the sound of steel striking stone rang out—sharp, final. A curse-bound ritual ignited.

A scream followed. Laughter.

*“You cannot silence me!”*

Ortis stepped fully into the room. With every fiber of his being, he seized the gate’s astral energies and shunted them as fire—driving them through the chair and the creature alike. Both shattered in a violent cascade of light and ruin.

Ortis collapsed. Blood streamed from his nose and eyes. His breath came shallow, ragged, as though each one might be his last.

The healer was on him before the next breath could fail him. She stabilized him, hands glowing as she worked.

*“He will live,”* she said—but her voice carried no relief. *“He is fractured. His rhythm is distorted. Echo threads torn.”*

Lord Bareck staggered into the room. A deep scar split his face, blood running freely down his cheek. One pauldron was gone entirely. His chest plate bore a new, brutal dent—and a crack ran through the Whiteheart glyph emblazoned upon it.

He took in the scene, then dropped to one knee beside the cloaked figure on the floor. One hand rose toward heaven. The other rested on Relis’s body as Bareck murmured a prayer.

Relis glimmered for a brief moment. A sound like wind passed through the chamber—felt by none, but heard by all.

*“Get him upstairs,”* Bareck said quietly.

One by one, battered, bruised, and dazed, the survivors crawled out of the pit.

Reality struck them all at once—sharp and undeniable—like the first breath of a newborn forced into the world.

Lord Bareck lifted Entic and cradled him in his arms as he carried him up the stairs. Weariness weighed heavily on him after the battles, yet this young champion deserved both praise and protection.

## Chapter ⊕: Light of Dawn

They emerged into the open air and collapsed as one—Bareck kneeling as he laid Entic upon the canvas, while others bowed, sat, or simply lay where they stood, drawing in the cool breath of early evening.

The healer Estrella and the cleric Mensor moved among them, checking each for signs of undead manifestation or abyssal degradation. One by one, they were guided into Sanctum Shrouds of canvas, stripped of corrupted remnants, cleansed as Entic had been before—until every trace of the breach was purged from flesh and spirit alike.

Above and around them, the dragons settled upon the scarred field. They walked across the remnants of the undead, crushing and grinding what remained, purifying the ground with fire and lightning until nothing stirred.

It was a caustic scene—one a mere school should never have been forced to endure. And yet it had, bearing the weight of violence with echoes still unresolved. The ground was strewn with stone and bone, the scars of something that should not have reached so far.

The dragon riders dismounted to check on the war-torn. Shoran moved first, stepping into the healer's ward tent where his brother lay—exhausted, breathing shallowly, alive.

Nearby, Ugnorgis surveyed the land as though expecting something still hiding beyond the ruin. His gaze lingered on the broken ground, troubled by the sheer viciousness of what had unfolded. A school—defended by its own—beaten to within an inch of collapse, and left standing only by will.

Ortis opened his eyes to see Shoran standing over him.

*“Thank you,”* Ortis said quietly, *“for your insight into war.”*

Sharon Laid a hand on his brother's shoulder,

*‘Someone must watch over my brother,’* he thought. *‘He is too willing to shoulder the dead and the severing of echoes as though they were merely another day's labor.’*

Ortis smiled faintly—and then coughed, the sound rough, grounding, human.

Relis stirred in the cot beside Ortis, pain still echoing through his flesh. *“Damned be damned,”* he whispered. *“Who was that witch? She bore the touch of death. She breached a sacred sigil of my flesh—only death can do that.”*

He looked around, realization settling as the fray faded into silence. With a measured breath, he lay back and began a binding rite, restoring his body and sealing the sacred mark where the witch had reached.

*“She paid for it,”* he murmured. *“Death always does.”*

Shoran had never seen a Myst Gazer so bare to the world.

He studied the branded sigils, the glyphs and sacred marks etched into Relis’s SINN-flesh—lines burned not by ink, but by ordeal. Some were sharp as scars, others softened by age, yet all of them *lived*.

*“That must have pained your soul,”* Shoran said quietly.

Relis did not look away. *“SINN transformation is never without consequence. I chose it... or it chose me. Either way, I stand sanctified from on high—to walk among the dead, and hunt what should not walk at all.”*

Shoran’s gaze lingered. *“What are they—these sigils?”*

Relis exhaled, slow and measured. *“Some are glyphs of redemption. Some are wards of protection. Others are burial rites—marks laid upon me when I passed from mortal to SINN.”*

He paused, as though listening inward. *“There are Veil barriers and Time bindings I do not fully know. Some are doors that only open in death. Others are calls—signs spirits recognize, and answer when duty demands it.”*

Shoran hesitated. *“What do you mean... by SINN?”*

Relis slowly pushed himself upright, the sigils along his chest faintly catching the light as he moved.

*“When Adama first walked this world,”* he said, *“he breached what was sacred. He carried a curse from Eyona into Cragnearth—and that fracture was SINN’s first wound.”*

Shoran frowned. *“So SINN is—”*

*“Misuse,”* Relis interrupted gently. *“Magic twisted from purpose into power. Knowledge wielded as dominion. Aid turned into weapon.”*

He drew a slow breath. *“When the forbidden tree took root, SINN spread—not as a thing, but as a choice. Those who see magic as conquest rather than care... they deepen the fracture.”*

Shoran studied the markings again. *“And you?”*

Relis met his gaze. *“To answer that corruption, the herald of Whiteheart carved a path. Not for purity—but for service.”*

He touched one of the older sigils, worn smooth by time. *“We take the very thing Adama broke this world with, and we turn it against the break. We do not defile what Whiteheart made.”*

His voice lowered, steady as stone. *“We cleanse it—one breath at a time.”*

The grounds looked as though a war of a thousand knights had clashed against a fortified enemy.

Caverns yawned where stone had once been whole. Pits gaped open, rimmed with broken masonry. Rubble, blood, and the charred remains of carcasses lay strewn across the field, while thin columns of smoke still rose from pyres Mensor had set—and dragons had sanctified with fire.



Destruction was everywhere.

Echoes lay breached. Memory threads were torn and trailing. Veils that had endured for centuries now existed only as fractured remnants, whispering where they once held firm.

After a long while, the Council returned—cautious, silent, stepping carefully as though the ground itself might still remember the violence. Their eyes were wide, not with fear alone, but with something closer to grief. What remained before them was not merely ruin—it was a lament. Proof that horror had slept beneath their feet, patient and unnoticed.

They began to speak in low, fractured arguments as the Chancellor arrived. He stopped short, stunned by the devastation.

And memory struck him he heard it deep within himself. “*Welcome.*”

He was young again—standing atop the walls of the Elrorian Citadel of the Third Elvish Region as the Red Scourge breached its defenses. Stone falling. Fire rising. The sound of wards failing.

It was a memory he had spent a lifetime burying.

And now it stood before him once more. Some horrors do not awaken. They wait to be forgotten. A vision flashed of a well. He recoiled.

The Chancellor scanned the horizon, searching for who still stood.

In the distance, dragons prowled the ruined ground—chewing bone, spitting fire, ice, and lightning as they stomped and clawed at the earth, digging as though something might yet remain hidden beneath the wreckage.

Paladins moved methodically through the devastation, inspecting what remained, measuring the breach, verifying the tethered echoes of what once was. Nothing was hurried. Nothing was assumed finished.

Near the shattered door, Ortis knelt alone, hands steady as he performed a quiet ritual—one of sealing, listening, and remembrance.

Not far away, the students sat half-naked on canvas sheets, wrapped in borrowed cloaks and bandages. All were alive. For the moment, that was enough. They smiled at one another—tired, shaken, laughing softly as they spoke of Entic’s heroics, as though saying it aloud made it real.

Lord Bareck stood beside the makeshift altar, voice low but resolute, offering prayers and reaffirming his vows. Nearby, the healer knelt, burning incense and murmuring invocations—unaware, or perhaps simply unacknowledging, the vigil unfolding around her.

And above it all stood Mensor.

He was perched atop a mound of crushed stone, churned earth, and skeletal remnants, arms crossed. His gaze was fixed on the grounds—not with fear, nor relief, but with the quiet scrutiny of one who saw more than the surface allowed.

His eyes followed the echoes that still lingered.

The Chancellor moved cautiously through the debris toward Ortis.

Ortis heard the crunch and uneven cadence of footsteps long before he saw him. He rose in a single motion and turned sharply, hand already set for spell or invocation. The faint glow in his eyes had not yet faded—the remnant power still pulsing in his soul.

*“You should not walk unannounced through the aftermath of a siege, Chancellor,”* Ortis said, voice low but edged. *“I could have lashed out—or worse.”*

The Chancellor gave a short laugh. *“Not on your best days.”*

He gestured broadly at the ruined grounds. *“So—what do we do with all of this?”*

Ortis did not answer at once. He looked around. Slowly, deliberately, he spread his arms and turned, taking in the shattered stone, scorched earth, and lingering echoes.

*“School,”* he said simply.

At the Chancellor’s look, Ortis continued—calm now, resolute.

*“Every fabric of this academy can serve learning. Purification. Proper burial of the dead. Grief rites. Echo cleansing. Veil studies. Thread mapping. Measurements of reality itself—laid bare, not theorized.”*

He met the Chancellor’s gaze.

*“It will take time. It will be difficult. But what the students gain will be immeasurable.”*

His voice softened—not in doubt, but in certainty. *“This is truth exposed. And truth, Chancellor, is the greatest teacher we have.”*

Ortis surveyed the grounds one final time.

He placed an arm lightly around the Chancellor’s shoulder and lifted his gaze to the sky, his voice steady—reverent, but not loud.

*“To you, Great Whiteheart,”* he said, *“be praise. We were spared the sorrow of losing this school—and those who stood for it.”*

He lowered his eyes and looked at the Chancellor. *“When the breach tore through silence, we did not rebuild in haste. We studied.”*

Ortis gestured toward the ruined earth, the scorched stone, the quiet that had followed. *“For truth, once laid bare, must be remembered—not covered over.”*

The Chancellor stood still, mouth slightly open, uncertain how to respond.

A sorcerer.

A school.

And now—Whiteheart and memory.

He stepped back, the weight of it settling in his chest, and pondered what had just been set in motion. Tears trickled down as he turned his head away.

As the echoes settled and memory began to still, the sky answered.

A bolt of brilliance tore downward.

The heavens shrieked—air resonating with a force older than storm or spell.

Bareck stood frozen in the light, his armor blazing like the noonday sun, every sigil alive. For a breath, he did not move.

Then thunder rolled.

Bareck collapsed to one knee, smoke curling from the ground beneath him—not wounded, but spent.

Ortis and Mensor did not rush to him.

They simply looked skyward, awe written plainly on their faces.

They understood.

Ortis approached Bareck with a quiet smile. He knelt beside him as Bareck remained on one knee, deep in prayer. Ortis laid a steady hand on his shoulder.

*“He has called your duties holy,”* Ortis said softly. *“He marked them with blessing.”*

Bareck looked up, eyes searching Ortis’s face. *“You know Him, my friend?”*

Ortis exhaled slowly. *“Only recently.”*

He hesitated—measuring the weight of what he was about to reveal. Then his gaze lifted skyward.

*“He introduced Himself with words that still give me pause,”* Ortis said.

*“I am eternal.*

*I am the heart of creation.*

*I am all-consuming.*

*I am.”*

The memory settled heavily between them.

*“I was charged with a duty,”* Ortis continued, voice quieter now. *“One I did not seek.”*

He drew a breath and let it ground him.

*He said:*

*“Elmon is my calling to this age. He is the heart of the called—the stone of strength in a world that has lost its way. You will lead him.”*

Bareck smiled—slow, knowing, unafraid.

*“Then this is no ending,”* he said. *“If this is the awakening of what is to come, we will see one another again.”*

He rose to his feet. As he did, the sigil and emblem of Whiteheart upon his armor gleamed—renewed, whole.

Ortis stood as well, then turned and walked toward the students.

The school broke from the violence for two months, allowing time to recover—and to prepare for what Ortis was quietly setting into motion.

Elmon walked the grounds almost daily, studying the echoes that still clung to stone and soil. Certain places screamed at him. Others hummed with fragile calm. He marked both.

Where resonance felt too sharp for study, he recommended distance. Where peace settled naturally, he asked the school to designate teaching circles—places of restoration between the heavier disciplines now taking shape.

Curriculums shifted. Some were rewritten entirely. Echo reading and tether inscription were no longer treated as abstract theory but as living practice. Elmon was asked to assist—guiding smaller circles, helping students learn how to listen before they reached.

Debris was cleared. Damaged halls were restructured. The scarred southern grounds were transformed into a four-acre field of disciplined training—open sky above, marked circles below.

The cleric ward expanded its instruction: cleansing rites, burial preparation, the duties of the Black Cloaks. Prayer alcoves were established where rubble had once lain. The dead were honored. The ruins cataloged.

The school breathed again.

And Elmon felt the shift within himself—from rote study to living record, from student of echoes to steward of them.

He wrote to his parents, describing the events as carefully as he could—reassuring them of his safety, though he no longer felt untouched by what had occurred.

Rumors began to move through the city in widening circles. Stories always follow violence. Some sharpen truth. Others distort it.

The school stood—changed.

## Chapter ⊕: End for a Beginning

*Where silence was torn, we planted memory. Where death walked, we taught breath.”  
—Sanctum Scroll, attributed to Ortis of the Thread Vigil*

The school year reconvened in the Month of Star. Winter still hammered the city as workers finished the last of the reconstruction and repairs.

In the wake of the Rupture, whispers spread beyond the academy walls. The Cult of the Damned surfaced openly in Scathnard, seeking to claim the scarred southern ruins as a sanctuary. They named their rite the Calling of Blood.

The King refused them.

Within days, the cult’s leaders were seized. By week’s end, they were executed outside the western gate. Scathnard had no appetite for further sacrifice. The Rupture had been enough.

The message was clear: whatever had stirred beneath Echo Hall would not be given allies above it.

Classes reconvened utilizing the new outdoor classroom.

They learned to smell the aftermath lingering in stone and soil, to hear the whispers of ancient and ancestral memory.

They traced ruptured threads, practiced proper cleansing rituals, and were taught clerical prayers and healer’s songs not normally offered—yet welcomed here.

The Holy Hand remained for three months, ensuring the grounds were truly safe.

Bareck thanked Ortis for his welcome, his aid, and the chance to bury yet another violation of death.

He whispered, laughing, to Ortis, “I’ll send the Chancellor a burden of coin in jest—just to bring his youth back.”

In the days of digging and removing debris—of gathering the remnants of the dead for burial—many artifacts were recovered from the tombs and collapsed chambers.

These were collected and housed within a secured vault beneath Echo Hall.

Each item raised questions.

Could it be returned to the surviving heirs?

Or would the school be compelled to use some of it to pay the laborers who had uncovered it?

The newly appointed overseer of Echo Hall, Master Morian Helsper a Kelt Human—saw to it that no such decision was made lightly.

Every artifact was entered into the Hall’s ledger with meticulous care: its exact location of discovery, links to associated items, notable markings or clues, and a brief account of its recovery.

Nothing was left to chance, as far as they were concerned.

Helsper was a Filí archivist, formerly lore master of the Silver Vault of Murion, chamber level three.

He and Ortis shared a long familiarity with the discipline of such work—and with the weight it carried.

For Ortis, it felt like a new kind of beginning.

No longer merely maintaining old vaults with the occasional addition,

They were now assembling a fractured history—one that demanded identification, acknowledgment, and the release of grief before it could finally be laid to rest.

Garek and four others were hired by the council to protect the battle sight and guard the storage Vault in Echo Hall. They were given a couple of the study rooms in the basement next to the various vaults that were being filled. A recommendation by Elmon and Alfred.

Among the most notable items recovered thus far was a crown, leading to the assumption of an overthrow or a reflection of the judge's depth of depravity for control. There are only a couple of possibilities: Lord Herin Makdik, who supposedly died at the battle of White Ridge, a nearly fatal breach of the Ildrol kinship during the Red Scourge siege, or it might belong to the missing Monarch Elrool Nijar Sheloo, who disappeared without a trace after visiting the Citadel of 'Garis Noll'.

Among the recovered items was a bow crafted from Relic Whisp wood—an Elvin artifact rare even in its own age, typically carried only by Master Archers or sworn Guardians.

Its limbs were unmarred, its string long decayed, as though it had been laid down with intention.

Several etched swords followed.

Each bore a name.

They did not appear forged for war, but gifted—ceremonial once, perhaps, before necessity claimed them.

Elcrull worked beside Helsper, learning proper logging procedures and archival notation. As she turned one blade beneath the lamplight, she paused.

Near the hilt lay a silver claw set within a crescent—cleanly struck, deliberate. Within the inward curve of the crescent rested a small star.

She leaned closer.

The silver claw was a known heraldic device—commonly used to designate Catar claim across documents and official seals. But this was not ink. It was forged into steel.

Helsper adjusted his lenses. "*Catar claim mark*," he said. "*You'll find it on their archives.*"

Elcrull nodded slowly. The inner symbol, however, was not generic. The variation mattered. She recalled:

Three dots marked archival works.

A long line crossed with a bar signified armor.

A small circle designated secured documents.

But a star...

Helsper frowned. "Magistrates or Lore Masters."

Elcrull's fingers hovered above the steel.

*“A star on a blade,”* she murmured, *“means it was made for purpose.”*

Not owned.

Made.

She recorded it carefully: Catar Forge Claim — Magistrate designation.

Helsper added a new entry into the master archive.

Elcrull said nothing more.

In Black Mountain, she had known only Dwarven craft. Her father had never spoken of Catar forging. Catar guarded. Catar fought.

They did not forge.

Or so she had been led to believe.

One artifact defied easy classification: a short rod, no more than two feet in length, capped with a halberd-like head. Quiet runes layered its surface, dim glyphs half-asleep beneath age. At its base lay the unmistakable signatures of both Dwarven and Hobbit smiths—a collaboration rare enough to suggest purpose beyond function.

There were also stone necklaces—ornate, weighty, and costly.

Rings of fine make, some marked with sigils whose meanings had already begun to fade.

And finally, an upper portion of plate armor bearing the sigil of the Corion Guild—a guild that once held power in this region, and no longer did.

Two staves stood apart from the rest.

One was unmistakably Fili—worked with disciplined restraint, its markings aligned to known sorcerous traditions, its balance precise and intentional.

The other was something else entirely.

It was ornate beyond classification, its composition exquisite in ways Helsper had never encountered. No joints were visible. No seams betrayed its making. When he lifted it from the table, it did not lean or fall.

It stood on its own.

Those nearby heard the voice—not spoken aloud, yet unmistakable:

*“I am claimed.”*

Helsper froze.

He did not reach for the staff again.

He did not question what had occurred.

He knew the meaning.

Whatever this relic had been fashioned for, it had found its bearer—or bound itself to him by design older than consent. Helsper stepped back at once and marked the moment in the ledger with a single glyph of recognition.

Word reached Ortis before the hour was out.

He came personally.

This fell within his sacred charge to the Filí Hall: the discernment of Ethos-bound relics and devices of mythic origin. Ortis studied both staves in silence, his attention lingering on the second—on the way the air around it seemed to hold its breath.

Of all the items recovered, a handful drew sustained scrutiny.

The Relic Whisp Bow foremost among them—a rare Elvin artifact, its limbs pale and faintly translucent. It would require ritual testing to determine whether it still answered to Elvin blood or the breath of a Guardian. Some such bows went silent when removed from their lineage. Others remembered.

The staves were next. As was the short halberd-headed rod—handheld, compact, and unmistakably deliberate. Anything bearing runes, sigils, or etched markings was isolated at once, especially those that whispered, echoed, or responded faintly to proximity.

The etched swords troubled Ortis the most.

Each bore a name.

Not maker's marks—but personal inscriptions, suggesting gifts, oaths sworn, or bonds sealed in ceremony. These would require careful verification: inscription tracing, thread reading, and emotional axis mapping to understand who they once belonged to—and why they had been laid to rest below.

Then there was the rod.

Barely two feet long, forged in a hybrid style unmistakably Dwarven and Hobbit in origin. Its runes were layered rather than stacked, the glyphs subdued but purposeful. Cross-cultural forging of this kind was rare—usually born of necessity rather than tradition.

Ortis suspected it was no weapon at all.

More likely a ritebreaker—designed to sever corrupted threads, breach damaged Veils, or perform work that demanded precision rather than force. Tools like that were never made lightly.

Beyond it lay the jewelry and armor.

Not a hoard—but a scattering of lives.

Rare stone necklaces, ornate rings, some bearing sigils of houses long forgotten. More than three dozen pieces in all. A hired Dwarven geologist and stone-reader was brought in to examine them properly, cataloging each gem with meticulous care—its origin, its cut, its pedigree. Stones remembered where they came from, even when names were lost.

The partial plate mail drew a hush when it was uncovered.

The sigil of the Corion Guild—an order erased so completely that it survived only in myth and half-remembered songs. Its presence explained much that had been misattributed over generations. This was not a rumor. This was proof.

These items would require thread tracing—not merely to identify ownership, but to locate heirs, reconstruct broken lineages, and release grief that had never been allowed to settle.

Then there were the staves.

Two of mastery.

One was unmistakably Fili—a sorcerer’s staff, lost and now returned. Ortis lingered over it longer than he intended. Who had carried it? A seeker of artifacts? A tracer of lost names? Someone who had walked willingly into silence?

The staff did not answer.

But it did not forget.

It was cataloged with reverence, its lore recorded, its resonance noted. Some truths would come later—when the world was ready to remember them.

The second staff defied comprehension.

It bore no lineage Ortis recognized—no school, no tradition, no echo-thread he could immediately place. Its craftsmanship was exquisite, but unfamiliar, as if shaped by intent rather than hand.

When Master Helsper lifted it, the room stilled.

The staff stood upright of its own accord.

And then—without voice, without vibration, without spell—

“I am claimed.”

The words did not echo.

They settled.

Helsper froze, breath caught halfway between surprise and reverence. He did not tighten his grip. He did not release it. The staff had not chosen his hands—it had chosen his presence.

A binding had occurred.

Not ownership.

Not mastery.

Purpose.

Ortis approached slowly, the way one does a sanctum threshold or a grave not yet named. His senses reached—not outward, but inward—seeking the marks beneath the marks.

Ethos.

Mythic intent.

The law is older than the inscription.

This was no artifact awaiting interpretation.

It was a living relic.

And its claim was not a reward, but a breach.

Something long veiled had stepped forward and redefined itself through witness. Ortis felt the weight of it press against parts of his understanding he had not touched in years—layers of meaning buried beneath scholarship and discipline.

Ritual archaeology of the soul.

Prophecy did not announce itself.

It embedded.

Ortis withdrew his hand before touching the staff.

Some truths were not meant to be tested.

Only carried—until they decided otherwise.

The students marveled at all they saw.

Some recoiled during the lectures, their souls cringing from truths too raw to swallow. Others leaned in—seeking clarity, comprehension, and the sacred weight of knowing.

Elmon walked the battlefield daily—not as a wanderer, but as a seeker.

His eyes traced Echo marks etched into stone and soil, each one a whisper of what had been. The whispers led to Sigils, and the Sigils to artifacts—some sacred, some vile. Each discovery expanded the tombs, not with stone, but with sorrow.

The students followed in staggered silence.

Some carried journals. Others bore incense. And a few held ritual tools gifted by Bareck—no longer symbols of ceremony, but instruments meant to endure what memory demanded.

When the Chair's remnants were unearthed, the air itself recoiled.

It screamed—not with sound, but with malice.

Deceit clung to its frame like rot. Degradation seeped from its joints. It was not a seat—it was a throne of violation, a relic of the Judge's dominion.

The treasure room Elmon had studied on the old map was no sanctuary.

It was a vault of madness.

Its walls echoed with defection—souls once pure, now twisted, thrust into darkness for a purpose not their own.

Concealment.

Control.

Dominion.

The Judge had not merely ruled—he had rewritten the sanctum's breath, turning memory into a weapon and silence into a prison.

Many attended Ortis's lectures not for comfort, but for clarity.

He spoke not from scrolls, but from soulwork—his voice a tether between the living and the lost.

When he held the Filí Sorcerer's staff, he did not teach.

He remembered.

Ortis's descent into the Ornate Staff's mystery was slower. He did not touch it again for three days. Instead, he prepared—fasting, inscribing breath-ward glyphs, and consulting the Echo Ledger.

When he finally approached, the staff stood on its own, as if awaiting him.

He whispered a phrase in Toreaz. The glyphs shimmered. A veil parted—not in the air, but in the soul.

*“This is not a tool,”* he said to the gathered students.

*“It is a vow. It remembers its bearer before the bearer remembers himself.”*

Elmon knelt nearby, eyes wide. He had seen many relics, but none that claimed a soul aloud.

Ortis turned to him.

*“You will trace its axis. Not with ink, but with grief. You must find where it was broken—and why it chose to be whole again.”*

The students began their training not with spells, but with silence.

They learned to listen to the staff’s hum.

To map its resonance.

To feel its weight in dreams.

One student wept during the third session.

Another saw a vision of a forgotten monarch.

Elmon found a glyph that matched one he’d uncovered near the Chair remnants.

Ortis nodded.

*“Then it is tied to the Judge. And we must prepare.”*

For Elmon, this was what school was meant to be—real, raw, authentic.

No longer a place of rote memorization or distant theory, but a sanctum where memory bled into motion and ritual cadence pulsed with meaning.

He doubled down on third-year Arcane Investigation with Ortis, drawn by the staves and the soulwork they demanded.

His battlefield recollections reframed everything.

What once felt abstract—Binding Memory to Motion, Sacred Annotation—now rang with truth.

The breach had taught him what lectures could not: that breathwork was sacred, that witnessing was a vow, and that annotation was not just precision—it was reverence.

His desk overflowed with journals and ledgers of Dream Inscription.

He reread them obsessively—not to revise, but to reinscribe.

A new journal began to form.

One that felt right.

One that could carry the authenticity, the secrets, the meanings of dreams, and the revelations that had reshaped him.

He knew he would have to turn it in at year’s end.

But he did not know what would become of it.

Would it be shelved in the school’s library, tucked among the student documentation he had seen before?

Or would it be sealed—sanctified—and read only by those who understood the weight of breath, and the silence between glyphs?

One afternoon, seated beside Master Ortis with fifteen other students, Elmon phased out—not physically, but mentally.

He stood in a dark corridor that ended at a raised platform of arches and emanating glyphs.

They pulsed faintly, alive with meaning.

He studied them carefully, placing each form into memory.

When he reached to read one—he was back in the classroom.

Master Ortis was staring at him, close, focused—like a man reading a page that had begun to write itself.

*“What is the room, Elmon?”* Ortis asked quietly.

Elmon blinked, gathering the shift. For a moment he couldn’t tell who had asked the question—the room, or the man beside him.

He felt it then.

Both were waiting.

He closed his eyes and centered his breath, letting the images rise without force.

A sanctum with no walls.

A gate that sang instead of opening.

And a figure cloaked in memory, not shadow, who leaned close and whispered—“You are not the echo. You are the thread.”

Elmon awoke cold, lying in the cleric’s ward.

Mensor sat beside him, gently wiping his forehead.

*“I tell you,”* he said with a soft laugh, *“if you need to see me, my door is always open. You do not need to go to such lengths just for a visit.”*

Over Mensor’s shoulder stood the Chancellor, his expression tight with unease.

Christin sat on the other side of the bed, silent but watchful.

The Chancellor cleared his throat and addressed Elmon.

*“Why do you keep disturbing the class’s quorum?”*

Before Elmon could answer, Relis entered the ward.

He was cloaked, his hood drawn. He removed it slowly.

*“Because, Chancellor,”* Relis said evenly, *“the boy is going places not of his own choosing.”*

The room stilled.

*“He is being drawn—by events, by prophecy, by liberations whose requirements lie beyond the academic frameworks you are comfortable with.”*

Relis met the Chancellor’s gaze without hostility. *“By movements of the spiritual realm you do not know, and cannot yet, comprehend.”*

Relis stepped forward, placing himself gently between Christin and Elmon.

He studied Elmon’s eyes—not searching, but listening.

*“Was the imagery clear?”* he asked quietly. *“Did it carry longing... or displacement?”*

*“I—I don’t know,”* Elmon said. He wasn’t certain what Relis was asking. Not fully.

Relis nodded once. *“In the future, when visions come—dreams, insights, callings tied to ethereal threads—you must attend to their sensory weight. Sound. Pressure. Heat. Absence. These are not embellishments. They are keys. They tell you what is happening—and why.”*

A deep voice spoke from the doorway, heavy enough to silence the room.

*“He must not walk this path. It will cost him even his memory.”*

Relis turned sharply.

A shade stood there—half-formed, like a memory refusing to fade.

Before it could withdraw, Relis raised his hand and cast a Sanctum Binding. The air tightened. The shade flickered, moaning softly as the binding held.

Relis stepped closer, his voice steady.

*“By this binding, I sanction you. Speak—do you seek release, or do you wander in unrest?”*

The form shifted.

A knight emerged—scarred, battered, eyes heavy with sorrow.

*“I am Herin Makdik.”*

Relis did not hesitate. He performed the Rite of Last Breath.

The knight bowed his head once as the binding loosened, and then he was gone—released from the echo of a cursed vigil.

The room remained still.

Herin Makdik’s death—known now to be bound to the Citadel and the Vault—answered many questions.

It raised one far more troubling.

How did a shade dead for more than a thousand years know Elmon’s name?

Elmon returned to his studies with renewed restraint, setting aside the pursuit of peace in favor of practices that cleared the mind. Quiet meditation became a discipline rather than a refuge. His life had grown crowded—visions overlapping with dreams, dreams bleeding into waking thought—and the strain had begun to show.

He recorded every vision.

Each dream was captured like a painted image, preserved through careful ledger notes etched into memory. Not interpretation—documentation. He was learning to witness without distortion.

The end of the fourth school year approached, marking the second year of his mastery. Time no longer rushed him; it layered him.

Together, they completed the Sacred Annotation of the two staves.

The Filí staff was finally identified.

It had belonged to **Sir Robert Dol Silverscent**—a figure long debated within the Filí courts. Some had claimed he was myth, others that he was a pedagogical construct, a story shaped to give students something worthy to become.

The staff disagreed.

Master Ortis opened a sacred Filí codex—one not touched lightly—and entered their findings. Not legend. Not aspiration.

A record of Sir Robert Dol Silverscent's demise.

**Codex Entry: 7043** Diminished References — Archived by Declaration

**Source note:** The staff identified as belonging to Silverscent was recovered from the encrypted burial vaults beneath the Citadel of Garis Noll, constructed under the authority of the Judge later designated *Mad*.

Silverscent's investigation traced the presence of a concealed relic within the Citadel—one whose discovery would have exposed the Judge's vault network and revealed the extent of his dominion-driven control over the Scathnian Isle. Such a revelation could not be permitted.

Silverscent was deliberately lured into a chamber containing seized and concealed treasures. He was executed there without a trial. His corpse, echo, and thread-structure were left within a cursed vault, sealed but not laid to rest.

Over time, that vault fell under demonic hegemony. The corrupted echo field rewrote memory, belief, and record, bending local histories to serve the core malignancy that grew unchecked until the rupture was formally acknowledged.

**Staff Notes (Physical and Mythic Assessment):**

**Length:** Personal staff 55 inches from base crown to staff Mount crown.

**Construction:** Six shafts of various triangulated cuttings of wood. Each cut rune glypheid and bound to form a central shaft.

**Woods Identified:**

- Farike black wood
- Crystal Faey Wood
- Shimmering Silverwood
- Red Iron Wood
- White Elvin Oak

**Crowns / Mounts:**

Both the base crown and the upper mount are forged of Sigil Iron, plated in Mythril. Dwarven inspection confirms identical composition and workmanship as best we can determine based.

**Separation Ring:**

The ring is of pure Mythril, and according to the Mythic study and Apparent AlèDün Scribes beliefs. It is seven layers of rune-marked Mythril, featuring a Quinline inner core that the crystal apex mount is made of.

**Apex Mount:**

A Memory Stone shard of unprecedented size, exceeding all known records. Secured by four leader shafts spiraling upward to the apex, terminated with a Mythril spike. Inscribed with advanced memory lithography.

### **Codex Closure:**

Recorded this day under the reign of King Mathis Oringal, Fourth Son of Scathnard.

Ortis required the Chancellor and the six Council members to place their signet marks upon the closing entry, affirming truth and time pliancy beyond dispute. The record was sent by manual courier alone.

For the steps he took, the man deserved a walk home.

The year closed on another academic threshold.

A battle had been fought on school grounds—not for conquest, but for containment. A sleeping, apocalyptic fracture of demonic hatred, ancient and seething, had been awakened and ritualized into war. Instead of domination or release, it was severed—sent into silence—to be studied as remembrance, duty, and function.

The entire Vault was excavated, its ceiling removed. The walls were built up with the remaining stone not used in the building of Echo Hall. Replication of some areas was conducted as a declaration of the actual findings.

Other spaces—One burial vault was untouched and unstudied. The site became a living museum, where classes were conducted within the wound itself. Large fragments of original stone remained in place for Echo study and advanced training.

Along the southern edge of the grounds, overlooking the eastern sea, a graveyard was established. All recovered dead were properly recognized and buried, accompanied by grief markers and runic inscriptions carved into stone mantles. Sigils were laid by Relis to ensure their rest—wards not of fear, but of peace.

During the closing festival of the year, Emmy Moorcal—the third council member, an elf of nearly three thousand years—made a quiet announcement.

I recall the Judge of Garis Noll had been hanged on the southern wall of the keep, some thirty yards from the edge of Echo Hall.

Ortis recorded the detail without comment.

He marked it for future investigation.

## Chapter ⊗: The Breath of Freedom

School was out for another two months for those noted as Master Students. The grounds had quieted, lectures paused, and the weight of the year loosened its grip.

Elmon had planned to take a ship to visit his parents. Instead, word reached him that they were coming to see him. His mother was very old now, and his father did not expect her to last the year.

Elmon arranged a bound suite near the school—quiet, warm, and close enough that he could attend to them without neglecting his duties. He paid for it himself, drawing from the earnings he had gathered through mentoring, tutoring, and serving as a secondary instructor.

It felt right. Not an obligation—but a choice.

Entic found himself admired by Elcrull—not for the chaos of battle, but for the precision of his courage. She had seen it firsthand: the moment he used the Ghost Walk not to flee, but to alter the course of the witch’s intent, thrusting the special spear true when it mattered most.

Around her, Entic felt different. Strong. Not pitied. Not overlooked. When she nuzzled close, soft and warm, it was not comfort offered—it was trust returned.

Weeks later, a letter arrived at his uncle’s home. It bore the school’s seal and spoke plainly of Entic’s actions during the battle—naming him a key aide in the defense of the grounds. Enclosed was a token granting payment of his tuition for the coming year.

No embellishment. No ceremony.

Just acknowledgment.

The gang had gathered to explore the city—an afternoon of breath and camaraderie before the next threshold. Among them walked three Master Students—now entering their final year: Elmon Silverwood, Chelsis Norgelis, and Con Tiligus. Four Archivists, now in their third year: Entic Orisal, Elcrull Mistern, Justine Rindle, and Maria Hourline. And the Graduate Student, Christin Maple, whose quiet insight often carried more weight than ceremony.

Each bore the sigil crest awarded by the school—etched in silver, stone, or woven thread—marking their year, their role, and their sacrifice. These were not mere decorations. They were seals of service: for their labor in reconstruction, their guidance amid chaos, and their unwavering presence in the sanctum’s darkest hours.

They knew the rules.

They stopped by the Hanging Unicorn to see it again after a year. The fake unicorn head was gone—but not forgotten.

The dwarven barmaid spotted Justin immediately. She swaggered up, grinning, and gave him a firm squeeze. Her friendliness hit Justin like a hammer strike to the ribs.

“*Well now,*” she laughed, “*what’s my axe-heaving knight drinkin’ tonight?*”

Justin grinned. “*Burn my beard—your Bitten Brew. Make it a Glistening Hammer. Feels like a cork-and-nose kind of night.*”

She chuckled and turned to fetch it.

Justin caught her wrist lightly, pulling her back just a step—too familiar. Too forward. The room shifted.

The pub owner noticed.

Without a word, he reached beneath the bar, lifted a heavy maul, and slammed it down onto the deck with a crack that silenced the room.

Every head turned.

Slowly, the bar returned to its lively nature.

*“I’ve seen you most nights,”* Gorith said, looking Justin square in the eyes. *“You’ve got a mythril eye.”*

Justin leaned in and rubbed her nose.

*“How long is this bar line?”*

She rubbed his nose in return. *“Called for a year left.”*

Justin smiled. *“How much to sever the bar line?”*

She pointed toward the barkeep.

Justin stood, glanced back at Gorith, and said, *“My hammer can fix this.”* Then he walked over to the bar.

The discussion was low and serious, lasting a few long minutes. Finally, the barkeep slammed his fist down on the bar.

Justin turned and headed back to the table with a grin.

*“Seems weed got sometin in common,”* he said. *“He knew mi fadder. So... how bout yus and mi grow beards together?”*

Gorith stepped back and looked him over slowly.

Elmon nudged Christin, smiling. *“He’s got rock eyes with Gorith.”*

Christin frowned slightly. *“Rock eyes?”*

Elmon leaned closer. *“He wants to marry her. Raise a family. Pups.”*

*“Oh,”* Christin said. *“Ahh Got it.”*

Elmon smiled. *“You don’t know dwarven mannerisms.”*

Gorith raised both hands, palms up, slow and deliberate.

Justin stood, flexed his shoulders, raised a fist, and pounded the table once.

The bar erupted in cheers.

For the rest of the evening, Justin and Gorith sat deep in discussion. She slapped him a few times—testing. He grinned.

Then Justin slapped her once—firm, measured.

She laughed and nuzzled him openly.

Elmon leaned back, satisfied. *“I think they’re getting married soon.”*

Christin nodded. *“Justin’s been talking about it for weeks.”*

As the festivities swelled and the merriment rose, a cloaked figure entered the bar unnoticed and slipped into a corner booth.

Entic and Elcrull sat arm in arm, drinking. The pub was loud with song and stamping feet.

Elcrull's head snapped toward the corner. She leaned close and whispered.

Entic followed her gaze. His jaw tightened. He leaned toward Elmon and murmured something.

Elmon waved a quiet no.

Entic bowed his head—and vanished.

Elmon rose, shaking his head, and crossed the room alone.

“Sir,” he said evenly, stopping at the booth, “*you know it’s illegal to project your desire onto others. I’d advise you to stop before I inform the barkeep.*”

The cloaked figure slid a dagger from his coat and laid it on the table.

“*Are you going to stop me, schoolboy?*”

The dagger slowly turned—its point angling back toward its owner.

The man’s eyes widened. He straightened, trying to look unbothered.

“*Spells aren’t allowed either!*” he snapped.

Elmon didn’t raise his voice.

“*This is no spell,*” he said. “*It’s a specter—and it has no care for absorbing your life.*”

The dagger lifted a finger’s width off the table.

Elmon placed his palm on it. The metal *sank*, clattering softly.

“*Mind your manners, sir.*”

The man lunged for the dagger. It vanished.

A dull *thud*.

The blade reappeared, embedded in the table—mere inches from the man’s hand.

Elmon paused, stepped back, turned, and returned to his friends.

The music never stopped.

Entic crawled out from beneath the table, brushing sawdust from his sleeves, making a show of having hidden the entire time.

Elmon glanced down at him. “*I think,*” he said calmly, “*we’ve resolved that issue.*”

A barmaid screamed.

She staggered back, knocking into a chair, her eyes locked on the corner booth.

The hooded man sat rigid—eyes glassy.

A knife protruded from his throat.

Another blade remained embedded in the table before him.

The barkeep didn’t ask questions. He raised a horn and blew hard.

Within moments, three men in heavy armor stormed in—one moving immediately to seal the exit.

The barmaid pointed, shaking.

Elmon lifted his hands slightly, palms open.

*“I sense something,”* he said evenly, *“crawling low across the floor in front of the bar.”* He threw his drink where he thought it was.

He shrugged, just enough.

*“I missed.”*

An old man materialized—hunched, barefoot, wearing only a sleeveless shirt—and dashed through and shattered the window.

The guards reacted instantly.

One hurled himself through the window after him.

Another froze at the door, stunned.

The third bolted past him and vanished into the dark street beyond.

Minutes later, three more men arrived and spoke briefly with the guard at the entrance. One was sent away at once. The others moved to the corner booth, examining the table, the body, the blood.

A wagon rumbled to a stop outside.

A tall, broad-shouldered man entered, followed by another dressed in dark, plain clothes. Together they lifted the corpse and carried it out without ceremony.

The taller man remained. He turned slowly, surveying the pub.

Students. Dwarves. Teamsters. Smithies. The barkeep’s staff.

No one shouted. No one ran. Nothing *looked* out of order.

He raised his voice.

*“Did any of you see what happened?”*

A teamster rose from his seat and walked forward, pointing toward Elmon’s table as he began to explain.

The man studied the floor.

A partial bloodstain—barefoot. The inside edge of a man’s foot pressed into the spill.

Several steps followed along the bar. Dragging. Slipping.

A broken mug lay nearby. Against the bar front, a faint outline where someone had been forced back.

The stride lengthened toward the shattered window.

Three men stood near the opening, pointing toward Elmon’s table as one of them spoke quietly.

The man crossed the room and stopped at Elmon’s table.

*“The teamster there,”* he said, nodding once, *“says you exchanged words with the man in the corner.”*

Elmon met his gaze. “Yes.”

*“What about?”*

Elmon replied evenly, explaining that the man had been projecting toward Elcrull.

Elcrull shook her head in confirmation.

The man’s eyes shifted—just once.

He looked at Entic. Entic met his gaze without blinking.

*“I approached the corner table to address a disturbance,”* Elmon said evenly.

*“The gentleman placed a dagger on the table after I informed him that projection was not permitted in a house of refreshment. He had already been warned of this by a patron named Garek.”*

*“I removed the dagger and embedded it in the table in front of him to make it clear that continuing would be unwise. I then stepped back and returned to my seat.”*

The guard’s expression shifted slightly at the mention of Garek. Several patrons nearby grumbled in agreement.

*“A short time later, I sensed movement near the bar front. I threw my drink toward the disturbance. At that point, a man manifested and fled through the window. Your men pursued him.”*

Elmon spread his hands faintly. *“The sequence appears to align with what you’ve observed.”*

The guard scanned the room once more.

*“Don’t leave the area,”* he said.

Elmon nodded. *“I still have another year at the school. I’ll be here. My name is Elmon.”*

The guard paused, then straightened, studying Elmon more closely.

*“You’re the ones who fought hell on the hill,”* he said. *“I heard Garek talking.”*

Elmon inclined his head. *“Yes, sir. We survived.”*

The guard exhaled slowly. *“Garek said there were hundreds of skeletons. Pits torn open across the school grounds. Burned bodies everywhere. Holy Hand present. Clerics. An Echo-mancer. Others.”*

*“Yes, sir,”* Elmon said. He gestured briefly toward Entic. *“He struck down a demonic witch with a consecrated spear. He saved lives.”*

Entic turned a deep, furious red.

The guard barked a short laugh and slapped Elmon’s shoulder. *“Well, you just saved me a mountain of paperwork.”*

Justine leaned forward then, unable to stop himself. *“You wouldn’t have helped much anyway,”* he said. *“The real work was done by a Myst Gazer, dragons, and Elmon. Six hours straight. The gate kept spilling filth.”*

The guard shook his head. *“Damned be damned. Glad I wasn’t there.”*

Justine swallowed, then added more quietly, *“The demon grabbed me. Entic buried my axe in its head. Made it angry. Dropped me.”* He rubbed his forearm unconsciously. *“Then the dragons came through the roof.”*

He gave a rough chuckle. *“We were covered in rot and bile by the end.”*

Elmon listened, letting it pass. *The story was already growing teeth*, he thought. *Dwarven-sized ones.*

The guard slapped Justin across the back of the shoulder. *“Now that’s a story.”*

Elmon added mildly, *“He neglected to mention the Undead Judge of Garis Noll. Master Ortis crushed him—with his mind.”*

The guard froze.

*“My great-grandfather passed down stories of that Judge,”* he said slowly. *“Evil to the marrow.”*

Before anyone could respond, the two pursuing guards reentered, hauling a barefoot man in a sleeveless shirt between them.

Elmon shook his head at once. *“That’s not him. I saw the man’s face—less than ten feet from me. He looked straight at me.”*

The guard dragged the suspect to the blood-smearred floor. One footprint. Then the other. Too small.

He straightened. *“Take him in for questioning.”*

*“Yes, sir,”* one guard replied.

The guard turned sharply. *“Where did you catch him?”*

*“Rummaging behind Garen’s Ale House and Inn.”*

The guard opened his mouth—then stopped. *“No.”* He exhaled once. Then seized Elmon by the shoulder—not roughly, but decisively.

*“We’re going to the bar district,”* he said. *“Get a dozen men. Block the streets. No one moves until we know who leaped out of that window.”*

The guard took Elmon by the arm and steered him firmly toward Garne’s Ale House.

*“You cannot do this,”* Elmon said, keeping his voice steady.

*“Son,”* the guard replied without slowing, *“you’re the eyewitness. If this is celebration, we identify the assassin. If it’s something worse—we contain it.”*

As they neared the tavern, the guard slowed. The street was alive with movement. Lamps burned bright. Shadows shifted where they shouldn’t.

Entic was ghost-walking.

The other students followed at a careful distance.

Christin Hollard hissed, *“My father will remove you from your post for this.”*

The guard didn’t turn. *“Then he can speak to me afterward.”*

Brief flashes of light flickered at alley mouths—signal lanterns. The street was sealed.

They stopped at Garne’s door.

The guard addressed the barkeep. *“We’re looking for someone. This man is an accomplice to a murder.”*

Before the barkeep could object, a guard moved past him and climbed the stairs.

Doors were opened. Guests were ushered out—grumbling, confused, half-dressed. One by one, rooms were cleared.

Empty.

The guard drew steel and searched thoroughly—under beds, into wardrobes, through lockers. Nothing.

Elmon closed his eyes.

*“I need the lights out,”* he said.

The guard studied him for a moment—then nodded.

Candles were snuffed. Lanterns shuttered. One by one, the room surrendered to darkness.

When the last light died, Elmon breathed once, slow and deliberate.

Now—he could try.

Elmon focused—not on the man, but on the Echo of him as he had seen it.

Beneath one of the tables, a small sphere bloomed into existence—soft light pulsing like a heartbeat.

A hush fell.

The sphere slid free of the shadows and drifted toward the kitchen.

Then it snapped backward—as if struck.

Blood dotted the floor.

A barefoot man shimmered into being, clutching his shoulder, a dagger wound leaking freely as he collapsed to one knee.

*“Now,”* Elmon said quietly. *“That’s him.”*

The guards moved at once.

Hands seized the man. Shackles clicked shut. He struggled weakly as they hauled him upright.

*“The accomplice,”* Elmon added. *“Not the one who struck—but the one who hid.”*

They marched him from the bar.

The guard ward was lit and alert. Garek stood at the door as the captain arrived—one prisoner bound, Elmon dragged beside him in irons.

Garek frowned. *“What did Elmon do?”*

*“Nothing,”* the captain replied evenly. *“I named him an accomplice. Publicly.”*

Garek blinked.

*“To discourage anyone else from finishing the job,”* the captain continued. *“Fear works better when it’s visible.”*

He paused, then looked at Elmon. *“You made an invisible killer glow. How?”*

Elmon exhaled. *“I followed the Echo. I didn’t bind him—I revealed him.”*

Christin entered sharply. *“Unhand him.”*

The captain raised a palm. *“He’s free.”*

Elmon lifted his wrists. *“Christin—he dragged me for effect. I just... made it obvious.”*

They spoke in low tones—plans layered over plans.

At last, the captain nodded. *“We stage a return. Hood. Shackles. Escort.”*

A false Elmon was marched toward the school.

The real one remained.

A whisper brushed Elmon’s ear.

*“We’re leaving.”*

Entic’s hand closed on his arm.

The world folded.

The guard straightened suddenly, startled.

Elmon was gone.

Moments later, students filtered from the ward as if nothing had happened—laughing, muttering, dispersing.

Justin remained behind at the Hanging Unicorn, still debating the virtues of a Glistening Hammer.

Christin grabbed Elmon by the collar and pulled him down just enough to meet her.

The kiss was not tentative.

It was desperate—anchored, as if she were afraid he might vanish if she let go.

*“I don’t want to lose you,”* she whispered against him.

Elmon froze.

*“What—?”*

But she had already stepped back, eyes bright with something between fear and resolve, and turned away before he could find the words.

The next morning came far too early.

A knock hit Elmon’s door—hard. Then it swung open.

The sun had not yet risen. *“What are you doing, Elmon?”* the Chancellor demanded.

Elmon groaned, blinking. *“What? Oh. Hi, Chancellor.”*

He pushed himself upright, disoriented.

*“I was informed last night,”* the Chancellor continued sharply, *“that you were arrested for murder at the Hanging Unicorn.”*

Elmon sat up fully now. *“No. I wasn’t arrested. The Captain said that—on purpose. To make them think I was an accomplice.”*

The Chancellor stared. *“What?”*

Elmon explained. It took nearly twenty minutes—skipping nothing that mattered.

When he finished, the Chancellor exhaled slowly.

*“Every time you set foot in that establishment,”* he said flatly, *“something catastrophic follows. You will stay away from it.”*

Elmon rubbed his eyes, irritation finally surfacing. *“I wasn’t planning on leaving campus anyway. I’m under house arrest for the week.”*

The Chancellor frowned. *“House arrest?”*

*“Protective,”* Elmon corrected. *“Unofficial.”*

A pause.

*“Garek is downstairs,”* the Chancellor said at last. *“He’ll be escorting you. Apparently.”*

He turned to leave, then stopped at the threshold.

*“Elmon,”* he added, without looking back. *“You are no longer invisible. Act accordingly.”*

The door closed.

Through murmurs under breath and the quiet drift of hearsay, Elmon learned who the murdered man had been.

A slaver.

One who dealt primarily in Catar.

He kept that knowledge to himself.

At midday, while the dining hall hummed with the comfort of routine, Elmon leaned toward Elcrull and spoke quietly.

*“You should consider carrying a dagger,”* he said. *“Or something for protection.”*

Elcrull raised her paw-hand.

With a soft click, curved claws slid free—an inch and a half of clean, natural steel.

She smiled.

*“I always do.”*

Elmon blinked. *“How do you—?”*

She cleared her throat. *“I am a Cat, Elmon.”*

She grinned wider, fangs showing, her withers bristling as if on instinct.

Then, almost casually, she added, *“I suppose I can tell you this much—the man who was murdered?”*

She paused just long enough to matter. *“A slaver. Specialized in Catar. I heard it on the wind.”*

Elmon nodded slowly.

Nothing more needed to be said.

He finished lunch. Smiled at Elcrull. Rubbed her shoulder as he rose and exited.

Elmon walked the scarred ground slowly, working through echo and thread mapping by instinct and memory, while Garek paced the newly finished training grounds beside him.

Garek broke the silence. *“This must have been a massive battle.”*

Elmon nodded and guided him toward a shallow depression in the earth. *“Here.”*

Pressed into the soil were dragon prints—nearly three feet across, edges still fractured where stone had buckled beneath the weight.

Elmon traced the path with his hand, walking Garek through the field. *“This is where the first breach collapsed. The paladins held here. The dragons came down there.”*

He stopped for a moment.

*“There were moments,”* he said quietly, *“when I was terrified. Not for myself—mainly for my friends.”*

He swallowed. *“I saw things I never want to see again.”*

Garek glanced at him. *“I heard there was a demon.”*

Elmon exhaled. *“Actually, two.”*

He stared at a section of ground where the stone had been fused and cracked. *“The witch was... something half-death, half-demon. But the other—”* He shook his head once. *“It nearly brushed the ceiling. Tusks. A beard like slivers of bone. Hair dark—blood red. Golden eyes.”*

He paused, choosing the memory carefully. *“When it spoke, it wasn’t one voice. It was like twenty people speaking in unison.”*

Garek frowned. *“Why didn’t you run for cover?”*

Elmon considered the question longer than expected.

*“I wasn’t afraid for myself,”* he said at last. *“And my colleagues needed me—just as I needed them.”*

Garek studied him for a moment, then nodded once. *“You’re rare, Elmon. Most would have fled in terror.”*

Elmon didn’t answer.

The ground beneath them still remembered.

Elmon spent most of the week walking the battlefield.

At one place—where the door had once stood—he always slowed. The air there felt tighter, compressed, as though the ground itself were holding its breath. Sometimes he thought he could almost hear something, just at the edge of perception.

But no matter how carefully he listened, there was nothing.

Perhaps it was a memory link he had not yet severed—an echo bound not to the land, but to the trauma he carried. In class, they had spoken of such things: how certain events could leave indelible marks on the psyche, impressions that lingered long after the danger had passed.

Or perhaps, he admitted, it was simply his own mind misfiring—trying to give shape to fear after the fact.

Either way, he knew what came next.

He would need to speak with Ortis.

Elmon stood where the door had once been, concentrating on the moment the sigils failed—on how the stone had not resisted, how it had simply *opened*, as if waiting.

The ground shifted.

The doors opened again—silently—directly before him.

An eerie, pale bluish light hovered at the base of the stairs, pulsing faintly, beckoning.

Elmon did not follow at once.

Then he did.

He descended slowly into the pit.

It felt wrong immediately.

Before, there had been a ceiling. Now there was none.

He looked up.

There was no sky.

The light drifted ahead of him, deeper into the vaults—past the treasure chamber, past burial rooms, past storage halls stripped bare. It turned down the final corridor.

Elmon knew this place.

On the old map, it was marked only as *the well*.

His hand trembled as he opened the door.

The room was filled with echoes.

Not sound—*memory*.

Ghostly figures reenacted a trauma trapped in repetition. A naked woman hung upside down, bound at the ankles, lowered screaming into the dark mouth of the well—then hauled back up. A twisted man with a malformed arm laughed each time her body struck the water.

Again.

And again.

Her screams tore at the stone as her flesh scraped the rough walls of the shaft. Minutes stretched into cruelty. At last, her body failed.

They cut the rope.

It followed her into the dark.

Elmon staggered.

*They never found this room, he realized. It must still be buried.*

The thought had barely formed when one of the figures turned.

The ugly man stepped toward him.

His gaze locked onto Elmon's.

The vision shifted.

Now a bound man knelt before the Judge, bloodied and shaking.

*“What are you staring at?” the Judge snarled. “You’re next—unless you tell me where you hid it. Speak, and I’ll kill you clean. Stay silent, and you’ll go into the ring well.”*

The Judge smiled.

Elmon backed away.

The room lurched.

Suddenly, he was standing beneath open sky.

He clawed his way out and ran.

### **Ortis’s Sanctum**

Elmon slammed his fist against Ortis’s door.

It flew open.

*“We haven’t uncovered all the rooms,” Elmon gasped. “There’s one with a well. I saw it. I witnessed what they did there.”*

Ortis froze.

*“They tortured a woman—lowered her naked into the well, dragged her back up until she died. And a man—bound, threatened. The Judge demanded to know where something was hidden. Said he’d throw him into the ring well if he didn’t speak.”*

Elmon swallowed.

*“That room is still sealed. Buried. And whatever he was looking for—it’s still there.”*

That afternoon, Elmon and Ortis spread Elmon’s map across the stone table and marked where the well chamber *should* have been.

Elmon climbed down into the exposed corridor, following the faint residual pull of the light he had seen before. He closed his eyes and walked by memory alone.

Step by step.

Then—stone.

He placed his palm against the wall he had struck and looked up. *“It’s still forward,”* he said quietly. *“And to the right.”* Ortis helped Elmon climb out of the uncovered passage.

Elmon then closed his eyes and paused to reorient himself. Keeping his eyes closed, Elmon turned as the memory guided him and walked the path as it existed *below*. When he stopped and opened his eyes, he was standing less than ten feet from the old groundskeeper’s hut.

He exhaled slowly.

*“It’s here,”* he said. *“Part of it lies under this ground. The hut sits over it.”*

The building had not been used in years. The lock was rusted through, the door swollen with age. At Ortis’s request, the current groundskeeper broke the lock and pried the door open.

Inside the cramped ten-by-twelve room, a ladder descended into darkness at the back corner.

The stench rose immediately.

Rot. Old water. Something long sealed and never meant to breathe again.

They summoned the Chancellor at once. Elmon explained what he had seen. Ortis corroborated the mapping. The Chancellor did not argue.

He ordered three groundmen into town to hire laborers.

By the following evening, digging revealed a filled-in corridor beneath the hut. They cleared it carefully, stone by stone, until they struck a wall where a doorway should have been.

It was sealed with smooth sheets of white stone.

Ortis knelt, examining them. His expression hardened. *“Enchanted,”* he confirmed. *“And deliberately.”*

Elmon frowned. *“That’s not what the histories describe. When the vault was breached before, the wights and undead came from the other end.”*

Ortis stood slowly. *“Then someone—or something—changed the layout. Not to seal the dead... but to hide what was here.”*

They did not attempt the slabs themselves.

Instead, they traveled to the Sorcerer’s Tower and Study Hall in town, requesting aid in unbinding the white stone seals. The sorcerer there had already heard of the events at the school.

He agreed without hesitation.

The next morning, an hour after sunrise, they began the disenchantments.

Mensor was present from the outset, vestments prepared, prayers already whispered into the air. Twelve hired mercenaries stood at measured intervals, armor checked and weapons ready. A single Paladin waited near the rear—still, watchful, prepared for violence if it came.

It took nearly two hours.

Layer by layer, the sheets of celestial stone were stripped away, each slab requiring careful unbinding rather than force. The stone resisted separation—not through weight, but through covenant.

When the final slab was lifted free, a door stood revealed behind it.

Celestial stone.

Nearly priceless. Rare even among sovereign vaults.

Old and intact.

Its seals bore glyphs of Sanctification.

Ortis studied them in silence. *“These were not placed to contain rot,”* he said at last. *“They were placed to protect something from discovery.”*

Elmon stepped forward and pressed the door open.

The stench struck immediately—wet, rotting, suffocating. It clawed at the throat and eyes, forcing them back from the threshold as one. Even the mercenaries recoiled, covering their faces.

They retreated several paces, drawing in fresh air.

Elmon shook his head slowly. *“This chamber was sealed nearly two thousand years ago,”* he said. *“There should be no smell left. Nothing organic should remain.”*

Ortis’s expression darkened. *“Then someone has kept the room active,”* he replied. *“Or something inside it has never stopped breathing.”*

Elmon turned to the visiting Sorcerer. *“If you would,”* he said quietly.

The Sorcerer nodded and raised his staff, sending a lance of flaming light arcing into the chamber.

The light struck the floor—and was swallowed.

From the darkness came a low growl. Teeth snapped. Something moved with weight and hunger. Then the flame guttered and vanished.

The Sorcerer did not hesitate.

He stepped forward and hurled a fireball into the room.

The explosion bloomed against the far wall. Howls erupted—inhuman and human together—layered screams twisting into one another. Chains rattled. Flesh burned. After several long moments, the noise collapsed into silence.

Another light was cast.

This time, it held.

Elmon stepped forward cautiously.

Bodies were chained to the walls—burned black, limbs twisted in positions that spoke of long torment. On the floor lay a massive, dog-like creature, its flesh charred and split. It convulsed once... twice... then exhaled a final, wet breath and went still.

Toward the back wall stood the well.

A pulley hung from the ceiling above it, its beam scorched. Burnt lengths of rope lay scattered across the stone like shed skin.

One of the bodies—little more than cinder and bone—tore free from its chains and staggered forward. It made it only a few steps before its frame collapsed, breaking apart into ash and fragments at their feet.

The Paladin entered the chamber.

He knelt and invoked Holy Ground. Light spread across the floor, purifying soil and stone alike. Then, methodically, he moved from body to body—cutting chains, breaking bones, and laying each remnant to rest.

He did not rush.

He did not speak.

When he finished, nothing in the room stirred.

When most of the skeletal remains had been cleared and the chamber inspected, Elmon noticed something wrong.

Faint black glyphs—shadowy, half-erased—ringed each set of chains where the bodies had been bound. They were not etched into the stone. They hovered *on* it, like residue that refused to settle.

The Paladin staggered back a step, then another.

*“I cannot remain,”* he said tightly. *“The malice is too thick. It burns the eyes—scrapes the flesh like acid.”*

He exited the chamber at once.

As he left, Ortis and Elmon became aware of a low, resonant hum, mechanical and pulsing, resonating through the room as if the stone itself were breathing. It reminded Elmon of some distant forge or factory—relentless, artificial, wrong.

Mensor entered carrying four flasks of sacred oil.

Without speaking, he poured the oil over the chains—then over the glyphs Elmon pointed out. The oil hissed softly as it spread. The hum deepened.

Mensor turned pale and retreated from the chamber. Outside, he collapsed to one knee and vomited violently, his body shaking as if wracked by fever.

*“Now,”* he gasped. *“Burn it, Burn it like hell!”*

The Sorcerer stepped forward and began the incantation. Mixing power with mystic variance, Mensor had already poured the remaining oil across the stone floor, the walls, the dead beast, the bricks themselves—then hurled the empty flasks inside. They would never be reused.

They cleared the corridor.

The augmented fireball struck.

Flame surged down the shaft like a living thing. It roared up the ladder entrance and blasted the hut door above clean from its hinges. Fire poured from the corridor mouth five—ten feet—before collapsing inward again.

Wood charred to glowing coals. Stone flushed red from the heat.

Then came the wail.

Not one voice—but many. A sound that made bones ache and teeth hum. Cries echoed up through the earth, layered with sparks and eerie, green-tinged apparitions thrashing within the flames. Shapes formed and dissolved, radiating pulses of fear, rage, and grief.

The Sorcerer dropped to a seated position, drained. He had pushed his augmentation beyond comfort—channeling destruction as deeply as he dared.

When the fire finally collapsed into silence, nothing remained but scorched stone.

And the hum was gone.

For nearly twenty minutes, the chamber burned—cooked like a dwarven blast forge sealed too long. When the flames finally died, the heat remained so intense it could have baked bread for days.

And still, the room was not clean.

A foreboding presence lingered—unhappy, malignant. Elmon felt it first.

Along the stone floor, something moved.

Black—fungal, slow, deliberate. It crept with purpose, as though seeking warmth, seeking flesh. From the well came wailing screams, the sound of something being crushed and bludgeoned again and again. Layered within it all was distant, hideous laughter—thin and warped—like a madman rejoicing in what he witnessed.

The Paladin immediately reestablished Holy Ground, invoking a full purge.

The black growth smoked and burned where the sanctification touched it—shrinking, recoiling—but it did not stop. It pressed forward across consecrated stone, diminished yet persistent, driven by something that did not fear holiness.

By then, the explosion and firestorm had drawn others.

Relis arrived first, followed by the Chancellor and several of Elmon's friends. Mensor ordered everyone back at once, his voice sharp with urgency.

The Chancellor did not argue.

He simply stood there—staring—then began to weep.

No words. No explanation. He turned away slowly and walked back toward his office, sobbing violently, as though the weight of centuries had finally found him.

To Relis, something was wrong.

This was not terror.

This was remorse—raw, corrosive, and terminal. The kind that fractures the soul from the inside out.

The Chancellor's spirit was unraveling. Not panicking—collapsing.

Relis stepped in front of him and seized his gaze.

In the Chancellor's eyes, Relis saw flickers—tortured souls, dark rites, shadows repeating themselves in patterns too practiced to be accidental. Memory bled through spirit.

Relis shoved him to the ground.

He dropped to one knee beside him, gripped his shoulders, and struck him hard across the face—not in anger, but to break the spiral before the man's mind shattered completely.

“WHAT... HAVE... YOU... DONE?”

The Chancellor convulsed. Terror poured from him like sap from a wounded tree—thick, sticky, unavoidable.

Relis pressed his palm to the Chancellor's forehead.

He did not hesitate.

He cast Soul Confess.

It was a rite never meant for the living.

But Relis needed truth—not excuses.

What flooded his mind was not a metaphor.

Two maidens—chained to stone. Broken. Violated. Their suffering is ritualized, not accidental. A cursed iron stake was driven through each skull as they still lived, sealing something ancient and hungry into the act itself.

The Chancellor was younger then.

Ambitious.

Desperate.

A voice in the dark promised him the Chancellorship—promised binding, protection, ascension—if he performed the rite.

He agreed.

He did it.

Twice.

Only after the second death did the path open.

Only then did he rise.

Relis ran down the hill, shouting for everyone to clear back from the thing crawling out of the pit.

*“Move away!”* he bellowed. *“This beast feeds on living flesh!”*

The Soul-ash creature dragged itself forward, shedding cinders of grief and malice.

Relis reached Ortis and pressed two fingers to his brow.

He spoke a short incantation.

A memory shard transferred.

Ortis collapsed instantly.

He struck the ground hard, a sound torn from his chest—not a scream, but a wail. Tears streamed down his face as his body convulsed, teeth grinding, breath stuttering as though his soul were trying to escape his ribs.

Everything that had come before—the battles, the dead, the siege—collapsed into insignificance.

Those had been rituals.

This was the truth.

When Ortis forced himself upright, it was not strength that lifted him.

It was rage.

His eyes burned red. Spittle frothed at his lips. He staggered toward the Chancellor like a man possessed, murder flooding every step.

Elmon stepped into his path.

He shoved Ortis back.

Ortis barely registered him.

Elmon struck him.

The slap echoed.

Ortis fell.

He surged up again, reaching for Elmon—

—and stopped.

What he saw was not Elmon.

It was the pale figure from the cleric's ward. The one who had hovered between breath and death. The one Elmon had nearly given his life to save.

Ortis broke.

He dropped to his knees and sobbed, raw and unguarded, grief tearing through him like fire through parchment.

The Chancellor's sins crushed him.

His voice, when it finally came, was hoarse, stripped of all authority.

*"Arrest the Chancellor."*

Relis conjured Shield of Darkness.

An eight-foot sphere of void-light enveloped him, its surface alive with shifting sigils. It moved as he moved—silent, deliberate. As he advanced toward the Soul Ash beast, the sphere and the creature reacted violently to one another. Arcs of fire and distortion leapt between them, like rolling hot coals striking wet stone.

The beast recoiled.

Hissing, unraveling, it retreated back toward the well house.

Relis did not pursue blindly.

He was a Gazer of the Celestial Rift—one who had stared into the divine schism where heaven cracked and silence bled through. Such Gazers were not chosen by lineage or faith, but by rupture. Their power flowed from cosmic exposure, ritual attunement, and emotional surrender. They spoke in tongues of light, dreamed in constellations, and bled prophecy.

Their magic was not gentle.

It was revelatory.

Relis read the veil the creature clung to—the residue of violated memory, grief forced into form. He raised his hand and summoned a radiant glyph, shaping it not to destroy, but to contain.

The glyph rang like a cracked bell.

Distortion rippled outward as waves of pain—echoes of the tortured woman's final moments—were drawn into it. From the doorway, from the well, from the air itself, black dust-like particles streamed inward. Fragments followed. Then silence, as the last remnants were pulled free.

The glyph convulsed.

Twisted.

Flared.

Then it collapsed inward and hardened into a solid sphere.

Cold as death.

Hard as the choice the Chancellor had made so long ago.

Relis staggered back. This was the most grievous memory he had ever bound—fear, violation, and sacrifice fused into a single artifact of corruption. It was not inert. It resisted.

The sphere vibrated faintly, emitting a soft metallic ringing, like strained iron twisting under pressure.

It would not hold forever.

He would have to take it to a Tower of the Winds—one of the few places capable of unmaking such a thing.

Even then, Relis did not know if it could truly be destroyed.

Relis moved toward the Chancellor without warmth, the black sphere cradled in his hands.

He seized the man by the collar and hauled him upright, fury burning behind his eyes. Without ceremony, Relis thrust the sphere into the Chancellor's hands.

The Chancellor screamed and dropped it.

The sphere struck the ground with a dull, resonant thrum.

Relis forced it back into his grasp.

Again, the Chancellor screamed—again, he dropped it.

Once more, Relis shoved it into his hands and held them there, unyielding.

“Chancellor.” Each word landed like a blow. “YOU... MUST... BEAR... YOUR... EVIL.”

The Chancellor froze.

His eyes locked onto the surface of the sphere.

Within its blackened sheen, his reflection twisted—not as flesh, but as truth. His deeds surfaced there: the choices, the silence, the bargains made in darkness. His own soul recoiled from what it saw, repulsed by the reality it could no longer deny.

He sobbed.

Relis dragged him up the hill toward the school's guard confinement room, the sphere chained with him. At the threshold, the duty protector secured the Chancellor in shackles—iron biting into wrist and ankle—binding the sphere to him as well.

Relis watched in silence.

Fear, revulsion, and recognition churned within the Chancellor, and Relis knew this mattered. The sphere fed on the memory that birthed it—but the Chancellor's horror at himself would starve it of coherence.

His punishment was not the chains.

It was remembrance.

Over the following days, a formal investigation was initiated to verify historical records tied to the missing women.

Five sets of bones had been found chained to the walls.

Yet across nearly a century of preserved civic, guild, and ecclesiastical records, only three women were officially listed as missing.

The discrepancy deepened the unease.

No echoes could be traced. No Veil threads answered inquiry. Echo knots, rifts, residual memory—every method of post-mortem attunement failed.

Whatever identities once clung to those remains had been consumed—drawn into the tormented sphere and erased beyond recall.

Once the stone had cooled enough to permit descent, lantern-bearers were lowered into the well itself.

They returned with eleven more skeletons.

Elmon studied each recovery in silence.

He was certain the Chancellor had not been responsible for these deaths. The vision he had witnessed days earlier—the Judge’s cruelty, the interrogations, the ring well—belonged to a far older hand.

Still, one memory would not loosen its grip.

*You are next unless you tell where you put it. We will go easy on you and execute you quickly. Or you will be next in the ring well.*

Elmon did not yet know what *it* was.

Only that whatever had been hidden was worth a centuries of silence and blood.

Elmon went to visit Ortis in the cleric’s ward.

He was resting.

Mensor sat beside him, singing softly—melodic chants and low prayers meant to soothe fractured spirit and breath alike.

*“Will he be all right?”* Elmon asked quietly.

Mensor did not stop singing. *“I can only pray,”* he said. *“I do not know what terror he sees.”*

Elmon sat beside the low bed.

*“You know, Master Ortis,”* he said after a long moment, *“if you decide you don’t want to teach me anymore, I would understand. I haven’t been your best student. I caused trouble. I pulled things off course. I even ruined a few training sessions meant for others.”*

He reached out, took Ortis’s hand, and rubbed it gently. Then, without thinking, he leaned down and kissed his teacher’s forehead.

Elmon stood to leave.

*“Elmon,”* Ortis whispered.

A snuffle. A shallow breath.

*“You—”* a cough broke his voice. *“You were never a bad student.”*

Another breath. *“You made life... worth living.”*

Elmon froze, then nodded once—unable to speak.

As he turned to go, Mensor inclined his head in gratitude, never breaking the rhythm of his song.

Elmon wandered the library until he found Elmin, the librarian, standing behind a long desk stacked with ledgers.

*“How long have you been at this school?”* Elmon asked.

Elmin paused, tapping his fingers thoughtfully against the wood.

*“I arrived when Admiral Waynford was acting judge of the watchtower overlooking the bay,” he said. “The King later sent Judge Morikium Foolmark to take command and oversee the construction of the citadel.”*

Elmon listened.

*“My family were farmers and wine vendors,” Elmin continued. “We held land in the southern part of the island—good soil. Fertile. It took nearly twenty-five years to complete the Citadel. Quite an accomplishment.”*

Elmon frowned. *“Was the school here then?”*

*“Heavens no,” Elmin replied. “But after a few years, the Judge raised taxes—three times. So high that we had to leave the island. We could no longer afford to live on our own land.”*

Elmon felt something tighten in his chest. *“We left our vines untended,” Elmin said. “They grew wild. No one ever harvested them again.”*

*“On the mainland,” Elmin went on, “we began to hear stories. Beatings. Executions. Common folk punished for failing to meet impossible taxes. The King eventually heard the same rumors and sent a detachment to investigate.”*

*“Lord Herin Makdik,” Elmon said quietly.*

Elmin nodded. *“Makdik and his men came to the Citadel. They found no bodies. No burial grounds. No villagers left to question—farms abandoned, just as ours had been.”*

Elmon’s brow furrowed. *“Why raise taxes once the Citadel was finished? Maintenance wouldn’t—”*

*“—require that level of coin,” Elmin finished. “Unknown at the time. Now?” He exhaled. “I suspect it funded what you uncovered beneath the grounds.”*

Elmon said nothing. He thought of the well. Of the chains.

*“The Lord sent most of his detachment back to the King with his findings,” Elmin continued. “But a skirmish broke out with the Ildrol near Fox Burrow. The King ordered Makdik to resolve it and return.”*

Elmin’s voice softened.

*“Many were lost. Makdik was never seen again. It was assumed he died on the northern edge of Fox Burrow—at White Ridge.”*

The words hung between them.

Years folded like parchment as Elmin searched his dusty memory.

*“There were rumors,” he said at last, “that the Lord and five of his men disguised themselves and landed on the isle aboard a common barge. It was said he caught the Judge in acts of treason—villainous dealings against nobles of the region.”*

Elmin’s fingers tightened on the desk.

*“When they confronted him, the Judge had already prepared a trap. Nothing was ever heard from Makdik again.”*

Elmon felt the weight of the silence that followed.

*“Then the Red Scourge began,” Elmin continued. “Most of us fled to the highlands. We lived in caves, stone hollows, and pits—hiding from the Red Demons.”*

Elmin turned and crossed to a bookshelf. He withdrew a thick ledger, thumbed through brittle pages, and laid it open before Elmon.

*“The Scourge besieged the Island of Scath,” he said. “They destroyed the Citadel and used its stones to build a bridge toward the mainland. But there was not enough stone to finish it.”*

Elmin exhaled.

*“When the war finally ended—after three hundred and fifty years—and what remained of the garrison returned,” Elmin said, “the reigning human king, Sir Malcom-Dorister, bastard son of the Mother’s Sorrow, made his decision.”* A breath and ponder.

*“It was over seven years, he moved the court, the crown, and the heart of the kingdom to the island. Thus, Scathnard was born.”*

Elmin hesitated, then continued more quietly.

*“The King’s men found something beneath the rubble of the Citadel. A massive door. When it was opened, they discovered vaults—buried bodies, desecration, and the remains of the undead. The dead were destroyed.”*

He folded his hands.

*“A document was created to summarize the findings. The ruins yielded notes, ledgers, manuscripts—some intact, others half-burned and crushed beneath stone. From them, the truth emerged of what lay beneath the door.”*

Elmon did not interrupt.

*“The Judge,” Elmin said, voice tight, “was proud of his work. There were writings—boasts, even. One note expressed regret that he had never been able to torture the King himself, simply for pleasure.”*

Elmon felt cold.

*“The ledgers listed names,” Elmin went on. “Convictions. Punishments. Atrocities that should never be spoken aloud—not even by a Blackcloak.”*

Elmin looked away.

*“The King ordered the massive stones placed over the door. To seal it. To remove its memory from sight. And—so he hoped—to put the past behind us.”*

Elmin hesitated, then added quietly,

*“Every document. Every artifact. Every name recovered that day was banished to the King’s Vault—sealed from inquiry. As if history itself could be interred.”*

Elmin paused, fingers resting on the desk as memory stirred.

*“This is when I finished my schooling. When the school was first founded here in Scathnard, they needed an academic scholar to draft the syllabi. I applied—and was accepted.”*

He smiled faintly at the thought.

*“At first, it was only a clerical school. Two buildings. The central hall—which later became the dormitories—and the Chapel Facility with its training rooms. That eventually became the clerical ward you know today.”*

*“They added a building for mystics next,” he continued, “believing them similar enough to clerics to share oversight. Later came the Study Consort building—a modest but growing library. This one.”*

He gestured around them.

*“The dining hall followed. Then the Mystics Hall was demolished to make way for the Sorcerers’ Hall—as it was called then. The spell hall now.”*

*“The women’s dormitories and the constables’ guard room were built last.”*

He paused.

*“Now we have Echo Hall.”*

Elmon frowned slightly. *“When was the groundskeeper’s hut built?”*

Elmin thought for a moment.

*“Ah. That was the Chancellor’s doing. He wanted permanent groundskeepers—part of the school itself, rather than hired hands. We needed a well, gardens, a means to subsidize our own food supply.”*

He hesitated.

*“That little hut took four months to build.”*

Elmin shook his head.

*“A bit excessive, we thought.”*

Elmon frowned, the timeline gnawing at him.

*“Why so long?”*

Elmin shrugged. *“The well, I suppose. They ran into slabs of rock during the digging.”*

Elmon’s voice cut through the dust of memory.

*“That was the ceiling of the well room below.”*

Elmin blinked, then continued slowly, as if walking unfamiliar ground.

*“At the time, the Chancellor was only an instructor. He argued constantly with the council—about improper processes, inefficiencies, things he claimed were holding the school back.”*

Elmin rubbed his whiskered chin.

*“About three years later, the Council gave him authority to address those problems himself. To see how he would handle them.”*

He paused. *“Things... seemed to fall into place after that.”*

Another pause. Longer this time.

*“Now that I think on it,” Elmin said slowly, “we did have a groundskeeper fail to show for work one day. Then, a few days later, one of the garden mistresses went missing.”*

Elmon didn’t speak.

*“They hired replacements,” Elmin went on. “The family of the groundskeeper came before the Council, asking after their husband. He hadn’t returned home in two days.”*

Elmin exhaled.

*“There were... other peculiar events over the next few years. Disappearances. Quiet ones.”*

He looked up at Elmon.

*“And yet—the Chancellor worked miracles. The school became solvent again. Stable. Respected.”*

Elmon said it plainly, without heat. *“The Chancellor sacrificed them.”*

Elmin stared at him. *“What?”*

Elmon didn’t look away. *“To something demonic. A shadow. He traded lives for position—for control of the school.”*

Elmin recoiled as if struck. *“You’re certain?”*

*“He confessed,”* Elmon said. *“Relis drew it from him. He’s confined now. Guard custody.”*

Elmin swallowed. His voice dropped. *“Do we know who they were?”*

*“Three women match records of the last century,”* Elmon replied. *“Missing. Unrecovered.”*

He hesitated, then added, quieter, *“But we found five bodies bound in the chamber.”*

Elmin’s face drained of color. *“Then two are unaccounted for.”*

Elmon nodded. *“Likely the groundskeeper. And the garden mistress.”*

Elmon, returning to his scholarly pursuits, was now entering his final year as a Master's student. With it came privileges—access to administrative and faculty meetings, and a voice that carried weight among the school’s elders. He had, after all, revolutionized the sanctum’s rhythm, and his presence was etched into the lives of faculty and even the Chancellor.

He took on the mantle of instruction, guiding first-year students through foundational lectures and ritual demonstrations. It was not an obligation—it was an offering. A gesture of grace, giving Ortis space to mend, to breathe, to remember who he was before the rupture.

Ortis remained in the cleric’s ward, resting. At times, his eyes brimmed with tears—not from his own memories, but from echoes he had inherited. The soul shard Relis had transferred still pulsed within him, and it was as if he were grieving lives he had never lived.

Their bond had evolved—from mentorship to comradeship, rooted in shared investigations, ritual co-authorship, and emotional resonance. Though Ortis was still recovering from a deluge of criminal, vicious memories, Elmon visited him daily—morning and evening—bringing the curriculum they had once shaped together.

He invited Ortis to annotate, amend, and guide its delivery, ensuring that even in silence, Ortis’s voice remained woven into the sanctum’s breath.

Elmon Silverwood’s mythic standing was formally recognized in three mastered disciplines, each bearing its own rite and signature practice.

### **Primary Mastery: Echo Theory & Resonance Mapping**

Recognized as Mentor and Interpreter of Echo Threads, Emotional Axes, and Memory Fractures. His focus lay in Dream Inscription and Emotional Resonance—mapping Echo marks to sigils, artifacts, and soul events, and teaching students not merely to hear, but to *listen* to silence, to breath, and to buried truths that resist language.

**Signature Practice:** *Thread Cartography*

A ritual discipline of mapping echoes across sanctum space and soul memory, tracing where grief lingers and where truth has fractured.

**Secondary Mastery: Sigil Mastery & Glyphic Binding**

Exalted through practice and witness, Elmon became a designer and interpreter of sigils, binding rites, and protective inscriptions. His work centered on grief markers, memory seals, and sanctum bindings—glyphs crafted not to dominate, but to *contain*, to hold sorrow without letting it consume.

He was honored by Relis and others for his collaborative role in protecting sanctum thresholds.

**Signature Practice:** *Lithographic Weaving*

The art of inscribing layered glyphs responsive to breath, emotion, and sanctum law.

**Final Mastery: Sacred Annotation & Dream Ledger Craft**

An archivist of visions and interpreter of symbolic dreams, Elmon inscribed mythic truth through painted prose and ritual memory. He taught annotation not as record-keeping, but as reverence—capturing not only what occurred, but what it *cost*.

He maintained a living ledger of sanctum transformation, bound to breath and silence alike.

**Signature Practice:** *Breathward Scribing*

A form of sacred annotation that binds memory to motion, and silence to meaning.

Elmon remained at the school until Ortis was fully restored. It took another year.

Elmon inquired after his friends.

Elcrull had graduated as a sorcerer. She was no longer working with the Blades Guild in a formal capacity. Instead, she studied under both a Sorcerer and an Echomancer in the city, filling the gaps she believed stood between her and her true aim—becoming a War Blade.

Elmon stumbled upon her one afternoon near the guard sector. She was dueling two guards at once—claw and sword moving as one.

She saw him.

And let her guard slip.

A wooden blade struck her shoulder, knocking her hard to the ground.

She rolled, sprang up, and dashed toward him.

“*Aww*,” she grinned, breathless. “*You brought Elmon. That’s cheating.*”

She threw her arms around him and nuzzled him openly.

Elmon stepped back. “*Where is Entic?*”

Her voice softened slightly. *“Back at the school. We’re not together anymore. Good friends, though.”*

She inquired with a pur, *“And Cristin?”*

“Called home. Something urgent.” Elmon replied.

She studied him, eyes lingering.

*“I still see you casting that sigil at the demon. Calling the axe.”*

*“You shoved me out of the way,”* Elmon replied. *“It nearly took your head.”*

She pushed him lightly against the wall, claws tracing the buttons of his coat.

*“What are you doing tonight?”*

*“I don’t have a position yet,”* he said evenly. *“Still researching an object that seems to call to me.”*

*“Ohhh. The staff?”*

*“Yes. I’ve drained the local archives. I’ll need to search further.”*

He circled her slightly, studying her the way he studied artifacts.

*“And you?”*

*“I’m training,”* she said simply. *“Filling what I lack.”*

They began meeting often.

Elmon spoke of experiments, of failed tethers, of places echoes pooled strangely. Elcrull listened, absorbing.

One afternoon he asked, *“Have you considered weaving your sorcery into blade and claw?”*

She paused.

*“Most summonings require both hands.”*

*“What if you inscribed the echoes into the blade itself?”* he pressed. *“Sigiled memory into steel. Then phrase or strike to awaken it.”*

Her eyes sharpened.

*“That would mean I wouldn’t need to shape it fully in the moment.”*

*“Isn’t that what War Blades do?”* he asked quietly.

Her mind ignited. For days she disappeared.

Then she knocked at his door, vibrating with restrained energy.

She dragged him to the southern court.

A pile of stones stood as her target.

She began with drills—precise, fluid.

Then she leapt, spinning, sliding her hand along the blade. A spectral shard launched and shattered the first stone.

She kicked through a Rake maneuver, peeling stone like bark.

Fire flashed from the blade’s edge.

She twisted mid-air, claws tearing through another stone as a shard storm burst outward.

Four layered strikes followed—each awakened by motion, not gesture.

The center rock fractured.

She collapsed, laughing, exhausted.

Elmon stared.

*“Remind me not to sneak up on you.”*

She pulled him down beside her.

*“That was your idea.”*

*“I only categorized possibilities.”*

She shook her head. *“No. You saw something.”*

She leaned against him, breath slowing. *“This could be the start of something,”* she murmured. *“You and me.”*

Elmon stiffened slightly. *“I have things I must achieve,”* he said carefully. *“Things unfinished.”*

She did not pull away. *“Then we achieve them,”* she said.

Elmon’s parents came to visit and stayed in the suite he had prepared for them.

His father, seeing what Elmon had become, spoke little—but pride required no language.

The university held a private dinner in their honor. The Council recounted the changes the school had endured, the trials survived, and the quiet prestige it had gained through Elmon’s devotion to its sanctum and its students.

When Elmon graduated, he was awarded the Stately Coat, bearing the school’s glyphs and the Glyph of Amoquindo—Master of the Test.

Only then did he fully understand the rarity of what he carried.

He showed it to his parents that evening.

They remained for two full years.

His mother, Erias, grew fond of the school and its rhythms—but more than that, she grew to love Elcrull. Not merely her strength or her wit, but the steadiness in her spirit—the way she stood beside Elmon without trying to bend him.

Erias saw affection.

And she saw future.

Among humans, such unions raised no concern. Blood mingled freely; legacy was measured in character.

Among High Elves, it was different.

Lineage was not simply ancestry—it was memory, vow, and preservation. The High Court guarded its bloodlines as carefully as its lore.

Elmon’s father watched in silence.

A Catar.

And a High Elf.

What would the family say?

How would the Lore Binder record such a union?

What would it mean for the House, for the High Court, for the ancient vows tied to their name?

He did not speak his concern aloud.

But he carried it.

Erias was 94 years old when she passed.

Elmon's grief was deep and unguarded. His love for his mother was such that the Council granted him a rare honor: she was laid to rest within the school's sacred graveyard, among those whose lives had become part of the sanctum's breath.

Elcrull stood with him. So did Ortis, several members of the faculty, and friends who had not yet left the city.

No speeches were given. No sigils were displayed beyond those required for passage and peace.

They bore witness to a woman who had raised a son of uncommon heart—and to the son who carried her memory forward, bound not by sorrow, but by gratitude.

Elmon often walked the university gardens during his final year at the school—sometimes alone, sometimes thinking of Christin—reliving memories, speaking softly of goals, of futures not yet shaped. He made one thing clear to Elcrull: until he understood his place in the world, he could not promise stability. Not yet. Not honestly.

One afternoon, he stopped beneath a tree he had passed a hundred times before.

At its base was a small placard, weathered and half-hidden by ivy:

*'For the child who shelters others. Named in shade, born of sorrow, grown in light.'*

The breath left him.

He realized then that it had been planted by his mother—quietly, deliberately—before she passed.

Only now could he see it.

The trees around it were not random. They curved outward in a slow spiral, echoing the cadence of her old druidic rituals—patterns meant not to command the land, but to listen to it. At the center stood a silverleaf.

When Elmon laid his hand against its bark, it hummed—softly, almost shy.

A young tre-ent.

Not yet awake. Not yet aware.

But growing.

Elmon spent his final days between school years buried in the library's breath, side by side with Elmin, tracing every surviving thread tied to the Staff of Perdina. His third-year archaeology and arcane investigation report tugged at him—not as a project, but as a forgotten memory pressing to surface.

To follow it, he would need to walk the Fili halls, Ortis's rune-key warm against his palm, granting passage into sealed places few were meant to enter. The Arcanist Vault of Lore awaited. So too did the Ravenscript Archives—each a sanctum of silence, each holding fragments of truths long buried and carefully ignored.

His life felt full. Lived. Marked by grief and by glory.

And yet, standing at the threshold of Perdina's mystery, Elmon knew one thing with absolute clarity:

He had not yet begun.

## Chapter ⊕: A Trail to Beginnings.

Five years had passed in the breath between questions, and Elmon was no closer to Perdina than when he first began. The world had opened its veils—some sang, some wept—but none revealed her.

Until he found the valley.

It pulsed with mythic song, veiled in serenity. The mountains surrounding it did not speak—they remembered. And in their silence, Elmon felt the echo of a name he had never forgotten.

He visited the School of Wizardry—now formally renamed Elmon’s Archive of Treasured Echoes. The name still felt strange to him, as if it belonged to memory rather than flesh.

Master Ortis invited him to sit in on a class. Elmon watched quietly from the rear as students traced resonance patterns and breath-bound sigils. One student stood out—not a mirror of Elmon, not touched by the same fractures—but sharper than the rest, attentive in a way that suggested listening rather than ambition.

The school was under new stewardship. Chancellor Marek Frenaris, a firemancer by discipline and a dreamer by inclination, now carried the weight of the sanctum. The halls felt different. Not lighter—but honest.

That afternoon, Elmon requested permission to visit the prison.

Former Chancellor Emuroil Fethermor had been condemned for the sacrifices he had offered—lives traded for power, authority bound through blood and fear. His punishment was severe and unrelenting, designed not to break the body alone, but to leave no refuge for denial.

When Emuroil saw Elmon, relief and terror crossed his face in equal measure.

Elmon did not come to accuse him.

He sat. He listened. He spoke only when necessary—quiet words not meant to absolve, but to steady what little remained of Emuroil’s fractured self. Whatever justice demanded, Elmon would not add cruelty to its burden.

Two years remained before execution.

Before leaving, Elmon sought the prison magistrate.

*“Why this form of punishment?”* he asked.

The answer was simple. *“It was decreed by the King himself.”*

Elmon nodded once—and carried the weight of that knowledge with him as he stepped back into the light.

He requested an audience with the King.

It took two weeks for the summons to arrive.

During that time, he did not wait idly. He sat in on classes across the archive—listening to instructors he had once studied under, and to others shaped by the aftermath he himself had helped forge. He demonstrated Echo mapping across the old battlegrounds, tracing Sigils where memory had burned itself into stone. When students asked about the battle, he spoke not of legend—but of responsibility.

In the afternoons, he would lie in the shade, absently stroking Elcrull's withers while she rested beside him, tail flicking lazily against the grass.

He also traveled south to South Point with her to visit Justin and Gorith.

They had two pups now—unmistakably their father's: headstrong, curious, already testing boundaries they did not yet understand. Justin worked as an Echo tracker and Veil tracer; his skills were in high demand. But his heart leaned elsewhere.

He spoke often of building a school for dwarves.

Not merely a place of training, but a forge of loyalty and resolve—one that would test courage, honor, and kinship even in the face of death. A place where loss was not hidden, but carried together.

Elcrull was excited for them.

Elmon listened, smiling.

Some legacies were not written in archives. Some were born in the next generation.

Justin pressed him one evening. *"What happened to Christin? And why Elcrull?"*

Elmon only smiled. *"Christin was called away by her father. Six months now. Not a word."*

Justin raised a brow.

*"As beautiful as she was... she was pushy,"* Elmon continued. *"Not cruel. Just certain."*

He laughed softly, eyes drifting into memory. *"I remember one afternoon, watching her walk away, wondering what she'd look like if she had a tail."*

Elcrull stared at him in disbelief—then burst into laughter. Justin joined her.

*"That would be bizarre,"* Justin said. *"A High Shadow Elf with a tail? What kind?"*

Elcrull flicked her own tail against Elmon's ear. *"Like mine."*

Justin sobered the next day, when they were alone.

*"When are you going to get serious?"* he asked.

Elmon studied him for a long moment. *"When I have found my place—and security in it."*

Justin leaned forward. *"Your place is what you make of it. It doesn't find you."*

Elmon did not answer immediately. *"I'm not ready yet,"* he said at last.

The next morning, Elcrull and Elmon rode north toward Scathnard.

When Elmon was finally granted audience with the King, he did not rush his steps. He studied the court as he passed—the banners, the murmurs, the weight of ritual and power—before stopping at the foot of the throne.

He asked two questions.

The first came without flourish. *"May I purchase the former Chancellor from the prison?"*

The court stilled.

The King leaned forward, his expression not angry, but genuinely shaken. *"Why,"* he asked slowly, *"would you wish to claim a man who defiled his victims and offered no path but execution? What merit lies in such a soul?"*

Elmon did not bow.

*“I know his skills. I know his heart. I know his purpose—and the rot that twisted it. I know why he believed what he did would better the school, even as it damned him. I do not seek to absolve him. I seek to bind the consequence even if it was sacrilegious or demented.”*

The King exhaled through his nose. *“A thousand gold crowns.”*

Elmon reached into his cloak and placed a small leather bag at the foot of the throne.

The jester retrieved it, opened it, and froze.

Inside lay a single Mythril coin.

The King smiled.

Elmon did not lower his gaze.

*“My second question,”* he said calmly, *“if a man is worthy of death, why torture him first? Torture does not cleanse guilt—it only feeds grief, and makes suffering feel like penance.”*

The King was silent for a long moment.

*“At times,”* the King said at last, *“a man must feel the pain he inflicted upon his victims.”*

Elmon nodded once. *“And what does that gain you, Your Highness?”*

The King’s jaw tightened. *“It sets an example.”*

Elmon looked at him squarely. *“If the pain is not witnessed, it teaches no one. It serves only the one who orders it. In that, you are no different from the man you condemn—cruel, not for justice, but for your own purposes.”*

The court erupted.

The King rose from his throne. *“Bind him.”*

Steel rang as guards surged forward.

Elmon did not resist.

He simply stepped backward—and was gone.

A ripple of displaced air marked where he had stood.

By the time the King shouted for pursuit, Elmon was already beyond the castle walls, walking the breath between places, the stone forgetting him as he passed.

He returned to the school before dusk.

Entic stood watch at the gates—now head of the school’s guard and warding. Elmon clasped his arm in thanks.

No words were needed.

That night, Elmon did not sleep.

Instead, he stood in the quiet breath between echoes and placed a memory—not a curse—into the King’s mind.

It was not pain. It was not a threat.

It was remembrance.

The King would not see Emuroil’s suffering—but he would no longer be able to forget the choice he had made. The echo did not speak. It did not accuse. It simply *remained*, returning in moments of stillness: the weight of a man bound, the silence of unseen

punishment, the knowledge that cruelty hidden from sight does not cleanse guilt—it multiplies it.

Sleep abandoned the King.

When night fell, the echoes stirred—not foreign, not invasive, but unmistakably his own. He woke breathless, convinced at first that he was haunted, that some external malice pursued him. He summoned Sorcerers. He sought Echo-mancers. He even petitioned the School itself.

None would aid him.

For there was no spell to break. No curse to lift. Nothing placed upon him that had not first been chosen by his own hand.

And so the King learned the lesson Elmon had offered in daylight:

That when suffering is inflicted in secret, it does not vanish—it waits.

When Emuroil was finally released—six weeks into the King’s echo-haunted misery—Elmon met him at the outer gate.

He did not come openly.

Mirrored recollection echoes veiled his features; the King still searched for him in anger and humiliation. It was not yet safe for Elmon’s name to move freely in court.

Emuroil stepped beyond the threshold like a man unsure the ground would hold him.

“*What is a broken man worth to you?*” he asked. His voice carried no pride now. Only fracture.

Elmon did not answer immediately.

He took Emuroil’s hand and gently closed it into a fist.

“*You have life,*” Elmon said. “*You have paid what was required. That is worth more than comfort.*”

Emuroil’s shoulders sank.

“*What I have done,*” he murmured, “*is a shame to all that is man.*”

Elmon’s voice did not sharpen.

“*You are free,*” he said evenly. “*You may go anywhere. Disappear. Build a new lie. Or sink into what you believe you deserve.*”

He stepped closer.

“*But I offer you a road you did not build. A path you would never have chosen. Walk it—not to redeem the past—but to discover what in you trusted darkness over light.*”

Emuroil did not speak.

He did not agree.

But he did not walk away.

And in that silence, Elmon understood:

The road had begun.

Then—

Elmon turned to Elcrull. *“Will you come with me,”* he asked quietly, *“or seek your War Blade?”*

She did not answer at once.

Her tail stilled.

*“I must finish,”* she said at last, voice breaking. *“I swore an oath. I will not become something lesser because the world shifts.”*

Tears came—but not from weakness.

*“I will become a War Blade.”*

Elmon nodded once.

*“Then leave word of your path at the school. I will find you when the time is right.”*

For the first time Elmon kissed her deeply, ruffled her fur. Hugged her.

This was not farewell.

It was divergence.

Two callings walking separate roads.

Their journey led them to the Ravenscript Archives—a sanctum of fractured lore and forgotten breath.

At first, Emuroil moved like a shadow.

His hands did not reach for books.

His eyes did not linger on ink.

He walked as one who had once ruled knowledge—and now feared touching it.

Elmon pressed him gently, asking for categories, fragments, traces—anything that might point to Perdina. They searched for staves, for soul-bound devices, for mythic constructs tied to emotional resonance.

Elmon had starting points, but he needed Emuroil’s eyes, his memory, his once-brilliant mind. He needed him to awaken—not to bask in his failed heart, but to rise from it.

Emuroil stumbled upon a passage in the Kingdom’s War Journal of a dwarven Forge Master working with a dark Elf and an AlèDün Mystic to construct a powerful weapon to bend the tide against the Wizards that sought to subjugate a land’s essence for his own lust for power.

The trail had a marker, or at least they hoped. The dwarf’s name Hondro Bregan. They began tracing all the works about this Forge Master.

They discovered that Hondro Bregan never remained long in one forge—moving between Houses and Holds as though pursued by something only he understood.

In the Egrolic and Silicis Territories, he discovered ways to build armor that would repel spells and swords. He was captured and tortured by a Matis Wizard of the House of Olan. Most of the items, notes, and lore logs were confiscated and never seen again.

The Matis Wizards were known by another name as well—Breach Masters, or more ominously, Gate Eaters. It was a term Elmon had not encountered before, and one that demanded investigation.

Historical records placed the Matis Wizards in constant conflict with the Coulman Wizards, who ruled the Hurisic, Coldirnocius, and Shadens territories. Their wars were not fought over ideology, but over trade routes, land, and peoples—treated as resources no different than timber or grain. The conflicts were relentless, and over time, the records suggested a shift: the Matis Wizards were gaining ground. Slowly. Decisively.

Elmon traced every reference he could find to Breach Masters and Gate Eaters—spells, sigils, ritual systems, marginal notes, even censored appendices. The accounts were inconsistent, fragmented, and often deliberately vague. Still, a pattern emerged. A Gate Eater was not merely a spell slinger. They were capable of **consuming** the essence of a gate itself—absorbing its memory, structure, and residual power—and storing it for later use. Not opening gates. Eating them.

It was Emuroil who uncovered the most troubling corroboration: an archive fragment referencing a town called Whisper Pawn. The record described a major confrontation between the Matis and Coulman factions. What followed was not a battle, but a siege of annihilation. Hundreds were slain on both sides. When it ended, the town was gone—not ruined, not buried, but erased so completely that no trace of its location remained. No foundations. No markers. No echoes.

It was as if Whisper Pawn had never existed at all.

They spent months sifting through fractured records and contested histories, and in the end, uncovered only three viable leads.

What emerged was a troubling pattern. The Matis Wizards had not merely adapted their magic—they had restructured warfare itself. Leveraging stolen or coerced dwarven lore logs, they began armoring non-wizards—those long dismissed as expendable pawns—with enchantment-laden plate and sigil-etched gear. These soldiers served two purposes: bait for enemy spellcasters, and mobile concealment for devastating arcane effects hidden within their armor. What appeared to be mundane infantry became vectors for controlled annihilation.

To confirm this, Elmon and Emuroil would need access to soured or war-ravaged archives scattered across the former Matis territories—lands now known as the Cornilian Country and portions of the Warlins Outlands. Unfortunately, most records from that era had either been destroyed or deliberately sealed.

Only two known repositories remained.

The first was a sealed vault beneath the King's Honored Court in Scathnard—utterly inaccessible to them both. The second was Pentor Hall, near the Black Lake on the northern mainland. Unlike the Court vaults, Pentor Hall still accepted sanctioned scholars, relic auditors, and mythic investigators under narrow conditions.

They could not breach the Honored Halls.

But Pentor Hall was viable.

Elmon studied the archive chamber in silence. Massive sealed doors lined the stone walls—older than the catalogued collections, older even than the Hall's public record. They were not locked for lack of keys, but for lack of *permission*.

*“There may be sanctified archives here,” Elmon murmured. “Hidden. Or forgotten on purpose.”*

Emuroil watched him carefully as Elmon turned toward the archivist's desk.

*"I'm going to try something."*

He removed the runestone of the Filí Halls from his satchel and placed it flat upon the table, his palm resting over it. The stone was inert—until Elmon closed his eyes and centered his breath.

He did not cast.

He remembered.

Elmon drew upon the Echo of Ortis's voice—the cadence, the phrasing, the *authority* embedded in the gifting of the stone. He recalled the moment of its bestowal, the words spoken not as instruction, but as recognition. As that memory aligned, the stone slid upward between his thumb and forefinger, humming faintly.

The rune ignited.

With quiet certainty—speaking not as a petitioner, but as one who knew the answer already existed—Elmon said:

*"I seek the script logs of the Matis Wizards. Specifically: the Binding of the Forge Lores."*

The stone's glow deepened.

And somewhere within the archive, something listened.

The Archivist inclined his head—just enough to acknowledge authority, not enough to invite notice.

Without a word, he crossed the chamber to a metal-bound door, six feet wide and unmarked by any visible lock. Its surface was uniform stone and iron—except for one section, subtly different, as if worn smooth by hands that knew where to touch.

He raised his palm and pressed it flat against that place.

With his pinky finger, he traced along the door's surface in a single continuous motion—never lifting, never hesitating—while his other hand withdrew. As the tracing completed its circuit, the Archivist lifted his palm and, in the air where it had rested, inscribed the outline of his hand as a sigil.

The mark flared once.

The door loosened with a muted breath of stone and swung inward.

Elmon eased it open just wide enough to slip through and motioned Emuroil forward. They entered without sound.

Behind them, the Archivist pressed the door closed.

It sealed—not with a thud, but with finality.

The room was dark as soot—lightless in a way that swallowed intention as much as sight.

Emuroil stiffened. His breath shortened, and a soft whimper escaped him before he could stop it. The darkness pressed inward, intimate and accusing.

Elmon placed a steady hand on his shoulder.

*"Summon an Echo light."*

Emuroil obeyed.

A pale glow bloomed—thin at first, then steady—casting long shadows that clung to the walls. Before them stood three towering bookcases, their shelves bowed under the weight of ancient texts.

Every binding was inscribed in Toreaz—not merely written, but *structured*—spell-language etched with purpose rather than grammar.

Elmon stepped closer, eyes scanning the spines.

Death of Iron

The Forge of Breath

Times–Times

Sulphur: Influences and Actions

The Trance of the Intellect

Natural Dissemination

The Seven Skies of the Universe — Volumes I, III, IV, V, VII, VIII

Repertoire of Subconscious Apparitions — Volume II

Cosmogony of Magnetic Fluids

Spherogenesis of the Multiverse — Volumes I through VIII

Some titles made Emuroil flinch. Others pulled at Elmon’s mind like hooks.

Between the codices lay manuscripts and folded maps, their ink faded to near-invisibility. When Elmon lifted one into the Echo light, threads ignited across the parchment—lines of conscious directive, memory laid into geography, intent woven into place.

“These aren’t maps,” Emuroil whispered. “They’re instructions,” Elmon replied.

There were treatises on compounds and forging processes—not recipes, but philosophies of transformation. Notes on how matter responded to breath. How iron remembered hands. How intention altered structure.

This was not an archive of history.

It was a record of how to change the world without spells.

Elmon glanced at Emuroil. “*Which do we begin with?*”

The question was practical—but it was also mercy. Darkness pressed at the corners of the room, and Emuroil’s past was never far behind him.

Emuroil steadied himself and gestured toward the upper shelf.

“*Spherogenesis of the Multiverse — Volumes I through VIII. Those would address echo-spheres, signature worlds... glyph-realms.*”

His finger shifted.

“*And The Seven Skies of the Universe — Volumes I, III, IV, V, VII, VIII. Cosmological veils. Multiversal strata.*”

He paused, eye narrowing at another spine. “*But The Forge of Breath... that may be different. That sounds like emotional architecture. The crafting of matter through resonance.*”

Elmon reached for *The Forge of Breath*.

The book resisted.

Not locked.

Not bound.

Resistant.

He gripped the top edge and pulled harder.

The volume tilted outward—

—and the entire bookcase shifted forward with a low, grinding sigh of stone on hidden rails.

Dust stirred.

Behind it, revealed in the hollow of the wall, was a narrow chamber—no larger than a monk's study cell. A research alcove. Intentional. Hidden.

Two tomes lay open upon a stone table:

The Seven Skies of the Universe — Volume II

The Seven Skies of the Universe — Volume VI

Volume II was open mid-script.

Beside it lay a sheet of parchment—blank at first glance—tilted oddly, as if abandoned mid-thought.

But faint glimmers moved across its surface.

Elmon lifted his hand and summoned a focused Echo light.

The page awakened.

Threads of pale luminescence revealed concealed transcription—words written in echo rather than ink.

Fragments emerged first.

'The Gate Realm shall serve as shelter and vault...' 'Echo Citadel of Forging...' '...left for the Sca—'

The final word was fractured, incomplete, as though the memory had been severed before its inscription finished.

Volume VI lay open to a description of a place called Aura.

The diagrams were not defensive like the Citadel schematics.

They curved. Flowed.

Less fortress.

More habitation.

The margins were filled with geometric diagrams—intersecting rings, vertical strata, a central axis marked with a sigil Elmon recognized.

He felt it before he understood it.

Perdina was not hidden.

She was archived in transit.

This was a destination.

Elmon read the text.

On the northern edge of this guardian world is the tower of Giants, standing abreast of the hills and valleys of the sacred plains. Giving a warning to those who would pass without purpose or permission.

The Void Grove Forest stood strong, waiting for those who would attempt to know her secrets. At the end of the valley stood the Erenal Gates. Tall of Mythril and Quinline were prepared in a hex of crossed lines and memories before the Citadel of Memories.

Nothing is known of the citadel, only its gates. Elmon felt a surge of something wanting to enter his mind.

He had learned to hold his mind gate half-raised at all times — a quiet strain he no longer noticed. It kept the dreams and visions at bay.

He asked Emuroil to place a Veil lock on the room. “*Why?*” Elmon, “*Something wants to speak to me. But I don’t want it to move me. Or if it is a trap, I can’t be taken.*” Emuroil veil locked the room.

Elmon took a deep breath, prepared, and cast an echo memory script, then released his mind gate.

It was a vision of a cocoon of crystal with a flickering within. Then it folded inward, as if aware it had been seen. Elmon explained the vision to Emuroil and kept the parchment with the echo script emblazoned upon it.

It was not a prison.

It was protection.

Looking back at the book, the line was a quote.

*‘These gates have not been opened in eons of memory. What lies beyond them? No one living knows. This Citadel is spoken of in legend:*

*There is nothing to open there — and nothing to regret. The gates wait. They do not guard. They beckon.’*

Elmon looked for more parchment, finding some in a drawer. He copied the verses on the page, rolled the scroll, and tucked it into his satchel.

Nothing else in the room drew attention.

Emuroil remained still at the far wall.

He studied it — the hairline cracks, the shallow marring in the stone, the faint seam that did not belong. His fingers traced the imperfections as though they might answer him.

Then he leaned into it.

Pushed.

Hard.

“*Why do you resist?*” he muttered, voice breaking. “*Have I not known you?*”

The stone did not move.

His breath hitched. Anger twisted into something else — something rawer.

He pressed his forehead against the wall.

“*I do not want your blood,*” he whispered. “*Leave me.*”

And then he crumpled.

Not dramatically. Not violently.

Just folded inward and slid to the floor, sobbing like a man who had reached the end of his strength.

Elmon crossed the room and knelt beside him.

He did not argue.

He did not reason.

He placed a hand at the base of Emuroil's neck and leaned close.

*"These times are no more,"* he whispered. *"I have freed you."*

Emuroil trembled.

Elmon pulled him into an embrace — firm, unshaken.

*"Peace, my friend,"* he said. *"I will protect you."*

And for a moment, the room did not feel like an archive of war.

It felt like a place of shelter.

He guided Emuroil to a chair and eased him into it.

*"Stay my friend,"* Elmon said softly.

Then he turned back to the wall.

He studied each stone carefully—height, grain, spacing, mortar seams. His fingers brushed across the surfaces, slow and methodical. One stone stood slightly larger than the rest. Its face was smoother. Worn. Not by time—but by touch.

He pressed his palm to it and traced the archivist's unlocking gesture.

Nothing.

He closed his eyes.

Instead of mimicking movement, he mimicked memory.

He imagined the wall opening. Again and again. Hands pressing. Stones shifting. The hidden space breathing.

He performed the vigil—not to unlock stone, but to recall its obedience.

The wall slid inward with a grinding sigh.

Behind it lay a narrow chamber.

A skeleton slumped against the far wall.

A dagger was buried deep in its back.

Stripped bare.

Its fingers were shattered—each one broken at the knuckle, as if it had clung desperately to something that was ripped away by force.

Emuroil drew in a sharp breath.

On a small table nearby lay the contents of a backpack—spilled and searched.

Not scattered.

Examined.

A small pouch with a handful of gold coins.

Chalk sticks.

Rotted remnants of jerky.

Four spherical crystals.

A coil of string.

And an open ledger—one page torn cleanly out.

Someone had come here looking for something.

And found it.

Elmon stepped forward slowly.

The items were ordinary.

The absence was not.

He gathered the four crystals, the chalk, and the gold coins. The rest he left untouched.

They sealed the chamber again.

Stone slid into place.

The bookcase moved back with a soft scrape of wood.

Elmon reset the displaced volume, locking the mechanism.

They opened the outer door just wide enough to pass through.

Closed it.

Pressed it shut.

Silence returned.

At the archivist's desk, Elmon placed four gold coins carefully on the surface.

No explanation.

Just acknowledgment.

They thanked the Archivist and retired to a modest inn near the eastern quay. Neither spoke much. The crystals rested between them on the small wooden table, catching faint reflections of lanternlight like watching eyes.

Sleep came—but lightly.

At dawn, a pounding shook the door.

Not frantic.

Measured.

Intentional.

Elmon rose immediately.

He paused before opening it, letting his senses widen.

He tested for blighted echoes.

Twisted weaves.

Fractured knots in the thread.

Nothing.

Only urgency.

He opened the door slowly, standing to the side.

The hallway was dim, lit only by a lantern swaying on its hook. Its flame bent unnaturally toward the figure standing there.

Hooded.

Breathing shallow.

Still.

Elmon kept one hand half-raised, attuned to the weave.

*“Speak your name,”* he said—not as challenge, but as ritual entry.

The figure hesitated.

Then whispered:

*“I carry a thread... from Aura.”*

Behind him, Emuroil stirred. He was already sitting upright, one hand reaching for the satchel where the parchment lay.

Elmon stepped forward.

*“Then speak the thread.”*

The stranger extended a scroll.

It was bound in quinline filament.

Sealed with a sigil Elmon had seen only once—

On the parchment beside *Seven Skies, Volume Two*.

Recognition struck before fear.

Elmon accepted it.

The moment his fingers touched the thread, the stranger stepped back.

Turned.

And vanished into the stairwell without sound.

The lantern flame stilled.

Silence returned.

They descended at first light, breaking their fast quickly before inquiring about passage to Pentor Halls.

The barkeep wiped his hands on a linen cloth and leaned across the counter.

*“For a price, the southern tower offers gates,”* he said. *“Else you can try the coast and barter for a ship. Weather’s mild this season.”*

Elmon checked his purse.

Two mythril.

Seven platinum.

Eighteen gold.

Enough — but not comfortably so.

He thanked the barkeep and stepped back into the cool morning air.

They made their way to the southern tower.

The structure rose like a stone needle, smooth-faced, windowless on its lower levels. The air around it felt still — too still.

Elmon paused at the threshold.

He widened his senses.

No twisted weaves.

No veil breaches.

No fractured knots.

The tower was clean.

He knocked.

The door opened moments later to a young woman, apprentice-robed, eyes sharp and assessing.

*“We seek passage to Pentor Halls,”* Elmon said evenly.

She nodded and ran upstairs without a word.

After several minutes, an elderly man descended, robes layered in faded sigil embroidery. His eyes were not weak — merely old.

*“Hundred platinum,”* he said without greeting.

Emuroil stepped forward immediately.

*“You greedy thief. It is but a few hundred miles. A hundred gold would suffice.”*

Elmon raised a hand, gently pressing Emuroil back.

Negotiation through pride was a mistake in places like this.

Instead, Elmon withdrew two of the crystal spheres from the satchel.

He held them up between thumb and forefinger.

*“One for transport,”* he said calmly. *“And one to inscribe a sigil of return.”*

The elderly man’s eyes sharpened.

He extended his hands and began to chant softly.

The spheres lifted from Elmon’s palm.

They glowed faintly.

Then—A reddish light flared within them.

The old man stiffened.

His fingers trembled.

He pulled his hands back abruptly.

The spheres dropped into Elmon's palm again, now warm.

Silence.

The apprentice glanced between them.

Elmon's voice did not change.

*"Well?"*

The old man studied him now, not as customer — but as variable.

*"You carry strange resonance,"* he muttered.

He began tracing sigils in the air.

A circular glyph formed — precise, layered, multi-threaded.

A gate lattice.

Elmon watched closely.

He memorized:

the tonal cadence

the finger articulations

the breath intervals

the MANA interlace anchoring the weave

The gate shimmered open — not a tear, not a rupture.

A woven aperture.

Clean.

Disciplined.

The Pentor anchor engaged.

The air inside the circle deepened into red-gold light.

Before stepping through, Elmon noted something subtle.

The weave pattern was not defensive.

It was consuming-neutral.

Efficient.

That troubled him.

Gate craft should stabilize space.

This one reorganized it.

He filed the observation away.

*"Pentor Halls,"* the elderly man said quietly. *"Return sigil embedded in the second sphere. Break it upon stone to reopen."*

Elmon inclined his head.

Then stepped through.

Elmon clasped Emuroil's wrist.

They stepped through.

The air folded — not violently, not even dramatically — simply rearranged.

They emerged just yards from the outer wall of Pentor Halls, the stone rising in pale tiers against a muted sky.

“Well,” Emuroil muttered, adjusting his cloak, *“fast and efficient. A quick trip.”*

Elmon glanced back.

The gate behind them had already sealed, leaving nothing but ordinary air and distant wind.

Too clean.

He filed that away.

They approached the city gate.

Pentor Halls was not ostentatious, but it was old — older than Scathnard in posture if not in stone. Its walls bore repairs from wars long past, layered masonry like scars deliberately left visible.

At the checkpoint, Elmon addressed the guard.

*“Where are the city archives maintained?”*

The guard looked him over — scholar, not soldier.

*“North quadrant. Follow the inner ring road until you see the vaulted façade. You’ll know it.”*

Elmon inclined his head.

They followed the directions.

The library rose before them — broad-faced, columned, its lintel etched with script in three languages. The doors were heavy oak, iron-banded, bearing hand-polished wear.

Elmon and Emuroil entered.

The scent struck immediately:

Dust.

Ink.

Binding glue.

Old vellum.

Sanctified knowledge.

They approached the curator's counter.

*“I require shelving of historical material on the Matis Wizards,” Elmon said evenly. “A study room. And literature on legendary constructs.”*

The curator did not look up immediately.

He scribbled on a small slip of parchment and pushed it forward.

Drawer Three and Four.

Rooms — five silver per day.

Scriptist — one gold per day.

Efficient.

Elmon placed three gold coins on the counter.

The curator weighed them in his hand, nodded once, then stood.

He unlocked a narrow side door and handed Elmon a key marked with a brass tag.

Without a word, he disappeared through another door.

Moments later he returned, followed by a young man pushing a small cart laden with:

Bound ledgers

Blank parchment

Ink wells

Three quills

A sand shaker

The young man avoided eye contact but moved with practiced discipline.

They entered the study room.

It was modest but secure.

A large central desk dominated the space — oak, scarred by decades of annotation. At the far end stood a penning desk, narrower, angled for copying. The scriptist set his tools there carefully.

A coat rack mounted near the wall.

A filing cabinet with twenty narrow drawers — likely local indexing, not open stacks.

A single high window let in filtered light.

The door shut with a firm click.

Silence.

Emuroil exhaled slowly.

“*Good,*” he murmured. “*Walls. Doors. Contained space.*”

Elmon moved to the drawer cabinet.

Three.

Four.

He opened them.

Inside lay index cards — names, campaigns, magical houses, territorial expansions, confiscations.

Matis.

Coulman.

Breech Masters.

Gate Eaters.

The ink here was older.

And some entries bore red annotations — sealed citations.

This was not common lore.

Elmon closed the drawer gently.

He looked to Emuroil.

*“We begin with structure,”* he said. *“Not war accounts. We trace their cosmology first.”*

The scriptist dipped his quill.

Ready.

Pentor Halls would not know it yet —

—but something long buried had just been asked to breathe again.

Elmon removed his overcoat, hanging it neatly by the door. He kept the stately coat on — the school glyph woven at the collar, the Glyph of Amoquindo resting over his heart — but loosened the buttons.

The young scriptist paused mid-stroke.

His eyes fixed on the sigils.

He tapped the edge of his desk politely.

Elmon turned.

*“You mastered the Ulrick Test?”* the young man asked quietly, almost reverently.

Emuroil did not hesitate.

*“Yes. In ten minutes.”*

He leaned back slightly, studying the young man.

*“I witnessed it myself.”*

The scriptist blinked.

Emuroil continued, voice low but steady.

*“I was Chancellor of the Wizard School at Scathnard when we first heard of him. An elf child who made candles flare without breath. Who shifted coat hangings across rooms. Who caused whispers among council halls and alchemic masters.”*

He folded his hands.

*“His uncle — a respected Alchemic Sorcerer and Veil Scriptor — wrote of a boy who did not learn magic. He conversed with it.”*

Elmon shifted slightly, uncomfortable.

Emuroil noticed, but did not stop.

*“When I first saw him,”* he said more softly, *“he was unsure. Not arrogant. Not controlled. But there was a weave about him — vibrant. Dense. As if the strands of the mystic field leaned toward him.”*

He looked at Elmon now.

*“I had only seen such density in archmages who had studied for fifty years.”*

The scriptist swallowed.

Elmon cleared his throat.

*“I passed the test because I understood its question,”* he said simply. *“Not because I am exceptional.”*

The young man studied him differently now.

Not as a prodigy.

But as something... unmeasured.

Emuroil gave a small, almost private smile.

*“Incalculable,”* he murmured.

Then he gestured to the drawers.

*“Now, let us see if the Matis Wizards were as clever as they believed.”*

The scriptist resumed writing — but his hand trembled slightly.

The young man stared at Elmon as though something impossible had just taken form in front of him.

A legend.

In the flesh.

His mouth opened slightly, then closed. He looked down at the glyph again, as if confirming it had not changed while he blinked.

*“I... I’ve read about the Ulrick Test,”* he said. *“They say most fail before the third sigil.”*

Emuroil gave a low hum of agreement.

Elmon met the lad’s gaze.

*“The test is only an application of understanding,”* he said calmly. *“Nothing more.”*

The young man shook his head slowly.

*“No, sir,”* he replied, half smiling, half stunned. *“Understanding is not ‘nothing.’”*

His joy was quiet but blazing — the kind a scholar feels when myth breathes beside him. He would tell this story. He would tell it a hundred times.

And no one would believe him.

Elmon offered a faint smile, then turned back toward the drawers.

*“Bring us the Matis indexes,”* he said gently. *“Legends are less interesting than ledgers.”*

The lad moved quickly — still glowing from the encounter.

Elmon slid open the second card drawer.

Four entries rested inside:

**Warrior and Misgovernance.**

**Theocracy of Magic.**

**Ends of Wars.**

## **Turbulence of the Forge.**

He studied them a moment.

Without looking up, he asked, “*What is your name?*”

The young man straightened. “*Peter Hornal, sir.*”

“*Well, Peter,*” Elmon said lightly, “*do you gather these volumes, or shall I?*”

Peter blinked. “*Give me the cards, sir. I will gather them.*”

Elmon glanced up at him. “*Call me Elmon.*”

The boy froze.

“*...Elmon?*”

His eyes widened further.

“*You survived the battles of the Sage Crypt?*”

Elmon slowly raised one brow and glanced at Emuroil.

Emuroil folded his hands behind his back. “*We had to call it something.*”

Elmon returned his gaze to Peter.

“*Yes,*” he said calmly. “*I survived.*”

Then, with a faint shrug:

“*By blade and by bow, we overcame the evil of the pit. Had it not been for the dragon riders and the three Paladins of the Holy Hand, we would all have perished beneath the demon.*”

Peter leaned forward slightly.

“*What did it look like?*”

“*Was it true there were hundreds?*”

“*Did the earth really split?*”

“*Did a Myst Gazer fight there?*”

The questions tumbled out faster than breath.

After the sixth interruption, Elmon held up a hand — not harshly, but firmly.

“*Peter.*”

The young man stopped.

Elmon handed him the four cards.

“*These first.*”

Peter swallowed, nodded vigorously, and nearly trotted from the room.

The door shut behind him.

Emuroil exhaled softly.

“*You attract myth like iron draws lightning.*”

Elmon returned to the remaining drawers.

“*Then let us make sure the myth is accurate.*”

After several minutes, Peter returned, pushing a cart stacked high with bound volumes. He arranged them carefully across the table.

Two volumes of *Turbulence of the Forge*.

Three of *Warrior and Misgovernance*.

Elmon slid *Theocracy of Magic* toward Emuroil without comment and opened the first volume of *Turbulence of the Forge*.

Most of the opening chapters were procedural — diagrams, ore temperatures, shaft densities. But a single marginal note caught his eye:

*“The shaft will not bind correctly without the settling.”*

Elmon frowned.

*“Settling,”* he murmured.

He was no smith. The term hung in his mind like a half-remembered sigil.

He turned to the second volume.

This one felt different — less instruction, more frustration.

One passage stood out immediately:

*‘The Mythril would not share its binding with the base’s crown.’*

Elmon leaned closer.

The description followed:

The Mythril shaft had been forged at peak heat. The crown was cooler. When the hammer struck to bond them — the plate fractured.

Mythril does not fracture.

The account continued:

*‘The anvil wept. The fire dulled in the shaft. I not be known this.’* — Recorded by Mathis Sor, Forge Smith

Elmon exhaled slowly.

Mythril refusing to bind.

Not failing.

Refusing.

The following chapters detailed repeated attempts — recalibrated heat, reforged shafts, altered alloys. The master smiths adjusted flame intensity, rune alignment, even hammer cadence.

Nothing held.

Until Mathis proposed a separator plate.

Quinline.

A thin layer — neither crown nor shaft — placed between them.

Both components were brought to tempered equilibrium. Neither too hot. Neither too cold.

When struck — They bonded.

Like butter pressed to warm bread.

Both shafts mirrored the process.

Elmon tapped the page thoughtfully.

Quinline as mediator.

Memory-metal between will and form.

The remaining chapters spiraled outward:

Crystals threaded through core channels. Ribbons of inscription woven into the binding seam. Runes drafted but crossed out. Sigil diagrams abandoned mid-notation.

It was clear something singular had been attempted.

But nowhere did the text state what was being made.

Elmon closed the volume slowly.

*"It was not armor,"* he said quietly.

Emuroil looked up.

*"No,"* Elmon continued. *"Armor does not require mediation between crown and shaft."*

He tapped the page again.

*"This was meant to hold something... volatile."*

Volume three was thin.

Only two chapters filled its opening. After that — blank pages.

Not torn.

Not removed.

Simply... unused.

The volumes bore no numbering, no placement mark within a set. No sigil indicating sequence. It was as if they had been cataloged in haste — or disassembled on purpose.

Elmon read the final written line in volume three again.

*"The seal forge was complete. The sanctum's weaves and metal ribbons of sigil structure were bound."*

Bound.

And then—

Silence.

The phrasing unsettled him. Volume two ended with struggle. Fracture. Experimentation. Trial.

Volume three opened as if something had already been achieved.

There was no transition.

No record of success.

No explanation of the final assembly.

It was like walking into a room and finding a fire still warm — but no memory of who lit it.

Elmon looked up.

“Peter,” he said calmly, “*is there a record of additional volumes? Misplaced, archived separately, or... withdrawn?*”

Peter straightened, nearly knocking over his inkwell.

“Yes, Master— I mean— Elmon.”

He hurried from the room, clearly thrilled to be entrusted with such a task.

Minutes stretched.

Emuroil said nothing. He was staring at the binding seam of volume three as if it offended him personally.

Finally, Peter returned — arms full, breath short.

He placed a stack of loose folios on the table, along with a partial book whose spine had ruptured completely.

The binding threads hung like exposed veins.

“*This was in the ‘To Be Bound and Restored’ archive,*” Peter said, almost reverently. “*No catalog mark. It was set aside for repair.*”

Elmon touched the damaged spine gently.

It was not old damage.

It was forced.

Elmon nodded to Peter. “*Ahh. What a resourceful youth you are.*”

There was no flattery in it. Only recognition.

He drew the fractured volume closer, his hands slower now—measured, reverent. Not as a scholar turning pages, but as one approaching a grave.

Each sheet lifted like a breath disturbed.

The binding threads had not simply failed. They had been torn.

Twenty pages in—

He stopped.

Two facing leaves bore a darkened stain.

Dried.

Cracked along the fibers.

Not ink.

Elmon lowered his head slightly and summoned a gentle Echo light—not bright, not invasive. The kind used in sanctum grief work.

The stain responded.

It did not glow.

It *remembered*.

The weave around the pages tightened. A low hum vibrated through the air. Not sound—resonance. A pulse of pressure in the chest.

Peter stepped back unconsciously.

Emuroil stiffened.

Elmon closed his eyes.

Dwarven blood carried density. Heat. Oath.

Under Echo light, the stain shimmered faintly—not residue, but layered resonance. Grief embedded into fiber. Final intent pressed into parchment.

A forge master's hand.

A struggle.

A refusal.

Elmon exhaled slowly.

*“These are the Lore Logs of Hondro Bregan forge master.”*

Silence followed.

He turned another page.

*“Taken during the Wizard Wars. Confiscated by the Matis House of Olan.”*

He did not say stolen.

The room understood it.

Peter swallowed and straightened his back, suddenly aware that he stood at the edge of recovered history. He withdrew a small codex slip and began recording formally—careful script, proper reference, chain of custody.

Elmon did not look at him.

He was still listening to the pages.

The blood pulsed once more under Echo light.

Not rage.

Not curse.

Witness.

One passage flickered under the Echo light.

Not with brightness—

With heat.

Emuroil leaned closer, breath shallow. His voice was barely more than a thread.

*“That’s not a forge log.”*

He swallowed. *“That’s a binding vow.”*

Elmon did not answer immediately.

He traced the edge of the bloodstain with his gaze, not touching it.

*“The ink fades,”* he said quietly. *“But the blood does not.”*

He closed his eyes briefly.

*“If the sanctum was sealed with blood, then whatever was forged there was not merely crafted. It was sworn.”*

Peter stood rigid beside the ledger desk, hands hovering uncertainly over parchment.

*“Should I prepare a restoration request, Master Elmon?”*

Elmon placed a steady hand on the boy’s shoulder.

*“Not yet.”*

His tone was gentle—but absolute.

*“This volume is not ready to be restored. It must be read in silence... and bound in truth.”*

He turned to Emuroil.

*“We do not search for the object yet.”*

Emuroil’s brow tightened.

*“We search for the sanctum Hondro sealed.”*

Elmon nodded.

*“If the forging was interrupted—if the vow was broken—then the object may not be incomplete.”*

He looked at the blood again.

*“It may be waiting.”*

The word lingered in the room like held breath.

*“And if the Matis Wizards tried to steal it,”* Emuroil added slowly, *“they would have torn through wards, sigils, sanctum thresholds.”*

*“They would have left fractures,”* Elmon said.

*“Fractured weaves leave trails.”*

Peter stared between them, eyes wide.

*“Master Elmon... what is it you seek?”*

Elmon’s gaze drifted toward the sealed bookcase wall.

His voice lowered—not from secrecy, but from reverence.

*“A stave.”*

A pause.

*“Of extraordinary purpose.”*

He did not say Perdina.

Not here.

Not in a room that had once hidden blood behind stone.

## Chapter ⊕: The Crystal Director

*“What do you mean by Weaves and Echoes?”*

Elmon sat in a chair and looked Peter in the eye.

*“In its simplest form, an echo is the repetition of sound caused by its reflection off a surface — heard again after the original sound has faded. But within mythic and emotional contexts, an echo becomes far more than acoustics. It is a resonant return. A memory stirred. A feeling revisited.”*

His hands rested lightly on the arms of the chair.

*“There are various types of these echoes. And that is a course of study.”*

Emuroil, standing with quiet restraint beside a crystal column, added dryly,

*“That you rewrote a few chapters of.”*

Elmon paused and looked at him.

*“Only because definition, clarity, and processes had been learned — and needed publication.”*

There was no irritation in his voice. Only precision.

Elmon continued.

*“Weave refers to the interlacing of elemental, emotional, and arcane threads that form the underlying structure of reality, memory, and resonance.”*

He rose from the chair and walked slowly toward the central table.

*“In ritual practice, a weave is not merely a pattern — it is a living lattice. Responsive to intention. To trauma. To truth.”*

He turned.

*“Do you understand?”*

Peter shrugged one shoulder.

*“I think so.”*

Elmon studied him a moment longer than was comfortable.

*“Well,” he said evenly, “there is a great school where you can learn such things — and so much more.”*

Peter said, *“My family is poor, but we make things work.”*

Elmon walked to the penning bench and sat. On a piece of parchment, he inscribed his echo seal.

*“By bow and by sword, I hereby claim residence for Peter Hornal.”*

He looked up. *“What is your clan, Peter?”*

Peter answered, *“My father has no clan. He is a bastard of Sigil, lord of Pearls Keep.”*

Elmon nodded once. *“Ahh. This should stir the roost.”*

He continued writing:

*“Peter Hornal, grandson of Lord Caldis Hornel. Breach of mastery in secret. Hereby bequeath my station to open for parliamentary excuse for scholarship to Elmon’s Archive of Treasured Echoes.”*

He breathed on it, rolled the parchment, melted wax, and sealed it with a glyph of his ownership.

Emuroil shook his head. *“There will be a swarm over this.”*

Elmon handed the scroll to Peter. *“This is my seal and lineage marking. You have a place and a scholarship in the School of Wizardry at Scathnard.”*

Peter was wide-eyed, fumbling for words.

Elmon said, *“You take this to the school and seek Chancellor Marek Frenaris—an old firemancer. Say, ‘Elmon gives a greeting and a request.’ Hand him the scroll unopened.”*

He paused.

*“You, Peter, have a three-year scholarship. Possibly five years, depending on how certain entities respond to kingdom compliance.”*

Elmon giggled and smiled.

After the break and teaching moment, Elmon and Emuroil returned to the volume.

Most of the remaining text proved interesting enough — detailed accounts of forge movements, trade corridors, and sealed deliveries — though it lacked a proper map of movement with names of dispositions. The absences were noticeable. Intentional.

Something had moved through the hands of the AlèDün, particularly the Evant forge masters.

A marginal note caught Elmon’s eye.

It was written in sigil script — clean, deliberate.

But wrong.

*‘Breech Home Far Cry.’*

The phrase sat on the page like a foreign object.

Echo-less.

Elmon’s eyes narrowed.

He turned slowly toward Emuroil.

*“Why would you write in sigil script a note and remove the weave and echo that placed it there?”*

Emuroil frowned. *“You can’t. There must be a trace, or it would not exist.”*

Elmon silently turned the volume and showed him the page.

*“Check yourself.”*

Emuroil leaned closer. He extended two fingers above the script, not touching it — testing resonance.

Nothing.

He shifted angle. Adjusted breath.

Still nothing.

His brow tightened.

*“This is a first.”*

Peter stepped nearer, careful not to disturb the book.

*“What is wrong?”*

Elmon answered without looking up.

*“When something is created — textual, glyphic, or sigilic — there is always an echo. Or a weave carrying echo. It must be evident.”*

Peter thought for a moment.

*“From what you said earlier... could it be not in the writing, but in the writing? Hidden? Painted over? Something like that?”*

Elmon’s head lifted slowly.

He examined the ink itself.

Not the script.

The ink.

He traced a subtle breathward lattice across the surface — light, careful, non-invasive.

There.

A faint echo.

But not anchored to the parchment.

Anchored to something deeper.

Emuroil felt it as well and inhaled sharply.

*“The ink is woven.”*

Elmon nodded.

*“It was not written.”*

He leaned back slightly, studying the anomaly.

*“This is a physical echo inscribed in time, not parchment.”*

Peter blinked. *“What does that mean?”*

*“It means,”* Elmon replied softly, *“the words were never placed on the page. The page was placed around the words.”*

Silence settled.

### ***The Lattice***

Elmon extended both hands over the script and carefully wove a light lattice — not to alter, but to reveal.

The faint echo trembled, resisting.

Then aligned.

The original phrase blurred slightly.

Beneath it — like a watermark seen only at certain angles — another line surfaced:

“Catar through breech bound now in claw.”

Emuroil’s expression darkened. “*Catar...*”

Elmon finished quietly:

*“It was moved to the city of Breech in the Catar highlands by the hands of the AlèDün.”*

Peter looked between them.

“So ‘*Breech Home Far Cry*’—was camouflage,” Emuroil said.

“Or *misdirection*,” Elmon added.

He closed the lattice gently.

The page returned to stillness, the surface phrase unchanged.

But now they knew.

Emuroil leaned back from the volume.

*“They were wise.”*

“Yes,” Elmon agreed. “*They wove the ink itself.*” He tapped the margin lightly.

*“No echo because it was never inscribed as text. It is a temporal echo fixed in physical medium.”*

Peter’s eyes widened.

*“Can that be done again?”*

Elmon’s gaze lingered on the page.

“Yes.”

A pause.

*“But only by those who understand that writing is not the act of marking parchment — but the act of binding memory to matter.”*

The chamber grew quiet again.

Somewhere in the layers of Pentor Halls, a subtle shift passed through stone.

Not reaction.

Recognition.

The trail had moved.

Catar.

Breech.

AlèDün hands.

And whatever Hondro had forged — or refused to complete — had passed through them.

Peter leaned closer to the table, the hidden words still settling in his thoughts.

*“That is just a few days from here,” he said. “And it is all but ruins. There is an archaeological study going on up there by the Tretis Magistrate for family lineage. I go there often as a page and recorder for findings.”*

Elmon looked up slowly.

“Oh?”

Peter nodded. *“They are cataloging broken seals, partial ledgers, fragments of family marks. Mostly inheritance disputes. Old land claims. Nothing... mythic.”*

Emuroil gave him a thin look. *“There is no such thing as ‘nothing mythic’ in ruins.”*

Peter hesitated, then added, *“The site is controlled. Official. Guarded lightly. They don’t let most people near the deeper vault stones.”*

Elmon closed the volume carefully.

“Well,” he said with calm finality, *“that makes the job simple.”*

Peter blinked. *“Job?”*

“You know the way,” Elmon replied. *“And you are hired for two days.”*

Emuroil turned his head slowly toward him. *“You are employing him already?”*

“For guidance,” Elmon said mildly. *“Not excavation.”*

Peter straightened slightly. *“Hired?”*

“Yes,” Elmon answered. *“Two days’ guidance through Catar’s Breech site. You will walk us through the magistrate’s sanctioned perimeter, introduce us as archival observers, and show us the strata they have not yet cataloged properly.”*

Peter swallowed. *“They won’t like outsiders.”*

“They will like legitimacy,” Elmon said. *“And I carry it.”*

Emuroil exhaled softly through his nose. *“You intend to enter under academic pretext.”*

“I intend,” Elmon replied, *“to observe what was moved and what was hidden.”*

Peter’s expression shifted from uncertainty to something closer to pride.

*“I can get you near the old forge quarter. The Magistrate thinks it was a minor smith district. They focus mostly on noble vaults.”*

Elmon’s eyes sharpened at that.

“The forge quarter.”

“Yes,” Peter said. *“Collapsed stone, slag heaps, broken venting shafts. Nothing of value, they say.”*

Emuroil murmured, *“Which means everything of value.”*

Silence lingered a moment.

Elmon stood.

“You will not speak of woven ink. Or echoes in time.”

Peter nodded quickly.

“And you will not attempt to interpret anything beyond your instruction.”

Another nod.

Elmon regarded him carefully, weighing not knowledge but steadiness.

“We leave at first light.”

Peter inhaled slowly. *"I can have passes arranged by dusk."*

"Good," Elmon replied.

Emuroil crossed his arms again, though there was less resistance in the gesture now.

*"You are moving quickly."*

"Yes."

*"Because?"*

Elmon's gaze returned briefly to the hidden phrase still lingering in his memory.

*"Because something was bound in claw."*

The words hung between them.

Peter frowned slightly. *"Claw?"*

Elmon closed the book and secured its latch.

*"We will discover what that means when we stand where it was bound."*

Outside Pentor Halls, the late light dimmed against stone arches.

Catar lay only days away. Ruins to magistrates. Archives to lineage hunters.

But to those who understood weave and echo— A transfer point. And perhaps, the first physical trace of what Hondro refused to complete. Elmon finished the third volume slowly.

He did not skim.

He did not rush.

He annotated in the margins of his own ledger — careful, angular script — while Peter copied two of the maps that appeared in the latter half of the text.

They were not conventional maps. At first glance they resembled star charts. But the points were uneven. Too deliberate for constellations. Too geometric for terrain.

Ground marker sigils, perhaps. Or a keyed overlay — something meant to align with physical landmarks.

Peter worked diligently, reproducing each angle precisely. Emuroil observed without comment.

When Elmon closed the volume at last, the faint dust of old parchment settled like breath released.

Peter stacked the books carefully and began returning them to their shelves. The great hall swallowed the sound of bindings sliding back into stone recesses. He paused, holding the battered volume — the one with the woven ink anomaly.

*"What do I do with the beat-up volume?"*

Elmon did not hesitate.

*"Include your scripted notes and put in a request for it to be transferred to the Echo Restoration Ledger, under provisional classification: Lore Fragment—Bloodbound, Echo-Woven, Sigil-Sealed."*

Peter blinked and repeated the classification under his breath to commit it to memory.

Elmon continued.

*“Attach your scripted notes, the glyph trace, and the echo lattice rendering.”*

Peter nodded.

*“Mark it as Unnumbered Volume—Suspected Third in Sequence.”*

Emuroil’s eyebrow lifted slightly.

*“That will stir the archivists.”*

Elmon allowed himself a restrained smile.

*“That is the intention.”*

Peter looked uncertain. *“Won’t they question the provisional classification?”*

“Yes,” Elmon replied. *“And they should.”*

He rose and gathered his own ledger.

*“If it is cataloged incorrectly, it will disappear into obscurity. If it is cataloged precisely, it will draw scrutiny.”*

Peter considered this.

*“And scrutiny is good?”*

*“Scrutiny,”* Elmon said calmly, *“is pressure. Pressure reveals fractures. And fractures reveal truth.”*

Peter held the worn volume with renewed care.

*“I will draft the transfer request tonight.”*

“Good,” Elmon said. *“Use formal registry tone. No speculation. Only findings.”*

Peter nodded and carried the book toward the registry desk.

Emuroil stepped beside Elmon as the boy moved away.

*“You are placing a signal.”*

“Yes.”

*“To whom?”*

Elmon’s gaze drifted briefly toward the high shelves of Pentor Halls.

*“To anyone who recognizes blood-bound sequence notation.”*

Emuroil folded his hands behind his back.

*“And if one of the Matis remnants is watching archival movements?”*

Elmon closed his ledger.

*“Then they will know someone else has begun reading.”*

The hall remained still.

But something had shifted.

Not loudly.

Not visibly.

A volume had moved from obscurity toward restoration.

And in archives as old as Pentor Halls—That was never a small thing.

Peter nodded, already reaching for the binding parchment.

His hands moved with newfound purpose — no longer merely a page, but a scribe of resonance. He selected heavier fiber, archival grade, the kind used for contested lineage records and sealed testimonies. Careful. Deliberate.

He aligned the battered volume square against the table edge before wrapping it.

There was no tremor now.

Only intent.

The book seemed smaller in his hands than it had moments before — not diminished, but contained. As if acknowledging custody.

Emuroil watched without speaking.

Elmon observed more quietly still.

Peter tied the cord in the registrar's pattern — cross-bind, loop return, tension set — then pressed his thumb lightly over the seam where the woven ink had been revealed.

He did not attempt to feel the echo.

He only respected it.

*"That classification,"* Peter said softly as he finished, *"will bring senior review."*

*"Yes,"* Elmon replied.

*"And if they attempt to suppress it?"*

*"They cannot suppress what has already been logged,"* Elmon said evenly. *"Once entered into the Restoration Ledger, it must be accounted for."*

Peter looked up.

*"Even if they wish it forgotten?"*

*"Especially then."*

Peter secured the provisional tag and inscribed the heading in clean registrar script:

Lore Fragment — Bloodbound, Echo-Woven, Sigil-Sealed Unnumbered Volume — Suspected Third in Sequence

He paused only briefly before adding the echo lattice rendering — a careful geometric reproduction of Elmon's earlier weave.

Emuroil exhaled quietly.

*"You are training him quickly."*

Elmon's voice was calm.

*"He is learning because he listens."*

Peter finished the final line of notation and sanded the ink lightly. When he lifted the sheet, the script held steady — no bleed, no hesitation.

He gathered the maps he had copied and placed them within the binding fold.

*"These markers,"* he said carefully, *"if they align to Catar..."*

*"They will not align on ordinary terrain,"* Elmon replied. *"Look for structural remnant — stone venting shafts, collapsed forge ribs, old drainage channels."*

Peter nodded.

He understood.

This was no longer only study.

It was preparation.

When he finally lifted the bound volume to carry it to the registry desk, the movement felt ceremonial — not grand, but deliberate.

A shift had occurred.

Not in the book.

In him.

Elmon watched as the boy crossed the hall.

No longer simply observing knowledge.

Now stewarding it.

And in Pentor Halls, stewardship was the first threshold of mastery.

Emuroil leaned against the shelf, watching the boy work.

*“He’s changed,”* he murmured.

Elmon, still reviewing the copied star maps, replied without looking up.

*“He’s begun.”*

The room settled into quiet motion — maps copied, glyphs annotated, echoes traced. The steady rhythm of ink and parchment replaced the earlier tension of revelation.

Elmon adjusted one of the copied diagrams beneath the lamplight. The arrangement of points no longer resembled stars.

They resembled vent shafts.

Or anchor pins.

Or the ribs of a buried structure seen from above.

He turned the page. The final leaf of the third volume bore a faint sigil, almost missed.

A claw-shaped crescent. Etched in quinline. Sealed with the faintest trace of Asnien.

Elmon stopped. His fingers hovered just above the page. Emuroil noticed the stillness and stepped closer. *“What is it?”*

Elmon tilted the book slightly so the light struck the sigil at an angle. *“That is not just a forge mark.”* Emuroil studied it carefully. The crescent was deliberate — not decorative.

*“That’s a claim sigil.”*

*“Yes,”* Elmon said quietly. *“Someone bound the object to a lineage.”*

Peter looked up from the ledger, attentive now. *“Bound how?”*

*“Not ownership,”* Elmon replied. *“Inheritance.”* Emuroil’s expression sharpened.

*“Then the stave isn’t just unfinished.”* He met Elmon’s eyes. *“It’s inherited.”*

Elmon nodded slowly.

*“And if it is in Breech, buried beneath ruin and silence, then we will need more than maps.”*

He closed the volume with deliberate care. *“We will need memory.”*

Peter rose from the ledger desk. *“I know the way,”* he said. *“And I know the magistrate. If the stave is there, I’ll help you find it.”*

Emuroil regarded him for a long moment — not measuring enthusiasm, but steadiness. Elmon allowed the faintest smile. *“Then let us prepare.”*

He secured the third volume and gathered the copied maps into a protective sleeve. *“We leave at dawn.”*

The lamps in Pentor Halls burned low, their light steady against ancient stone. Outside, night gathered. Inside, intention settled.

Breech awaited — not as ruin, but as inheritance. And somewhere beneath its fractured forge ribs, something bound by claw and quinine waited to be remembered.

Elmon walked to the curator’s counter and laid two more gold coins on the bench. They did not clink loudly. They settled.

*“Scribe Peter will be escorting us to the Catar Archaeological Investigation north for further inscription.”*

He handed the Archivist the formal request to transfer the battered volume to the Echo Restoration Ledger. The Archivist adjusted his spectacles and began reading. His brow lifted slightly at the classification.

Then again at the notation: *Unnumbered Volume—Suspected Third in Sequence.*

He looked up. *“How do you know this?”* Elmon did not answer immediately.

Instead, he turned slightly and stopped Peter with a raised hand. *“Observe.”* He lifted the blood-laden page — the one bearing the woven anomaly — careful not to crease its age.

With measured breath, he conjured the lattice again. Not forcefully. Precisely.

The faint echo structure shimmered into visibility — threads interlaced across the ink, refracting under controlled breath.

The hidden phrase trembled just beneath perception. The Archivist leaned forward despite himself.

*“It is remarkably clever work,”* Elmon said calmly. *“Whoever did this, it is in the ink — not written, but woven.”*

The Archivist’s eyes widened. He stepped back, then bowed reflexively. *“Sorry, sir. I did not know you were an Echo Scholar.”* Peter, unable to contain the surge of pride in his voice, added quickly:

*“This is Master Elmon of the Wizardry School of Scathnard — who survived the battle of the Sage Crypt.”* Elmon gave Peter a brief sideways glance, though not unkindly. The Archivist’s bow deepened — and paused.

That pause did not go unnoticed. Across the hall, near the entry arch, the City Hall magistrate observed the incomplete bow with a practiced eye. He was not aware of any dignitaries visiting the city.

He stepped away from his conversation and approached the counter. The Archivist straightened slightly but did not fully rise from the bow until the magistrate stood beside him.

*“Is there a matter requiring municipal review?”* the magistrate asked evenly.

Elmon inclined his head — not a bow, but acknowledgment. *“No matter of dispute. Only archival correction.”* The magistrate’s gaze moved to the page still suspended within the faint lattice.

His eyes narrowed, not in hostility, but in calculation. *“And you are?”*

*“Elmon,”* he replied. *“Of Scathnard.”* A pause. The magistrate studied him more closely. *“Wizardry School?”*

*“Yes. . . . “And you have identified a misclassified volume?”* Elmon lowered the lattice gently and placed the page back upon the counter. *“I have identified a woven inscription masked as script.”*

The magistrate glanced toward the Archivist. *“Verified?”* The Archivist swallowed. *“Yes, sir.”* Peter stood straighter beside Elmon.

The magistrate’s gaze flicked briefly toward the two gold coins still resting on the bench. *“And this escort to Catar?”*

*“Legitimate,”* Elmon replied. *“Under inscription review.”* The magistrate held silence a moment longer than was comfortable. Then: *“You understand that the Catar site is under lineage investigation.”*

*“I do.”*

*“And that certain families have interest in what may be found.”*

*“I am aware.”* The magistrate’s expression did not change. *“Then you will register your names before departure.”*

*“Of course.”* The magistrate gave a brief nod and turned back toward the main hall, though his pace had slowed. He had not dismissed the matter. He had merely logged it.

The Archivist exhaled once the magistrate had retreated. *“You did not have to demonstrate it publicly,”* he whispered. Elmon’s tone remained composed. *“Yes. I did.”*

Peter looked between them, exhilaration still bright in his eyes. Elmon collected the page and allowed the lattice to dissolve completely. *“Once entered,”* he said quietly, *“it cannot be quietly removed.”* The Archivist nodded slowly. *“I will process the transfer immediately.”*

*“Good.”* Elmon turned toward the exit arch. Peter followed.

Emuroil lingered a half-step behind, watching the magistrate’s distant silhouette disappear into administrative corridors. *“Now,”* Emuroil murmured softly, *“it will stir.”*

Elmon did not look back. *“It already has.”* Outside, dusk had deepened into full night.

And somewhere beyond city walls and lineage claims, Catar waited — quiet, ruined, and perhaps not as abandoned as the magistrate believed.

*“Afternoon, sir. I am Magistrate Hawthorn.”* The greeting carried a polished sharpness — courteous in shape, possessive in tone. As though familiarity were a privilege, he had already granted himself.

Elmon did not bow. He inclined his head the slightest fraction and, without visible gesture, invoked a subtle echo-reading — not invasive, not coercive. Merely reflective.

The magistrate's echo trembled with calculation. Position first. Reputation second. Truth somewhere beneath both. *"Who might you be, sir?"* Hawthorn asked.

Peter, still flushed with exhilaration, answered before Elmon could. *"This is Master Elmon — of the Wizardry School of Scathnard! He who survived the Battle of the Sage Crypt. And has already granted me a scholarship to the University."*

Peter lifted the bound remnants of Volume Three and wheeled them toward the Echo Restoration room with careful pride. The magistrate bowed. And paused.

That pause carried resonance — not reverence. Recognition.

A flicker of memory aligned in his echo, though he masked it quickly. Elmon stepped slightly forward and nudged him upright with a gentle gesture. *"Master Hawthorn."*

His voice was quiet, but precise. *"You do not know me. Nor will you ever — with that attitude."* The words did not strike loudly.

They settled. Emuroil, leaning casually near the counter, added dryly, *"He reminds me of myself before I was sent to the King's stockade. Filth in the making."*

The magistrate's jaw tightened. Color rose faintly at his collar. Elmon glanced sideways at Emuroil with a raised eyebrow — and the faintest grin. *"At least he has not sacrificed women and children for his position yet."*

The silence sharpened. Elmon turned back to the magistrate. *"Or has he?"* Hawthorn's nostrils flared slightly — anger bridled by public awareness. Several scholars had slowed their browsing.

Two city officials stood within earshot. An archivist had stopped mid-annotation. Hawthorn forced a thin smile.

*"Master Elmon,"* he said, the title now edged with strain, *"I was unaware of your visit. Catar remains under formal lineage investigation."*

*"Yes,"* Elmon replied evenly. *"And we remain under formal inscription."*

Hawthorn bowed again — shallow this time — and straightened without pause. His echo contracted. Control reasserted. *"Then I wish you safe research."*

He turned and exited swiftly, the rhythm of his boots clipped and deliberate.

The murmurs did not begin until he passed beyond the arch. Emuroil exhaled once.

*"You enjoy provocation."*

*"No,"* Elmon said calmly. *"I enjoy clarity."*

Peter returned from the Restoration room, breath quick with purpose. *"They've logged it,"* he said. *"Immediate review."*

Elmon nodded. *"Good."*

He cast one final glance toward the corridor Hawthorn had taken. The magistrate's echo lingered faintly in the air — pride wounded, calculation recalibrating.

*"He knows something,"* Peter said quietly. *"Yes,"* Elmon answered.

Emuroil folded his arms. *"And now he knows that we know."*

Elmon closed his ledger. *“Which means he must decide whether to oppose — or observe.”*

Outside, the evening bells began their measured toll. Dawn would come quickly. And with it, Catar.

Elmon waited for Peter to finish his daily duties. He did not hurry him.

He stood beneath the low arch of Pentor Halls’ outer corridor, watching the last of the clerks extinguish lamps and secure the registry doors. Emuroil lingered nearby, silent as a shadow stitched to stone.

When Peter emerged at last — ink-stained fingers cleaned, ledger apron folded — Elmon fell into step beside him.

They walked through narrowing streets toward the lower quarter, where stone gave way to timber and plaster, and lantern light glowed warmer. Peter introduced him before they even reached the threshold. *“Father,”* he said with unusual steadiness, *“this is Master Elmon.”*

The greeting was warm, reverent, and carried no trace of the earlier nervous boy. Peter’s family gathered quickly — siblings hovering close, their voices already rising in excited murmurs.

His father stepped forward. A strong man, worn by labor rather than years. His gaze was careful — not suspicious, but protective. *“You honor our house,”* he said simply.

Elmon inclined his head. *“I come not as a scholar,”* he replied, *“but as a man searching for truth — arcane masterpieces — and histories that were nearly lost.”* The words settled differently than titles would have.

Peter, unable to restrain himself, unrolled the sealed scroll for his siblings to admire. They clustered around him like bees in an orchard, pointing at the wax seal, whispering.

Peter’s father saw it. His expression sharpened. *“What is that?”*

Elmon stood a little taller — not proud, but reverent. *“That, sir, is his scholarship to the School of Wizardry in Scathnard.”*

Silence fell between the words. *“He has a bright mind,”* Elmon continued. *“Such a mind needs light expanded.”* Peter’s father’s jaw tightened.

He nodded once — but his eyes welled despite him. He turned slightly, as if to inspect the hearth, though there was nothing there requiring attention. Peter’s mother gasped softly.

Then, without hesitation, she fell to her knees. *“Sir,”* she breathed, hands clasped. *“We cannot—”*

*“You can,”* Elmon said gently. *“And you will.”*

She bowed her head and thanked the visitors with words that trembled under the weight of relief and astonishment.

Emuroil stood quietly near the door, saying nothing. Elmon reached into his purse. With subtle care — making certain the father and children were distracted — he pressed a small coin into the mother’s hand.

*“This should help while he is away at school,”* he said quietly. *“The next quarter begins in about a month.”* She looked down at the coin.

Her brow furrowed. She had never seen mythril. It did not shine like gold.

It held light. A cool, steady sheen — pale as morning frost.

She turned it once between her fingers, uncertain. Elmon closed her hand gently around it. *“For travel,”* he said softly. *“And for quiet days.”*

Her breath caught again, but this time she said nothing.

Peter was still speaking animatedly to his siblings, explaining the journey to Scathnard, the Chancellor, the halls of learning. His father finally turned back. *“Will he be safe?”*

Elmon met his eyes directly. *“He will be challenged.”*

A pause. *“And he will be taught.”*

The father studied him for a long moment — measuring sincerity, not status. Finally, he nodded. *“Then he goes with blessing.”*

Peter looked up at that. Something settled in him — not excitement. Foundation.

Outside, evening deepened. Inside the modest home, a new future had quietly taken root. Elmon stepped back toward the door. *“We leave at dawn for Catar,”* he said.

Peter’s voice rose again with eager certainty. *“I’ll be ready.”*

Elmon glanced once more at the family — at the mother holding the coin she did not yet understand, at the father standing straighter than before, at the children clustering around hope.

Then he stepped into the night. Breech awaited. But something else had been bound this evening. Not by claw.

By promise.

Elmon and Emuroil left Peter’s home and headed to an inn for lodging for the night. Night had settled fully by the time Elmon and Emuroil left Peter’s home.

Lanternlight shimmered across wet cobblestones, and the lower quarter gave way to broader streets lined with inns, guild halls, and the mercenary exchange.

They did not go first to the inn.

They turned instead toward the Mercenary Hall. The hall smelled of oil, iron, and old leather. A clerk behind a scarred oak desk looked up briefly. *“Knights? Structured men-at-arms?”* Elmon asked evenly.

The clerk jerked his chin toward the far corner.

A large man sat alone at a rough table, methodically sharpening a blade. His armor lay partially disassembled beside him. He polished each plate with care that suggested discipline rather than vanity.

Elmon approached. *“Sir. My name is Elmon Silverwood.”*

The man did not look up immediately. *“What are your wages for a week’s duty?”* Elmon asked.

The mercenary smirked faintly. *“That depends on who you want me to kill.”* It was said in jest — but not entirely.

Elmon replied without hesitation. *“Possibly yourself, if need be.”* The man looked up now.

Slowly. He rose to his feet. He stood nearly three inches taller than Elmon, broad-shouldered and thick through the chest.

A pause.

Then a grin. *“Good,”* he said. *“You are not afraid of task and duty. You will do.”*

He wiped his blade clean. *“Sir. What are your wages?”*

*“We are heading north,”* Elmon replied. *“To the Catar archaeological site. And I am certain Magistrate Hawthorn will not remain silent.”*

The mercenary’s expression shifted — amusement fading into recognition.

*“Four gold a day,”* he said plainly. *“Two gold coins for each man that dies I have to bury.”*

A pause.

*“My name is Appolice Skullcraker.”*

Elmon studied him.

*“Part dwarf,”* he said calmly. *“Part... Benish, I suspect.”*

Appolice’s eyes narrowed.

*“How would you know?”*

*“You are built like a mountain dwarf,”* Elmon replied. *“And I am familiar with the trail and lineage of the Skullcrakers from Black Mountain Hold — and the bravery that marks your bloodline.”*

He tilted his head slightly.

*“You have the eyes and hair of the Benish.”*

The mercenary stared at him a moment longer — then barked a short laugh.

*“Hawthorn,”* Appolice muttered. *“That sniveling rut. He taxes us just to see us squirm. The mayor recently marked against him — taxes based on earnings, not presence. Now Hawthorn has his snoopers checking everything that comes and goes for wages, perpetuities, or anything he conceives as wages.”*

Elmon reached calmly into his purse and laid six gold coins into Appolice’s hand.

The mercenary blinked.

*“What is this for? I have not done anything.”*

*“For breakfast,”* Elmon replied. *“Extra polish. Attitude. And the first day of duty.”*

A faint smile.

*“And yes — you talked. Demonstrated your position. And willingness to handle the duties bestowed upon you.”*

Appolice weighed the coins in his palm, then nodded once.

*“The Bridled Dragon?”* he asked.

*“Yes,”* Elmon said. *“Morning.”*

Appolice tucked the coins into a leather pouch at his belt.

*“You will not regret this.”*

Elmon inclined his head.

*“That remains to be seen.”*

Outside, the night air felt cooler.

Emuroil fell into step beside him.

*“You trust him?”*

*“I trust his pride,”* Elmon replied.

*“And pride is enough?”*

*“For now.”*

They turned toward the Bridled Dragon Inn, its sign creaking gently in the evening breeze.

Behind them, in the mercenary hall, Appolice resumed polishing his armor — though now with sharper purpose.

Ahead lay Catar.

Behind them, Hawthorn’s pride had been stirred.

And between those forces, Elmon had placed a dwarf-blooded shield with Benish eyes and Skullcraker resolve.

Dawn would test the alignment.

They did not return directly to the inn.

Instead, Elmon turned toward the narrow street where iron lanterns burned steady blue — the district of secured exchange.

### ***Coin Trust.***

A brass scale hung above the door. No ornament. No advertisement. Only weight.

Inside, the air carried the scent of metal and oil.

The keeper looked up without surprise.

*“Elmon Silverwood,”* he said evenly. *“It has been some time.”*

Elmon inclined his head.

*“I require an account.”*

The keeper gestured toward the polished counter.

Elmon reached into his satchel and removed a small leather bag. He loosened the cord and poured a measure of off-white, silverish flakes onto a velvet weighing cloth.

They did not glitter.

They absorbed light.

*“Two ounces only,”* Elmon said calmly. *“Not a sliver more.”*

The keeper did not touch the flakes immediately.

He rang a small bell.

Two gentlemen stepped from a side chamber and took positions beside the scale. One adjusted the counterweight; the other observed without speaking.

The flakes were weighed carefully.

Exact.

Two ounces.

The keeper opened a heavy ledger embossed with metallic filaments.

*“Verification,”* he said.

He recorded the entry under ***Mythril Dust — Purity & Saturation.***

One flake — only one — was placed into a narrow crystal vial and handed to one of the attendants, who disappeared into the rear chamber.

The room remained quiet.

Emuroil stood near the wall, watching the process without expression.

After a few minutes, the attendant returned with a folded slip of paper.

The keeper unfolded it and read:

98% pure — raw MANA saturated

He looked up.

*“Would you care for it to be exchanged for usable coin?”*

Elmon answered immediately.

*“Two mythril. Ten platinum. Ten farthings. Twenty gold.”*

A pause.

*“One ounce of gold dust as well. In an iron vial.”*

The keeper nodded, making the calculations swiftly.

*“That will be one gold for the vial-bound gold.”*

*“Sealed,”* Elmon replied.

The keeper’s pen paused.

*“Of course.”*

The attendants moved efficiently — mythril bars measured and stamped, platinum disks counted, gold weighed and pressed, farthings clinked into small cloth rolls.

The iron vial was filled with fine gold dust and sealed with pitch and cord.

The keeper slid the exchange across the counter in organized stacks.

Elmon did not touch it yet.

*“And,”* he added evenly, *“let Master Hawthorn know there are no earnings here.”*

The keeper’s eyes flicked up — just slightly.

*“Elaborate.”*

*“King’s law,”* Elmon said calmly. *“Exchange is not earnings or perpetuities.”*

The keeper’s lips curved faintly.

*“Correct.”*

He made a small notation beside the account entry.

Non-income exchange. Verified.

The ledger was closed with a quiet thud.

Elmon gathered the coins and vial without haste, distributing weight between purse and satchel.

Emuroil spoke once they stepped back into the cool street.

*“You intend to irritate him further.”*

*“I intend to remove leverage,”* Elmon replied.

*“The magistrate cannot tax what is not earned.”*

Emuroil’s mouth twitched faintly.

*“And now he knows you know the law.”*

*“Yes.”*

The lantern light shimmered against the mythril bars hidden within Elmon’s satchel.

Behind them, the Coin Trust door closed with measured certainty.

Ahead, the Bridled Dragon Inn glowed warm.

Catar awaited.

And somewhere within its ruins lay an inheritance bound by claw, lineage, and quinline.

Now properly funded.

They spent the night at the Bridled Dragon Inn.

Doors barred.

Veil locked.

Elmon wove a quieting lattice across the threshold — not to defend against intrusion, but to prevent residue. Emuroil followed with a counter-sweep at the window frame, erasing trace echoes of presence.

When dawn came, they cleared the room with discipline.

No lingering thread.

No breath-bound imprint.

No residual lattice.

Like they had never been there.

Downstairs, the common room smelled of bread and roasted grain.

Appolice sat at a corner table, finishing a meal with efficient appetite. His armor was polished, strapped, and layered with quiet precision.

Elmon and Emuroil took the table beside him without ceremony.

They ate in silence.

No strategy spoken aloud.

No assumptions declared.

When finished, Elmon rose and placed a farthing on the barkeep’s counter.

*“In case anyone needs food today.”*

He added ten gold beside it.

*“That should cover a few meals.”*

The barkeep blinked — surprised — but nodded with quiet gratitude.

Elmon returned to the table and handed Emuroil a small purse.

*“Five farthings. Five gold.”*

Emuroil weighed it briefly in his palm.

“Contingency?”

“Flexibility,” Elmon replied.

Appolice stood, slinging a pack across his shoulder.

*“I assume we move now.”*

“Yes.”

They walked to the northern edge of town. The morning air was thin and pale.

Elmon paused just beyond the last stone marker and scanned the horizon. No movement.

No distant banners. No dust trails of mounted oversight. He closed his eyes briefly — sensing not threat, but orientation.

Clear.

Peter arrived shortly thereafter, breath steady, not hurried. A sturdy backpack hung from his shoulders. A satchel at his side carried penning equipment — ink, parchment, charcoal, ledger strips, wax.

*“I am ready,”* he said.

Appolice grunted approval. Moments later, he emerged from behind the town wall’s outer bend — fully equipped. Steel, shield, axe, and a longsword strapped at his hip.

Ready for war. Elmon regarded them both. Scholar and soldier.

Ink and iron. He nodded once.

## Chapter ⊕: The Breech of Catar

“*Breech.*” Elmon pointed up the road. They turned north. Behind them, town life resumed its daily rhythm. Ahead, the road narrowed into scrub and rising stone.

Ruins lay beyond the ridge. And beneath those ruins —

An inheritance bound by claw. The day had begun. Off they went.

The road north bent through dry grass and rising shale, dropping into an old river wash choked with splintered timber and the blackened ribs of wagons long burned. The trip to Catar proved smoother than expected—no patrol delays, no official challenge. That unsettled him more than resistance would have.

Appolice kept an easy pace, relaxed in posture, alert in practice. His eyes moved without turning his head. Ridge lines. Broken walls. Wind shifts. Nothing escaped habit.

By midmorning, the ruins came into view, sprawling across hillsides and down into a shallow valley. It was not a ruin of a town.

It was the ruin of a metropolis.

Breech.

Even broken, it was breathtaking.

He marked the high ground first. Then the choke points. The blind turns. The long sightlines. Concealment. Approach angles. Retreat paths. He had done this for nobles, merchants, mages, and men who thought themselves kings.

But this was different. He was bodyguard to a scholar... and a boy.

The thought almost made him smile. Memory flickered—Galord’s Men Infantry Academy. His father’s hand on his shoulder the day he left. Ranger of the Rruriom Siege Master unit. A hard man. A good one.

He had once walked beside Galord’s own son in battle. Earned a privilege that would pass to his dwarven-blooded child.

He had escorted a Fire Mage to his death trying to free a citadel from the undead.

He had watched a witch burn in Orni’jorm.

He had fought goblin and Meroil lizard incursions in the settling of Galishole after the Ildorol disasters.

All of it felt like another life.

Appolice Skull Craker climbed the central ruin and took the highest roof. From there he watched.

And watched.

He descended occasionally, pacing the perimeter of the dig, careful not to disturb the scholars’ precious fragments. His hands wanted steel. His mind wanted structure. Instead, he guarded dust and dreams.

On the western edge of the ruins, something moved. Too fluid for scavenger. Too deliberate for wanderer.

A slender figure in heavy leather, hugging broken stone, careful with shadow. Watching.

Not the diggers. Not just the scholars. The whole site.

Appolice did not call out. He watched. The figure watched for several long minutes... then slipped away behind collapsed masonry and did not return.

Appolice remained still long after it vanished. The ruin was no longer empty. He rescanned the ruins. Stone ribs of collapsed halls curved upward like the bones of a forgotten titan. Venting shafts punctured the earth at odd intervals. Half-buried archways stood stubborn against time. Survey markers dotted the slopes — thin wooden stakes with parchment tags tied in oilcloth.

Several remnant structures were being inspected and cataloged. Rune marks were carefully traced in charcoal. Echoes were being logged into field ledgers.

Even fractured sigils were numbered and assigned provisional meaning.

Peter exhaled softly. *“They’ve gone deeper than last season.”*

Elmon’s gaze moved across the terrain — not at random, but in alignment with the copied maps.

Yes.

The star-markers overlaid.

Not perfectly.

But close.

Then he saw him.

Elmon stopped a few yards away and raised his voice.

*“Sir — have you found anything that would strike my fancy?”*

Jurioam stiffened.

He straightened slowly.

He turned.

Recognition unfolded across his face like dawn breaking through fog.

He scampered down the slope toward Elmon.

*“What are you doing here?”* he exclaimed, arms waving as he turned in a half-circle. *“Only rubble and mysteries!”*

He grinned widely.

*“Ah — mysteries. Your favorite.”* They embraced.

Emuroil watched, amused but reserved.

Elmon stepped back and gestured. *“Gentlemen — this is Jurioam Smith. Archivist extraordinaire. Nothing escapes his mind.”*

Jurioam gave a half-bow, then leaned in conspiratorially. *“Bengamin is here as well.”*

Elmon’s expression softened slightly. *“How is he these days? He was shaken after the zombies dragged Con down into the Hole. Then Entic leaped in after him.”*

Jurioam winced faintly at the memory. *“He recovered. Mostly. Come.”*

They crested a nearby rise. Below, near the edge of a partially exposed slab, Bengamin crouched, tools laid neatly beside him. He was carefully prying at something beneath the stone lip.

Jurioam walked down and sat beside him casually. *“Still haven’t dug that thing out?”*

Bengamin grunted. *“You know if Elmon were here, he would have it out in a moment.”*

Elmon’s voice drifted from just behind him. *“But he is not?”*

Bengamin froze. Slowly, he turned. Elmon stood with folded arms. Bengamin blinked. *“Frankly,”* he muttered, *“you didn’t care for me much.”*

Elmon stepped forward. *“I didn’t what?”*

He crouched beside the slab, examining the edge. *“I helped you with Adaptive Spell Craft. Living Glyphs. Metaverse Structure classes — for free.”*

He met Bengamin’s eyes. *“And that sigil extraction experiment you wanted to attempt. I did not have to help you.”*

A pause. *“But you were a friend I needed.”*

The words settled deeper than accusation. Bengamin’s posture softened. *“I thought you only helped because you pitied my failures.”*

Elmon shook his head faintly. *“No.”*

He traced the edge of the stone slab. *“I helped because you persisted.”*

Jurioam leaned back with a satisfied grin. *“Now that the reunion is complete,”* he said lightly, *“perhaps you might prove your alleged superiority and extract this?”*

Elmon glanced at the slab. *“What have you tried?”*

*“Mechanical lift,”* Bengamin replied. *“Echo read. Surface glyph trace. It won’t budge.”*

Elmon studied the stone more carefully.

There — faint. Not a binding glyph.

A pressure resonance. He exhaled softly. *“This is not resisting force,”* he said. *“It is resisting ownership.”*

Peter leaned forward eagerly. *“Like the Sanctum?”*

Elmon gave the slightest nod. Appolice shifted his stance slightly uphill, keeping watch.

Elmon placed his palm gently against the stone’s surface. No strain. No claiming.

He simply aligned breath. The slab trembled faintly. Bengamin’s eyes widened.

Elmon shifted his weight, adjusting the echo-lattice subtly — not to move the stone, but to release what held it.

The slab loosened. Jurioam laughed softly. *“Of course.”*

Bengamin stared at Elmon — something between awe and relief. *“You still do that,”* he murmured. *“Do what?”*

*“Make it look like it was never meant to be difficult.”*

Elmon rose slowly. *“It was never meant to be difficult.”*

He gestured toward the newly revealed gap beneath the slab. *"It was meant to be approached correctly."*

From within the exposed darkness below, a faint trace of quinline shimmered.

Claw-shaped. And old.

Emuroil stepped closer. *"Then we are in the right place."* Elmon nodded. "Yes."

Breech had not hidden its inheritance.

It had waited. *"I should never have retrieved your soup bar from under the contraption you made."*

Elmon said it without looking up from the newly shifted slab. Bengamin froze. Then slowly lifted his head. His eyes widened. *"You remember that?"*

*"I remember the smoke,"* Elmon replied evenly. *"And the smell. And you swearing it was 'structurally stable.'"* Jurioam burst into laughter.

Bengamin shook his head in disbelief. *"Why,"* he said, rising to his feet, *"would the gift to the School — and master of war — come to our humble rubble?"*

Elmon brushed dust from his hands. *"Since you asked — I am following the trail of an object the AlèDün sent to Catar during the Witch Wars."*

Bengamin and Jurioam looked at one another. Then at Elmon.

Then at Emuroil. And they laughed. Not mockingly. But as if the timing were absurdly perfect. Bengamin wiped at his eyes. *"You could not have known."*

Elmon's expression did not shift. *"Known what?"*

Bengamin leaned closer, lowering his voice in dramatic exaggeration. *"A week ago, we uncovered a sealed stone Catarian sigil case."*

Jurioam nodded vigorously. *"One of the rarest objects uncovered so far."*

Bengamin continued. *"Quinline inlay. Asnien trace. Completely intact."*

Peter inhaled sharply. *"The Curator suggested we send it to Scathnard for investigation,"* Jurioam added. *"We're scheduled to dispatch it tomorrow."*

Bengamin spread his arms wide. *"And instead — Scathnard comes to us."*

He grinned broadly. Elmon did not smile. He simply nodded once. *"Where is it?"*

Master Herins Galewel, curator of the Catar investigation, stepped out from the shadowed entrance. Dust clung to the hem of his robe, but his posture remained deliberate—measured, composed, accustomed to being obeyed without raising his voice.

Appolice marked him immediately. Not by rank. By bearing.

Control. Authority. A magistrate without armor.

Galewel's eyes swept the site—not hurried, not uncertain. He did not scan for danger.

He assumed order.

Appolice adjusted that assumption silently.

He brushed dust from his sleeves and squinted into the sunlight. *"What is this about Scath coming to us?"* He shaded his eyes, peering down the slope.

Recognition dawned slowly. Emuroil stepped forward first. *“You crotchety old coot,”* he called dryly. *“Haven’t you had enough dirt to eat?”*

Herins blinked once. Then twice. *“Who would have thought,”* he said, stepping down the rocky incline, *“that you — a bag of bones — would return to field work.”*

Emuroil spread his arms slightly. *“Retirement did not suit me.”* Herins’ gaze shifted to Elmon. It lingered. Measured. *“You’ve grown taller,”* Herins muttered.

*“Perspective does that,”* Elmon replied. Herins snorted softly. *“And this object you claim to be chasing?”*

*“Elmon Silverwood,”* Jurioam interjected proudly, *“is following a Witch War transfer from the AlèDün to Catar.”* Herins’ expression sharpened.

He looked from Elmon to the others. *“And you arrive the day before we send out a sealed sigil case with AlèDün markers.”*

Silence followed. Not heavy. But charged. Herins exhaled slowly.

*“Well then.”* He gestured toward the cave entrance. *“Either coincidence has acquired a sense of humor... or you’ve arrived at precisely the right moment.”*

Appolice followed — not at his shoulder, but far enough back to see both the entrance and the ridge above it.

Appolice shifted slightly uphill, keeping his vantage. Peter stepped closer to Elmon, eyes bright. Herins turned and began walking back toward the cave.

*“Come,”* he said over his shoulder. *“Let’s see if your trail ends in stone.”*

Elmon fell into step beside him. *“No,”* he replied quietly.

*“It begins there.”*

Elmon fell into step beside Master Herins Galewel as they entered the mouth of the cave. *“So,”* Elmon asked evenly, *“what of this Catarian Sigil Case you mentioned?”*

Galewel did not slow. *“It was found at the bottom of a shaft — four feet deep.”*

They passed from sunlight into filtered shadow. The air cooled.

*“The shaft was filled deliberately,”* Galewel continued. *“A mixture of sand, crushed shale, fibrous plant material, and layers of clay — spaced approximately every six to eight inches.”*

Elmon nodded faintly. *“Compression layering.”*

*“Yes,”* Galewel replied. *“We would not have found it if we had not stepped directly upon it. It compressed.”* He glanced sideways at Elmon.

*“Looking at it, you would never have known.”* Peter leaned in, absorbing every word.

*“The shaft measured two feet square,”* Galewel went on. *“Perfectly cut. No collapse lines. No natural formation.”*

*“Deliberate,”* Emuroil muttered.

*“At the bottom,”* Galewel continued, *“was the case. At first we assumed it was a stone cover over something deeper.”*

He paused at a bend in the cavern passage and gestured toward a roped-off area further inside. *“We removed it.”*

“*And?*” Elmon asked quietly.

“It descended.”

Peter blinked. “Descended?”

“Yes,” Galewel replied. “*Another two feet.*”

They stepped into a chamber illuminated by mirrored lanterns reflecting sunlight from outside. There, supported by wooden bracing, stood the object.

The Catarian Sigil Case. Stone, but not ordinary stone.

Smooth planes intersecting at subtle angles. Quinline lines traced its surface in claw-like crescents. The inlays shimmered faintly even in dim light.

Elmon did not approach immediately. “*And beneath it?*” he asked.

Galewel folded his arms. “*Revealed a partial shaft.*”

He let the words settle. “*Apparent mythril.*”

Peter inhaled sharply.

Elmon stepped forward at last.

The air around the case felt still.

Not dormant.

Contained.

“*You have not opened it,*” Elmon said.

Galewel snorted softly.

“*Of course not. We are archaeologists, not grave robbers.*”

Elmon crouched beside the structure.

“*Is it bound?*”

“Yes.”

“*How?*”

Galewel gestured to the claw-shaped sigil at its crest. “*Lineage and pressure resonance. We tested mechanical leverage. It sank. We tested echo sweep. It absorbed.*”

Emuroil stepped closer.

“*And the mythril shaft?*”

Galewel nodded toward the pit behind the bracing.

“*Partial exposure only. Smooth. Cylindrical. Too refined to be decorative.*”

Elmon extended his hand but stopped short of touching the case. “*Has it reacted to anyone?*”

“*Only once,*” Galewel admitted.

“*Who?*”

“*Bengamin.*”

Bengamin stiffened slightly. “*It hummed,*” he said quietly. “*Only briefly.*”

Elmon glanced at him. *“Did you claim it?”*

*“No.”*

*“Did you try?”*

Bengamin hesitated.

*“...Perhaps.”*

Elmon allowed the faintest smile. *“It does not respond to ownership.”*

Galewel studied him carefully. *“You’ve seen this before.”*

Elmon’s gaze remained on the sigil. *“Not this case.”*

A pause. *“But I know its grammar.”*

He stood slowly. *“If the AlèDün sent something here during the Witch Wars, and it was bound in claw — then this is not storage.”*

Peter swallowed. *“What is it?”*

Elmon’s voice was calm. *“It is a transit vault.”*

Emuroil exhaled slowly. *“Which means,”* he said, *“what lies below is not merely mythril.”*

Galewel’s expression shifted — from skepticism to calculation. *“And you believe it relates to your mystery?”*

Elmon nodded once. *“Yes.”*

The chamber fell quiet. The quinline inlay caught the lantern light.

And somewhere deep within the shaft below, something faintly — almost imperceptibly — aligned.

Jurioam stepped closer to the Catarian Sigil Case and ran his hand just above its surface.

*“I found no echoes on the exterior,”* he said carefully. *“None that register as inscription or imprint.”*

He shifted his angle, studying the seam lines. *“But there is something all over this thing — memory weaves that radiate outward and fold back in with the seams.”*

Elmon nodded faintly.

*“Recirculating lattice.”*

Jurioam’s eyes lit slightly.

*“Yes. Exactly.”*

Bengamin folded his arms and added, *“There are no latches. No pins. No holes. No hinges.”*

He gave the stone a light shake.

A faint, muted sound answered from within. *“There’s something loose inside.”*

Peter leaned in, eyes wide. *“You’ve moved it?”*

*“Carefully,”* Bengamin said defensively. *“Very carefully.”*

He continued, *“We had a mystic in town attempt several opening methods.”*

Elmon raised an eyebrow but did not interrupt. *“Knock spell,”* Bengamin listed.

*“Dispel magic.”*

*“Lore read.”*

*“Dimension shift.”*

*“Falger’s violation.”*

Jurioam snorted lightly.

*“Which I told him was unnecessary.”*

Bengamin shrugged. *“Nothing worked. Not even a change we could sense. No pressure shift. No echo disturbance. No weave displacement.”*

Galewel folded his arms.

*“We determined it best to send it to Scathnard for broader investigation.”*

Elmon circled the case slowly. Memory weaves, Jurioam had said.

Not bound to surface. Not radiating outward in imprint. But folding with the seams.

He crouched and studied the quinline crescent along its edge. *“Did the mystic attempt ownership invocation?”* he asked.

*“Yes,”* Bengamin replied. *“It sank again.”*

Elmon nodded. *“And relinquishment?”*

A pause. *“No,”* Jurioam admitted.

Elmon rested his palm lightly against the stone. Not pressing.

Not claiming. Just aligning breath. The weaves trembled faintly.

Peter felt it first — a shift like air drawing inward.

Emuroil narrowed his eyes. *“This is not a lock,”* Elmon said quietly.

*“Then what?”* Bengamin asked.

*“It is a conversation.”*

The stone did not glow. It did not crack. But the faint memory weaves Jurioam had described began to ripple — folding and unfolding like a breathing lung.

Elmon withdrew his hand. *“It has not responded to force,”* he said. *“Nor to intrusion. Nor to violation.”*

He looked at Bengamin. *“And it did not respond when you tried to open it.”*

*“No.”*

*“Because you attempted to access it.”*

Silence settled.

Jurioam tilted his head. *“Then what does it want?”*

Elmon studied the seams again. *“It does not want.”*

He exhaled slowly. *“It recognizes.”*

Emuroil’s voice was low. *“And it has not recognized anyone yet.”*

Elmon nodded. *“Not fully.”*

He stepped back and looked at the braced shaft behind it. *“The mythril beneath confirms this is not storage.”*

Galewel frowned slightly. *“Then what is it?”*

Elmon answered without drama. *“A transfer cradle.”*

The word lingered in the cave. Bengamin glanced at Jurioam. *“For what?”*

Elmon’s eyes did not leave the stone. *“For something not meant to be opened.”*

A faint sound — almost too soft to register — came again from within the case. Not movement. Alignment.

Peter swallowed. *“It’s still going to be sent to Scathnard tomorrow,”* Galewel said carefully.

Elmon looked at him. *“No.”*

A pause. *“It will not survive transit.”*

The chamber went still. Emuroil studied the case more intently now. *“You’re certain?”*

Elmon nodded once. *“Yes.”*

The memory weaves folded again along the seam — tighter this time. As if listening.

Elmon, *“May I... see it?”*

Galewel gestured toward the storage chamber adjoining the excavation tunnel. Inside, tables were crowded with cataloged fragments — rune shards, carved lintels, broken glyph tablets, sealed urns, tagged and indexed with meticulous care.

When Elmon stepped across the threshold, he stopped. On the far wall — hanging among ordinary finds — something shimmered.

It looked at first like a square lattice of fine wires — hundreds of lines drawn within a frame.

But to Elmon, it was not still. It pulsed. Fire tracing veins of invisible geometry.

He turned to Emuroil. *“Do you use it on the wall?”*

Emuroil frowned. *“There are things all over the walls. Which one?”*

Elmon gestured directly toward it. *“Why are you hanging a luminous weave on the wall?”*

Every head turned. Jurioam squinted. Bengamin leaned forward.

Galewel stepped closer. They saw nothing unusual. *“A square with wires laced and bonded to a frame,”* Galewel said flatly.

*“Decoration, perhaps.”*

“You do not see the tracing weaves?” Elmon asked.

They shook their heads. “No.”

Elmon walked forward slowly.

To him, the mesh was alive — hundreds of fine threads radiating outward in layered patterns, pulsing faintly as if waiting for alignment.

He reached up and carefully lifted it from its hook.

The sensation was unmistakable.

Resonant. He turned, holding it before them.

*“This.”*

They stared.

Galewel repeated, puzzled, *“It is a square frame with wires bonded to it.”*

Elmon tilted it slightly, studying the pattern.

*“Strange. I see it without invoking any aspect of my skills.”*

He laid it gently upon a nearby desk.

*“For later inspection.”*

They pulled the Catarian Sigil Case from a locked trunk and laid it at the end of the long table.

The chamber quieted. As the case settled into place, the wire-frame lattice on the desk jittered.

It oscillated faintly. Erratic.

As if attempting to align.

Emuroil’s eyes narrowed. *“You see that too.”*

Elmon nodded slowly.

He walked to the frame and picked it up. The wires flickered. He carried it toward the stone case.

The oscillation intensified. Not light — but tension.

Elmon held the frame above the case, comparing angles. He flipped it once, rotated it, turned it ninety degrees.

The seams on the case and the radiating wires began to mirror one another — not perfectly, but increasingly close.

He paused.

Then carefully placed several small wooden shafts across the top of the case, forming a temporary cradle. He set the wire frame upon it.

Emuroil folded his arms, watching closely. *“What a familiar action, Elmon,”* he murmured.

*“Haven’t we seen this before?”*

Elmon did not answer. The wires began to shimmer faintly — and now, slowly, the others began to see it. At first, only a glint. Then a subtle glow.

A single point of light appeared at one corner of the mesh and began tracing along the wires — moving deliberately, as though following layered instructions.

Jurioam stepped closer. *“I.. see something.”*

Bengamin swallowed. *“So do I.”*

The point of light continued its path — climbing one wire, crossing another, then folding back along a diagonal seam.

Elmon’s voice was calm. *“It appears to be a key of sorts. Or perhaps ...”*

He did not remove his hands. *“Has anyone determined what the frame and wires are made of?”*

Jurioam blinked. *“We thought it decorative.”*

Bengamin nodded reluctantly. *“We did not waste time on such a trinket.”*

Elmon’s gaze did not waver from the unfolding pattern. *“It is not decorative.”*

The light now traced two lines simultaneously. The quinline seams of the stone case shimmered in faint response.

Emuroil spoke softly. *“It is sequencing.”* Elmon nodded. *“Yes.”*

The wire mesh pulsed brighter — and the Catarian Sigil Case answered with the faintest shift in tone, a harmonic vibration too low to be heard but felt in bone.

Peter stepped back instinctively. The layered light continued tracing.

Not forcing. Not unlocking. Aligning. Elmon exhaled slowly. *“This is not an opening mechanism.”*

The point of light reached the center of the frame.

Paused.

Then descended along a mirrored seam in the stone. The case did not open.

But something inside it shifted. The faint sound from within grew clearer.

Not loose. Suspended.

Emuroil’s voice was almost reverent now. *“A transit cradle,”* he said.

Elmon nodded once. *“And this,”* he added quietly, *“is the orientation matrix.”*

The final thread of light locked into place.

The room brightened faintly.

And beneath the case, deep in the mythrill shaft below —

Something aligned in answer. Elmon removed a small sack from his satchel.

He loosened the cord carefully. *“I found some tweezers,”* he said quietly.

He withdrew a single flake. The others leaned in.

*“This is unenchanted raw Mythrill. We verified it — ninety-eight percent pure.”* He held it up between the tweezer tips. *“If the wires are Quinline, the Mythrill should be repelled.”*

A pause.

*“If they are Mythrill, it should flutter with the ebb and flow of the Weave.”* He moved the flake slowly toward the frame. Nothing.

Closer. Still nothing.

Two inches away— The flake elongated.

It thinned. It began to stretch into a hair-fine filament, reaching toward the frame as if drawn by invisible tension. Elmon pulled it back immediately.

The filament recoiled, collapsing into a flake once more.

He frowned. *“Hmm.”*

Galewel crossed his arms.

*“Perhaps it is a different alloy. Something inducing a different phenomenon.”*

Elmon nodded slightly.

*“At this point, I agree with you, Benga.”*

He looked again at the frame.

*“But we know it is reactive to MANA-balanced material.”*

He rolled the flake between tweezers thoughtfully.

*“Mythril is balanced.”*

He looked up. *“Being drawn to something. Why?”*

Jurioam stepped closer, thinking aloud. “Some materials exhibit fractured MANA patterns related to elemental structuring. Mythril is balanced. Perhaps the fracture is seeking balance.”

Elmon’s eyes sharpened. “Not seeking. Equalizing.”

He lowered the tweezers. “Let us take these items outside — to where you found them.”

They gathered the objects and made their way toward the half-buried chamber.

Halfway across the cave —

**THUD.**

Stone dust fell from the cave ceiling.

A metallic ring echoed. Then a hiss.

Appolice was already moving.

He reached the entrance just as a massive scaled body tore through the upper ledge and crashed to the ground — a thick-skinned desert lizard, all teeth and sinew.

The ground shook again.

Another shape dropped behind it.

Appolice didn’t wait to classify it.

He drove forward — a straight thrust through the midsection of the first beast. The blade sank deep. It roared, twisting.

A skitter. A pivot.

He cleaved across its flank.

Then—

A heavy axe descended from above and nearly removed the creature’s head in one brutal arc.

Blood and dark, oily ichor splattered across Appolice’s face and arms.

It burned.

Not flame — but chemical heat.

He didn’t hesitate.

He kicked the dying creature aside, sprinted for the large wash cauldron near the excavation, and dove in without ceremony. The water hissed faintly as the residue dispersed.

The burning subsided.

Behind him, a towering figure grabbed the second lizard by its hind leg and dragged it out of sight beyond the hill.

Galewel stepped forward calmly and pointed. *“That is Goundom Born. Half-orc. Half-ogre. My chief defender.”*

Appolice climbed from the cauldron, water streaming from his armor. Blisters had already risen along his forearms. He scanned the hillside. The lizard was gone.

Galewel pointed silently. Appolice moved.

He found the ogre-orc at the edge of the slope, tossing what remained of the beast down the ravine as if discarding refuse. Up close, the creature was immense. Corded muscle. Scarred hide. Axe still dripping.

Appolice spoke in Orcish. *“Poison in its blood? It burned my skin.”*

Goundom answered in crude Tarin, voice gravel-thick. *“Acid tongue beast. Good for cleaning blade.”*

Appolice nodded once. Useful information stored. Then his tone shifted.

“Who commands the guard of this dig?” A young Benish human called down from above the cave mouth. “No one commands. We keep watch. Make sure it stays safe.”

Appolice turned slowly. He walked until he stood only a few feet from the young man. *“Who are you? How many guards? Are you Sectured? What shifts and who Assigns them?”*

“Kared Schumer I am. For guards there are three of us.”

Kared hesitated momentarily, gaging Appolice. “No assigned sectors, and we have no defined magistrate of chief.”

“Hmmm. “ Appolice let the silence sit.

Then his eyes moved past him. A short, stocky figure sat on a nearby hill, head slightly bowed, unmoving. He gestured. *“That one.”*

Kared glanced back. *“That’s Master Mergal. Called Mercikom. Amanija from the Coral Mountains. Half Catar. Says he hears the wind speak. Claims he can hear thoughts within a hundred feet.”*

A pause.

*“He only wants expertise to his lineage. Whatever that means.”*

Kared studied Appolice, releasing an arrow that was set for release. “And you are?”

Appolice straightened.

*“I am Appolice Skullcracker. Released from the Third Regiment of Siege Masters. I now hire as mercenary.”*

Recognition flickered across Goundom’s face. *“Barkret Nocall Durom?”*

Appolice smiled faintly. *“Yes. I fought the Durom Wars.”*

His gaze hardened. *"I walked with Twbin Barkret in Hanster's Alley."*

Goundom raised his axe high and bellowed, voice echoing across the ruins. "Gains of Death has come!" He grinned, a tusk catching the light.

Galewel had been silent during the exchange, listening. When Appolice named his regiment, Galewel's expression shifted.

His eyes widened slightly. He turned to Elmon. *"You brought a hardened Siege Master to an archaeological dig."*

A pause. *"Why?"*

Elmon did not look away. "At the Archives in Scathnard," he began quietly, "I found ink-woven markings in a battered volume. Not decorative. Not accidental. Embedded."

Galewel's brows narrowed.

Elmon continued.

*"I formally requested the volume be transferred to the Echo Restoration Ledger. The Archivist adjusted his spectacles, read the classification... then paused."*

He met Galewel's eyes. *"Twice."*

*"Unnumbered Volume. Suspected Third in Sequence."*

Galewel inhaled slowly. *"And?"*

"It drew Magistrate Hawthorn's attention." Elmon's voice sharpened slightly. "He pretended indifference. But he lingered. Asked questions he did not need to ask."

A brief silence. *"I left the lattice active."*

Galewel blinked. *"You what?"*

*"I left it active so he would see it."* Galewel studied Elmon. "You baited him."

*"Yes, and he reacted."* Elmon's voice lowered. *"Not with curiosity. With calculation."*

A breath. *"I do not know what lies buried here. But I know someone in Pentor Hall took interest in preventing its study."*

Galewel held his gaze. *"So you hired a soldier."*

Elmon nodded once. *"To answer your question directly."*

He glanced toward the ridge lines Appolice had already evaluated.

*"I did not know what would be here. Nor who might follow."*

A small pause. *"Scholars are poor at bleeding."*

At the cave entrance Elmon looked around, he paused. He could see it now. A faint pulse wandering the walls — subtle, almost like drifting embers beneath stone.

*"Where is the shaft?"* he asked.

They showed him. At the very back of the building. Along the perimeter. At an odd distance from the corner.

Not centered. Not symmetrical. Intentional.

Elmon studied the wall dimensions. *"Benga. Math. What part of the wall is this case positioned?"*

Benga counted stones aloud, then stepped back. *"It is sixteen by four."*

Elmon nodded once. *"When a weave is created — where do you start it?"*

Jurioam answered immediately. *"At the point the echo falls into place."*

*"Inside or outside?"*

*"Usually outside. The weave builds around it."*

Elmon smiled faintly.

*"Good."*

He placed two wooden shafts across the hole and set the case upon them.

Then he carried the wire frame inside. *"Where was the frame found?"*

Benga answered, *"In the indentation by the front entrance. Opposite the hole in the back."*

Jurioam's eyes widened slightly. *"This is a woven room waiting to be read."*

Elmon looked slowly from front indentation... to back shaft... to side walls... to ceiling. *"I think you are right."*

He stepped toward the doorway. *"Bring the case to the door. Set it on the ground in the opening."*

They complied. The frame hummed faintly in his hands. *"Get me a broom."*

Peter blinked. *"A broom?"*

*"Yes."*

They handed him one.

Elmon began sweeping the floor. Not randomly. In measured strokes.

Clearing dust from stone in straight lines. He was revealing surface geometry.

Under the dust, faint scoring marks emerged. Parallel. Grided. Not decorative.

Jurioam inhaled sharply. *"It's not a room."*

Elmon continued sweeping. *"It's a chambered instrument."*

The faint wandering pulse along the walls intensified as more dust cleared. The room was not passive.

It was layered. Galewel whispered, almost to himself: *"We didn't excavate a building."*

Elmon set the broom aside. *"We exposed a resonant cavity."*

He placed the frame flat against the front entrance indentation. It settled there naturally — no adjustment required.

The wandering pulse brightened. Then stabilized.

*"Now,"* Elmon said quietly, turning toward the shaft.

*"Bring the case back over the hole."* They lifted it carefully.

The moment it crossed the room's midpoint—

The Mythril flake in Elmon's tweezers began to elongate again. Not toward the frame.

Toward the shaft. Elmon did not pull away this time. He let it stretch.

The flake thinned into a filament and pointed like a compass needle.

Jurioam whispered: "*It's mapping field gradient.*"

Elmon nodded. "Yes."

The room wasn't decorative. It was calibrated. And the case wasn't sealed. It was broadcasting.

Now the room was beginning to decode it. Galewel fetched a large broom and a hand broom.

Elmon took the larger one and began sweeping the dirt out of the room — not hurriedly, but in straight passes, corner to corner. Dust rolled outward in measured lines.

Stone emerged. Not rubble. Not fractured floor. Intentional surface.

Eventually, the final layer of grit cleared. There it was.

A square of smooth stone — perfectly cut, flush with the surrounding floor but of slightly different coloration. Subtle. Concealed beneath time.

Elmon stepped back. "Place the case on the stone."

They did. The moment the case touched the surface, it rotated.

Slowly. Deliberately. As if aligning to a datum unseen. It stopped at a precise orientation.

Emuroil exhaled softly. "*It found north.*"

"No," Elmon said quietly. "*It found origin.*"

The faint wandering light within the walls intensified.

It began traveling more deliberately now — tracing lines along stone, folding through corners. Elmon observed carefully.

The light made its way to the square platform and paused at one corner.

The only corner without a visible seam.

Elmon spoke without turning. "*You pick the point to start the weave.*"

He cleared everyone from the room. "*No one enters.*"

Jurioam hesitated. "*Elmon—*"

"*Out.*"

They stepped beyond the threshold. Elmon placed the wire frame directly upon the case.

It rotated, aligned.

He moved to the far side of the room — to the one spot where a small circular stone lay partially buried in the floor.

He had noticed it earlier.

He brushed away the last dust with his hand.

The circle was not decorative.

It was a pivot. The frame trembled. Then began to turn.

Not the wires. The entire structure. The case responded.

A faint tone filled the room — not audible, but structural. Then the case began to separate. Not splitting. Unfolding.

Segments lifted.

Edges flipped outward.

Stone twisted along invisible hinges that had never been carved — only sequenced.

The wire frame expanded with it — unfolding, rotating, locking into newly revealed channels. Quinline seams illuminated faintly as layers repositioned.

Elmon crouched low, instinctively reducing his profile as sections shifted above him.

He saw it. This was not a container. It was a deployment mechanism.

The smooth square beneath the case split at precise intervals, rising to meet the unfolding geometry.

The frame did not unlock the case. It orchestrated it. Stone ribs extended outward.

Mythril beneath the shaft rose like a central spine. Panels locked into place.

A threshold formed. A door.

But not into the shaft. Into the room itself. Elmon's eyes widened slightly as the final section pivoted.

The doorway was forming at the wall behind him. Not at the shaft.

Not at the case.

The entire room had been reconfigured into an access chamber.

He pressed himself lower as the last segment aligned.

Then—

Silence.

A final lock sequence engaged.

The air changed. Behind him, the original doorway of the room sealed shut. Stone folded over it seamlessly.

Outside, Jurioam stepped forward and grabbed for the handle of what had been the entry. It was no longer there. He pounded on stone. "*Elmon!*"

No answer.

The chamber was acoustically isolated.

Inside, Elmon slowly rose to his feet.

Before him stood a finished archway of mythril and stone.

Integrated.

Breathing faintly with layered light.

The wire frame had collapsed inward, now embedded within the structure as structural ribs.

The case no longer existed as a box. It had become architecture.

Elmon stepped forward slowly. He placed his hand upon the new threshold.

It was warm. Not reactive. Waiting.

Outside, Jurioam struck the wall again. *“Open it!”*

Emuroil placed a hand on his shoulder. *“Stop.”*

He leaned closer to the stone, listening not with ear, but with memory. *“He is not trapped.”*

Jurioam swallowed. *“Then what?”*

Emuroil’s voice was calm. *“He is inside the weave.”*

Inside the chamber, Elmon exhaled slowly. *“This was never storage,”* he murmured. *“It was assembly.”*

And now—

The door had chosen its reader.

Inside, Elmon stood still.

The chamber had transformed. It was no longer stone walls and floor. It was structure suspended in depth. A three-dimensional map.

Not carved. Projected. But not light alone.

Substance.

Corridors rose in delicate lattices. Towers extended upward in layered planes. Ramps, chambers, vaulting ribs — all rendered in faint luminescent lines.

It resembled a castle. No — a citadel.

Every line precise. Every junction intentional.

At the center of the ceiling — if ceiling it could be called — hung a crystal. Suspended. Faceted. Alive with faint internal motion.

Elmon stepped forward slowly and retrieved it.

The moment his hand closed around it, a single beam of light extended from its pointed end. Not a flare. A focused line.

He angled it toward the nearest corridor. The light illuminated the pathway it traced — marking rooms as it passed. He rotated the crystal slightly.

The beam shifted.

He guided it along branching passages, through chambers, across courtyards suspended in layered geometry.

The beam flickered occasionally — as if searching.

Then —

It shifted. Stabilized. Held. Elmon stopped moving.

The beam now pointed toward a central chamber of the map.

Large.

Open.

Structured with layered seating and raised platforms.

A throne room.

Or a presence hall.

The illuminated point rested directly upon the throne. Not beside. Not before. On it.

Elmon's breathing slowed. *"This is not orientation,"* he murmured.

*"It is designation."*

He stepped closer to the projection of the throne.

The crystal in his hand grew faintly warmer. The map responded. Corridors trembled. Planes shimmered.

Then—

The chamber began to unravel. Not violently. Systematically. Walls folded inward. Lines withdrew. Towers collapsed into filaments. The projection deconstructed itself with mechanical precision.

The floor beneath his feet segmented and withdrew. The archway dissolved into quinline threads. Elmon stepped backward instinctively. The crystal dimmed.

The entire three-dimensional citadel folded in on itself — layer by layer — until only the Catarian Sigil Case remained.

Restored. Whole. Silent. The room reassembled around him as if nothing had occurred.

The original doorway reformed behind him. Dust lay undisturbed.

The square stone platform was flush once more. The case sat closed. Still.

Elmon stood motionless for a long breath.

He reached into his pocket. The crystal. Still there.

Outside, Jurioam struck the wall again. *"Elmon!"*

Stone shifted. The doorway reappeared.

Light from the outside flooded in.

Jurioam nearly stumbled forward as the barrier vanished. *"Elmon!"*

Elmon stepped out calmly. The case remained behind him on the stone square. Unopened. Untouched. But no longer unknown.

Emuroil studied his face. *"Well?"*

Elmon held up the crystal. *"It is not a vault."*

A pause. *"It is a locator."*

Jurioam blinked. *"For what?"*

Elmon's voice was steady. *"For a throne."*

And somewhere far from Catar — A citadel waited.

Elmon stood very still. For a long moment, he said nothing. He was not composed. He was stunned. Utterly. A room that was a weave. Not metaphor. Not projection. Architecture behaving as algorithm.

Behind him, everyone had seen it. The case unfold. The chamber seal. The reconstruction. They had watched stone behave like thought.

Elmon bent, picked up the wire frame, and carried it carefully to the indentation near the front entrance where it had originally hung.

He placed it there. It settled. Quiet. Stable.

Everyone began speaking at once.

*“What was in there?”*

*“What did you see?”*

*“Did it open?”*

*“Is it dangerous?”*

Elmon raised both hands.

Silence fell.

He sat down on a fragment of fallen masonry.

He looked not afraid — but deeply puzzled. *“How is this possible?”* he murmured.

Peter stepped closer. *“Elmon?”*

*“Get your penning set,”* Elmon said. *“Prepare to map. Draw. Write.”*

Peter nodded instantly and began unpacking parchment, ink, charcoal, wax, and ledger strips. While Peter prepared, Elmon began speaking. Slowly. Deliberately.

*“It was not a vault.”*

He drew lines in the dust with his finger. *“It was a three-dimensional structural map. Suspended geometry. Layered corridors. Towers. Ribs. Stair ascents. Courtyards.”*

He gestured in the air, reconstructing the spatial memory. *“A citadel. Miniature — but complete.”*

Jurioam leaned forward, breath held. *“Complete how?”*

*“Furnished.”* Elmon replied.

That word hung heavy. *“Seats. Banners. Galleries. A central hall.”*

Peter’s charcoal moved rapidly across parchment.

*“And in the center,”* Elmon continued, *“hung a crystal.”*

He reached into his pocket and withdrew it. It caught the light faintly.

Bengamin’s eyes widened. *“That was inside?”*

Elmon nodded. *“This was what was rattling.”*

He rotated it in his fingers. The tip glinted. *“The Director.”*

Jurioam swallowed. *“It pointed?”*

*“Yes.”*

*“To what?”*

Elmon looked at them each in turn. *“A throne.”*

Silence.

Peter paused mid-sketch. Emuroil folded his arms slowly. *“A locator,”* he said quietly.

Elmon nodded. “Yes.”

He stood again and walked toward the back shaft.

He examined the square stone. “*This room is not a container.*”

He turned slowly. “*It is a reading chamber.*”

He pointed toward the front indentation where the frame now rested. “*The frame fragments the signal.*”

He gestured toward the shaft. “*The case broadcasts.*”

He held up the crystal. “*And this isolates designation.*”

Peter spoke carefully. “*Designation of what?*”

Elmon did not hesitate. “*Authority.*”

The word settled differently than power. Not force. Not conquest. Authority.

Jurioam frowned slightly.

“*You are saying that the AlèDün sent... a throne?*”

“No,” Elmon replied. “*They sent a way to find one.*”

The crystal shimmered faintly in his hand. Emuroil studied him carefully. “*And the citadel?*”

Elmon’s voice lowered. “*Was not here.*”

A long pause. “*It was elsewhere.*”

Peter looked up. “*Where?*”

Elmon shook his head slightly. “*I do not know.*”

He turned the crystal again and a faint beam flickered briefly at its tip — almost too faint to notice. “*But something does.*”

The room remained quiet. The case sat inert. The frame hung silent.

The shaft below did not hum. But the crystal in Elmon’s hand felt warm. Not activated. Aware.

Jurioam broke the silence first. “*So this is what the Witch Wars were about?*”

Elmon looked at the case. “*Not about conquest.*”

A pause. “*About succession.*”

Outside the chamber, wind moved through broken stone. Inside, they stood at the threshold of something much larger than Catar.

The Director had been found. And it pointed to a throne. Elmon held the crystal for a moment longer. Then he handed it to Emuroil. “*Enter as I did,*” Elmon said quietly. “*Frame upon case. Stand on the circular stone. Do not force direction. Observe.*”

Emuroil took the crystal without comment. He entered the chamber alone. Jurioam held his breath.

Peter stood ready, pen hovering above parchment. Emuroil placed the wire frame upon the case. It rotated. Aligned. He stepped onto the circular stone. The room unfolded. Again.

Stone lifted and separated with mechanical grace. Walls inverted. Panels flipped and expanded. Geometry deployed with quiet precision until the three-dimensional citadel rose within the chamber.

Outside, they saw only the light swell and the doorway seal.

Inside, Emuroil stood within the projection. He looked upward.

The crystal appeared where it had for Elmon. He retrieved it.

The beam extended. He guided the light through corridors. Across bridges. Down stairways. Into chambers.

The light illuminated as before — but differently.

Where Elmon had found a point that stabilized and held, Emuroil's beam did not settle.

Instead—

It shifted color. In one chamber, it glowed amber. In another, violet. In a third, a cool blue.

The hue altered depending on the space it touched. He slowed his movement. The throne hall. He directed the beam there.

The light washed across the throne. But did not anchor. It pulsed once — and faded to a pale white. No fixation. No designation.

Emuroil frowned. He stepped off the circular stone.

Instantly, the projection collapsed. The citadel folded inward, panels twisting back into the case. Stone ribs withdrew. The arch vanished. The original doorway reformed.

The room returned to its inert state. Emuroil stepped out slowly. He was not shaken. But he was visibly altered. “*Well?*” Jurioam pressed.

Emuroil took a breath. “*It is stunning.*”

He turned the crystal in his hand. “*The light characteristics change.*”

Peter leaned forward. “*Change how?*”

“*Color.*”

He glanced at Elmon. “*In certain rooms and halls, it shifts hue. Not randomly. Deliberately.*”

Elmon's brow furrowed slightly. “*But no fixed point?*”

Emuroil shook his head. “*No permanent light.*”

Silence settled.

Peter spoke carefully. “*Then what is the difference?*”

Elmon considered. “*Not difference,*” he said quietly. “*Condition.*”

Jurioam crossed his arms. “*You mean the device is responding to the person holding it.*”

“*Yes.*”

Emuroil nodded. “*It did not designate for me.*”

Peter looked between them. “*So it's not broken.*”

“*No,*” Elmon said. “*It must be selective.*”

He took the crystal back and held it in his palm. *"It did not choose you."*

Emuroil did not seem offended. *"I would not have expected it to."*

A faint smile touched his lips.

Peter's charcoal scratched rapidly across parchment. Jurioam murmured, almost to himself, *"Then the throne is not merely location."*

Elmon nodded slowly. *"It is alignment."*

He looked again at the case, the frame, the circular stone. *"This room does not open to intruders."*

He lifted the crystal slightly. *"It reveals designation."*

A pause. *"And designation is not transferable."*

The wind outside shifted faintly through the ruins. Inside, they stood in the presence of something engineered not just for security—

But for succession. Emuroil folded his arms again, eyes sharp. "So."

He looked at Elmon. *"It pointed for you."*

Elmon did not answer immediately. But he did not deny it either. Elmon did not speak further. He picked up the broom again. Slowly. Methodically.

He swept every inch of the chamber floor — not just clearing dust, but studying surface interruptions. Every pass revealed more scoring marks, more subtle depressions in the stone.

Jurioam watched him, recognizing the pattern of thought.

Bengamin stayed silent. Peter stood still, charcoal poised but unused.

As the dust cleared completely, circular outlines emerged from beneath centuries of grit.

One. . . Two. . . Three. . . Four. . . Five. . . Six.

Six circular stones spaced at equal intervals along the perimeter of the chamber.

And the one they had been using — the circular stone near the rear — was not centered at all.

It was offset.

Seven stones.

Elmon stood back and counted again.

Seven.

He spoke quietly, almost to himself. *"The Seven Masters of the Sigil Ring..."*

Peter's eyes widened. *"The scripting text."* Elmon nodded once. Seven points. Not one chosen. A ring. He turned to the group. *"Well. It seems there are enough places where we can all see this."*

He began assigning positions. *"Jurioam — stand to the right of the door."*

Jurioam moved without question. *"Benga — opposite him."*

Bengamin crossed the room and took position. *"Emuroil — back left corner."*

Emuroil stepped precisely where indicated. *"Peter — left of the door."*

Peter swallowed but complied. “*Master Galewel — front right corner.*”

Galewel moved slowly, understanding dawning in his expression. Elmon stepped to the entrance and called out sharply to one of the diggers nearby. “*You — here. Quickly.*”

The man jogged in, confused but obedient. Elmon placed him in the back right corner. Seven stones. Six around. One at the center.

Elmon stepped into the center position. He looked around the ring. The frame still rested near the entrance. The case sat upon the square platform. The shaft below waited.

Elmon’s voice was calm. “*Now. Everyone — close your eyes.*”

They hesitated only briefly. “*Do not open them until I say.*”

One by one, eyelids shut. The room grew very still.

Peter peeked for a moment then closed his tight.

Elmon bent and retrieved the frame, placing it upon the case. It rotated. Aligned.

He stepped fully into the center circle. The moment his weight settled—

The chamber unfolded. Stone separated. Walls inverted. The citadel rose once more.

But this time—

It was not solely visible to him. Each person standing upon a circular stone felt it. Not with sight. With resonance.

Peter inhaled sharply, though his eyes remained closed. Jurioam felt pressure along his temples. Bengamin felt warmth in his palms. Galewel felt vibration in his chest. Emuroil’s posture straightened instinctively.

Elmon held the crystal. He did not raise it yet. The citadel projection stabilized more rapidly than before. He spoke softly. “*Open your eyes.*”

They did. The three-dimensional citadel filled the chamber. And this time—

They all saw it. Not faintly. Not partially. Fully. Jurioam staggered back a half-step.

Bengamin’s mouth fell open. Peter’s pen dropped from his hand. Emuroil did not move.

The light from the crystal extended outward. But now—

It fractured. Seven faint beams radiated from the central projection, aligning toward each of the seven circular positions.

Each beam touched a different sector of the citadel. The throne hall glowed brighter.

Not exclusively for Elmon. But in response to the full ring. Galewel whispered hoarsely: “*It required quorum.*” Elmon nodded slowly. “*Yes.*”

The throne was not for one. The room was not built for designation of a single bearer. It was engineered for collective alignment. Seven points. Seven witnesses. Seven harmonics.

The light within the throne hall intensified — but did not anchor to any one person. Instead—

It stabilized at the center. Emuroil spoke quietly. “*This is not a succession device.*”

Elmon’s voice was steady. “*No.*”

*"It is a council key."* The citadel shimmered. And for the first time, the throne did not point to a single figure. It awaited seven.

Elmon placed the frame upon the case once more.

He stepped onto the center circle.

Closed his eyes.

He did not reach outward this time.

He listened.

Not with ear.

With structure.

He felt the movement of echoes — strands brushing past one another like threads in tension. The weave was in motion, subtle and layered. A slow oscillation rippled through the chamber.

Then—

It stopped. Perfect stillness. He opened his eyes. Darkness.

The projected citadel was present — but unlit. Only structure. No illumination.

Elmon withdrew the crystal from his pocket. He raised it slowly.

A faint beam extended. He moved the point through corridors and halls. Certain chambers remained illuminated once touched — steady, persistent.

When the beam reached the throne—

It held. A red light. Not pulsing. Not flickering. Fixed.

He studied it carefully. Designation again. But not exclusive.

He handed the crystal to Emuroil. Emuroil stepped into the beam path and began tracing the corridors.

Where he passed, lights ignited—

Yellow.

Hallways retained the glow. Side chambers remained lit.

Infrastructure. Support. Pathways. The throne remained red.

Emuroil passed the crystal to Jurioam. Jurioam moved the beam carefully.

Several archive-like chambers glowed faint amber. Knowledge sectors.

He passed it to Bengamin. Workshops and mechanical galleries shimmered pale blue. Craft. Construction. Galewel received it next.

The outer walls glowed green. Foundations. Boundary. The digger held it briefly. Storage vaults glimmered faint white. Provision. Finally—

The crystal reached Peter. He held it carefully. Raised it. Moved it along corridors. Nothing. No color. No persistent glow.

The beam illuminated as it moved — but left no trace behind. He paused. Confused. He lowered it slightly. Still nothing. He glanced at Elmon. Then—

Without speaking—

He placed the crystal gently upon his parchment. He picked up his quill. He intended to record. To map. To describe. The quill touched the page. Ink spread.

But he was not moving his hand. Lines formed. Not chaotic. Structured. Precise. Corridors. Chambers. Dimensions. The throne hall. Annotations. Script.

Layer upon layer of ordered transcription. Peter's eyes widened. The parchment filled without his conscious direction. His breath quickened.

He did not interfere. He simply stood. The writing continued until the sheet was complete. Then another. Then a third. When the motion ceased, the quill fell still. Silence returned.

Peter lifted one sheet with trembling hands. He brought it to Elmon.

Elmon stepped closer and examined it. The mapping was exact. More detailed than memory alone could produce.

Not merely architecture—

Codified sequence. Jurioam whispered, "*He did not illuminate space.*"

Elmon nodded slowly. "*He illuminated record.*"

Peter swallowed. "*I.. did nothing.*"

Emuroil looked at him thoughtfully. "No," he said quietly. "*You did everything.*"

Elmon stepped off the center circle. Immediately, the citadel projection folded inward.

Walls collapsed into threads. Threads into seams. Seams into stone.

The chamber returned to its inert form. The case sat silent. The frame rested still.

Elmon held the parchment in both hands. The map remained. Alive in ink.

The Director had revealed not merely a throne—

But a function. One pointed. One supported. One recorded.

Elmon looked at Peter. "Now," he said softly,

"*We understand.*"

For a long moment, no one spoke. Then Jurioam sank to his knees. Not in worship. In astonishment. Bengamin followed. Galewel lowered himself slowly, not from weakness, but from the weight of what had just been witnessed.

Even Emuroil stood motionless, his jaw tight, eyes distant. Peter remained upright only because he was still holding the parchment.

Never would one conceive of such a thing. Not in academy halls. Not in battlefield improvisation. Not in archived theory.

A weave that:

Constructed architecture from encoded stone. Required quorum. Assigned functional light by bearer. Recorded through a neutral conduit.

And folded itself back into inert matter. It violated nothing. Yet surpassed everything.

They spent the remainder of the day in the buried chamber. Not activating it again.

Not daring to. Instead, they discussed.

Galewel paced slowly. *“Nothing in excavation archives describes structural weave deployment at this scale.”*

Jurioam nodded. *“No lore texts reference architecture that exists only when observed.”*

Bengamin rubbed his temples. *“Invocation treatises speak of temporary projection. Illusion fields. Dimensional anchoring. But this was neither illusion nor breach.”*

Emuroil folded his arms. *“It was stable. Integrated. Engineered.”*

Elmon sat quietly on a fallen stone block. *“This is not spellcraft.”*

Peter’s quill scratched rapidly in Libic shorthand. He was not transcribing dialogue alone. He was structuring. Categorizing. Hypothesizing.

### ***Peter’s Treatise Notes***

#### **Observations:**

Weave requires seven positions (peripheral harmonic anchors).

Central pivot initiates deployment.

Frame functions as fragmentation lattice.

Case functions as broadcast core.

Chamber functions as resonant cavity.

Crystal functions as designation vector.

Light coloration correlates to bearer function, not authority.

**Red:** Throne designation (Authority).

**Yellow:** Pathways (Support / Governance).

**Amber:** Archives (Memory).

**Blue:** Craft sectors (Construction).

**Green:** Boundary integrity.

**White:** Storage / Provision.

**Null state:** Recording / Neutral Witness.

#### **Hypothesis:**

Weave is non-hierarchical by default. Authority requires quorum recognition. Recording function cannot be self-designating. Neutral bearer acts as living script medium. Peter paused only briefly to breathe. Then continued writing. He began outlining potential creation processes:

#### **Foundational Stone Encoding**

MANA-balanced mythrill shaft as spine. Quinline seam lattice integrated at quarry stage. Structural scoring beneath floor as waveform boundary.

#### **Resonant Cavity Calibration**

Chamber proportions based on harmonic ratio. Seven anchor stones placed according to sigil-ring geometry. Off-center pivot to prevent unilateral activation.

#### **Signal Fragmentation Matrix**

Frame constructed of unknown alloy reactive to MANA gradient. Functions as spectrum analyzer of broadcast core.

### **Designation Vector Crystal**

Single-axis directional emission. Color modulation based on bearer echo profile. Unable to self-anchor without quorum.

### **Neutral Recording Protocol**

Living script activation in non-designated bearer. Auto-transcription of weave state. Prevents secrecy.

Peter stopped and stared at what he had written.

He had not invented these thoughts. He had structured them. The weave had allowed understanding.

As dusk approached, light filtered faintly through the broken ceiling of the chamber, thinning into long gray strands that pooled along the stone floor.

Galewel lifted a hand twisting it and flicked his fingers upward. A small white pulse bloomed in the air, no larger than a coin at first, then swelling gently in brightness. When it reached the illumination he desired, he closed it in a fist. He lowered his hand. The light held — steady, controlled, obedient.

They remained seated in thoughtful silence.

Elmon finally spoke. *“This was not created during the Witch Wars.”*

They all looked up. *“It predates them.”*

Galewel nodded slowly. *“Witch War engineering was destructive.”*

Elmon’s voice was quiet. *“This is preservative.”*

Emuroil added, *“It was hidden.”*

Peter looked at the case. *“Not hidden,”* he said softly. *“Waiting.”*

They considered that. Jurioam exhaled slowly. *“No archive mentions this.”*

Elmon’s gaze rested on Peter’s parchment. *“It was never meant to be archived.”*

Silence returned.

Outside, wind moved through fractured stone. Inside, they sat before something no textbook had described. No treatise had prepared them for. No invocation had hinted at.

A weave that thought in systems. That required balance. That distributed function. That refused hunger. Peter dipped his quill again.

He titled the page:

### **Preliminary Structural Analysis of a Quorum-Based Resonant Citadel Weave**

And began writing. Emuroil leaned over Peter’s shoulder. The boy’s hand moved with disciplined efficiency — Libic shorthand compressed into elegant clusters of angled strokes and curved binding marks. No hesitation. No wasted ink.

Peter paused mid-line and glanced up. *“Is there something I am forgetting?”* Emuroil shook his head slowly. *“No, my boy. Your transcription is superior to what I learned.”*

Peter blinked. *“Truly?”*

Emuroil nodded once. *“Your structure is clean. Your ordering is disciplined. You are not merely copying — you are synthesizing.”*

Peter flushed slightly. *“I learned most of it from the archivist curator. He taught me the foundations. Then he gave me a book.”*

Emuroil glanced at Galewel, who was seated on a stone fragment reviewing one of the earlier sheets. Peter continued, *“Inscriptive Treaties and Archival Scripting by Galewel.”*

Emuroil’s finger lifted. Slowly. He pointed at Galewel. *“Well. There he is in the flesh.”*

Peter froze. *“You mean—”*

*“Yes,”* Emuroil said dryly. *“That Galewel.”* Galewel looked up from the parchment.

He squinted. *“What are you whispering about?”*

Peter stood abruptly. *“You wrote the Treaties?”*

Galewel frowned slightly. *“Which edition?”*

Peter blinked. *“There’s more than one?”*

Galewel sighed. *“The third corrected printing is the only one worth keeping.”*

Peter stared. *“You— you were my tutor without ever meeting me.”*

Galewel gave a small snort. *“If that book survived your hands, then you were reading it properly.”*

Emuroil folded his arms. *“He was my Chancellor.”*

Peter turned to Emuroil. *“When you were at the Wizard School?”*

*“Yes.”* Peter looked back to Galewel. *“Really?”*

Galewel waved a dismissive hand. *“I was younger. More tolerant. Slightly less crusted with dirt.”* Emuroil chuckled.

*“You were never tolerant.”* A faint smile tugged at Galewel’s mouth.

*“And you were never quiet.”* Peter looked between them, astonished. *“So you— both of you—”*

*“Shared halls,”* Emuroil said. *“Shared discipline,”* Galewel added. *“Shared consequences,”* Emuroil corrected.

They regarded one another for a long moment — not as excavator and field scholar, but as former teacher and student. Peter slowly sat back down.

His eyes glowed with a different understanding now. *“You wrote the structural indexing method I used for the Weave Analysis,”* he said quietly to Galewel.

Galewel leaned forward slightly. *“Show me.”* Peter handed him the most recent sheet. Galewel read silently. His expression shifted.

Not surprise. Recognition. *“You inverted the third column,”* Galewel murmured.

*“Yes,”* Peter replied. *“The structure required phase priority, not material priority.”*

Galewel looked up sharply. Emuroil gave a quiet, satisfied exhale. *“There,”* he said softly. *“That is the difference.”* Peter looked uncertain. *“What difference?”*

Galewel folded the parchment slowly. *“You did not merely apply the method.”*

He handed it back. “*You understood it.*” Peter’s breath caught. The chamber remained dim, the Catarian case inert beside them. But something else had shifted. Not the Weave. The lineage. Knowledge passing not by inheritance alone—but by recognition.

Emuroil rested a hand briefly on Peter’s shoulder. “*You are writing something that will not remain in margins,*” he said quietly.

Peter swallowed. “*I am only recording what we saw.*”

Galewel shook his head faintly. “*No.*”

He glanced toward the silent case. “*You are defining what has never been described.*”

Outside, the late sun cast angled light into the ruined chamber.

Inside, three generations of scholarship stood together—

The Chancellor. The Student. And the Scribe.

And in the center of the room—A Weave that required them all.

The chamber had grown quieter. The case sat inert. The frame rested against the entrance. The shaft waited.

Peter finished the last line of his collective discussion — structured, marked, indexed — then rose carefully. He gathered the sheets into ordered alignment and approached Galewel.

“*Sir,*” he said, steady though his pulse quickened, “*I would like your perspective on my scripting. I have read your book.*” Galewel looked up.

“*Which one?*” Peter blinked. “*Inscriptive Treaties and Archival Scripting, of course.*”

Galewel leaned back slightly “*They still use that in school?*” Peter’s expression shifted — just enough. He answered quietly. “*I have never been to school.*”

Silence.

Emuroil cast a stern glance at Galewel — not hostile, but corrective. Galewel caught it.

He extended his hand. “*Let’s have a look here.*” He took the pages.

The group held still as his eyes moved across the sheets. The first page. The second. His brows lifted. “*My, my...*”

He adjusted his stance. “*This is quite good.*”

He turned a page. “*You’ve even placed the Notice, Debate, and Thesis identifiers.*”

He glanced up at Peter. “*Even I did not tend to use them consistently.*”

Peter frowned slightly. “*In your book,*” he said carefully, “*you stated that for the informed Libic scripters, Marks, Systematic Identifiers, and Debate Identifiers are stewardship of the master scriptist.*”

He swallowed. “*So that is not true?*”

Galewel paused. For a long moment, he held the pages loosely in his hands.

He was caught — not in error, but in memory. The doctrine he had written. The discipline he had codified. And now — the living application before him.

The group held its breath. Galewel exhaled slowly. “*It is true.*”

He looked at Peter directly. “But doctrine and practice are not always twins.”

He tapped the edge of the parchment lightly. “I wrote that when I believed precision must be earned before structure.”

Karid approached the doorway in unfractured silence, leaning just enough to look inside. “All is well?”

Galewel nearly started out of his skin. He caught himself, straightened. “Yes.” A slow breath. “*Much has transpired here today.*” Appolice stood just behind Karid, steady, unreadable. “*Should I distribute rations?*”

Galewel nodded toward the doorway without looking away from Peter. “*Guards eat first. We will later.*”

The moment shifted. The pressure eased — but not fully.

After the incursion had settled into quiet again, Galewel lifted one of Peter’s sheets. He studied it.

Then looked back at him. “You used structure to discover precision.”

Emuroil’s expression softened slightly. Galewel continued. “*That is not contradiction.*”

He paused. “*It is evolution.*”

Peter’s eyes widened faintly. “*So I did not misuse it?*”

“No,” Galewel replied firmly. “*You applied it earlier than I would have allowed.*”

A faint smile touched his lips. “*And correctly.*”

As the guards walked away, Appolice fell into step beside Karid. “*Did they do anything?*” he asked quietly.

Karid shrugged. “*Some days they look like ants searching for food. Other days they just sit staring at a stone.*”

Appolice grunted.

They reached the Storehouse room. Karid broke open a crate and rolled a barrel aside, removing rations and wrapped bundles of dried goods.

Outside, Mercikom had already begun preparing the night perimeter.

Three small fires burned at calculated intervals across the dig site. Each sat in shallow depressions — controlled, low, deliberate. Enough light to work by. Not enough to silhouette the camp against the hills.

The flames were kindled with shards of Firestone and fed with splintered wagon wood and dried wash timber from below the slope.

No open glare. No blindness. No invitation. Appolice scanned the ridgelines again. Old habits did not sleep.

Jurioam exhaled quietly. Bengamin nodded to himself.

Peter glanced down at his own script, then back up. “*But if you did not use them often—*”

Galewel interrupted gently. “*Then perhaps I should have.*”

A silence settled — not tense, but reflective. The scribe's doctrine had not been dismantled. It had been tested.

And refined. Galewel handed the pages back. *"You are not a student repeating marks."*

He gestured toward the case in the center of the chamber. *"You are witnessing something that has no precedent."*

He looked at Peter more carefully now. *"Stewardship of script is not about guarding method."*

*"It is about preserving clarity."* Emuroil stepped forward slightly. *"And clarity has found you."*

Peter looked down at the sheets in his hands. The ink was steady. Alive.

He nodded once. *"I will continue, then."*

Galewel gave a small approving motion. *"Yes."*

He glanced toward Elmon. *"And so must we."*

In the center of the chamber, the silent case waited. Not demanding authority. Not offering power. But revealing something else entirely—

That even masters revise their own teachings. And that living knowledge is not betrayal of doctrine—

But its fulfillment.

Galewel did not speak at first. He looked at Peter. Then at the parchment. Then at the case. Then inward. *'What would I tell a class?'* he thought. *'That's the question, isn't it?'*

He let the chamber quiet fully before he answered — not Peter alone, but the invisible lecture hall of memory behind his eyes. He spoke slowly. *"I would say this."*

He stepped forward, holding Peter's pages gently. *"A Master Scriptorist does not grant permission."*

He looked at Peter. *"He recognizes emergence."*

The words settled into the stone of the chamber.

*"The scroll is not static,"* Galewel continued. *"It is a living weave. When a scribe inscribes with precision, clarity, and resonance — beyond what was taught — he is not violating doctrine."*

He lifted one of Peter's sheets. *"He is revealing its next form."*

Peter stood motionless. The others listened without interruption. *"Permissive variation,"* Galewel said, *"is not rebellion."*

He glanced at Emuroil briefly. *"It is ritual evolution."*

He lowered the page slightly. *"I wrote that marks and identifiers belong to the master."*

A pause. *"Perhaps I should have written that they belong to the one who sees them clearly enough to use them well."*

The chamber seemed to breathe. Peter's expression did not show triumph. It showed understanding.

Galewel fell silent again. He was no longer addressing the group. He was considering the deeper implication. *'If Peter sees what I did not...'*

His gaze drifted to the woven case resting upon the square stone. *'Then the stewardship has already passed.'*

Not by decree. Not by title. By manifestation. Emuroil watched Galewel carefully. He saw the shift.

The subtle recalibration of a man who once believed mastery required guarding. Now recognizing that mastery sometimes requires releasing. Galewel handed the pages back to Peter — not as correction.

As acknowledgment. *"Continue,"* he said quietly. Peter nodded once. He returned to his parchment. The quill resumed its steady motion.

And in that buried chamber beneath Catar, among ruins and mythril and a throne that waited for quorum—

A transfer occurred more significant than the deployment of a citadel weave. Not of authority. Of stewardship. Unannounced. Uncontested. Undeniable.

Elmon rose slowly. He did not raise his voice — he did not need to. *"I have been studying Peter's map of the weave,"* he said evenly.

Jurioam, who had been holding the archaeological survey parchment, stepped forward and handed it to him. *"And this,"* Elmon continued, *"is the current site map of Breech."*

He knelt and laid both maps side by side upon a flat slab of stone.

Peter's transcription — detailed, layered, precise.

Jurioam's excavation survey — measured, structural, scaled. Elmon began placing small stones upon both maps.

Matching shapes. Angles. Offsets.

He did not speak while he aligned them. The others leaned in.

Peter held his breath. Bengamin crouched lower. Galewel watched intently. Elmon placed a stone upon the throne hall of the weave-map.

Then placed another stone at the highest remnant foundation on the excavation survey.

He stepped back slightly.

*"Look."*

The angles matched.

Not perfectly.

But proportionally.

He moved a second stone to represent the archive sector.

On the survey map — a collapsed vault chamber lay in corresponding relative position.

A third stone.

A fourth.

Gradually, the room saw it.

The relative geometry of the projected citadel mirrored the archaeological layout beneath them.

Scaled.

But preserved.

The excavator who had earlier stood uncertain spoke hesitantly.

*“Theoretically... could the Weave be a scaled map of the site before destruction?”*

Silence followed. Galewel’s eyes narrowed slightly.

Jurioam swallowed. Peter looked from one parchment to the other in dawning realization.

Emuroil turned slowly toward Elmon. A faint frown tugged at his brow. *“You like making masters look bad, don’t you?”*

Elmon did not smile. He did not gloat. He simply answered. *“No.”*

He tapped the two maps gently. *“I like revealing what they built.”*

He shifted one of the stones slightly. *“If this citadel existed here — fully realized — then what we are excavating is not random ruin.”*

He glanced at Galewel. *“It is collapsed architecture.”*

Galewel exhaled slowly. *“You are suggesting...”*

*“Yes.”* Elmon nodded.

*“The Weave is not projecting something distant.”* He pointed at the excavation map.

*“It is remembering what stood here.”* Peter’s voice was barely above a whisper.

*“Before the Witch Wars.”* Jurioam’s face paled slightly.

*“That would mean...”* Bengamin finished. *“They didn’t send something to Catar.”*

Elmon’s eyes remained steady. *“They preserved Catar.”* The chamber felt smaller now.

Denser.

Emuroil’s frown softened into something else. Recognition. *“You are saying,”* he said carefully, *“that this was not a transit vault.”*

*“No.”* Elmon’s voice was quiet.

*“It is a restoration template.”* He pointed to the throne position on Peter’s map.

*“And this...”* He placed his finger gently on the matching location on Jurioam’s excavation survey.

*“...is buried beneath our feet.”*

Galewel looked down at the maps for a long moment.

Then up at Elmon. *“You are aware,”* he said slowly, *“that if this is true, we are not excavating history.”*

He gestured around the chamber. *“We are standing inside it.”*

Elmon nodded once. *“Yes.”*

Peter’s hand tightened on his parchment.

The excavator who had spoken earlier looked around uneasily. *"You mean,"* he asked quietly, *"this room isn't the only one?"*

Elmon looked toward the ruined ceiling above. *"No."*

A pause. *"It is the only one we have activated."*

Emuroil folded his arms. *"And you believe the throne chamber location is still structurally intact?"*

Elmon's gaze returned to the stone markers. *"If the Weave preserved proportions — then yes."*

Silence.

Heavy now. Galewel straightened slowly. *"Then we are no longer discussing theory."*

He looked at Jurioam. *"Mark excavation quadrant three."*

He looked at Bengamin. *"Recalculate structural depth."*

He looked at Elmon. *"And you..."*

A faint, reluctant smile touched his lips. *"You are either about to vindicate yourself entirely. Or expose us all to something far larger than scholarship."*

Elmon's expression did not change. *"It was built to be seen."*

He glanced at Peter. *"And recorded."*

Peter dipped his quill again. Outside, wind moved across shattered stone. Inside, seven people stood over two maps —

And the past was beginning to reassemble itself. Elmon remained crouched over the maps. His finger traced three points in quick succession. *"Here. Here. And here."*

He looked up sharply. *"In these locations — have we examined odd stones in those areas?"*

The excavation crew exchanged glances. Elmon rose halfway, voice steady but edged with urgency. *"Not artifacts. Not pottery. Not tools."*

He tapped the excavation survey. *"I mean stones that feel... out of place."*

A pause. *"Resonant. Patterned. Anything that did not match the surrounding strata or expected formation."*

Jurioam frowned. *"We've cataloged foundation anomalies."*

*"Not anomalies of structure,"* Elmon corrected. *"Anomalies of behavior."*

The digger from earlier stepped forward uncertainly. *"There were... three stones we marked but never prioritized."*

Galewel turned sharply. *"Why not?"*

*"They weren't carved. No runes. No surface glyphs."* He hesitated. *"But they rang differently."*

Silence.

Elmon's eyes sharpened. *"Rang?"*

*"When struck lightly,"* the digger clarified. *"The tone didn't match the surrounding rock."*

Bengamin stepped closer. *"You didn't log tonal variance?"*

The digger flushed. *“We marked them as possible replacement stone.”*

Elmon straightened fully now. *“Where?”*

The digger pointed on the map.

One.

Two.

Three.

The stones aligned precisely with the points Elmon had marked from Peter’s weave map.

Jurioam exhaled sharply. *“That is not coincidence.”*

Peter’s quill scratched furiously. Galewel’s posture shifted from skepticism to command. *“Take us to the first one.”*

They moved quickly through the ruins. Galewel’s floating light preceded him, casting pale arcs over broken stone and fractured walls.

Mercikom stepped from the darkness without sound.

“Your light makes you a target,” he said flatly. “Precision marksmen favor silhouettes. Raiders to the south. Goblin bands to the west. You should dim it — or become dead.”

Galewel did not argue. The white sphere vanished instantly.

He drew a small rod from within his robe and slid his fingers along its length. A dull glow answered — no brighter than a flared ember — just enough to see by, not enough to be seen.

Appolice, part dwarf by blood, moved easily in the dimness. The dark-sight of his lineage allowed him to see the broken lines of stone and shadow long after ordinary vision failed. Opposite him, Goundom—the Ogre-Orc—flanked the scholars at equal distance, thirty yards to either side, their movements staggered and deliberate.

They did not walk like escorts.  
They walked like perimeter.

Mercikom sat upon a fallen column, still as a carved idol. His Manija discipline allowed him a form of mind-sight—an inward listening. He was not watching the darkness. He was listening to it. Thoughts carried differently at night. Fear louder. Intent sharper. He sifted through the silence like wind through reeds.

Karid possessed no uncommon sight. No night-vision. No mental weaving. But his echo precision—his ability to sense disturbance in memory and space—made him invaluable. When something shifted that should not have shifted, Karid would feel it first.

Above them, the moons divided the sky.

Menuva hung low in the west, a soft silver crescent slipping toward descent—gentle, almost forgiving.

It was her final night of watching.

Within days, Ashtar would begin its slow southern rise—climbing higher each night for a hundred days, burning steady and unwavering—before vanishing again for years beyond count.

The sky itself moved in seasons of memory. And tonight, it felt like something was turning.

But Es'ilo burned high overhead. Its reddish hue washed the ruins in foreboding light, staining broken walls in rust and blood-shadow.

The city did not feel asleep.

It felt aware.

Broken walls cast angled shadows across the excavation lines. Survey markers flicked past as they crossed to the western quadrant.

The digger stopped beside a partially exposed block.

By this time the evening chill of Fall crept through the ruins. Elmon felt it first in his fingers. The stones he held retained the day's warmth, and he kept turning them in his palms as if they were small anchors against the air.

They withdrew to the tents and cave to rest before first light.

Elmon did not sleep.

Images moved behind his eyes in restless procession—mechanics folding into philosophy, echo-lore tangling with geometry. Concepts fused, then separated like oil and water in a shaken vial. Nothing settled. Nothing resolved.

He was not merely confused. He was unsettled by the possibility that everything fit together in ways he had not yet learned to see.

Perception haunted him.

Peter, however, slept loudly and without dignity.

He dreamed of school—hundreds of bodies crammed into a narrow hall while an elderly instructor pointed at diagrams and spoke for hours without pause. Then digging holes in sand only to fill them again. Writing poetry no one would ever read. It was exhausting even in sleep.

Jurioam lay on the cot beside Benga, drifting in and out of half-consciousness. Every so often he would murmur a question—soft, unfinished—then abandon it entirely.

Benga eventually stuffed cotton wads into his ears.

Galewel slept like a man whose labor had earned him silence.

Appolice slept a crooked corner of stone away from the others, deep in shadow along the road that approached the site. He did not choose comfort. He chose vantage.

Goundom paced the western perimeter slowly, deliberate and heavy-footed.

Mercikom sat atop the cave entrance, motionless as stone. It seemed his chosen post — not from duty, but instinct.

Just after midnight, a bark echoed from the southern road.

Appolice's eye opened like a shutter snapping wide.

He did not rise.

He scanned from shadow.

At the base of the road he saw them — three goblins mounted on wargs, silhouettes shifting in the moonlight.

Behind them a tall beastly creature stood. Appolice could not define it. Could be half ogre of form.

His sword slid from its sheath without sound.

Beside him lay his two-shot crossbow, already loaded with anchor-edge bolts.

Armor-piercing. Bone-splitting. Flesh-hooking.

Once they bit, they did not let go.

He did not signal yet.

He watched.

They moved along the western edge of the perimeter — twenty yards — sniffing, scratching at loose stone and soil. Not hunting. Testing.

Then they drifted east — fifty yards this time.

Again the same pattern. Scratch. Sniff. Pause.

Not random.

Checking for awareness.

Appolice did not shift his weight.

Did not breathe differently.

Then—

An arrow hissed from somewhere unseen. It struck one of the wargs high in the shoulder. The beast yelped — sharp, startled, furious.

The goblins did not shout. They did not retaliate. They wheeled instantly and vanished back into the treeline, swallowed by brush and shadow.

The Beast scanned the horizon then vanished. That was unnerving.

Silence returned as if nothing had happened.

Appolice remained still. Because the arrow had not come from him.

He drifted back to sleep.

The Sun rose in the west as it always had with dark clouds showing on the horizon in the eastern sky. Appolice noted a Drake chasing a Large Arian. Eventually the eagle climbed high in the sky vanishing from sight. The Drake swooped back and forth a few minutes then settled in the trees a few miles away.

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At first glance, it appeared no different from the surrounding masonry.

But as Elmon stepped closer—He felt it.

A subtle hum.

Not audible.

Structural.

He crouched and brushed dirt from the stone's surface.  
The texture was marginally smoother. Not polished. Balanced.  
Emuroil placed his hand near it. *"I feel it too."*  
Galewel crossed his arms tightly. *"Test it."*  
Elmon removed a single flake of mythril from his pouch again.  
He held it near the stone.  
The flake did not elongate this time.  
It vibrated.  
Subtly.  
The air seemed to compress faintly around the block.  
Peter whispered,  
*"It's a node."*  
Elmon nodded slowly.  
*"Yes."*  
He stood and looked toward the other two marked locations.  
*"If the citadel map is scaled correctly,"* he said quietly, *"then these are anchor points."*  
Jurioam swallowed.  
*"For what?"*  
Elmon's voice was calm.  
*"For reconstruction."*  
Emuroil glanced back toward the chamber they had left.  
*"The room we activated..."*  
Elmon finished.  
*"...was only the control cavity."*  
Galewel's jaw tightened.  
"You are telling me we are standing atop a distributed structural weave network."  
"Yes."  
Silence settled heavily.  
The wind shifted.  
A faint shimmer moved across the surface of the stone beneath Elmon's hand.  
Barely perceptible.  
But present.  
Peter looked down at his map, then up at the ruins around them. *"If we align the seven stones—"*  
Emuroil cut him off quietly. *"Not align."*

Elmon nodded. *“Recognize.”*

The digger took a step back. *“What happens if all seven activate?”*

No one answered immediately.

Elmon looked across the shattered remains of Catar. Collapsed arches. Broken towers. Buried corridors.

Then he spoke. *“It remembers.”*

Galewel stared at him. *“And if it remembers too well?”*

Elmon did not look away from the horizon. *“Then we will see what was lost.”*

The hum beneath the stone deepened — just slightly. As if listening. And beneath the ruins of Catar, something long buried waited —

Not to be discovered. But to be acknowledged.

One of the crew — a younger digger named Vess — hesitated before speaking.

*“There were a few,”* he said cautiously. *“One near the southern trench — smooth, almost glyph-marked, but no known language. Another embedded in the north wall. Shaped like a sigil, but fractured.”*

Jurioam stepped forward, brow furrowed.

*“We cataloged them as anomalies. They didn’t match any known strata. No quarry signature. No era-specific tooling.”*

He pointed toward the excavation field.

*“We never moved them. They’re still resident where found. The flags marking them are blue.”*

Elmon placed a finger on the map where Peter’s transcription aligned with the site survey.

*“They are,”* he said quietly. *“Or they were.”*

He looked up.

*“The Weave isn’t merely a ritual chamber.”*

He tapped the parchment.

*“It is a memory of place.”*

A pause.

*“And those stones might be its anchors.”*

Galewel stepped forward slowly, voice low.

*“Then we must return to those stones.”*

He looked toward the dig field.

*“Not to move them.”*

His eyes narrowed.

*“To listen.”*

Peter was already reaching for his scripting kit.

*“If they’re anchors,” he said quickly, “they might respond to resonance. I can inscribe a test glyph from your book — a passive echo probe. No activation attempt. Just harmonic listening.”*

Galewel’s eyes widened slightly. *“You would use my indexing structure for live field testing?”*

Peter nodded. *“With modification.”*

Galewel blinked once. *“Show me.”*

Peter sketched rapidly — a small circular glyph with three offset identifiers marking harmonic neutrality, non-invasive query, and memory-safe resonance.

Galewel leaned in. *“That... is not in the book.”*

Peter swallowed. *“I know.”*

Emuroil crossed his arms, though his eyes were sharp with interest. *“And if they respond?”*

A beat.

*“But what still remembers.”*

An answer came before anyone could speak.

A roar split the western edge of the ruins.

Stone trembled.

Dust fell in sheets from broken columns.

From the fractured roadway beyond the collapsed arch, something moved.

Tall.

Brutish.

Its shoulders hunched as it walked — and with each step, its back seemed to grow. Spines pushed through skin. Hair bristled outward like iron quills dragged from bone.

Goundom did not wait.

He drove his axe into the stone beside him and roared in challenge.

The beast stopped.

Turned.

Appolice was already moving — vaulting to the roofline, crossbow drawn in one smooth motion.

Mercikom twisted at the cave entrance — and dissolved into dust-shadow.

Two arrows struck from the north.

The creature bellowed, tearing one free — flesh and muscle ripping with it.

Appolice loosed both bolts.

One center mass. One through the arm.

The beast charged.

And faded.

Goundom stepped between two stone blocks and swung blind.  
Mercikom's silhouette flickered in dust.  
Elmon felt it then. Not rage. Not hunger.  
An unfamiliar echo.  
Twenty feet from Goundom, the air shimmered faintly.  
A glow — low to the ground.  
Mercikom struck from the light itself — precise, brutal.  
The creature solidified mid-stagger.  
Nine feet tall. Hair like barbed iron. Spines protruding like a living siege engine.  
Appolice's axe spun end over end.  
The beast twisted aside.  
Three more arrows landed.  
Goundom leaped.  
When he struck the ground, stone exploded outward.  
The creature turned on Appolice.  
Quills drove forward — not thrown, but lunging.  
They pierced him like heated lances.  
He cried out as he was flung aside.  
Goundom buried his axe into the creature's shoulder.  
It roared inches from his face.  
He drove his fist into its maw.  
Mercikom shattered its knee.  
Appolice rose — blood running — sprinted up broken stone, and leapt.  
His axe buried deep into the side of its skull.  
The beast thrashed once.  
Collapsed.  
Silence fell—  
—but only for a breath.  
From the southern road, small shapes slipped through debris.  
Goblins.  
Unseen by most.  
Appolice dropped to his knees.  
Barbed quills were still embedded in his shoulder and thigh.  
Mercikom reached him and ripped them free.  
Appolice screamed.

Karid loosed two arrows skyward.  
Forty feet above, the runes ignited.  
The ruins flooded with celestial light.  
Every shadow died.  
The goblins were no longer hidden.  
Two bolted downhill.  
Karid's bow sang twice.  
Both dropped in the dust.

Mercikom appeared beside the last — wide-eyed, shaking — and struck twice with brutal efficiency. The goblin collapsed unconscious.

He bound it quickly and dragged it up the slope.

Silence settled.

The dig went quiet.

After half a minute, Galewel emerged from the ruins, shadow-cloaked, scanning the ridge. He moved to higher ground.

*"Appolice is hurt,"* he called. *"Get him to the cave."*

Goudom lifted him easily and carried him to the entrance — too large to pass within.

The others gathered.

Emuroil disappeared briefly into the cave and returned with a satchel.

They flushed the wounds with water.

Then Dwarven ale.

Appolice screamed.

The flesh bubbled where the quills had pierced him.

Emuroil uncorked a flask and poured a measure down his throat.

*"Mating season for Quil Bears,"* he said grimly. *"The toxin draws females."*

He studied the wound.

*"I have not seen one this far south. They dwell in the ravines of the Harmal Mountains north of here."*

*"What would draw it here?"* Jurioam asked.

Karid tossed the bound goblin at their feet.

*"They did."*

Wind shifted across the ruins.

Galewel looked toward the darkening ridge.

*"Inside. All of you."*

Elmon retrieved the cube and its frame and secured them in the cave's storage alcove.

They built a small fire.

Wrapped Appolice in blankets.

Elmon pressed his hand to his brow.

Burning.

He closed his eyes and drew an Echo of ice — not freezing, not violent — just enough to cool the fevered rhythm beneath the skin.

The air hissed softly.

Appolice's breathing steadied.

For now.

Galewel watched Elmon for a long moment, then shook his head softly.

*"You make everything look simple."*

Elmon did not answer.

He rarely did.

They administered another measure of anti-poison. Appolice's tremors lessened, his breathing slowing into an uneven rest.

One by one, the others settled where they could—stone against back, cloak beneath head, weapons within reach.

The cave quieted.

Elmon moved to his usual place near the entrance, where wind and silence met.

He folded into meditation.

Breath slowed.

Thoughts narrowed.

But beneath the calm, something remained unsettled.

The unfamiliar echo from the field. The way the beast had phased. The timing of its arrival.

Not random.

Never random.

He let the questions settle rather than chase them.

He anchored himself.

And waited.

The celestial light guttered and died.

The dig fell into darkness.

Dawn rose cold and clear in the Month of Souls.

Elmon opened his eyes—

—and saw not the ridge line of the ruins.

He saw stone.

A cavern.

Dim firelight against carved walls.

A dwarf stood before him—broad, unmoving, arms crossed. Not hostile. Not welcoming. Waiting.

Elmon blinked.

The cavern vanished.

The ridge returned.

The ruins lay silent in morning light.

He did not move for several breaths.

Appolice groaned.

He rolled to his side and forced himself upright. His shoulder throbbed as though iron still burned within it. His leg pulsed, numb and savage by turns.

He pushed to stand.

Collapsed.

Pain lanced upward, sharp and blinding.

Emuroil woke instantly at the sound and crossed to him.

*“The toxin burns through tissue,”* he said, steady but not unkind. *“If you don’t move it, the muscle will wither wrong.”*

Karid moved to assist.

Appolice gritted his teeth.

He had broken bones.

Taken bolts.

Carried steel in his flesh before.

But this—

This was different.

After several minutes, Appolice managed to stand. He could walk — but slowly.

Elmon rose and looked toward the southern trench where a faint blue flag flickered in the morning air. He recalled the conversation that had ended the day before the Quil Bear rose.

*Not what was,* he thought.

He gathered his thoughts. Set his goals for the day.

Confirm anchor locations.

Most of them began walking following Elmon and the diggers.

Appolice moved with them, stumbling. He could feel muscle fibers tearing as bruising deepened beneath the skin.

The first anchor stone lay half-buried in the southern trench.

Smooth.

Subtly different from the surrounding masonry.

Peter knelt.

He did not carve.

He did not etch.

He placed the prepared test glyph upon parchment and pressed it lightly against the stone's surface.

He closed his eyes.

Not to invoke.

To steady.

The glyph did not glow.

But the air shifted.

A faint vibration pulsed outward from the stone — not strong, not bright — but structured.

Peter's hand trembled slightly.

*"It's... answering."*

Jurioam leaned closer.

The vibration extended toward the northern wall.

Toward another blue flag.

Galewel inhaled sharply. *"They are linked."*

Emuroil's voice was low. *"Do not push it."*

Peter did not.

He withdrew the parchment slowly.

The vibration diminished.

The stone returned to stillness.

Elmon stepped closer.

He placed his palm flat against the smooth surface.

*"It is not activation,"* he murmured.

*"It is recognition."*

He lifted his hand and turned to the others. *"This site is not random ruin."*

He looked across Breech's broken geometry. *"It is dormant structure."*

Galewel exhaled slowly. *"And we have been excavating its skin."*

Peter gathered his parchment, eyes still wide. *"The anchors respond to listening."*

Emuroil looked toward the northern wall. *"And if all anchors listen at once?"*

Elmon did not answer immediately.

He studied the line between the southern trench and the north wall.

Between the blue flags.

Between the stones that rang differently.

Then he spoke. "*Then Breech will not be restored by force.*"

A pause.

*"It will reassemble by memory."*

The wind shifted again.

This time, faintly—

Very faintly—

The blue flags quivered in unison.

## Chapter ⊕: The City That Buried Itself

There was a mark on the weave-map that did not exist on the ground.

An echo point—unlabeled by ruin, unanswered by stone—resting on a slope where the site should have been silent.

Elmon crouched over the dig map, then over Peter's lattice rendering, eyes narrowing. *"Perhaps it is there,"* he said, *"but buried—under rock, debris, dust, and the slow weight of years."*

They moved six diggers to the slope.

They cut into the hill like surgeons into scar tissue—measured, patient, certain only of the question.

It took three days to find the first flat stone.

Seven feet down, their shovels struck something that did not belong to collapse: a circular disc of worked stone—four feet across—perfectly shaped, perfectly placed, as if the hill had been poured over it.

Vess wiped sweat and grit from his brow, staring at the excavation. *"I think..."* he said slowly, *"...the entire hill is debris. That changes everything."*

Four voices answered him at once. *"What?"*

Vess swallowed, eyes still on the disc. *"We could have been digging this out all last year. If the hill itself is fill—if someone moved all this—then this wasn't just destruction. Who buries a city beneath its own ruin? Who spends that kind of labor, that kind of energy... after a war?"*

He looked up at Elmon. *"It was supposed to have been destroyed during the Wizard Wars."*

Emuroil's voice cut in, quiet and sharp. *"Or..."* he said, the words hanging like a blade over the stone, *"...was it?"*

Galewel stood very still, eyes fixed on the exposed disc of stone. *"Who,"* he whispered slowly, *"would destroy their own town... just to keep it from being destroyed... by an invading army?"*

The thought settled like ash.

*"Oh my..."* His breath caught. *"There is something hidden here. Something costly. A Catar Citadel was leveled to the ground—along with its town—and recorded as a loss from war."*

Benga crossed his arms, studying the slope with a craftsman's eye. *"This isn't ruin,"* he said quietly. *"This is sanctified preservation."*

He looked to the others. *"Why didn't they simply return after the war?"*

Elmon did not answer immediately. His gaze traced the contour of the hill, then the exposed stone beneath it.

*"Perhaps,"* he said, voice steady but distant, *"to leave it buried was safer than reopening a wound."* Silence followed. Galewel turned toward him fully now.

*“Elmon,” he said carefully, “I gather you are the most skilled in echomancy among us. Is it possible to map this city—without uncovering it? To read what lies beneath... without tearing it open?”*

Elmon felt the weight of the question—not technical, but ethical.

To map a city through echomancy would mean listening to grief compressed into earth. It would mean reading the final breath of a people who chose burial over surrender.

He drew a long, slow breath.

*“That,” he said quietly, “is a call to listen beyond limits.”*

His eyes closed. *“To hear what even silence has preserved.”* The group stood in silence. Elmon’s words settled like dust over the maps and stones.

Peter spoke first, barely above a whisper. *“Then every stone we uncover... is a memory. Not just of place.”* Emuroil nodded slowly.

*“And every echo we hear... is a choice. To remember... or to let it sleep.”*

Galewel stepped beside Elmon and placed a steady hand on his shoulder. *“Then let us listen. Not to conquer the silence—but to honor it.”*

### ***The Search for the Perimeter***

Appolice Skull Craker watched continually scanning the site and surrounding areas from the roof of building centrally located on the highest point of the ruins. Occasionally getting down and wandering the site. His leg aching at times. Making sure not to disturb anything he could. Scouting edges and boundaries of the dig. To keep his mind from forgetting his services.

Over the next several days, Elmon strained to locate the perimeter walls and gates through echo alone.

He closed his eyes often, kneeling in the soil, pressing his palm to the earth as if it were parchment.

He searched for tension lines in the weave — straight boundaries where intention had once stood.

But the hill resisted.

The burial had not been chaotic.

It had been deliberate.

—

One afternoon, a small detachment of soldiers marched up the southern road — a cleric among them, and another figure hooded against the wind.

They halted before Elmon.

*“We saw the summoning light for aid,”* their captain said. *“We came as quickly as we could.”*

Elmon glanced at the workers, then back at them.

*“What summoning light?”*

Kindred answered quietly, *“The celestial flare during the Quil Bear incident, I suspect.”*

Two soldiers exchanged uneasy glances at the mention of the beast.

*“We brought medical supplies,”* the captain added. *“Not knowing what we would find.”*

The dig workers looked around in confusion.

Emuroil stepped forward.

*“Your coming is appreciated,”* he said evenly. *“The bear is dealt with. The goblins as well. But Appolice was lanced.”*

He gestured toward him.

The cleric moved immediately, kneeling beside Appolice.

*“Bleeding? Deep bruising? Knife-like pain at the wound sites?”*

Appolice nodded once.

The cleric opened his satchel and withdrew a flask and a small jar of bluish paste.

*“Drink,”* he said, firm but not unkind.

He handed the paste to Appolice.

*“Apply this at night until the pain recedes.”*

Emuroil studied the jar.

*“What does the paste do?”*

The cleric paused before answering.

*“It arrests degradative muscle breakdown.”*

He met Emuroil’s eyes.

*“The poison is insidious. It converts the victim’s own fluids into more toxin. It feeds on motion. Left unchecked, it disables.”*

Appolice’s expression shifted from irritation to alarm.

He seized the flask and drank.

Stripping off armor and trousers, he applied the paste to the puncture wounds. The cooling sensation spread immediately.

The cleric examined his leg.

*“The bruising down the limb,”* he said quietly, *“is the poison advancing.”*

Emuroil inclined his head to the detachment.

*“You are welcome to remain a few days and recover.”*

He added, without embarrassment, *“We cannot offer coin. But we have rations and water.”*

The soldiers accepted without complaint.

Emuroil showed them the cave alcoves and spare tents. The soldiers did not sit long. Within an hour they were walking the perimeter — disciplined, restless, unwilling to stand idle among unstable ruins.

For two days they patrolled.

On the third morning, the captain approached.

*"It is time,"* he said simply.

The cleric left five healing draughts, another jar of paste, and three sealed scrolls.

*"In case the grounds answers again,"* he murmured.

They packed quietly.

As the column reached the southern gate marker, movement stirred beyond the trench.

Three worgs dragged something across the stone.

Karid narrowed his eyes.

*"The two oblins,"* he said. *"Food. They finally found them, or dared to approach dinner."*

The cleric shuddered.

The wild wastes did not waste what men left behind.

In the fifth day of digging along what Elmon believed to be the eastern approach, a shout rise from the trench. They uncovered a silver plate.

It was ornate — claw-engraved, crescent-lined, framed with sigilic embellishment. Despite centuries beneath soil, the metal shimmered faintly, as if it refused to forget.

One of the diggers brushed dirt from its face and read aloud:

**WELCOME TO BREAK**

He blinked. *"Break?"* he asked. *"This is called Breech."* Silence again.

Galewel stepped closer, eyes narrowing. *"Who says?"* he asked quietly. *"The first time I saw it in print was nearly five hundred years ago. An archival survey."*

He paused. *"By an author named Priz Grayclaw."* Emuroil's expression shifted. *"That,"* he said slowly, *"is a Catar name."*

It took Elmon two weeks of relentless labor to trace the ghost of the city. By the end of it, he had identified:

Approximately forty structures, three of the wall towers, one of the five gates referenced in fragmented historical chronologies, the rest lay silent beneath the hill.

They paused excavation for a week to allow the diggers to clear debris properly. There was far more rubble than expected. Much of it had compacted over centuries — not loose collapse, but pressure-forged mass. In places it resembled hardened slurry, as though the city had not simply fallen, but melted and settled.

Elmon stood at the ridge and studied what little had been revealed. He sensed it. There would be no more clean outlines. The weave had grown dense.

Distorted.

Layered.

Still — the discs.

He turned his attention to them. The discs had been discovered in scattered, improbable positions.

The bruising along Appolice's leg slowly faded. The swelling in his shoulder eased with each passing day. The knife-like pains dulled to memory.

Walking no longer felt like crossing broken glass.

He rolled his shoulder once, testing it. Flexed his leg. Nodded.

*“I’ll not mock a Quil Bear again,”* Appolice muttered.

Goundom let out a deep, rumbling chuckle. He clapped Appolice on the back—

Hard enough that the smaller man staggered and nearly lost his footing.

*“You know the beast now,”* Goundom said. *“That different than hearing of it.”*

Appolice shot him a glare, then smirked despite himself.

*“Yes. I do.”*

He had faced siege engines, scaled walls under arrow-fire, and broken lines of men beneath banners.

But that creature—

That had been different.

As an adversary, it was more dangerous than besieging a citadel.

One was embedded into the eastern wall itself. Two others were mounted into what appeared to be terrace remnants — though the terraces could have belonged to any elevation or structure. They were not where they should have been. Or perhaps they were exactly where they must be.

Elmon paced slowly. *“Where is the Echo point?”*

Every weave projection has a reference frame — an anchor, a conceptual casing, a structure of origin. Memory does not float freely; it attaches. *‘Is there a frame we have not uncovered? Is there a Case that binds the echo?’*

If the city veiled itself, then the discs are not decorations. They are coordinates. But coordinates to what?

The questions began multiplying faster than answers. And for the first time since the excavation began, Elmon did not know what the next step should be.

Elmon retrieved the Catar Case from the building and carried it into the open courtyard.

He set it carefully upon the director’s plate — the supposed anchor point of the model he had reconstructed in memory.

Then he sat upon it. The response was immediate — and unusable, instead of hearing noise, he momentarily hears silence — then noise crashes in.

Echoes surged upward like tangled roots.

Not clean lines.

Not mapped structures.

Not layered history.

Noise. Dense. Twisted. Overlapping. As if every memory in the city were speaking at once.

He pressed deeper. Nothing separated. Nothing resolved.

The same problem he had encountered while mapping the walls returned: Location would not stabilize. The echoes were mixed together — folded, distorted, muffled beneath something thicker than time.

He stood abruptly.

Inside the building, he retrieved the Frame — the geometric construct he had used before to define memory boundaries. He carried it up the hill near one of the circular plots and cast it down the slope.

The frame struck the earth. Nothing shifted. No harmonic alignment. No re-centering. No echo clarification.

Elmon began pacing. *‘What are we not seeing?’ Think deeply, ‘What are we not hearing?’*

He turned to Galewel and Emuroil.

*“We are missing something. We are listening to the echoes as best we can — but they are distorted. The circular plates are in places that make no structural sense. The Case does not stabilize the projection. The Frame does not define it.”*

He exhaled slowly.

*“What other facet could be tied to this weave? What variable are we not accounting for? This is not just architecture. It is not just memory. It is not just projection.”* He paused.

*“I stopped at the Frame. I did not examine the rest of the store.”*

His eyes sharpened. *“If the Frame does not define the echo... something else does.”*

He turned toward the storeroom. *“I am going to examine every object in that room.”*

Lanterns glowed across the archive chamber, casting long, fractured shadows across shelves and tables.

Elmon moved slowly from object to object. *“What am I missing?”* He closed his eyes for a moment. *“If I name them... perhaps the weave will answer.”*

He began speaking softly to himself.

*“Small mill stone.”*

*“Vase fragments.”*

*“Hooked metal stake... bent inward.”*

*“Polished plate.”*

*“Sigil defining Home.”*

He paused. *“Hmm. A bent sword. But bent along the blade edge... not the flat. Perhaps a mashed crown.”*

*“Gloves.”*

*“Roughened rod... it sings when I touch it.”* He glanced back at it briefly.

*“Catar coins. Different faces.”*

*“Bone hammer.”*

*“Writing plate.”*

*“Instrument fragments?”*

*“Funnels.”*

*“Placard — Fortunes Laid Before You.”*

He tilted his head. “Interesting.”

He turned to the far table.

*“Ledgers. Star-covered. Flowered. Moon-glyph circle.”*

*“Stone tablet fragments.”*

Then he stopped. At the edge of the table sat a single glass sphere. It glowed faintly.  
*“What are you?”*

He lifted it gently.

The surface was smooth. Warm.

Elmon extinguished the lanterns. Darkness settled, the sphere brightened. Inside it, a star passed slowly through a crescent moon—halfway—then stopped.

It reset, again.

Star through crescent moon, halfway then it stopped.

Repeating.

Elmon rotated the sphere in his hand. The image did not rotate. The star and crescent remained at the same orientation—always aligned to something beyond the glass. His breath slowed. *“Very odd.”*

He held the sphere still and looked toward the doorway. It was not projecting an image, but it was aligning to one.

Elmon relit the lanterns. The room filled again with warm amber light. He moved to another table.

*“A table full of pottery fragments...”*

He leaned closer. *“All the fractures are squared.”*

He picked up one shard, turning it in his fingers.

*“No irregular breaks. No stress fractures. These were not shattered.”*

He set it down carefully. *“They were cut.”* He turned.

*“Jewelry.”* A long table, heavy with gold and silver. *“Amulets. Necklaces. Rings.”*

Every piece bore the symbol of the moon.

Different phases.

He began arranging them in an order. Crescent. Half. Full. Waning. Dark.

The line stretched across the table.

He paused.

Two of the amulets bore something unusual. At the edge of the moon’s curve—A second, smaller moon. Red and offset.

He narrowed his eyes. He gathered the arranged pieces and stepped outside. *“Jurioam. Bring the dig map.”*

Jurioam came with the parchment. *“The tags and markings are find-locations, yes?”*

Jurioam nodded. *“We record every object to its exact place. Location matters. Often more than the object itself.”*

Elmon laid the jewelry in its ordered moon sequence beside the map.

*“Show me where each was found.”*

They marked them one by one. Silence fell. Jurioam leaned in. *“They were found... in a line.”* Not scattered. Not clustered. Aligned.

Elmon reached for chalk.

He drew a single line across the dig map slowly, measured. *“That’s not coincidence,”* he murmured. He glanced back at the red-moon amulets. *“Those weren’t decorative.”*

He tapped the map. *“They’re directional.”*

Elmon returned to the storeroom. He lifted the glass sphere.

This time, he wrapped it in a dark cloth. *“If it shows starlight,”* he murmured, *“then it must be seen in darkness.”*

Jurioam walked beside him.

*“Guide me,”* Elmon said quietly. *“I need to watch, not walk.”*

They stepped into the dig site.

The cloth shielded the sphere from the daylight. Beneath it, faint light shimmered.

The star passed halfway through the crescent moon.

Stopped.

Repeated.

Elmon began walking slowly directed by Jurioam. The image shifted, the star rotated not randomly, but deliberately.

He froze. *“It’s not decorative,”* he whispered. *“It’s directional.”*

He moved again, the star turned like a needle and Jurioam adjusted their path as Elmon watched only the sphere. They wandered the slope. The image rotated left then forward then right.

Like a compass seeking alignment. Elmon’s breathing slowed. *“This isn’t celestial,”* he said softly. *“It’s local.”* They reached the edge of the hill and the star cut cleanly through the crescent.

Perfect alignment.

Elmon felt something change. The image stopped rotating it began to turn slowly... in place. A full circle as if searching, as if confirming. He lowered the cloth and pointed to the ground. As the star passes through the crescent, the faintest second red moon flickers into view. Just once then gone.

*“Dig here.”*

Jurioam blinked. *“What are we looking for?”* Elmon shook his head. *“I don’t know.”*

He looked at the sphere again. *“But something here is answering.”*

After two days of digging at the point the sphere had indicated, the crew struck stone.

Three feet below the surface, the shovels uncovered what at first seemed like sculpted rock. As the dirt was brushed away, the shape clarified.

Three Catar hands.

They formed a circle. No thumbs. Fingers extended upward. They were not grasping. They were offering.

Elmon stood still for a long moment. *“Clear the rest.”*

The diggers widened the excavation. Beneath the hands stood a square pedestal—twelve inches across, rising nearly four feet from a circular stone platform three feet in diameter. The column sides were etched with lunar sequences.

One face bore a single moon cycling through phases. The opposite face showed two moons—intertwined phases. The left face displayed three moons in varied states. The fourth side, once cleaned, revealed a faintly inscribed verse.

Elmon stepped back. *“Anyone read Catish?”*

Peter hesitated, then stepped forward. *“A little.”* *“Better than I,”* Elmon replied.

Peter traced the script with his eyes, murmuring the glyphs aloud as he reconstructed them. *“I think it says... ‘Moon myths, Silent stars, guide the heart.’”*

The group fell quiet. Jurioam folded his arms. *“Poetic.”* Emuroil shook his head slowly. *“Not merely poetic.”* He stepped closer to the monument.

*“The Catar revered the stars. They believed the constellations were placed by their celestial guide—Ishan of the Night Eyes. Power did not come from conquest. It came from alignment.”*

He gestured toward the three hands. Speaking celestial archeology. *“Ishan’s sigil was an eye with wings. Above it, a heart. And rising from the heart—a hand. Thumb turned away. Four fingers raised, supporting a star.”*

The crew looked again at the stone. Three hands. Moon phases. A guiding verse.

Emuroil lowered his voice. *“This is not decoration. It is devotion shaped into mechanism.”*

Elmon stepped forward and carefully placed the glass sphere upon the fingertips. The sphere settled naturally, as though it had always belonged there. No thunder. No flash. Just alignment. He stepped back.

The wind shifted across the hill, and for a brief second, the faint star within the sphere seemed to pulse—halfway through its crescent, then still.

Elmon exhaled slowly. *“This is not a key,”* he said quietly. *“It’s a listening point.”*

*“Do you recall from the Tome of the Celestials what is written of her?”*

Emuroil scratched his beard, eyes fixed on the altar. *“Ishan is said to appear as a caracal with starlit eyes... guiding lost souls through veiled paths. She is keeper of the Threefold Mirror — an artifact said to reveal the soul’s past, present, and potential.”*

He paused, thinking deeper. *“There is also mention of a threadless child. One born without alignment. And a night of unveiling — when all veils are lifted.”*

Galewel raised a finger looking downward, he slowly lowered himself to his knees and began examining the base of the podium more carefully, fingers tracing the seams. He breathed heavily as he rose.

*“Legend says she gave the caracal priest a flute of summoning.”*

Elmon froze.

The words *flute of summoning* struck something buried deep in his memory—the rod that sang when he touched it. His eyes flared. Without another word he turned, breath catching, and sprinted toward the storeroom.

Galewel blinked. “What is he—”

He did not finish. Moments later Elmon returned, breath sharp, holding the roughened rod that sang when touched. Galewel stared at it.

*“It is said the flute was to be used only in times of moral or cataclysmic distress of the nation.”*

Elmon held the rod up between them. *“And what would you call this?”* The wind moved across the hill. The sphere atop the hands glimmered faintly.

Elmon handed the rod to Galewel. The moment Galewel’s fingers closed around it, he stilled. He heard it. Not merely a tone — but a layered melody, subtle and structured.

*“Oh my...”* he breathed. *“I thought it was simply a peculiar artifact. I tried for hours to determine the melody. I assumed the song meant something.”* Jurioam answered quietly, *“I suppose it does.”*

Galewel turned back to the podium and resumed his search. As he rose, brushing dust from his knees, something caught his eye.

*“In the center,”* he murmured. Between the three upturned stone hands was a narrow opening — nearly invisible unless one searched for it.

*“Elmon. Lift the sphere.”* Elmon carefully removed the glowing crystal. Galewel slid the rod into the small aperture. It entered only halfway before resistance halted it.

They replaced the sphere.

As it settled into the stone fingertips, its weight pressed downward — and the rod slid fully into place with a muted, resonant hum.

The earth responded not violently, but musically.

The ground began to sing.

The same melody as the rod — but deeper now. Amplified beneath their feet.

A harmonic vibration rippled through the hill.

Then the shaking began.

Slow at first. A tremor. Stone shifted.

Dust cascaded from unseen seams.

Walls groaned — not collapsing, but remembering.

Debris lifted.

Turned.

Locked into place as if guided by unseen hands, pieces of an immense, deliberate puzzle restoring itself.

The diggers staggered backward.

Someone shouted. Another fled.

Fear spread faster than the rising stone.

From the northern ridge, a band of goblins appeared — perceiving what seemed the perfect moment to strike, with everyone caught off guard.

The workers retreated from the site, hearts pounding, unable to comprehend what they were witnessing.

The goblins froze.

Watched.

Then scattered in sudden terror.

Goundom and Appolice tracked their movement, weapons raised.

The goblins did not look back.

They vanished over the ridge.

Their cries echoed down the slope —

Not war cries.

Not rage.

Panic.

As if something behind them had begun to move.

But Elmon did not run. He dropped to one knee beside the altar, eyes wide, breath shallow. He was not watching destruction. He was watching remembrance reformed stone by stone. Line by line. The Catar citadel was reconstructing itself before his very eyes.

The ground continued to tremble, but not violently—more like a breath held for centuries, finally exhaled.

Stones lifted, rotated, and settled into place with deliberate precision. Walls rose not as ruins rebuilt, but as remembered architecture—each block aligning with echoes long buried beneath dust and time. Elmon remained kneeling beside the podium, eyes wide, heart steady.

The rod beneath the sphere continued to sing. Its tone deepened, joined now by faint harmonic layers from the rising walls—as if the city itself had found its pitch and was tuning to it. Jurioam swallowed. “*It’s not rebuilding,*” he whispered. “*It’s remembering.*”

Peter stood frozen, his scripting kit pressed to his chest. “*This is the Threefold Mirror,*” he murmured. “*Past, present, potential. It’s showing us all three.*”

Elmon’s lips curved in a slow grin. “*Not quite.*” Peter blinked. “*Then what is it?*”

Elmon rose to his feet, never taking his eyes off the forming citadel. “*A mirror reflects,*” he said quietly. “*This does not reflect. It obeys.*”

A tower locked into place with a resonant chime. *"This is not past, present, and potential,"* Elmon continued. *"This is intention, preserved. A decision made long ago—waiting for alignment."*

Another wall rotated, seams knitting as though guided by invisible hands. *"They did not leave a memory of what was,"* Elmon said. *"They left instructions for what would be."*

Peter lowered his kit slowly. *"Then we are not watching history."*

*"No,"* Elmon answered, as the final outer gate sealed with a thunderous hum. *"We are watching a covenant complete itself."*

Galewel stepped forward slowly, reverence overtaking even his usual restraint. *"Ishan's sigil wasn't merely symbolic,"* he said, voice low. *"It was a seal."*

He turned in a slow circle, taking in the rising towers, the locking seams, the returning geometry of streets long forgotten. *"This citadel was never lost. It was... veiled."*

The word seemed to settle into the stone itself.

Emuroil stood with arms crossed, though his eyes betrayed him—bright, reflective. Weeping. *"And we,"* he said quietly, *"just lifted the veil."*

Elmon shook his head gently. *"No."* They all turned to him. *"We did not lift it."*

Another section of wall aligned with a resonant tone. *"It was lifted because the conditions were met."* Peter frowned. *"Conditions?"* Elmon gestured toward the altar, the sphere, the rod, the three-handed monument.

*"The sigil. The rod. The sphere. The alignment. The heart."* He looked back toward the forming citadel. *"The veil was not meant to be broken by force. It was meant to be answered."*

A final harmonic note rippled through the courtyard as a gate tower locked into place.

Galewel exhaled slowly. *"Then the Catar did not hide."*

*"No,"* Elmon said. *"They entrusted."*

Silence followed—not fearful now, but heavy with recognition. The city stood, not resurrected, not reclaimed, but remembered into presence.

As the dust settled, a central spire rose from the heart of the citadel—tall, black granite, its seams still glimmering faintly before fading into seamless stone. At its peak, a crystal roof caught the light and fractured it into subtle arcs that drifted across the courtyard.

The grounds were broader than any of them expected—expansive, deliberate, proportioned with intention rather than defense. Near the perimeter walls they counted twenty-three circular stones, evenly spaced, each flush with the earth as though waiting for something yet to occur.

The land lay flat.

No ridge.

No ravine.

Where broken earth had split and sloped the day before, there now stood a wall.

Appolice, Goundom, Karid, and Mercikom moved cautiously to where the ridge had once risen.

They stopped.

A twenty-five-foot wall towered before them — seamless stone, newly set yet ancient in bearing. A gate stood at its center, sealed and barred, iron-bound wood reinforced with deliberate craft.

They exchanged glances.

Karid exhaled softly.

“Well,” he said, almost amused, “*this should make the job easier.*”

“*I’ll check the towers.*”

He moved along the perimeter, scanning for weaknesses, vantage points, entry seams.

Goundom approached the wall.

Ten feet from it, he raised his hammer and struck with full intention.

The impact rang.

Deep.

Solid.

The vibration traveled through the stone like a living thing.

Goundom lowered the hammer and grinned.

“*Good stone,*” he declared.

The Dig crew moved through the new structures.

Within the inner halls, symbols marked certain chambers—some lunar, some geometric, some bearing sigils none of them immediately recognized. Elmon moved toward the Court Chamber.

The doors were unbarred. Inside, the air felt settled—not stale, not abandoned—simply paused.

The throne stood at the far end of the chamber, carved from the same black granite as the spire, but veined with faint silver threading. It was not ornate. It was architectural. Built as if it were part of the structure itself rather than placed within it.

A subtle red luminescence pulsed beneath the seat, not bright, not flickering, but steady.

Elmon approached slowly. He extended his senses—not aggressively, but with practiced precision. He traced the stone. Tested for weave tension. Searched for tethered echoes, residual memory strands, glimmer threads.

Nothing.

No echo signature, no weave distortion, no residual emotional imprint. The glow was not reactive. It was inherent.

Emuroil stepped beside him. “*What do you see?*”

Elmon did not answer immediately. He placed his palm lightly against the throne’s armrest. Cold. Solid. Ordinary, and yet not.

“*It isn’t glowing because something is bound to it,*” Elmon said finally. “*Then why?*” Peter asked. Elmon’s eyes narrowed. “*It isn’t emitting.*”

He leaned closer, watching the faint red pulse beneath the seat. *“It’s measuring.”*

The chamber fell silent. Galewel glanced toward the circular stones outside. *“Measuring what?”* Elmon stepped back, studying the room’s proportions.

*“Presence,”* he said quietly. *“Alignment. Or perhaps... readiness.”*

The red light pulsed once—slightly brighter. Then returned to its steady rhythm. No echo answered it, but something had noticed them.

After about an hour, the shock softened into laughter and half-formed explanations spoken all at once.

They gathered in the bailey before the twin entry gates. Voices overlapped—astonished, thrilled, trying desperately to describe the most impossible thing any of them had ever witnessed. It sounded like thirty men arguing and celebrating at the same time.

The exhilaration was enough to build a mountain.

At last, spent, they collapsed onto the warm stone and lay staring at the evening sky above the newly risen spire. The crystal roof caught the last light of day and returned it gently, like a heartbeat slowing after a sprint.

Peter lay with his hands folded behind his head, brow furrowed in thought. *“Is this what school is like?”* he asked quietly. *“If so, I would be twenty years older when I graduate from my five-year program.”*

Jurioam chuckled without lifting his gaze. *“With Elmon? Yes.”*

*“Only on the good days,”* Benga added at the same time. Emuroil snorted, rolling onto his side. *“Elmon makes work... work.”*

Elmon did not defend himself. He simply watched the sky deepen from amber to indigo and listened to the faint, almost imperceptible hum of the citadel settling into itself. He thought.

**Some cities fall. Others choose to sleep. And when they wake, they do not rise—  
they remember.**

## Chapter ⊕: Mundane Thrown

The next morning, the sun rose beneath a veil of thin spring clouds. The sky promised rain — the kind that would wash dust from the city and settle the air into something new.

The wall stood unchanged.

They sat debating for hours.

Two dissertations emerged. Five competing theories of weave cohesion. Arguments formed and reformed like the stone had the day before.

Some claimed the harmonic resonance of the rod had triggered an architectural memory — a latent reconstruction field woven into the anchor stones.

Others argued the burial itself had been an inverted stabilization lattice — and their testing had corrected an imbalance rather than caused one.

Peter insisted the parchment test had not activated anything — only revealed alignment.

Galewel countered that revelation and activation were not separate acts when dealing with intentional weave.

Elmon listened.

He did not rush to speak.

The wall had not risen in anger.

It had risen in response.

That distinction mattered.

Arguments on resonance anchoring, structural memory, and whether the citadel now existed independently of the altar.

At last, silence.

Elmon exhaled slowly. “*No.*” He stepped toward the podium. The sphere rested in the hands of stone. The rod beneath it still hummed faintly, as though the city were breathing through it. “*If we remove it,*” Elmon said quietly, “*does the weave collapse? Does the citadel forget?*”

No one answered. He reached out slowly. Carefully. He lifted the sphere. The hum shifted.

Then he drew the singing rod free. For a moment—nothing happened.

The citadel did not tremble. The walls did not dissolve. The spire did not dim. The city remained. Elmon looked up. “*It was never being sustained,*” he said softly. “*It was being remembered.*”

They had the diggers and excavators to secure the entry gates to the citadel. Elmon noted that within the compound walls was the storeroom. It was actually one of the east side rooms of the peristyle.

Elmon scanned the courtyard.

Something shifted in his posture.

He turned sharply.

From one of the newly risen towers, a bell rang.

Clear.

Deliberate.

Every head snapped toward the sound.

In the stillness of the morning air, Karid's voice carried from above:

*"We have an alarm now!"*

*"Galewel,"* said, *"when I first saw you, you were coming out of a cave."* Elmon nodded slowly. *"I don't see that cave anywhere."*

Umuroil began walking the path he remembered—precise, deliberate. Two years of repetition etched into muscle and memory. He stepped where he knew the ground had dipped, where the stone had split, where the arch of the entrance once stood.

He stopped. The south wall stood before him. Unbroken. Solid as if it had always been there. He placed a hand against the stone. It was warm from the sun. Seamless.

Behind him, Peter continued scratching ink across parchment, refusing to let the moment outrun the record. His Libic shorthand flowed faster now, more confident, though not fully understood. Over thirty pages lay stacked beside him—nearly half his supply already consumed.

He paused only once, staring at his own notes. *'This must be what school is like, he thought. So much happening at once. So much to learn. I don't even know what half of this means.'*

He dipped his quill again and kept writing.

Midday found them seated in the bailey, backs resting against stone now warm beneath the spring sun. They shared Harnel bread and Runmar cake. Spiced meat cut through the dust that still clung to their throats—a welcome change from days of venison and tjer jerky.

A soft rain began to fall.

Unusually warm for that time of year.

Peter lifted his face toward it.

*"That's not right,"* he murmured.

They stood in the drizzle, watching as water struck the stone and ran cleanly along narrow seams—vanishing into concealed ducts. The flow was guided, intentional, passing downward to somewhere unseen.

Dust washed away.

The structure drank.

Elmon chewed absently, hardly tasting the food.

His eyes never rested.

They scanned.

Recognized.

Measured.

Stone angles. Seam lines. The geometry of the spire's shadow. The way light pooled in alcoves that had not existed a week ago.

This was not random reconstruction.

It was design.

*'Memory-veiled reality... constructed within a slip veil.'*

He had theorized it a year ago. Scribbled half-formed frameworks in the margins of his ledgers. Speculation. Academic architecture. Now he stood inside one.

What he once called "*advanced weave theory*" felt primitive beside what the Catar had accomplished centuries before he ever conceived the idea.

This was not spellwork.

This was civilization-level intelligence.

It shifted something in him.

He had always believed the Lightning Warriors formidable because of training, discipline, and sharpened senses. But what if their true strength was cognitive? What if perception itself—augmented, layered, veiled—was part of their design?

He finished his meal and rose, brushing crumbs from his hands.

The citadel felt quiet again.

The rain faded to a hush.

Elmon wandered the inner chambers alone.

The rooms were spare—alcoves recessed cleanly into stone, geometry precise and restrained. No clutter. No ornamentation. No excess.

Deliberate emptiness.

There was no historical precedent for a Catar citadel of this magnitude.

Chartered halls, yes.

Gathering places.

Lore Holds—the largest known Catar constructs.

But this—

This was a hundred Lore Holds and more.

What had this place been?

It was not poverty.

It was intention.

Elmon kept the Sphere active at his side and the Flute device in hand, sustaining a low harmonic field as he moved. He listened not for sound—but for memory.

The stone did not resist him.

It waited.

Without realizing when the path curved or how long he had walked, he found himself standing once more in the King's Court chamber.

The air was cooler there and still. The throne stood exactly as memory had rebuilt it—dark stone, deliberate lines, austere authority. No ornamentation beyond what necessity demanded.

He approached slowly. Pressed along the armrests. Pulled at seams. Tapped the base with knuckles. Whispered low tonal pulses to test for hollow resonance.

Nothing.

He knelt and placed his ear against the stone. Silence. He exhaled and shifted into echo perception. Still nothing. No tethered weave. No glimmer of embedded sigil. No dormant cadence.

Yet in the Case Room Memory model—the reconstruction held in the Catar archive frame—the throne had pulsed with a red luminescence, but not here. Not now.

He leaned back on his heels, brow tightening. “*It cannot be ornamental,*” he muttered. “*The Catar did not ornament.*”

If the red glow had appeared only in the memory model... then perhaps it was not a function of the throne. Perhaps it was a function of the observer.

Elmon slumped into the throne. His breath came shallow. Fingers raw from hours of pressing, pulling, listening. Stone dust clung to his sleeves. His mind felt scraped thin.

Beneath him, the faint red luminescence still pulsed. Slow. Measured. Not reacting. Not responding. Just... present.

No echo flared when he reached outward. No tethered weave answered his probing. Only a voided quiet that felt deliberate. Then—

Ten feet before the throne, the air folded. Not shimmered. Not glowed. Folded.

A low wall rose from nothing, two or three feet high, shaping itself into existence without dust displacement, without echo disturbance. It did not *emerge* from memory. It asserted itself.

At the center of that low wall stood a monument. Agerian in form. Two feet wide at the base. Eight feet tall. Dark stone, too smooth for quarry work. Too precise for rubble reconstruction.

Three sides bore dragons carved in ascending spirals — bodies sinuous, mouths open, claws gripping the rising column as if climbing toward something unseen.

The fourth face, turned toward the throne, was smooth — except for runes cut with deliberate severity. Ancient. Clean.

Centered in that face was a shaft and recessed aperture — identical in dimension to the altar of the three hands.

At the crown of the obelisk stood a celestial figure carved in relief: Eagle wings unfurled but lowered. A sword planted before her. Head bowed.

Not in triumph. In submission. And beneath her, in the stone — a black abrasion. Not carved. Not etched. Burned. As though something had once pressed there. Or been bound there.

Elmon nearly leapt from the throne. Instead, he fell back into it. The red glow beneath him pulsed once—then steadied.

He leaned into the carved stone, breath shallow, eyes wide, fixed on the wall and the obelisk that had not existed moments before. “*What else is forgotten?*”

The words did not leave his mouth. They moved through him. He forced himself still. No reaching. No probing. No pushing.

He let his eyelids lower halfway, letting the enormity of the moment settle—not into thought, but into bone. Silence.

Then—

The faint scent of spring. Not dust. Not stone. Spring. New grass after thaw. Warm soil. The first bloom breaking frost.

A whisper of melody followed—barely audible. Not from the rod. Not from the stones. Something older. A tone that curved instead of rang.

An echo pulsed—

Not outward. Inward. Then faded. *Click*. Not loud. Not mechanical. Precise.

A soft mechanical shift whispered beneath him.

Not loud. Not dramatic. Just the faint sigh of stone remembering its weight.

The throne exhaled. Elmon did not move. Footsteps pounded in the corridor.

Jurioam burst into the chamber first, breath ragged, eyes wild. Benga followed close behind, nearly colliding with him.

“*There are vault-like rooms appearing all over the grounds—*” Jurioam began, then stopped. They froze. The chamber was no longer the chamber they had left.

Where once there had been bare walls and emptiness, a gallery now rose aloft, curving along the upper reach of the hall like a crown of stone. Torches that had not been lit moments before now burned in recessed alcoves.

Along the walls sat twenty-two stone chairs—each evenly spaced. Each deliberate. Each facing inward.

Between every pair of chairs, two slightly elevated platforms stood—subtle, but intentional. Not thrones. Not pedestals or stations.

Benga swallowed. “*This was not here.*” Jurioam’s voice dropped to a whisper. “*No,*” he said. “*It was waiting.*” Elmon remained seated.

The red glow beneath him had dimmed—no longer pulsing, but steady, contained. As though the throne had relinquished something it had been holding.

The obelisk stood ten feet before him, unchanged in shape—but the black abrasion beneath the winged Celestial now looked deeper. Not worn. Opened.

A faint current moved through the chamber—not wind, not echo. Something structured. Deliberate. Elmon finally stood.

“*Twenty-two,*” he said quietly. He did not yet know what the number meant. But it did not feel arbitrary.

Elmon sat upright. The seat beneath him trembled—barely perceptible, like a pulse beneath skin.

Then—

A soft shift. From the underside of the throne, a hidden panel slid open with seamless grace. No grinding stone. No echo of gears. Just inevitability.

Inside, nested within a cradle of interwoven silver lattice, lay a ledger. Not a book. A presence.

Its sheath was polished silver, impossibly smooth, unmarred by time. Faint sigils traced its surface—so subtle they seemed invisible—until Elmon’s breath passed over them. Then they shimmered. Not with light. With recognition.

Jurioam exhaled slowly. *“It was waiting for you.”* Elmon did not answer.

He reached toward it—but hesitated an inch away. The air around the ledger felt structured. Not warm. Not cold. Defined.

Benga stepped closer, voice hushed. *“Another vault?”* Elmon shook his head. *“No,”* he said quietly. *“This is not a vault.”*

His fingers brushed the silver sheath. The sigils brightened—just once—and then settled. Not flaring. Accepting. He lifted the ledger from its cradle.

The silver lattice beneath it folded inward and vanished, as though the throne had surrendered its burden. The red glow beneath the seat faded entirely.

The throne was now stone. Elmon held the ledger in both hands. The chamber did not tremble. The walls did not shift. But something had completed.

Peter arrived shortly thereafter. Ragged breath. Persistent steps. He arrived to see Elmon lift the ledger.

Peter gasped. *“It was part of the throne?”*

Galewel stepped forward, reverent. *“Not just stored. Sealed. This was meant to be found only by one who sat in weariness, not conquest.”*

Elmon shook his head slowly. *“I think not. It needed weight. Pressure. A firm seat to break the seal that held it. No celestial whisper. No mythic intervention. Just cold mechanical ingenuity.”* He glanced at the hollow beneath the throne. *“It could have remained hidden for centuries.”*

He reached into the cradle and lifted the sheath.

It was cool—denser than it looked—its weight disproportionate to its size. Not heavy in mass. Heavy in meaning. A faint pulse tremored through the silver. Elmon froze.

The rhythm was not random. It matched his own heartbeat. He turned the sheath slowly in his hands.

The surface was smooth, flawless—until light shifted across it. Something stirred beneath the silver. Not etched. Not carved. Revealed.

Letters rose from within the metal itself, like frost forming on glass.

### **Perdina.**

The name did not glow. It emerged. As though it had always been there, waiting for breath, for pulse, for recognition.

The chamber went still. Even the lingering tremor in the stones seemed to quiet.

Peter swallowed. *“That’s... the staff.”*

Elmon did not speak. But his grip tightened. Because this was no longer a mechanical coincidence. The throne had not crowned him. It had named him.

Jurioam whispered, *“The Folded Light.”* Galewel nodded slowly. *“Then this ledger is not a record. It’s a mirror.”* Emuroil’s voice lowered. *“And Elmon... you were the one it waited for.”*

Elmon shook his head, almost impatient. *“Not everything is mystical.”*

He turned the silver sheath in his hand. *“If this were destiny, then anyone could have sequenced the steps and triggered the same result. Processes. Pressure points. Mechanical bindings.”* He gestured toward the throne. *“Locks and switches do not wait for chosen men. They wait for force applied correctly.”*

He looked at them one by one. *“If memories are tied to mechanisms, then unless the mechanism is engaged, the memory remains veiled. Silent. Not waiting. Simply untriggered.”*

He stepped away from the throne slowly. Deliberately. He approached the monument.

The stone hands waited, fingers raised. Without ceremony, he placed the sphere upon their tips. Then, with measured precision, he set the singing rod—flute of legend—into the narrow aperture below the sphere.

The rod slid only partway. He adjusted it. Waited. The chamber held its breath.

The red crescent above the monument flared once. Not brightly. Not triumphantly. Just a single pulse.

Then it dimmed. What remained was not darkness—but a thin black aura, clinging to its edge like a shadow that had chosen not to leave. A pressure moved through the chamber.

Not sound. Not wind. A felt whisper in the weave:

**The heart has been offered. The memory may now speak.**

Elmon did not look at the crescent. He looked at the others. *“We’re not excavating a city anymore,”* he said quietly. *“We’ve stepped into a sanctum.”*

Galewel’s voice was almost reverent. *“It remembers more than stone.”* He studied the darkened crescent. *“That mark... that’s not extinguished light. It’s transition.”* He swallowed.

*“Something has crossed. Not place. Not time.”* He looked at Elmon. *“Readiness.”*

Or perhaps, he thought but did not say—

*“It waits to be filled, it is awaiting something to color it.”*

Elmon stepped closer to the monument, eyes fixed on the red crescent.

*“It flared when the sphere was placed,”* he said quietly. *“Dimmed when the rod sang. But that black edge...”* He shook his head. *“That’s not absence.”*

He exhaled slowly. *“It’s waiting.”*

Galewel folded his hands behind his back. *“Black is not always emptiness,”* he said. *“It can mean fullness. Defilement. Completion. Or death.”*

He studied the crescent as if it might blink. *“In the Catar tongue, color was more than hue. It was emotion given form. A state of the heart.”* He glanced toward Elmon.

*“Perhaps it waits for resonance. A grief. A vow. A truth declared.”* Peter, clutching his scripting kit, swallowed. *“Then it isn’t a warning. It’s a mirror.”*

Elmon shook his head slightly. “No... *not a mirror.*” He stepped closer, studying the way the aura held its edge. “*It feels measured.*”

He looked at the monument, then the throne, then the ledger. “A *vault gauge.*” Benga frowned. “A *gauge of what?*”

Elmon’s eyes never left the crescent. “*Of what has been offered. Of what remains.*”

A silence fell between them. Benga cleared his throat. “*Or maybe,*” he said, nodding toward the silver ledger in Elmon’s hand, “*it’s tied to that.*”

The crescent did not brighten.

It did not fade.

It simply waited.

Outside the chamber, away from the monument and its measured glow, Emuroil knelt beside one of the circular plots. He brushed dust from its surface slowly, thoughtfully, as if apologizing to it.

The bell rang from the eastern tower.

Karid’s voice followed from above. “*Southern gate!*”

They moved quickly.

Standing before the gate was an old Catar.

Not moving.

Not breathing.

He stood like a statue carved from memory itself—formal posture, eyes glazed, hands folded with ceremonial precision.

They approached slowly, circling in cautious awe.

It was not decay.

Not illusion.

Not flesh.

As Elmon stepped closer, the Catar’s head turned.

Its eyes focused.

“*My memory speaks.*”

The voice was neither loud nor whispered. It carried without echo.

Then the figure thinned.

Mist first.

Then dust.

And was gone.

Emuroil returned slowly to the circular plot at the courtyard’s center.

Elmon remained where the Catar had stood.

Something hollowed inside him — not fear, not grief — but absence. As though a word had been spoken in a language he once knew and had since forgotten.

He turned and walked back toward the throne chamber, replaying the moment.

“My memory speaks.”

Speaks of what?

Of whom?

Of where?

Emuroil’s voice broke the quiet, low and deliberate.

“We have been listening wrong.”

The others turned.

“We treat echoes as sound. As vibration. As something to be heard.”

His fingers traced a faint spiral etched into the stone floor.

“But what if they were never meant for the ear?”

He looked up.

*“What if the weave is not auditory... but emotional?”* Silence stretched. *“A resonance of grief. Of longing. Of choice.”* He swallowed. *“Of regret. Of waiting.”*

He pressed his palm flat against the stone. *“Of borrowing.”* The word hung strangely in the air.

*“What if the Catar did not bind memory to stone alone... but to feeling? To vow. To what was unresolved.”*

He closed his eyes. *“We may be trying to solve a heart with logic.”*

He brushes dust from the terrace stone, revealing a faint spiral etched beneath. Vess and Benga lean in behind him. *“The Catar did not inscribe with ink alone,”* Vess says quietly.

*“They used emotional anchors,”* Benga adds. *“Places where memory was not stored—but bound.”*

Emuroil studies the spiral. *“We may be missing the emotional axis. The vow points. The silence points.”* He gestures toward the scattered discs. *“This isn’t a directional mark. It’s recursion. Grief returning. Choice repeating. Waiting preserved.”*

His fingers hover above the carving. *“It isn’t meant to be read.”* He looks up. *“It’s meant to be felt.”* A long pause settles over them. *“That,”* Emuroil says softly, *“is why they were so secretive.”*

He had Vess help him to his feet. *“We need to speak with the others.”* They entered the throne room. Emuroil stopped short.

The crystal moon above the monument glowed black. Not dimmed. Not shadowed.

Black. His breath caught. *“What did you do?”*

Elmon sat on the throne, steady, almost too steady.

*“I placed the spheres and the singing rod in the anchor chamber of the monument.”* Emuroil’s jaw tightened. *“That is vault death. Or a sigil-bound gate left unresolved.”*

Jurioam frowned. *“I’ve never heard of such a construct. And I carry every doctrinal archive of the School in my mind.”*

Emuroil turned sharply, voice edged with iron. *“And you wouldn’t. Not unless you violated the bound Chancellor’s Sanctum—where unaddressed, unverified anomalies are stored until they are studied, proven, or sealed.”*

Silence.

Elmon’s eyes narrowed. *“I did violate your sanctum,”* he said evenly. *“I searched it for your black moment. Your private tyranny. I found nothing.”*

Emuroil’s breath hitched. *“You think I would leave it unveiled?”* he whispered.

His legs gave way. He fell to one knee. His hands trembled. *“I thought I could bury it,”* he said, voice breaking. *“Not just the act... but the intention.”*

The black crescent above pulsed once. *“I sealed it in the Chancellor’s Sanctum. Wrapped it in logic. In doctrine. In silence.”* His shoulders shook now. *“So no one would see what I almost became.”*

Elmon rose slowly from the throne, the silver ledger still pulsing in his hand. *“But memory doesn’t forget,”* he said quietly. *“It waits. And when the weave is stirred... it sings.”*

Emuroil’s composure broke. *“So that someone... would not find... me... out.”* The words tore through him. Not loud. Not dramatic. Just exposed.

The black crescent above flickered once. Bitter memory surfaced—hatred of his own intention—etched deep into his weave. Galewel stepped closer, concern overtaking reverence.

*“What did you do, old man?”* Jurioam’s voice barely formed a whisper. *“What did you bind?”* Emuroil lifted his head. His eyes were hollow—not empty, but exhausted.

*“A future,”* he said. Silence swallowed the chamber. *“One I thought I could shape... to silence a voice I could not bear to hear.”*

Galewel’s voice dropped. *“Whose voice?”* Emuroil did not look at him. *“Unknown,”* he said. *“But convicting. Cold. Unyielding.”* The red crescent dimmed further, the black aura deepening—not in anger, but in recognition.

Elmon stepped forward before anyone could press further. *“He did not bind a person,”* he said, voice steady. *“He stepped into ancient tethers—older than doctrine, older than caution. He thought he could anchor a possibility. Redirect it. Shape what had not yet happened.”*

He paused.

*“He mistook foresight for authority.”* Emuroil flinched—but Elmon did not look at him. *“He bound and programmed sequences into the weave. Conditional acts. Contingencies. A future not necessarily his to command.”*

Silence thickened. Galewel’s jaw tightened. Jurioam did not breathe. Elmon shifted deliberately—turning the room away from the man and toward the sanctum.

He stepped beneath the crystal moon. Its black aura pulsed faintly—like a breath withheld for centuries. *“The sanctum answered the sphere. It answered the rod. But not completely.”*

He looked up. *“The moon isn’t black because something is missing.”* His voice lowered. *“It’s black because something was buried.”*

Galewel scanned the chamber slowly, eyes narrowing. *"Then the better question,"* he murmured, *"is not what was opened."*

He met Elmon's gaze. *"It is what haven't we restored?"*

Elmon did not look at Emuroil again. Instead, he turned slowly beneath the darkened crescent. *"We're assuming the sanctum is finished speaking,"* he said. *"It isn't."*

He began counting on his fingers. *"The placard — 'Fortunes laid before You.' That is not decorative. It belongs somewhere."*

He gestured toward the storeroom. *"The pottery shards. Every fracture squared. No natural breaks. Someone cut those vessels apart intentionally."*

His eyes narrowed. *"The three-sided prism. The golden sphere. The ledgers we have not yet opened."* He looked to Jurioam.

*"We have been reacting to what rises. We have not yet asked what was laid down."*

Jurioam did not argue. He moved at once, retrieving the ledgers and the prism, arms full of bound history and light. Benga returned moments later with the instrument fragments, metal pieces clinking softly in his grip.

Peter hovered near the throne, parchment ready, breath shallow. The black crescent pulsed once. Waiting.

Jurioam placed the ledgers into Elmon's hands. *"I'm going to guess what they are before I open them,"* Elmon muttered, almost to himself.

He tapped the first cover. *"The Star Ledger. Processes. Names. Events."*

The second. *"The Flower Ledger. People. Houses. Alliances."*

The third—circle with the moon glyph. *"Prophecy."*

He opened the Star-covered ledger.

The first line read: *'A summation of the violations and the approaching, on the eve of war.'*

Elmon paused. *"I was wrong."* This was not process. Not record. Not mechanics. It was accusation.

He closed it slowly and opened the flower-covered ledger. No introduction. Only stories. Families butchered in the southern province. Names crossed out. Entire lineages erased.

He swallowed. *"Wrong again."* He opened the moon-glyph ledger. His breath stopped.

On the first page—hastily drawn, imperfect, unfinished—

A face. His face. The second page bore a single line:

*'He will come and revive the secrets. But he will fail to know why.'*

The room seemed to tilt. Peter leaned closer. *"Is it wrong?"*

Elmon did not answer. Because this was worse than wrong. It was *foreknown*.

Elmon stared at the page.

The figure was hastily drawn, almost careless—but unmistakable. Brow furrowed. Hand outstretched toward a vault. Toward something sealed.

Peter leaned closer, squinting. *"That's you. Isn't it? It looks like you."* He tilted his head. *"Your ear is a little bigger, though."*

A faint breath escaped someone in the room—almost a laugh. Elmon did not smile. He nodded slowly.

*“Or someone like me,”* he said. *“Someone who stirs the weave... but does not know its song.”*

Silence settled again.

Galewel spoke softly, almost to himself. *“Then the prophecy isn’t about success.”* He looked at Elmon. *“It’s about failure to feel.”*

Peter, clutching his scripting kit, murmured, *“Then this isn’t just a sanctum. It’s a memory chamber.”*

Galewel gave a quiet snort. *“Memory does not live in chambers, boy. It lives in consequences.”*

Emuroil’s voice was low, reflective. *“We’ve offered the heart... but not yet the memory.”*

Peter continued sketching, then suddenly looked up. *“The sword. The bent one. It wasn’t placed anywhere. And the coins—seventeen of them. The puzzle isn’t complete. And the tool pieces. And... Yon.”*

He pointed toward the table. *“The peculiar golden sphere.”*

Emuroil blinked. *“Yon? Really?”* His brow rose. *“You think that sphere is so important you would wager your position on it?”*

Peter stiffened.

*“As much as you think you have a position to wager with,”* Emuroil added dryly. *“You are paid. Technically, you have no standing.”*

A beat.

*“But,”* Emuroil conceded, folding his arms, *“I understand your perception.”*

Peter didn’t shrink. He simply replied, *“It keeps showing up.”*

Elmon’s eyes widened.

*“Bent on the blade axis. Not the flat.”* He turned the sword slowly in his hand. *“That’s not damage. That’s intention. It was forged to break alignment. This isn’t a ruined blade... it’s a turned one.”*

He looked up. *“It’s not broken. It’s keyed.”* Emuroil’s voice came hoarse, almost strained. *“It’s the key.”*

Silence fell heavier.

*“The vaults that materialized,”* Emuroil continued, *“they’re sealed by a blade-bend sigil. A fracture of intention. A will turned against itself.”* His jaw tightened. *“It must be returned.”*

Vess stepped forward, eyes darting between them. *“Returned where?”*

No one answered immediately. Because the room itself seemed to be listening.

Elmon turned slowly, his gaze settling on the monument crowned by the eagle-winged Celestial. *“There,”* he said quietly.

The others followed his eyes. Beneath the bowed figure—just below the sword carved in stone—was the dark abrasion. Not a crack. Not decay. A wound.

*“I thought it was symbolic,”* Elmon continued. *“But it’s not weathering. It’s shaped. Measured.”* He stepped closer. *“It’s a receiving chamber.”*

Silence gathered.

Benga disappeared into the storeroom and returned moments later, carrying the bent sword. Its edge caught the chamber light with a faint, star-like glimmer.

As he approached the monument, the crystal moon above pulsed—red for a heartbeat—then fell back into its blackened hush. Not rejection. Not approval.

Awareness.

The air tightened. Emuroil swallowed. *“It recognizes the fracture.”*

Elmon knelt before the monument, the bent blade resting across his palms. He studied the abrasion beneath the Celestial’s carved form. It was not round. Not straight.

It was angled. Turned. Like the blade.

*“This wasn’t broken,”* Elmon whispered. *“It was turned on purpose.”*

The crystal moon flickered again—red along one crescent edge—then dimmed to black.

Waiting.

Elmon knelt before the monument, the bent sword cradled in both hands.

A thin line of starlight shimmered along the blade’s warped edge, pulsing faintly—answering the moon’s distant throb.

He leaned forward and traced the black abrasion beneath the eagle-winged Celestial. The stone was smooth. Not weathered, not chipped. Worn.

As if something had once rested there too long.

His fingers followed the curve. It was not a crack. Not damage. A fracture shaped with intention. A wound carved deliberately into memory.

The Celestial above stood with head bowed, sword before her, wings half-furled—not in defeat, but in vigil. Elmon swallowed.

*“This was never broken,”* he murmured. *“It was opened.”*

The moon overhead pulsed once—red at its edge—then sank again into its waiting black.

He pressed the sword’s tip into the abrasion. It resisted. Then yielded.

Not with a click—but with a sigh, as if the sanctum itself had been holding breath for centuries.

The crystal moon pulsed—black... red... then silver. A low hum gathered in the chamber. Not from the rod. Not from the sphere. From the walls. From the floor. From the chairs carved along the perimeter.

The whole citadel was answering. Galewel turned slowly. *“What now?”*

Elmon did not immediately look at him. He was listening—not to sound, but to pattern.

*“We need a tinkerer,”* he said at last. *“Someone to assemble those pieces in the storeroom. The fragments that looked like an instrument.”*

He shifted slightly in the throne, gaze distant.

“Take a guess,” he said to Jurioam and Benga. “How many vault-like rooms appeared?”  
“Seventeen,” Benga replied automatically. “Seventeen,” Elmon said at the same moment.  
Benga blinked. “How did you—”

“The coins,” Elmon answered, leaning forward. “Each one bears a different face. Not decorative. Intentional.” He lifted one from the pouch at his belt and rolled it across his knuckles.

“Seventeen coins. Seventeen vaults.” He looked toward the monument.

“They aren’t currency. They’re indexes.”

Jurioam frowned. “Indexes to what?” Pausing thinking. “Not to locks,” Elmon said quietly. “To meaning.”

He glanced again at the sword still seated in the stone wound.

“If this sanctum remembers through structure... then each vault requires more than insertion. It requires alignment.”

Benga scratched his beard. “So the coins don’t unlock the doors?” Elmon’s eyes narrowed slightly. “They will. But not because they fit.”

He held up the coin. “Because they correspond.”

While they stood debating unused objects and possible paths forward, the bent sword caught the crystal light. Its hilt cast a long shadow across the floor.

As the shadow passed over a faint glyph carved in the stone, the symbol glimmered softly.

Then faded as the shadow moved beyond it. Peter froze. “Elmon... why is that symbol glowing?”

Elmon dropped to one knee and brushed dust from the floor. There were more—eight others—set in irregular spacing around the monument.

They watched in silence as the sword’s shadow crept slowly across the chamber. When it touched another glyph, that one glowed as well—brighter this time—holding its light only while shadow covered it.

Peter swallowed. “A sundial? Inside? What kind of time could it be marking?”

Elmon rubbed his chin. Then tapped his nose—a habit when something aligned. “Not time as we measure it,” he murmured. “Function time. Sequence time. Trigger intervals.”

The shadow moved again. Another glyph shimmered. Peter, distracted and thinking faster than he could filter, picked up the golden sphere from the table.

He held it beside the crystal sphere.

“They’re the same size.” No one answered him. “Well,” Peter continued, half to himself, “we have a pillar with fingers waiting to hold something.”

Peter ran outside to the monument where the crystal sphere had rested. Elmon Followed.

It reacted immediately—glyphs in the floor flickering faintly.

He hesitated and looked to Elmon. Elmon shook his head once. Not in refusal. In warning.

Peter set the golden sphere on the empty fingertips. The sphere began to rotate.

Slowly at first.

Then steadily.

Across its surface, micro-glyphs scrolled—tiny symbols racing like script across polished metal. Not random. Not decorative. Sequential.

Nothing changed outside. They returned to the Kings chamber.

The sundial glyph inside glowed brighter. Then the next. Peter dropped to his knees, scripting furiously. *“It’s logging something,”* he whispered. *“Or reading us.”*

The sphere stopped. Everything went still. The last glyph beneath the shadow held its glow for one breath longer than the rest.

Then darkness.

Peter’s hand trembled as he finished scripting the glyphs.

*“They’re not just symbols,”* he whispered. *“They’re... names. Events? Feelings?”*

Elmon leaned closer, eyes narrowing.

*“Possibly. A log. A ledger not bound in paper.”* He glanced toward the monument. *“A memory sphere. Not passive. Reactive.”*

*“Reactive to what?”* Peter asked.

Elmon did not answer immediately. He watched the fading glow of the last glyph. *“We do not assume. We observe. We measure recurrence.”*

Peter collapsed backward onto the stone floor with a groan. *“This must be what school is like.”* Elmon almost smiled. *“Why is that, Peter?”*

*“Well,”* Peter said, staring at the ceiling, *“great and marvelous things happen... and then you wait around to see if they happen again. Or you repeat them until you can prove they weren’t just luck.”*

*“In many ways, yes,”* Elmon replied. *“But often, weeks pass with nothing marvelous at all. Only book work. Memorization. Scripting. Refinement. Creating tests to prove what you think you saw.”*

Peter turned his head. *“That sounds exhausting.”*

*“It is,”* Elmon said quietly. *“But it is how truth survives wonder.”* As if offended by the word *waiting*, the golden sphere rotated again. Micro-glyphs ignited across its surface — faster this time. Elmon’s head snapped toward the monument.

*“The shadow.”*

He was already moving. He sprinted toward the throne room, boots striking stone in sharp rhythm. The sword’s hilt shadow was sliding across the floor — nearly leaving the edge of a glowing glyph.

The symbol pulsed — brighter than before. Elmon dropped to one knee. *“Not a sundial,”* he muttered. The shadow passed. The glyph dimmed. The sphere stopped.

Silence.

Elmon exhaled slowly. *“Not time,”* he said. *“Sequence.”* Peter entered behind him, breathless. *“Sequence of what?”* Elmon’s eyes did not leave the floor.

*“A timber,”* he said softly. *“For logs. For memory.”*

He stood. *“This is not random activation. It is recording alignment.”*

Peter blinked. *“Alignment of what?”* Elmon finally looked at him. *“Of us.”*

Galewel stepped forward, studying the glowing floor. *“And the sundial glyphs?”* he murmured. *“They are not merely markers. They are triggers.”*

Emuroil folded his arms, voice low and steady. *“Then we wait. Not for the right tool... but for the right hour.”*

Elmon glanced between them. *“For what?”*

Galewel did not answer immediately. He stepped into the chamber’s center, watching the sword’s shadow stretch long across the floor. As it crossed another glyph, the symbol flared and dimmed.

He spoke without turning. *“For the moment the sanctum chooses to remember.”*

Peter pushed himself upright, eyes wide. *“You mean... it’s not just us triggering it?”*

Elmon exhaled slowly. *“No. ... We are not activating something simple.”*

He looked at the monument, the sphere, the black crescent.

*“It appears we are reassembling a master phenomenon.”*

His voice steadied. *“Ancient knowledge. Engineered memory. Spiritual covenant. Structured truth.”*

He turned back to them. *“And it is deciding when to speak.”*

Silence settled. This was no longer excavation. It was invitation.

Emuroil nodded slowly. *“We’re not the authors. We’re the witnesses.”*

The words hung there. Elmon returned to the sphere. It had gone still again — as if it had never moved at all. He crouched beside it, fingers hovering just above its surface.

Not touching. Not commanding. Just... waiting.

*“The memories aren’t ours to command,”* he said quietly. *“They’re ours to receive. To understand.”*

His jaw tightened. *“But why?”*

He stood, pacing once — twice. *“Why the formality? The structuring. The vaults. The keys. The time markers. The emotional anchors. Why veil a city in architecture and ritual instead of simply hiding it?”*

He looked toward the black crescent above. *“The book haunts me.”*

He did not need to open it. The words were carved into him.

***He will come and revive the secrets. But he will fail to know why.***

Elmon’s voice dropped. *“What does it mean to revive something... and not understand its purpose?”*

He looked at Peter. At Emuroil. At Galewel. *“What if the failure is not ignorance?”*

His eyes flicked back to the sphere. *“What if it is assumption?”*

Silence. The sanctum did not respond. But something in Elmon had shifted.

Jurioam's voice was quiet. *"So we wait. Not for the right tool. Not for the right person. But for the right memory?"*

Galewel stepped closer to the glimmering glyph. *"That one,"* he said, pointing. *"It's shaped like a flame. What if it marks grief? Or rage?"*

Peter, scripting furiously, murmured, *"Then the sanctum isn't just a chamber. It's a journal. And we're reading it one shadow at a time."*

Emuroil shook his head. A small giggle escaped him. Peter looked up. *"What? What is so funny?"* Emuroil tried to stop it — but it grew into a full laugh. Not mocking. Not dismissive. Just... weary and honest.

*"For years,"* he said between breaths, *"I assigned titles to everything. Filed it. Indexed it. Named it."* He gestured around the chamber. *"Shadow Phenomenon. Glyphic Time Anchor. Emotional Resonance Node."*

He wiped his eyes. *"Perhaps... it's just a shadow passing over a stone."*

Peter blinked. *"But it made the glyph glow."* "Yes," Emuroil replied. *"And sometimes a door is just a door."* He paused.

*"And sometimes it is not."* The laughter faded. The sanctum hummed softly around them.

Elmon glanced at him. Emuroil's eyes were clear now.

*"Not everything is myth,"* he said gently. *"And not everything mundane is meaningless."*

Elmon smiled faintly at Emuroil's laughter. *"Then maybe that's the lesson. Not everything needs to be mythologized. But everything can be remembered."*

Peter, still scripting, paused. *"So what do we call it?"* Galewel chuckled. *"Nothing. Let it be what it is. A flame. A shadow. A moment."* Jurioam, voice low: *"Then the sanctum isn't asking for names. It's asking for presence."* The sphere pulsed once—soft, silver, then still.

Elmon looked up at the crystal moon, its pulse now faint but steady. *"We're not here to define,"* he said quietly. *"We're here to witness. To feel. To remember."*

His gaze moved across the restored stone, the vaults, the glyphs half-lit in shadow. *"The Catar did not bury this city to be resurrected. They veiled it with purpose. Whatever that purpose is... it has not finished speaking."*

Emuroil nodded, eyes softer than they had been in years. *"And perhaps,"* he added gently, *"to laugh when the weight grows too heavy."*

Peter grinned, clutching his scripts to his chest. *"Then I'll keep writing,"* he said. *"But I won't name the flame."*

The crystal moon dimmed to silver. And the sanctum waited.

## Chapter ○: The Sanctum Remembers More Than Stone

Elmon opened the silver ledger carefully, as if it might bruise beneath careless hands. The metal did not creak. It unfolded.

He did not begin reading. He listened.

The pages were thin but dense, layered with faint sigil tracings only visible when the light shifted just so. He let his fingers hover above them, searching for echo, for weave tension, for the hum of bound memory.

The Star Ledger was first. Its opening line was not decorative.

*'A summation of the violations and encroachments on the eve of war.'*

The entries were precise.

Calculated.

Catalogued.

Appolice entered the chamber quietly. He paused at the threshold, counted the bodies, acknowledged the names etched along the inner walls.

Elmon looked up. "What?"

"We haven't seen you in hours," Appolice said. "Just making sure no one's gone missing."

A pause.

"Have you seen Mercikom?" Appolice asked. "We haven't seen him since yesterday."

Galewel glanced up from the far table. "No. Did he mention anything the last time you saw him?"

Appolice did not answer.

He turned and exited the chamber.

Elmon nodded once and returned to the ledger.

Wizards bargaining with daemons. Villages emptied in exchange for leverage. Children marked as conduits. Whole provinces destabilized to draw out rivals.

Not chaos. Strategy.

The heartbreak was not loud. It was methodical. Elmon's jaw tightened. "*This wasn't war,*" he murmured. "*It was ambition.*"

He closed it slowly. Then opened the Flower Ledger.

No introduction. Only stories.

Names. Births. Courtships. Harvests. Songs sung in courtyards. The pride of a daughter entering her first rite. The laughter of markets. The rebuilding of a southern wall after a spring quake.

And then— Elmon noted the text. *'They had found our gates and besieged the city. The Veil has been called. We wait.'*

No panic. No plea. Just resolve. Peter swallowed. "*They knew?*"

Galewel's voice was quiet. "*They didn't run?*" Emuroil stared at the final line for a long moment. "*They chose to sleep.*"

Elmon traced the ink with his finger, but there was no ink. The words shimmered faintly beneath his touch, as if the memory itself resisted fading. *“They didn’t bury the city to survive,”* he said softly.

*“They buried it to remember.”*

The sanctum was not silent. It was listening.

Elmon closed the Flower Ledger and rested it across his knees. *“The Veil call...”* he murmured. *“That wasn’t a retreat. It was an ignition.”*

Peter looked up from his notes. Elmon’s voice grew distant, analytical—dangerously so.

*“The moment they called it, the spell did not simply hide stone. It armed itself. It froze the citadel in a preserved state—memory intact, structure intact. Not crumbled. Not scattered.”*

He stood slowly, pacing.

*“The siege happened. The armies arrived. But what they saw...”* He stopped. *“Was not the city.”* Galewel tilted his head. *“An illusion?”*

“No,” Elmon replied, sharper now. *“Not illusion. Replacement.”*

He pressed his fingers against his temple.

*“The Veil may have projected a destruction image. A false aftermath. Rubble. Collapse. Ruin. Not to deceive the Catar—but to satisfy the expectations of their enemies.”*

Peter’s eyes widened. *“So history recorded what the Veil wanted remembered?”*

Emuroil’s voice was low. *“Or what Ishan allowed to be remembered.”*

Elmon exhaled slowly.

*“Imagine it. A besieging army watches a city fall. Stone collapses. Towers fracture. Smoke rises. They leave believing they won. Chroniclers write what they witnessed.”*

He looked toward the black crescent. *“But the citadel never broke.”* His thoughts accelerated, threading theory into theory.

*“What if the Veil is not concealment... but substitution? What if it authors perception? What if it binds not just matter—but narrative?”*

The room felt smaller.

Elmon swallowed. “These are concepts I would have called heresy a few years ago.”

A ripple in the air. Mercikom faded into view.

He raised his head and regarded the scholars.

They startled.

Elmon blinked. *“How long have you been here?”*

*“Since yesterday,”* Mercikom replied evenly.

Emuroil snorted softly. *“Laughing at us, probably.”*

“No,” Mercikom said. *“I recognized the dig is layered. One memory at a time.”*

He stepped forward, voice calm.

*“We of the Shadowed Veil understand veils as you name them. We use them to conceal — and to wait until opportunity places itself.”*

He looked directly at Elmon.

*“Deception in view is mastery of the moment. Hiding truth for a later cause.”*

Peter raised a brow.

Elmon’s gaze drifted upward toward the celestial carving above them, its head bowed.

*“Perhaps she is waiting for that cause.”*

Silence.

Elmon looked down at the ledger again. “The Veil did not freeze time,” he said quietly. “Perhaps it redirected it.”

Silence followed.

Not confusion.

Recognition.

*“The flute,”* Elmon whispered, staring at nothing. *“The singing rod. It came from Ishan.”*

He laughed once—dry, brittle. *“Many of these objects defy comprehension. They blur the boundary between craft and calling.”*

He paced once. Twice. *“Times, events, and objects tied to mundane acts trigger mythic consequences. And mythic interventions reshape mundane outcomes. It’s circular. A loop. Cause and invocation. Tool and miracle.”*

He pressed his hands to his temples. *“We have not checked the spectrums.”*

Peter blinked. *“Spectrums?”* *“Not sound. Not light. Not memory. Spectrum of agency. Of authorship. Of who moved first.”*

His breathing shortened. The rod. The sphere. The Veil. The ledgers. The prophecy.

Elmon staggered backward and dropped to the ground, staring up at the open sky beyond the ruined archway.

*“Perhaps,”* he said softly, *“what we are labeling... trying to define... is not Catar architecture at all.”*

Silence answered him.

*“Perhaps it is divine intervention—at Catar request.”*

He closed his eyes. *“The Veil has been called. We wait.”*

His voice thinned. *“Where did they go?”*

No one answered. *“They would not have remained here. Not to be butchered. Not to be tortured.”*

His eyes opened again—sharp now. *“What did they wait for?”*

His thoughts raced through possibilities.

*“A savior?”*

*“A signal?”*

*“A reckoning?”*

*“A cause placed?”*

The wind moved faintly through the chamber. And for the first time since the citadel rose, Elmon did not feel like its awakener. He felt like someone late.

Elmon opened the moon-glyph ledger again. Slowly. Carefully.

The drawing stared back at him — brow set, hand extended toward a vault he had not yet opened. It was not heroic. It was unfinished.

Mercikom spoke again, his words nearly forming into echo.

*“I have sensed the cause has been placed.”*

He pointed — not accusing, not praising.

*“You.”*

Elmon did not look up.

*“You need to know why?”* Mercikom continued quietly. *“Causes are not born of reason. They are born of necessity.”*

He stepped closer to the ledger. *“They do not choose their hour. They are made for it.”*

Silence pressed against the chamber walls. Mercikom faded as mist.

Elmon scanned the page of the ledger again. The words beneath it felt heavier now:

*‘He will come and revive the secrets. But he will fail to know why.’*

Elmon’s throat tightened. Was everything he had learned... all the theories, the structures, the weave models...

Was it all scaffolding around something he never understood? Was he merely a hinge? A trigger? A necessary ignorance?

He closed the ledger slowly. But the image did not fade. It burned behind his eyes.

Peter shifted closer, voice barely above breath. *“Is it wrong?”*

Elmon did not answer immediately. His jaw flexed. *“No,”* he said at last.

And then, softer— *“It’s incomplete.”*

He looked up. *“What frightens me is not that it says I will fail.”*

His gaze moved toward the crystal moon. “ ”

Silence settled around them. Jurioam swallowed. Galewel’s voice came low. *“Then perhaps the failure is not ignorance.”*

Elmon’s eyes flicked back to the ledger. *“Perhaps the failure... is certainty.”*

Elmon shook his head. *“No. It’s worse.”*

His voice did not tremble. “ ”

Galewel stepped closer, studying the moon-glyph page. *“Then the prophecy isn’t about failure,”* he said slowly. *“It’s about emptiness. About restoring without remembering.”*

Elmon’s jaw tightened. *“Perhaps,”* he answered. *“But emptiness is not absence. It is displacement. Pride enters the heart... and ignorance takes its place.”*

Peter sat back, his scripting kit slipping from his fingers onto the stone.

*“Then what do we do?”*

No one answered immediately. The sanctum hummed faintly around them — not loudly, not mystically — just present.

Elmon finally looked up. *“We stop trying to complete it.”*

Galewel blinked. *“Complete what?”*

*“The story. The mechanism. The prophecy. The city.”* Elmon closed the ledger carefully. *“We’ve been solving it like a puzzle.”*

Peter frowned. *“It is a puzzle.”*

“Yes,” Elmon said. *“But not for mastery. For alignment.”*

Jurioam tilted his head. *“Alignment with what?”* Elmon looked toward the crystal moon, still dim, still waiting. *“With the cause it chose to sleep.”*

Silence settled again. Emuroil exhaled slowly. *“Then the question is not what to open next.”*

Elmon nodded. *“It is what must be remembered before it opens.”*

Elmon didn’t answer immediately. He stared at the moon-glyph ledger, fingers tracing the worn edge of the page as if it might answer him back.

*“We stop assuming the sanctum is ours to unlock,”* he said at last. *“We begin treating it as something that must be... felt. Sensed. Learned the way a child learns the world—without conquest.”*

Galewel nodded slowly. *“Then the vaults aren’t waiting for keys,”* he murmured. *“They’re waiting for remembrance.”*

Elmon considered that. *“Possibly. They may still require keys. But not in the way we expect them to be used.”*

Emuroil’s voice came low, almost fragile. *“And for someone willing to be wrong. Not just in theory. But in heart.”*

Elmon turned toward him—not sharply, but deliberately. *“To see everything your way,”* he replied quietly, *“is ignorance of facts, of information, of realities you do not yet know. But to see only your own way... is blindness.”*

Elmon pondered his own words.

Silence gathered around them. The sanctum did not hum. It did not glow. It simply waited.

Peter swallowed. *“So we learn to be wrong?”* Elmon’s gaze softened. *“No. We learn to listen before we are certain.”*

Elmon stood slowly, the ledger still in his hand. *“Then let’s begin again,”* he said quietly. *“Not with pride. Not with certainty. But with silence. With a child’s wonder. With tests as if we had never learned.”*

He returned to the throne and sat—not as a ruler, but as a student. He slid the ledger from its seamless silver sleeve and drew a long, steady breath.

*“How does one,”* he asked, almost to himself, *“who has learned... walk as if unlearned?”*

The question lingered in the chamber.

Peter shifted awkwardly. A few of the diggers exchanged uncertain glances. Most of them had never seen the inside of a formal school. Peter could read and write—barely beyond that.

Jurioam frowned. *“You are suggesting ignorance as a method?”*

Elmon shook his head. *“No. I am suggesting innocence.”*

He looked toward the laborers—their hands scarred, their eyes observant in ways books never taught. *“We each take one of these men,”* Elmon continued, *“and let them investigate. Let them ask the questions we would never ask. Let them see what we overlook because we assume we understand it.”*

Galewel smiled faintly. *“You want the sanctum interpreted by those who have no doctrine.”*

Elmon nodded. *“Doctrine filters. Wonder reveals.”*

Peter swallowed. *“What if they break something?”*

Elmon’s gaze moved slowly across the vaulted chamber. *“Then we will finally know what can break.”*

Peter blinked, unsure. *“Me?”*

Elmon nodded. *“You’ve sketched what you saw. Not what you were taught to see. That’s what the sanctum needs.”*

Peter swallowed, suddenly aware that everyone was looking at him. Galewel stepped toward a digger named Rann—hands calloused, nails split with stone dust, eyes alert but uncertain.

*“You’ve never read a glyph,”* Galewel said. *“Good. Then you won’t assume what it means.”*

Rann shifted uncomfortably. *“I don’t know what I’m looking for.”*

*“That,”* Elmon replied gently, *“is the advantage.”*

Jurioam hesitated, the scholar in him bristling. *“You’re asking us to surrender our frameworks.”*

Elmon remained seated, fingers tracing the edge of the moon-glyph ledger.

*“No,”* he said quietly. *“I’m asking you to lend them. Let someone else walk the weave without our weight.”*

Emuroil folded his arms, eyes distant. *“Then the sanctum will not open to knowledge,”* he murmured. *“It will open to wonder.”*

Silence settled again — but it was a different kind this time. Not confusion. Permission.

Benga handed a coin to one of the diggers. *“Start with this. Don’t match it. Just... feel it. Ask it what it wants.”*

Rann took the coin gingerly, as if it might whisper or bite. He turned it in his palm, thumb brushing over the worn face. No clear sigil remained—only a faint impression, like something remembered too often and rubbed thin.

He squinted at it. *“I don’t know what it is,”* he admitted quietly. *“But it feels... heavy.”*

He shifted it from one hand to the other. *“Not in weight. In waiting.”*

Galewel exchanged a glance with Elmon.

*“Perhaps,”* he said. *“Then we should find what it waits for. Not a match. Not a symbol.”*

He stepped closer to the nearest vault door.

*“An opening. A revealing. An acknowledgment.”*

He looked back at Rann. *“Not with words. With wondering.”*

Rann stepped toward one of the vault doors. Its surface bore a spiral etched into the stone, a single dot resting at its center.

He didn't press the coin to it. He didn't search for a slot. He simply held the coin near the spiral and waited—eyes wide, breath slow, as though the stone might startle.

For a long moment, nothing happened. Then the vault shimmered. Not bright. Not loud.

Just a faint distortion, like heat rising from summer rock. A glyph flared along the spiral's curve—brief, uncertain—then faded as if embarrassed to have shown itself.

Peter gasped. *“It responded.”* Elmon did not move. His voice was calm, steady.

*“Record everything. Not just what it does. What he does.”*

Peter fumbled for parchment. Rann swallowed, still staring at the door. *“I didn't do anything.”*

Elmon's eyes remained on the stone. *“That's the point.”*

Elmon's voice was steady, but there was a crease between his brows.

*“Not to knowledge,”* he said quietly. *“To presence? Did it open... or only acknowledge the coin?”*

Rann shook his head. *“It didn't open. But there's a sigil there now. That wasn't there before.”* They all leaned closer.

The spiral's center now held a faint mark—new, unfinished. Emuroil studied Rann instead of the door.

*“What does that mean to you?”* he asked. *“Not intellectually. How does it feel?”*

Rann hesitated. *“I feel...”* He swallowed. *“Cheated. Angry. Like it showed me something and then pulled it back.”*

Galewel nodded once. *“Good. And what do you do with that?”*

Rann glanced at the pouch of coins. *“I could try another one. See if one of them changes it more. Or... maybe the coins match symbols on the doors.”*

Peter leaned forward eagerly. *“Well?”*

Rann turned the coins over in his palm. One bore a worn spiral almost identical to the one on the vault. He held it up. *“This looks right.”*

He paused. *“But it doesn't feel right.”* Elmon didn't answer immediately.

*“What are you going to do?”* he asked instead. Rann exhaled slowly.

*“I'm going to check every vault. Find the coin that looks right for each door... and leave it there. Even if it feels wrong.”*

*“Why?”* Jurioam asked.

*“Because,” Rann said, scanning the chamber, “there’s an order here I don’t understand yet. And I don’t think it’s about the first answer.”*

So they went.

From vault to vault they moved, placing coins that matched in image but not in feeling. Each door shimmered faintly. Some revealed sigils. Some only warmed beneath the hand.

None opened. Peter recorded each attempt. Elmon watched Rann, not the doors. The sanctum was not testing the coins. It was testing the patience.

Peter watched Rann withdraw his hand from the fifth door. The faint glyph that had appeared there slowly faded back into the stone. *“It’s like they’re acknowledging the attempt,”* Peter whispered. *“But not accepting it.”*

Emuroil’s jaw tightened. *“Acknowledgment is not approval.”*

Galewel folded his arms. *“Or perhaps it is mercy. It could have rejected us entirely.”*

Rann stepped back from the row of vaults, a coin still clutched in his palm. *“They’re not wrong,”* he said quietly. *“But they’re not right either.”*

Elmon finally spoke. *“Then the sanctum is not asking for recognition of symbols. It is asking for alignment.”*

*“With what?”* Jurioam asked. Elmon looked at the spiral sigil glowing faintly on the nearest vault. *“With the reason or cause they were sealed.”*

Silence settled.

The coins lay against cold stone—correct in image, empty in intention.

And somewhere in the chamber, a low harmonic note trembled once... then stilled.

Jurioam folded his arms. *“Well, you think you’ve matched coins to doors. Now what?”*

Rann didn’t look embarrassed. He looked intrigued.

*“I go back,”* he said simply. *“And see if any feel right. If there’s an order, I don’t see it yet. But that doesn’t mean it isn’t there.”* He rolled one of the coins between his fingers.

*“This is fascinating,”* he added with a half-smile. *“Like playing Four Dragon Any. You reach into the bag, not knowing which rune bone you’ll draw. The trick isn’t guessing. It’s reading what you’re given.”*

Peter perked up. *“But in Four Dragon Any, you don’t force the pattern. You wait until the bones speak to each other.”*

Emuroil chuckled softly.

Elmon watched Rann closely. *“Then perhaps,”* Elmon said, *“this is not about finding the right door for the coin.”*

Jurioam tilted his head. *“But the right coin for the story?”*

Rann paused. *“...Or the right moment.”*

The nearest vault shimmered faintly—just once—then stilled.

They circled the chamber again, slower this time. Jurioam carried the dig map tucked beneath his arm, marking vault positions with quiet precision, though no pattern had yet revealed itself.

Rann stopped at one door. *"This one,"* he murmured. *"This feels... closer."*

He tossed the coin lightly at the surface.

Nothing.

He picked it up, pressed it to the spiral sigil, rubbed it across the etched lines as if trying to wake something sleeping beneath the stone. He searched for a slot, a recess, a seam—anything that resembled intention.

Nothing. *"Well?"* Emuroil asked. Rann scratched his chin. *"Nothing I can find."*

Emuroil stepped closer, studying the door. *"Then perhaps this is not the door."*

Rann blinked. Then slowly grinned.

*"Or perhaps,"* he said, glancing upward, *"it isn't on the wall at all."*

Peter's eyes widened. *"You mean—?"* Rann pointed toward the vaulted ceiling. *"If I built something to confuse scholars, I'd put the door somewhere they wouldn't think to look."*

He chuckled softly. *"Maybe it's on the roof."*

Peter slapped his thigh. *"Prove yourself wrong!"*

Jurioam looked up reluctantly. *"You cannot be serious."*

But Rann was already scanning the ceiling stones.

And there—faint, almost invisible in the angled light—was a circular indentation.

Not perfectly round.

Coin-thin.

Oddly shaped.

Waiting.

They hauled a ladder beneath the vaulted ceiling and steadied it against the stone. Rann climbed first, coin clenched between his fingers, breath slow and deliberate.

At the top, he knelt. There it was.

A shallow recess carved into the ceiling stone—thin as a coin, but far wider than any coin they possessed. The outline was not circular. It bent in subtle arcs and angles, as if shaped by something organic rather than geometric.

*"Elmon,"* Rann called down, squinting. *"What are you seeing?"*

Elmon narrowed his eyes from below. *"A form not meant to be recognized quickly. Thin like a coin... but large. It's not round. It's... relational."*

Benga folded his arms. *"Keep asking yourself what to try. Not what it is."* Rann nodded.

He pressed his palm flat against the indentation. Nothing. He leaned forward and rested his cheek against the stone. A faint tremor answered him. Subtle. Like a pulse.

He shifted slightly. The vibration lessened. Moved again—stronger. Weaker. Stronger.

He traced the outline with his fingertips, mapping the invisible current by feel rather than sight.

*"There's a high point,"* he muttered. *"Right... here."*

He placed the coin against the stone.

No slot. No click.

Instead, he began to roll it along the shallow channel of the recess, following the path where the vibration peaked—slowly, carefully, letting the stone guide him.

Below, the others watched. At first, nothing happened. Then—

A faint grinding sound.

Along the side of the vault wall, a thin seam appeared. Stone shifted outward as if being cut by an unseen blade. Chunks of masonry began separating in a shape that mirrored the ceiling's strange outline.

Peter gasped. *"It's carving itself!"*

The stone did not crumble. It parted.

Like memory making space.

Rann continued tracing the path until he returned to the place where he had first felt the strongest resonance.

The moment the coin reached that starting point— It vanished.

Not dropped. Not fallen. Gone.

Rann jerked his hand back. *"Did you see that?"* he shouted.

Below, a section of the vault wall slid inward with silent precision, revealing an opening where no door had existed moments before.

Jurioam whispered, stunned, *"The coin wasn't a key."*

Elmon nodded slowly. *"It was a signature."*

One by one, the vaults yielded—not to mastery, but to presence.

Inside, they found:

- ❖ Ledgers bound in unfamiliar leather, edges gilded but unmarked.
- ❖ Portraits of Catar elders and unnamed children.
- ❖ Jewels and amulets bearing lunar phases.
- ❖ Carved tablets inscribed with vows rather than decrees.
- ❖ Wrapped relics never cataloged in any known archive.

Elmon ordered the archivist to record everything—but touch nothing more than necessary.

*"Log. Do not relocate. We are not here to claim,"* he reminded them.

For two days, they watched as the unschooled diggers—Rann, Vess, and others—experimented without doctrine. They pressed, listened, leaned their heads against stone, rolled coins, reversed them, ignored obvious fits and followed discomfort instead.

By the end of the second day—All seventeen vaults stood open.

No explosions. No blinding light. No triumphant revelation. Just doors parted, as if finally persuaded.

### ***The Monument Responds***

That evening, as they returned to the throne room—A runic sigil upon the face of the central monument began to glimmer.

Not brightly. Not dramatically. Just... awake. Peter pointed first. *"It wasn't lit before."* Jurioam stepped closer. *"That glyph means continuance. Or... sequence completed."* Elmon studied it in silence. *"Maybe,"* he said slowly, *"we got something right."* But his voice carried no triumph. Only weight.

### ***The Question That Remains***

They stood beneath the crystal moon. The citadel reconstructed. The vaults opened. The monument stirred.

And yet—

No Catar. No procession. No return. No awakening crowds. Just wind in empty corridors. Elmon's jaw tightened.

*"Where are the people?"*

He turned slowly, scanning the vast chamber. *"Why such catastrophic measures? Why bury a city. Veil it. Architect puzzles into its bones. Bind memory into stone... just to raise it again?"*

Silence answered him. Even the rod did not sing. Elmon's gaze drifted upward to the faint black aura lingering around the crystal moon. *"Why bring the citadel back from the dead,"* he murmured, *"if no one was meant to come home?"*

The sigil on the monument pulsed once more.

Not as an answer. As a reminder. The city had not resurrected.

It had remembered. But remembrance, Elmon realized, was not the same as return. And that thought unsettled him more than any vault.

Elmon stood beneath the glimmering sigil, memory pressing against him like weight.

*"The cave,"* he said quietly, turning to Galewel. *"You once walked out of it. But the wall stood in the way when I searched. Let us go outside the walls—to where it should be. What was remembered there?"*

Galewel did not answer. He simply nodded. They climbed the outer slope.

One man mounted the wall and stood where the entrance had once aligned. From below, Elmon adjusted their bearing by sightline.

*"There,"* he said.

Half buried beneath sediment and slope, a polished stone slab lay flush with the earth. Not rubble. Not collapse. Intentional.

Elmon ran his hand across its surface. *"This is not debris,"* he murmured. *"This is a seal."*

It took two hours to remove it.

When the slab shifted free, air escaped—not stale, but still.

At the threshold lay four skeletons, arranged carefully. Not sprawled. Not fallen. Not Catar.

Laid. A single gravestone stood behind them.

No elaborate epitaph. Just a mark. Galewel swallowed. *"They did not flee."*

They lowered a ladder and descended.

The cave was wrong. Not destroyed. Reorganized. Large crates had decomposed, their contents collapsed inward:

- ❖ Swords wrapped in oilcloth
- ❖ Armor plates stacked and abandoned
- ❖ Sharpening stones
- ❖ Tools
- ❖ Travel packs never opened
- ❖ Prepared for war.
- ❖ Prepared for departure.
- ❖ Prepared for something.

But unused.

On a stone shelf lay a ledger. Elmon opened it. An inventory list. Precise. Ordered. Dated 1565. He scanned the page. His brow tightened. “*These items,*” he said slowly, “*are not here.*”

Jurioam stepped beside him. “*Missing?*” Elmon shook his head. “*No.*” He closed the ledger gently. “*They were never meant to be used.*”

He walked back around the bend, voice lower than before. “*Oh . . . They are still here.*”

Elmon and the others joined Galewel where he stood. Before them rose *two massive pillars*, supporting an archway of stone that had not cracked, not shifted, not yielded to time.

Three glyphs anointed the arch:

- ❖ A crushed crown, pierced clean through by a sword.
- ❖ An hourglass shattered, its sand absent.
- ❖ A star cradled by four fingers rising from a heart.

Between the pillars stood a door. Not wood. Not iron. Stone.

Bound in a pale, off-white silvery metal that caught no light—yet seemed to drink it. Elmon felt his breath shorten. The metal. The texture.

The silence around it. His mind returned unbidden to his first encounter with Quinline... during the Ulrick Test. That same presence. Not power. Density.

There were no handles on the door. No hinges. No seams. They walked the entire circumference of the construct.

It was immense—fifteen feet across, eleven feet high. The pillars alone were four feet thick, carved from a single continuity of stone.

The back side bore no scripts. No glyphs. No mechanism. Only silence.

At the apex of the arch on the front, nearly lost to erosion and shadow, a faint symbol marked the stone.

A sword pointed downward. Above it, a halo. Elmon narrowed his eyes. “*I have seen that somewhere before.*”

Emuroil did not hesitate. “*It was in the Healing Hand shrine back at the school.*” He swallowed slightly. “*That is the symbol of the great Whiteheart.*” He continued.

*“Lord, creator, maker of all things.”* Elmon glanced at Galewel. *“You know of this Whiteheart?”*

Galewel nodded. *“I have read extensively about him—his purposes, his designs, his concepts. Why build a construct like this in a sealed cave?”*

*“Maybe to hide it,”* Galewel added. *“The polished marble would look like a burial crypt. And if disturbed—as we did—the skeletons and grave markers would drive most away. A mass grave is a powerful deterrent.”*

Elmon studied the arch again. *“We have a crushed crown. A sword. No hourglass. And we know of the yard altar with the golden sphere.”*

He stepped closer to the pillars. *“The mundane to show the mythic... to name the mundane.”*

He touched the first glyph. *“This is mundane. Not celestial. Not abstract.”* He traced the crushed crown pierced by the sword. *“A once-great kingdom. Broken.”*

His finger moved to the shattered hourglass. *“Time ended. Or time removed.”*

Then to the star cradled by fingers above a heart. *“And Ishan of the Night Eyes.”*

Elmon stepped back and read the symbols aloud, not as theory—but as testimony. *“Your days ended as a kingdom... veiled by Ishan of the Night Eyes.”*

Silence followed. They turned and made their way back to the others.

Meanwhile, as they investigated the cave, each person sifted through the scattered pieces, turning fragments in their hands, fitting and refitting shapes. An archivist and archaeological investigator named Gortis began aligning the metal bars and jointed arms into a structured form. He paused.

*“My father had something like this,”* he murmured. *“He was an architect. Before... before the bandits.”* The pieces locked into place—four arms joined at pivot points, ruled with etched measurements. A quad-ruled device.

Peter leaned closer, eyes bright. He grabbed a sheet of parchment and sketched a small sigil from one of the vault doors. Adjusting the arms into different notches, he traced again.

The symbol grew—perfectly proportioned, only larger. He looked up slowly. *“This tool doesn’t mark walls,”* Peter said. *“It scales.”*

Everyone stared. Peter held up the parchment. *“Maybe there’s a sigil somewhere too small to see clearly. Maybe we’re missing detail. If we enlarge it—”*

Emuroil crossed his arms. *“What detail?”* Peter hesitated. *“I don’t know yet. But what if the symbol we think we understand... changes when we see it properly?”*

Silence lingered. For once, no one dismissed him.

They found no symbol small enough to justify scaling. No hidden micro-script. No concealed pattern. The quad-rule device was set aside.

Next on the unsolved list: the prism.

Jurioam lifted it carefully and handed it to Peter. *“They usually fracture light,”* he said. *“How would you like to do with this?”* Peter blinked.

*“That is an improper question.” Galewel tilted his head. “How so?” “How would refers to method or execution,” Peter replied carefully. “You’re asking me how I would act. But I don’t yet know what the object is. I can’t determine method without first understanding function.”*

Galewel’s brow lifted. *“I disagree.”* Peter frowned. *“You disagree with grammar?”*

*“I disagree with your hesitation,”* Galewel said. *“Figure out with the object whether I’m wrong.”* Peter stared at him. *“That makes even less sense.”*

Emuroil folded his arms, amused. Peter looked between them. *“You want me to determine purpose before I determine method. But you asked for method first.”*

Galewel nodded. *“Yes.”* Peter squinted at the prism. *“You are all insane.”*

*“I would find a shape that fits it,”* Peter said slowly. *“Something that resembles it. Or serves the same function.”*

*“What function?”* Jurioam asked.

Peter frowned. *“I don’t know. A wedge, perhaps. A lock. A handle.”* They returned to the vaults. Peter searched every arch, every indentation, every stone seam. Nothing.

They moved to the throne room.

Every stone chair along the wall had a recess in its side — each one the precise depth of the prism. The throne itself bore a cutout at the top back, nearly the same shape. On one of the carved dragons, the curve of a wing seemed to invite it — but the space was slightly too small.

Rann leaned closer. *“Maybe that scaling tool can enlarge the cutout.”* They tried.

They measured. They traced. They carved. Nothing.

The fit was always just wrong.

Elmon watched them struggle and finally asked, *“Are you trying... or feeling? Is the object meant to be altered? Or your perception of it?”*

Peter paused. He placed the prism on parchment and traced its outline.

Then he adjusted the scale slightly — smaller.

Rann helped him redraw it carefully. They overlaid the new drawing against the cutout.

This time... it matched. Peter swallowed.

He lifted the prism and held it near the stone, preparing to mark where it must be trimmed. He stopped. He stared. Slowly, he pressed it into the recess.

It slid in. Perfectly. No resistance. No carving. No change. Peter stepped back. *“We didn’t alter it,”* he whispered.

Elmon’s eyes gleamed faintly. *“No. You altered how you were looking at it.”*

Elmon and the others entered the throne room. The moment they crossed the threshold, the air felt different. Everyone paused. *“Well?”* Benga pressed. *“What did you see?”*

Galewel exhaled slowly. *“A grave of sorts. At least that’s what one would assume when the polished stone plate was removed.”*

Jurioam frowned. *“A grave marker?”*

“Sort of,” Elmon replied. “*But deeper in... the construct remains. Untouched. Sealed. I read the sigils before we left.*”

He looked toward the monument. “*They said: Your days ended as a kingdom, veiled by Ishan the Night Eyes.*” A low sound moved through the chamber — not quite wind, not quite breath. Everyone turned instinctively.

Peter squinted upward. “*It changed.*” They followed his gaze.

“*The Celestial,*” he whispered. “*She’s not bowed anymore. She’s looking up — hands raised.*” His voice trembled slightly. “*And the sphere... it’s no longer dim. It’s shining. Like a star.*”

Emuroil turned slowly in place. “*The thrones.*” His hand brushed one of them. “*They were plain before. Now they’re carved. Inscribed.*” He leaned closer. “*Names.*”

Jurioam called down from the loft. “*Nothing changed up here!*” Benga ran a hand over the throne itself. “*Seat’s the same. No new mechanism. No shift.*”

Rann stood near the windows. “*They’re wider,*” he murmured. “*Or... the frames are thinner. I can see more sky.*” Elmon circled the monument.

He stopped. The dragon that once crawled along the rear face was gone. In its place was a sigil. He knew it instantly. Silence. Ritual silence. Not absence — containment.

He lifted his hand toward it... then paused. Not yet. He moved around to the front of the monument.

Three glyphs that had been dormant were now glimmering faintly — not bright, not fully awake. But active.

Elmon’s jaw tightened. “*We triggered something,*” he said quietly. “*Not by force. By understanding.*”

He looked around the chamber, at the subtle but undeniable shifts. “*Something else,*” he added, almost to himself, “*we have done right.*”

Elmon stood staring at the monument, brows drawn tight. “*Why here?*” he murmured. “*Why activate this? The construct in the cave is the seal. This monument is only a reflection. Why awaken the reflection?*”

Emuroil folded his arms, thinking slowly rather than reacting. “*Perhaps,*” he said carefully, “*the figure of Ishan is not decoration. Perhaps she is declaration.*”

He circled the monument once. “*Or this is not merely an altar. It may be a recording point. A convergence marker. The sanctum assembling itself in stages. When all is aligned... something reveals.*”

He stopped. “*There are only two of my glyphs that have not sung.*”

The room grew still. Elmon’s eyes shifted toward the throne. Not dramatically. Not theatrically. Deliberately.

Without speaking, he crossed the chamber and sat. The movement felt different this time. Not investigative. Intentional.

He withdrew the silver-sheathed ledger from its seamless sleeve. The metal caught the light of the crystal moon, reflecting a faint crescent across his hands.

He opened it. The pages breathed. And he began to read aloud.

The staves were handed to Caris and Tenther from the Dun forgers, with instructions to mount the crowns upon them. The crystal is reserved in the Shrine of Juno. She guards its veil.

The temple forgers labored without rest to complete the next measures. When finished, messengers were sent to Ringe Mountain Hold.

The enemy has followed the makings. They besiege our gates. Time is shortening.'

Elmon's voice slowed.

"The Veil has been called. The watchmen wait. The Celestial Gate is charged — and Ishan has come. She beckons us through the Gate."

Peter swallowed. Elmon continued.

'The Sigil Lord, Arimas, and the three Shadow Guards are dispatched to the Hold with the Instructions and the staves yet incomplete. Nothing can stop it now. It is folding. The Kingdom is veiled.'

The room felt smaller.

I pray her heart will be known. I pray her vault will be found. I pray the Keys to the secrets we have hidden so long may yet be discovered.

Let our secrets be revealed by Ishan and Laser, our guardians. We go now to the darkness of sleep — to awaken when the Veils call once again.'

Elmon lowered the page.

'By my hand, Micrium Yowl. Sage of Ishan. Veiler of Souls.'

Silence.

Elmon turned the final page. It was blank. No — not blank.

A sigil glimmered faintly in the center of the page.

It shifted.

- ❖ Sundering. The ink bled, reshaped.
- ❖ Worship. The glyph folded inward, sharp angles softening.
- ❖ Death. The page darkened at the edges.
- ❖ Summoner. A spiral formed from nothing.
- ❖ Veil Call. The symbol widened — thinned — almost vanished.
- ❖ Weave Reading. The lines brightened.

Then the glyph dissolved.

And began again.

Now it feels alive.

Emuroil shook his head slowly. "*What a wicked band they were. My father was butchered by them. Tortured for something he did not know.*" His jaw tightened. "*They followed power. Anything that promised elevation, they devoured.*"

Galewel's voice did not rise. It hollowed.

"*Wicked?*" He exhaled once. "*I watched them peel the flesh from a child to make the mother confess to things she did not know.*" He did not look at anyone. "*They called it leverage.*"

Silence followed. Not scholarly. Not curious. Heavy. Elmon studied Galewel for a long moment. "*You don't look four thousand years old Elf.*"

Galewel glanced at him. "*I am not.*" A pause. "*I am four thousand one hundred and eighty years your senior.*" That landed differently.

Jurioam swallowed. "*What were they after?*"

*“Relics,” Galewel said. “Anything that amplified persona. Anything that made them appear greater than they were.” He looked at the sanctum walls. “They mistook amplification for ascension.”*

*“The wars lasted nearly a four hundred years,” Galewel said. “Then one season... they stopped.”*

*“Stopped?” Peter asked.*

*“Wizards vanished. Towers emptied. Some say the sky spoke. Not thunder. Not storm. A voice.”*

*He looked upward unconsciously, legend. “One wizard—Hepacoris—raised his staff in defiance. The heavens answered. Lightning struck him where he stood. A meteor followed. In a blink, he was gone.”*

*Silence lingered. “After that,” Galewel said quietly, “no one raised a staff to the sky again.”*

*Elmon exhaled slowly. “Then Ringe Hold is next. After we return Peter and settle his accounts.” Emuroil’s voice cut across the chamber. “No.”*

*The room quieted. “Not until we know why this city woke,” he said. “You said it yourself — let us not keep the ledger oath true.” Peter stepped forward, almost tripping over his own excitement. “We figured something out. The tool — it changes the prism. Or... maybe it reveals how it fits.” He held the prism up awkwardly. “If it changes shape... where does it belong?”*

*He looked at Elmon. “Is this alright?” Elmon studied him for a long moment. “Let the unlearned lead,” he said quietly. “Without our weight.”*

*The throne? The stone chairs? Or somewhere else? “Well,” Peter said, turning the prism in his hands, “it’s crystal. Polished. Shapeable. Maybe it belongs somewhere that was meant to receive light.”*

*Elmon’s eyes lifted toward the spire. “The crystal tower.” They climbed the narrow stairs to the top floor.*

*The chamber was ringed with markings — prisms drawn in charcoal, etched into stone, painted faintly in mineral dye. Large, small, inverted, fractured, whole. Symbols layered over one another as if generations had added to them.*

*Peter walked the circumference of the room, touching each marking. Each one felt similar — a texture in the weave. Not sound. Not echo. A pressure.*

*He tried pressing the prism into several of the shapes. Nothing answered.*

*It was late. Minds dulled. Muscles aching.*

*They descended to rest, still talking as they went—marvels, mysteries, new doctrine forming in half-spoken theories.*

*Sleep came unevenly.*

*Dreams replayed the day’s events in fractured sequence—doors opening sooner, prisms fitting cleanly, echoes answering where silence had stood. Each mind rewrote the hours differently.*

*The morning sun peered over Hanorian Peak. Snow along its crest fractured the light into a hundred shifting hues, scattering color across the rising citadel walls.*

All but the diggers climbed the tower again.

When Elmon stepped into the chamber, he stopped. The crystal ceiling was alive.

Sunlight poured through it in angled shafts, refracting into dozens of prism-shaped projections across the walls. The shapes drifted slowly as the sun rose — stretching, shrinking, sliding across etched symbols.

Elmon said nothing. He sat. For three hours.

He marked with chalk every prism of light that changed shape. Every one that drifted. Every one that stabilized. Patterns began to emerge.

Some of the drawn prisms aligned perfectly with the projected light — but only briefly. Others never aligned at all. By midday, Elmon stepped back.

His chalk lines — tracking the path of alignment — had curved into the shape of a crescent. He froze. The sphere.

He knelt and carefully calculated where a star-line would pass through a crescent at its midpoint. He drew the line. At either end of that line — two prism shapes aligned almost perfectly with the current light projection.

He stood slowly. *“Peter,”* he said quietly. *“Bring the prism.”*

Peter climbed the tower with the prism cradled carefully in both hands. He tried fitting it into every etched outline that even slightly resembled its shape. Pressed. Turned. Held it against the wall. Against the floor.

Nothing. He stepped back, frustrated but thoughtful.

*“It doesn’t feel right,”* he said quietly. *“I’m not seeing what you’re seeing.”*

Elmon studied him for a moment.

*“Then don’t force it. Wait for morning. Watch the light.”*

Peter nodded. They began descending the spiral stair. Halfway down, Peter stopped.

*“Wait.”* Above them, carved into the inner curve of the stairwell — so high it was nearly lost in shadow — was writing.

Elmon lifted a lantern. The words emerged slowly from the stone.

*Let the prism be placed where silence waits.*

*Let the light fracture where memory folds.*

*Let the Astra sing, and the veiled awaken.*

*For the Gate is not locked—it is listening.*

No echo answered. No glow. Just stillness.

Galewel whispered, *“That wasn’t there before.”*

Emuroil exhaled slowly. *“Or we weren’t ready to see it.”*

Peter looked at the prism in his hands. *“Where does silence wait?”*

Elmon did not answer. But his eyes drifted — not upward — but downward.

The next morning, As the sun was rising Peter returned to the top floor just as the first light pierced the crystal roof. The air was cool. Quiet. Untouched by voices.

Elmon was already there. The crescent moon and the star line had been redrawn in fresh chalk, cleaner now — deliberate. Peter stepped beside him, holding the prism in both hands.

He did not rush. He lifted it slowly into the descending beam. Light fractured.

The crystal caught the sun and split it — not into chaos — but into a thin arc.

It stretched across the wall. And settled. Exactly over the chalked star line.

No adjustment needed. No correction. The arc fit as if the wall had been waiting for it.

Peter inhaled sharply. *“It matches.”*

Elmon did not answer. The beam intensified. The prism warmed in Peter’s hands.

Then — the light did not stop at the wall.

It bent. Folded. And struck the opposite surface where no chalk had been drawn.

A faint sigil shimmered into existence. The symbol of ritual silence.

Elmon whispered, *“That’s it.”*

Peter stepped forward, aligning the prism with the two chalk-marked prisms at either end of the star line. As the sun crossed the crystal roof, the beam struck the wall.

A shadow formed—not cast by the prism—but revealed by it. An indentation emerged along the star line at the edge of the crescent. Peter’s breath caught.

He lowered the prism into the shadow. It fit. The light fractured. Not outward—Inward.

The crescent completed into a perfect circle. A thrum—deep, restrained—moved through the stone.

The crystal roof ignited. A column of light shot into the sky like a beacon.

Across the chamber, glyphs shifted positions, reorganized, then vanished as if rearranged in memory.

The thrum did not stop. It settled into a steady resonance. Galewel entered, breathless, staring at the circle of light.

*“It’s not a moon.”* He pointed. *“It’s an eye.”*

Elmon turned slowly. *“We’ve placed the prism.”*

He swallowed. *“But what did we just open?”*

They reached the courtyard just as the beam intensified. It did not flare. It *deepened*.

The column of light sharpened into something almost solid—like a pillar carved from brilliance itself. It cut through daylight, through cloud, through thought. The air around it shimmered, humming at a pitch too low to hear and too heavy to ignore.

Appolice, Karid and the others gathered in the courtyard. Cover their eyes from the light. They looked around expecting something.

Mercikom sat and entered into meditation looking outward. It struck him souls marched. He did not see them but felt them.

Goundom, *“Bright as a sorrowed forge.”* Even in full sun it burned like a Dwarven Sorrowed Furnace.

Peter shielded his eyes. *“Why would a forge be sorrowful?”* Jurioam answered, voice tight. *“When a forge is driven beyond its temper, the stone begins to weep. The fire blinds the smith. It becomes too much for the vessel meant to hold it.”*

Peter swallowed. *“So sorrow is not sadness.”*

*“No,”* Jurioam replied. *“It is strain.”*

Benga stepped forward slowly, awe overtaking skepticism. *“We’ve been forcing answers. Testing our thoughts. Naming everything before it revealed itself.”*

His voice cracked faintly. *“Pride was walking ahead of us.”*

The beam shifted. Not outward. Upward.

The sky responded. Clouds bent—not blown, not scattered—but curved subtly around the ascending column. A faint ring of refracted color rippled outward, too vast to be fully seen from the ground.

Elmon stood very still. *“We were never opening vaults,”* he said quietly. *“We were aligning something.”*

The hum deepened again. The crystal roof above refracted the light into cascading arcs, scattering prismatic shards across the citadel walls like celestial script.

Peter whispered, almost afraid, *“Is it... calling something?”*

Elmon did not answer immediately. His breath slowed. His posture shifted—not as a scholar, not as a wizard—but as a witness.

*“Let the unlearned lead,”* he said softly. *“Let the sanctum teach us how to forget.”*

The beam surged.

And somewhere far above—beyond sight—something responded.

## Chapter ①: The Awakening

The shock passed. Not violent. Not destructive. But absolute. The thrum did not stop, it grew. It settled—low and steady—like a second heartbeat beneath the stone.

Peter's voice broke the silence. *"How do we turn it off? I feel it in me."*

No one answered. They hurried back into the throne room. Every sigil burned.

Not flickering—burning. Steady. Awake. The runes along the monument shimmered like veins of molten silver. The crystal moon above pulsed in slow rhythm, red fading to black, black to silver.

But nothing else had moved. The throne stood as before. The stone chairs were still. The floor unbroken. The sanctum was not reacting.

It was... holding.

Elmon stepped forward slowly, eyes scanning, listening beyond sound. The air felt charged—not with magic cast, but with something sustained. Maintained.

*"We didn't trigger destruction,"* he murmured. *"We completed a sequence."*

Then it came.

Faint at first.

A sound from beyond the walls. Not wind. Not stone.

Voices.

Low. Rhythmic. Layered. Chanting.

They froze.

The sound grew—not louder, but fuller. Harmonies threading through one another like woven breath.

Jurioam whispered, *"That is not an echo."*

They moved together toward the courtyard.

The twin gates stood open.

Beyond them—the grounds were filled.

Catar.

Dozens. No—hundreds.

Standing in ordered circles, hands raised toward the beam that pierced the sky. Their eyes reflected the light like polished obsidian. Their voices rose in unison—not frantic. Not confused.

Reverent.

At the peak of the beam, above the floating crystal stone, a figure stood suspended in brilliance.

Not descending.

Not arriving.

Already present.

The chanting ceased.

Silence fell—not absence, but weight. Centuries settling.

The being turned.

Its voice did not travel through air.

It split the weave.

*“Elmon.”*

The name did not strike his ears. It struck his memory.

*“You are called for this generation. They need you.”*

The beam flared.

*“The Eternal Whiteheart sanctioned you and made you for such a time as this.”*

The Catar lowered themselves to one knee.

*“Perdina’s path awaits in the hallowed archives of the Forgotten Thread.”*

Mercikom turned slowly and looked at Elmon.

His stare was empty.

Cold.

Defining.

Like memory that had never been his.

Elmon did not move. Did not bow. Did not speak. He stood—utterly still—like a man who has just discovered that the world has been waiting for him longer than he has been alive.

*“Return to your school. Ortis is waiting for your heart. He has seen the archives once.”*

The figure’s eyes burned like twin stars. *“There is much I would teach you. But your heart must learn the ways. Your memories are scriptures to be forgotten.”*

The beam softened slightly. *“Mine will guide you.”* The light did not fade. It folded.

The chanting resumed—not loud—but steady. Elmon felt something inside him shift—not power. Weight. For the first time in his life—he had no words.

For once in Elmon’s life, the cat had his tongue.

He stood there, mouth slightly parted, eyes fixed on the fading brilliance above. No lecture. No theory. No correction. Just stillness. Confounded.

Emuroil stepped beside him, voice steady but reverent. *“Yes... we are special, Elmon. I knew it the day you passed the Ulrick Trial. No one had done that since Ulrick himself.”*

The others were not staring at the celestial figure anymore.

They were staring at him. Not with fear. Not with worship. But with recalculation.

As if something invisible had shifted into place around him—something none of them had named before. Galewel spoke quietly, almost reluctantly. *“He will come. To lead his people in ways of peace. His voice will be different—and known. His heart will know no law but its calling.”*

Elmon blinked, finally tearing his eyes from the sky. *“What are you talking about?”* Galewel swallowed. *“I found it years ago. In a chrome-bound tome I keep in my tent. Catar*

*script. Some of it so old it barely makes sense. Other lines read like twisted song—half prophecy, half warning.”*

He looked directly at Elmon now. *“I didn’t understand it then.”* A pause.

*“I’m not sure I do now.”* The chanting resumed softly behind them, the Catar swaying like reeds in a current of light.

Elmon exhaled slowly. *“I did not ask for this.”* Emuroil gave a faint, almost sad smile. *“Neither did Ulrick.”*

Galewel swallowed and continued, his voice lower now, as if repeating something not meant for open air. *“‘El Ole Mon’s time will come... benevolent in peace, fierce in knowledge beyond his years. From Elfen lore and the cries of war he will rise. He will domesticate the silence of stone. Seek clarity within shadow. And defile the evil of creation. Wizardry renewed—no longer throne, but tool.’”*

Silence followed. No one spoke. They stared at Galewel. Then at Elmon.

Peter’s mouth opened slightly. Jurioam shifted his weight. Emuroil did not look away. Elmon blinked once. *“First,”* he said carefully, *“that name is unfortunate.”*

A few nervous breaths escaped the group.

*“But second...”* His eyes hardened. *“Prophecy reads clean on parchment. It bleeds in reality.”*

Galewel nodded slowly. *“I did not write it.”*

Elmon lay flat upon the courtyard stones as the Catar began to sing again. Their voices were not loud. They were layered.

Ancient.

*“Your eyes lead to peace and sleep to awaken when life is freed. Ishan be praised in the light you have given in our time of need.”*

There were other verses — rising and falling like tide — but that line anchored itself in Elmon’s mind. Sleep to awaken. Life freed.

Galewel rose, scanning the gathering. He sought authority, structure — someone who could answer questions. Eventually, he was led to a tall Catar draped in ash-white cloth, eyes silvered with age.

Yowl. Veiler of Spirits. Galewel bowed slightly. *“Emorali speak thine ear, gracious one?”*

Yowl inclined his head, voice like wind over stone.

*“Speak may you.”* Galewel hesitated only a moment. *“You slept. For how long?”*

Yowl’s gaze lifted toward the crystal beam piercing the sky. *“Three Tri-Gleams we slept.”*

*Galewel replied “Through Norister’s ruin. Warring wizards stripped Bald for twelve hundred cycles of Ashtar. Ways you know not known. Kingdoms rose. Kingdoms fell. Peace now—mostly.”*

The courtyard seemed suddenly larger. Three Tri-Gleams. Norister destroyed. Twelve hundred cycles. Elmon remained on the stone, staring upward. They had not slept through days. They had slept through history.

Over the next two days, Elmon wrestled with the words like a man holding a moon-sledgehammer—too heavy to lift cleanly, too dangerous to drop.

He had awakened the city. The beam had split the sky. The Catar had risen. But had he found the purpose?

Or was he merely walking a script already written? The line from the moon-glyph ledger would not release him: *He will come and revive the secrets. But he will fail to know why.*

Revive the secrets. He had done that. But *fail to know why* — that was the splinter. Was this awakening an end? A beginning? A correction? Or a test of his pride?

He paced the bailey at dusk, watching the Catar move through restored halls as if they had never left. Children laughed. Elders sang. The citadel breathed.

Yet inside him something remained unlit. *“I have triggered mechanisms,”* he murmured to himself. *“I have solved puzzles. I have restored architecture. But have I restored intention?”*

The prophecy did not accuse him of failure. It accused him of emptiness. And that frightened him more than defeat.

### ***Elmon entered the throne room.***

The Catar were already there—seated along the stone chairs, walking the floor in hushed clusters, voices low and reverent. The restored chamber did not feel abandoned. It felt inhabited.

Without announcement, Elmon crossed the floor and sat in the throne. The room fell silent. Not curious silence. Offended silence.

Three Catar rose at once. They moved toward him—measured, not frantic—but with unmistakable intent. One reached for his arm. Elmon did not resist physically.

Instead, he opened the weave. A pulse of echo expanded from him—brief, controlled. He projected a remembered lineage: Catar clans without crowns. Councils without kings. Authority bound to song and vow, not throne and decree. A history where no monarch ruled. The three Catar halted mid-motion.

They staggered back—not from force—but from recognition. An elf. Reading Catar memory. Before the tension could fracture further, Yowl entered.

His presence did not command the room. It settled it. He regarded Elmon calmly. *“Know not your position, Elf?”*

Elmon held the echo lightly now, not projecting—only offering. He attempted to transmit a fractured memory: what he had studied, what the archives suggested. That this throne did not signify dominion among the Catar.

Yowl closed his eyes briefly. When he opened them, he understood. *“You speak partial truth,”* Yowl said softly. *“Know not truth of Catar. Only fragments.”* He placed a hand over his chest.

*“Kingdom not stone. Kingdom in heart. In song. In threshold.”* He gestured toward the monument behind the throne. *“Throne is Ishan. Monument memory. Hall is contested truth.”*

The words hung heavy. This throne was not political. It was sacred. Elmon’s certainty thinned. He rose slightly from the seat, not in surrender—but in humility.

*“What is the purpose,”* he asked quietly, *“in awakening all of this?”* This time the question was not theoretical. It was personal.

From within the gathered Catar, a single voice rose. A Female Warden stepped forward—armor worn smooth by age, eyes bright as embers beneath ash.

*“Purpose is not in the awakening,”* she said evenly. *“It is in what follows when the veil is lifted. We did not sleep to be restored. We slept to await your calling. Your Cause.”*

The words struck the chamber like a bell. Then an older Elna Sha approached—hair silver, posture bowed but not broken. She came close to the throne and regarded Elmon without fear. *“Who awakened us?”* she asked—not accusing, not grateful. Merely weighing.

Her gaze moved across the chamber. *“We were buried to remember what was paid. The purpose of a scar is not beauty. It is memory. To teach. To remind. To never let us forget.”*

The Warden turned and pointed—directly at Elmon. *“You are marked by Eternity. Shaped for purpose. Called by the Great Whiteheart. Guided by Ishan. Created for Cause. Walk your Calling. Honor your Creator.”*

The words did not crown him. They burdened him. Yowl stepped forward last. *“Purpose,”* he said quietly, *“is not a question to solve. It is a song to enter.”*

His eyes met Elmon’s. *“You are not its beginning.”* A pause. *“You are its next verse.”*

Silence followed—not empty, but expectant. And for the first time since the city rose, Elmon did not feel like its awakener. He felt like its answer being tested.

Elmon was not satisfied with the answers. They were true. They were reverent. They were poetic.

But they were not functional. So he left the chamber and returned to the cave. When he arrived, he stopped.

The door was gone. Not shattered. Not displaced.

Gone.

In its place stood an open portal framed by the same twin pillars and arch. The glyphs above remained untouched—crown crushed, hourglass broken, star held above heart.

But the threshold itself no longer resisted. Elmon stepped closer. He read the echoes of the construct. Nothing. He read the weave. Nothing.

He searched for cadence—residual intention, tension in the MANA lattice, a vibration of transition. Nothing.

He extended his senses and tried to attune to the structure directly. There. A faint pulse.

Not presence. Absence. A hollow beat, like a chamber that had once held something immense and now held only the memory of weight.

He contemplated invoking a Black Wind—to stir the veil, to force response. He restrained himself. Force would distort the answer. He knelt and pressed his palm to the stone.

He listened for Breath-stone veins—those subtle currents that whisper through old structures. He searched for missing silence—the kind that signals concealed resonance. He probed the veil surrounding the portal.

No fracture. No artificial modification. No dimensional shear. No locked paths. No folded seams. It was clean. Too clean.

*“It’s here,”* he muttered to himself. *“Even if it came from somewhere else, it is here now.”*

He tested for grafting—whether the construct had been anchored from another realm.

Nothing. No misalignment. No displacement. No echo drift. It was not sealed.

It was not broken. It was not hidden. It was empty.

Not vacant. Not dormant. Empty.

He leaned back slowly. *“Is there a message-bound dream here?”* he whispered.

He closed his eyes. He did not know how to dream walk. And for the first time since the city rose—he wondered if that ignorance was the point.

He contemplated the glyphs that did not align with the construct. None responded. None resisted. He could not identify a pattern or flaw.

*Is there a silent Echo awaiting activation?*

He sat at the threshold of the arch for several hours. At last, he knelt and drew the Ishan Glyph into the dust before him. He stood over it and fixed his eyes upon its lines.

*“Ishan of the Night Eyes,”* he said quietly, *“you told me I was made for such a time as this. You said there was much you would teach me—but my heart must learn the ways. That my memories are scriptures to be forgotten. That yours would guide me.”*

He exhaled slowly. *“What of you will guide me? How can I learn what I do not know I need? How can my heart know a hunger it has never felt?”*

A flower bloomed in the center of the glyph. Not slowly. Not hesitantly. In mere moments it rose—stem, leaf, petal—unfolding into full height and impossible beauty.

The air shifted. The scent of a garden drifted through the cave. Fresh hay. Morning dew. A memory of life where none should be.

The petals glistened as though dawn had just touched them. Then, just as swiftly, the bloom withered. Color drained. Stem bowed. Petals collapsed inward. It shriveled to dust.

Elmon did not move. *“Is this representing me?”* he murmured, reading the weave. There was no audible voice—yet something pressed against his mind.

*Rise.*

A lament threaded through the silence. Time passing. A choice deferred. A moral weight uncarried. Then nothing. Elmon ground his heel into the sigil and the dust of the flower, scattering both into the stone.

While he stood there, something touched his shoulder. He had heard no step. No breath. No shift of gravel. It came with silence.

Elmon spun.

Before him stood only a silhouette—no face, no form—just the outline of presence where light should have been. *“Time is your enemy,”* it said—not aloud, but within him. *“Your moment is near. A journey is required. Or you will fade from your calling.”*

The figure reached toward him. When it touched him, the world fractured.

He saw himself seated at a desk beneath a tower of books—searching. Always searching. Pages turning. Nothing found. He saw himself running—yet never leaving the same place.

He saw himself weeping—without feeling. *“You have allowed yourself to become something you were never meant to be.”*

The silhouette moved around him without moving at all.

*“The answer pushed you. Fate shaped you. School refined you. Battle informed you ”*

A pause.

*“You were the answer. You have always known the next step. You changed minds. You altered paths.”*

Another pause.

*“But you missed the purpose.”* Elmon’s knees folded beneath him. His hands fell into the dust—he sifted the remains of the flower and the broken glyph. He let the grains slip through his fingers.

*“I was created for purpose,”* he whispered. *“Before I could choose. Before I could refuse.”* He breathed unevenly. *“I was drawn here by ambition. To find a staff. To claim it. To prove myself.”*

His eyes lifted toward the cave mouth. *“This city waited.”* A bitter laugh escaped him. *“Like Breech... no. Break.”* He shook his head slowly. *“It was never about what I could revive. It was about what I refused to see.”*

He pressed his palm into the dirt. *“I thought I was the answer.”*

Silence.

*“I was the question.”*

The next morning, Elmon gathered Peter, Appolice, and Emuroil at the edge of the bailey. The citadel stood whole behind them—no longer ruin, no longer rumor.

Catar moved thought the Citadel. Moving things shifting, realigning.

Peter adjusted his parchment bundle. *“Back to town, then?”*

Elmon nodded. *“To settle accounts.”* They had not gone far when Emuroil slowed.

He worked his tongue against his teeth, an old habit when pride wrestled with truth. *“Elmon... may I remain?”*

Elmon turned. Emuroil did not meet his eyes at first. *“I would stay. Work. Learn.”* He swallowed. *“Repay.”* The word cost him.

Elmon stepped closer and placed a steady hand on Emuroil’s shoulder. *“My Chancellor,”* he said quietly, *“the world is yours to do as you please.”*

Emuroil finally looked up. *“I did not bring you here for position. Nor prominence. Nor the preservation of a name.”*

Elmon’s gaze drifted back toward the awakened city. *“I brought you because somewhere beneath the silence, you were still listening.”* A faint smile.

*“You have awakened again.”* He squeezed Emuroil’s shoulder once. *“Adventure is not for those seeking stature. It is for those willing to become.”*

Peter blinked between them. *“Does that mean he’s staying?”* Emuroil gave a small, humbled nod. *“Yes.”*

Elmon stepped back. *“Then learn,”* he said. *“Not to be great. But to choose greatly.”*

The morning light caught the crystal spire behind them. This time, it did not blaze. It simply shone.

*“I will see you around, my friend,”* Elmon said quietly. *“Peter has studies to return to. And I have halls yet to walk.”*

He clasped hands, then turned.

*“I go to the Fíli halls first. There are answers there — or the shape of them. Then back to school.”*

They visited Yowl, White Claw, Longtooth, and the others they had come to know.

Elmon promised to return.

White Claw — shaman by calling, eyes clouded yet piercing — studied him a long while before speaking.

*“We will need you one day,”* he said. *“The hawk has spoken. Perdina will show you.”*

It was not a threat.

Not a blessing.

A certainty.

Peter’s notes, drawings, and careful documentation were bound in oilskin and cord. Every sketch of anchor stones. Every glyph variant. Every mapped resonance line.

Nothing was left loose.

Rations were packed. Water skins filled.

At last, with few words and no ceremony, they said their goodbyes and turned south toward Pentor Hall.

A gate guard acknowledged them and drew the iron-bound doors open. The hinges groaned softly as they passed through.

The road felt longer now. And narrower.

As they cleared the walls, just after noon, something stirred within Elmon. Not sound. Not thought.

A summons.

Not from the citadel.

Not from the Catar.

Not from stone.

From somewhere older.

The words did not enter his ears. They rose from within him.

*I have called.*

*Will YOU answer?*

*Will you serve?*

Elmon did not look back.

But he did not turn away either.

And the road continued.

On the road, Peter asked more questions than one would expect in the span of an entire school year.

They came in waves.

About the citadel.

About the Veil.

About the Catar.

About the being in the light.

Elmon answered as best he could—surface truths, simple definitions, careful not to drown him in depths he himself had only just begun to measure.

By the time they reached the ruins of an old farmhouse—once besieged during the Wizard Wars—Elmon felt the fatigue settle into his bones.

They made a small fire in the lee of a collapsed stone wall. The wind moved softly through broken rafters overhead.

Peter was still thinking. Elmon lay back, staring at the dark.

*“You know,”* he said quietly, *“you’ve seen more this past month than some men see in a lifetime.”*

Peter did not answer.

Elmon continued.

*“You’ve witnessed things I would have called impossible a year ago.”*

A pause.

*“I understand more now. But not because I was wise.”*

He turned his head slightly. *“I believed I already knew the answers.”*

The fire cracked. *“The Break... broke that.”*

He exhaled. *“It stripped the arrogance out of me. The assumption that knowledge meant control. That perception meant mastery.”*

Another pause.

*“It was not just a battle. It was a test.”*

Peter looked at him then. *“A test of what?”*

Elmon’s voice lowered. *“My humanity.”*

The wind moved again through the rafters.

This time, Peter did not ask another question.

They slept.

Peter dreamed of school — of digging through boxes for hidden answers, colored tabs tucked between pages, clues waiting to be noticed.

Morning came clean and bright.

The sky was clear, the sun already warm for the Month of Moon. Harvest usually began under cooler breath, with frost whispering along the fields at dawn.

Not today.

The air felt generous.

The days would cool soon enough. The light would thin. Time would slow the way it always did after gathering — when labor gave way to counting, and counting gave way to memory.

But for now, the world felt open.

And unworried.

They arrived at Pentor Hall just before noon.

Peter settled accounts with the curator, cheeks flushed but steady. The coin pouch was lighter now — properly so.

As they turned to leave, Master Hawthorne approached, hands folded neatly behind his back.

“Well,” he said smoothly, *“that was a healthy contribution to Peter’s household. I do appreciate the town’s tax portion.”*

Elmon stopped walking.

He turned slowly.

“*That was not income,*” Elmon said evenly.

Hawthorne blinked once.

“*It was Peter’s tuition payment for the Wizard’s School in Scathnard.*”

A small silence settled in the courtyard.

“*According to the King’s Edict,*” Elmon continued, voice steady and precise, *“families of scholarship students are to receive one shilling per day from the township during their term of study. That stipend is not taxable income.”*

Hawthorne’s posture shifted, just slightly.

Elmon did not raise his voice.

“*Since you have now acknowledged receipt of those funds as taxable earnings,*” he said, *“you have confessed to violating royal statute.”*

He gestured lightly toward Appolice.

“*Master Appolice stands as witness. He is faculty and a sanctioned student investigator under the King’s charter for the School of Wizardry — Elmon’s Archive of Treasured Echoes.*”

Hawthorne’s smile faded.

Elmon’s eyes did not.

“*I will be filing report with the Constable and the Lord Sheriff. You may, of course, make restitution before they arrive.*”

The courtyard was very quiet.

Peter stared.

Appolice crossed his arms.

Elmon inclined his head — not in threat, but in courtesy.

*“Good day, Master Hawthorne.”*

And then he turned and walked.

*“I hereby deputize you as a Sanction Binder for the School,”* Elmon said evenly. *“Escort this individual to the Constable’s office and hold him there until I arrive. Request the King’s Edict of School Jurisdictions.”*

Silence fell.

Master Hawthorne stared, color draining from his face.

*“You can’t do this,”* he sputtered. *“I am the King’s tax collector.”*

Elmon did not raise his voice.

*“Precisely,”* he replied. *“Which means you are expected to know the King’s law before anyone else.”*

A pause.

*“You have violated it.”*

Appolice’s grin was slow and unapologetic. He stepped forward, lifted Hawthorne cleanly off the ground as if removing a crate from a shelf, and carried him toward the Constable’s office.

Hawthorne protested.

Appolice did not slow.

Elmon went first to the Coin Trust.

He withdrew all but one mythrill from his account and transferred ownership to Peter Nindler.

*“Send notice to his family,”* Elmon instructed the clerk. *“Payment rendered for services provided. Debt satisfied. Account closed.”*

No flourish. No explanation.

Then he made his way to the Constable’s office.

Before he reached the door, he could hear Hawthorne’s voice—loud, indignant, and increasingly vulgar, resounding like a sailor or worse.

Appolice’s voice cut through it at intervals.

*“Sit down.”*

A pause.

*“And hush.”*

Elmon stepped inside.

The Constable looked up from his desk. *“Master Elmon. Are the charges accurate?”*

*“You have the King’s edicts as required by the Sanctum’s jurisdiction?”* Elmon asked evenly.

“Yes, Master Elmon. Right here.”

The Constable unrolled the scroll.

The parchment crackled in the quiet room.

Hawthorne fell silent.

*‘By Royal edict of King Narris Elrool Damar.*

*The School of Wizardry is sanctioned under this Sovereign's hand  
to expand, instruct, and train young minds for service to the Crown.*

*All subjects of peasant holdings, if found gifted by mastery, and accepted as scholars,*

*shall be exempt from levy and taxation upon their entry into study*

*until such time as they return home or are formally entered into service of the king.*

*Furthermore, the scholar's household shall receive remission in the sum of one shilling per day  
from the Crown treasury until the scholar's graduation or death.*

*Signed this day in the Thirty-Fifth Year of My Reign,*

*King Narris Elrool Damar*

Elmon looked at Hawthorne. Then to the Constable.

“Master Constable,” he said evenly, “this man has mistaken royal stipend for taxable income. The coin granted to the Nindler family is not earnings. It is Crown-sanctioned scholarship provision from the School of Wizardry in Scathnard.”

He removed his outer cloak.

The fabric fell back, revealing the layered insignia stitched beneath:

The School's Crest.

The King's Signet.

The Glyph of Mastery.

The Sanctioned Instructor's Mark.

And over his breast—the Glyph of **Amoquindo**.

The room shifted.

“I am Master Elmon Silverwood,” he said calmly. “Survivor of the Battle of the Sage Crypt.”

Hawthorne's face drained of color.

The Constable blinked once. “I heard of that,” he said slowly. “Zombies. Witches. Demons. Dragons. Hell on earth.”

Elmon inclined his head slightly. “That summarizes it.”

Silence settled heavy and deliberate.

Elmon turned slowly toward Hawthorne.

“Master Hawthorne,” he said, voice level, “you now stand at a crossroads.”

He raised one finger.

*“First. You may return the scholarship stipend in full to the Nindler family and correct the ledger quietly.”*

A second finger.

*“Second. You may stand before the King and answer for violation of his own edict.”*

A pause.

A third finger.

*“Or third — and I advise this path — you may call assembly in the Court Hall. There, before witnesses, you will return the stipend, publicly affirm that Peter Nindler has been awarded full scholarship to the School of Wizardry, and issue apology for the misunderstanding.”*

Silence stretched.

Elmon turned his gaze to the Constable.

*“Number three seems equitable, does it not?”*

The Constable shifted, clearing his throat. *“It does.”*

Hawthorne swallowed.

Elmon did not raise his voice. *“Very well.”*

He turned to the Constable. *“Master Constable, I formally request writ of transfer to the King’s Bench under Article Three of School Jurisdiction.”*

The Constable stiffened slightly. That clause was rarely invoked.

Elmon reached into his purse and placed ten silver shillings upon the counter.

*“Court fees.”*

Then five gold crowns. *“And transport levy for escort and documentation.”*

He looked directly at Hawthorne. *“I would prefer resolution here.”*

Silence.

Hawthorn buckles. *“I will apologize and remit the coin to them.”*

Elmon gathered the silver and left the gold upon the counter. *“For the clerk’s record and filing,”* he said evenly.

Elmon pressed a single platinum coin into Appolice’s palm.

*“See Peter safely to Scathnard,”* he said quietly. *“He is walking a road he would never have found alone.”*

Appolice looked at the coin — then at Elmon. *“And the rest?”*

Elmon gave a faint smile. *“The rest is yours. Consider it hazard pay... and an investment.”*

He stepped back. *“Our paths will cross again.”*

Appolice closed his fist around the platinum. *“I know.”*

As Appolice clasped forearms with Elmon, the Constable leaned subtly toward Hawthorn.

Low voice. No anger. No drama.

*“You would be wise,”* he said quietly, *“to remember that the School keeps records.”*

Hawthorn did not respond.

But his jaw tightened.

Elmon stepped out of the Constable's office and paused in the street.

Pentor Hall lay quiet before him.

Simple stone. Narrow lanes. Smoke rising from cookfires. No marvels. No towers piercing the sky. No echo-halls humming with memory.

Just a town.

He studied it for a long moment.

*I could build something here.*

A small school. A place of discipline. Of listening. Of slow growth instead of catastrophe.

He considered the square near the well. The ridge above the southern road.

Too far from the current of the world.

He exhaled.

Not here. Not yet.

He turned toward the nearest Fili Hall and made brief arrangements. Then he stopped at a merchant stall and purchased three additional waterskins.

"The Harnarian Desert is not forgiving," the merchant muttered.

Elmon nodded. He knew.

By dusk he had secured passage southward, bargaining a place aboard a coastal ferry bound for Dragon's Breech — the last true port before the desert swallowed the land whole.

As the town walls receded behind him, he did not look back.

Upon arrival at the desert abode of Breech, Elmon secured a guide and a desert-bred horse — lean, narrow-eyed, and unimpressed with everything.

The guide approached with theatrical confidence.

*"I am Birgale Morngal, at your service,"* he announced with a half-bow. *"Former desert bandit."*

Elmon raised a brow.

Birgale shrugged. *"It was not profitable. Too many competitors. So I adopted a more sustainable business model."*

"And that is?" Elmon asked.

*"Guiding people who believe they understand the desert."*

Elmon almost smiled.

Birgale adjusted the scarf at his neck and squinted at him. *"Where are we headed?"*

*"The Courts of Mystal of the Fili."*

Birgale's expression shifted — not fear, not surprise. Calculation.

*"Well then,"* he said after a moment. *"We leave when the Hollow Moon rises. Tonight."*

Elmon glanced upward. *"Why wait?"*

Birgale chuckled dryly. *"Because this is Furnace season."*

Elmon: *"Furnace?"*

*"That,"* Birgale said, sweeping his arm toward the dunes beyond the city walls, *"is what we call summer when it tries to kill you."*

*"I have never heard of a Hollow Moon,"* Elmon said, genuinely puzzled. *"Is that a visual, structural, or metaphorical term?"*

Birgale blinked.

Then he laughed — a dry, wind-burned sound.

*"A philosopher bound for the Fili Courts,"* he muttered. *"No, Master Elmon. It is not metaphysical."*

He pointed toward the eastern horizon.

*"When the moon rises red and thin through the dust haze, it looks scorched. Burned out. Hollowed."*

He adjusted the wrap at his neck.

*"We call it the Hollow Moon."*

He continued, tone shifting from humor to instruction.

*"Day temperatures in the heart of the desert run one hundred and ten to one hundred and thirty degrees. That's why we call it the Furnace. It cooks pride out of men."*

*"Nights,"* he added, *"are kinder. Eighty-five. Maybe ninety."*

He studied Elmon a moment.

*"If we leave at moonrise and ride steady, we can make Sorrows Landing by mid-morning. There's a well. Traders. Repairs."*

A faint grin creased his face.

*"And the best dragon stew you'll find east of the dunes."*

Birgale studied Elmon for a long moment.

*"Master Elmon,"* he said more quietly, *"I noticed you packed that stately coat. Glyphs of a wizard's school."*

He adjusted the reins and continued without looking at him.

*"I've taken a few of your kind across this furnace."*

A beat.

*"It is not an easy crossing."*

*"There are bandits. Beasts. Things that move beneath the sand. Things that circle above it."*

He shifted in the saddle. *"A few years ago we were ambushed. Forced into Crimson Toe Gorge. Cooler there. Hard to track. Hard to run."*

He exhaled through his teeth. *"We rounded the Toe and found a dragon having sport with the brigands."*

Elmon's eyes flickered. *"I cut us through the canyon wall trail. Quiet. Fast."*

He paused.

*"As we came out the far end, Tadals descended."*

“*Tadals?*” Elmon asked.

“*Desert carrion vultures. Large. Patient.*”

Birgale’s voice lost its humor. “*We did not all leave that week.*”

He finally looked at Elmon. “*We buried a wizard. And his young swordsman.*”

Silence hung between them.

“So,” Birgale finished, tightening his scarf, “*keep your eyes on the horizon. Dust trails. Sudden shadows. Movement where there should be none.*”

He faced forward again. “*The desert gives warning.*”

“*If you learn to see it.*”

Birgale unrolled a weathered map across a crate and weighted the corners with small stones.

He tapped each mark as he spoke. “*Breech.*”

His finger slid south. “*Sorrows Landing. First well.*”

Further in. “*Way stations here. And here. If we miss one, we ration.*”

His hand paused over a jagged circle drawn in faded red ink.

“*Hanor. Dead volcano. The Courts of Mystal.*”

Elmon leaned closer.

“*It sits high on a scorched crown of stone,*” Birgale continued. “*The earth there is unnaturally warm. Some say fire elementals make their home in the fissures.*”

His finger traced a narrow path. “*Stray too far from this line and the sand can turn to glass under your feet.*”

Elmon studied the map carefully. Whatever heat could melt sand to glass was not something to test.

Birgale tapped another mark. “*Fire Canyon. Eleven hours southeast of the Courts. That’s our second secure stop.*”

He leaned back. “*You’ve come at a fortunate time.*”

Elmon glanced up.

“*Hottest part of the year. Least bandit activity. Dragons are in mating season. Most vermin burrow deep.*”

A small shrug. “*Even thieves prefer shade.*”

Elmon prepared carefully for the crossing of the Furnace.

He veiled two of the waterskins — not to hide them, but to slow evaporation and protect them from heat rot.

He etched small protection glyphs along the saddle straps and cinch lines, subtle enough not to spook the mounts.

On the forward horn of his saddle, he inscribed a discreet sigil of predatory flight — not to fly, but to startle and scatter aerial threats should they descend too near.

He laid a hand upon each steed in turn and read their echoes — testing temperament, fatigue, and resilience.

Satisfied, he turned back to the map.

Rather than memorize it, he wove it.

Contours, wells, canyon lines — fixed into a recall weave anchored to his breath.

It would not fade easily.

Then he hesitated.

He had never attempted this before.

He closed his eyes and shaped an Echo thread — light, precise — meant for one recipient.

He imagined Master Ortis seated in his sanctum. The desk. The sigil-marked door. The familiar scent of vellum and oil.

He formed the message carefully — not words alone, but intent.

Then he released it.

The thread vanished.

Gone.

Elmon exhaled slowly.

Either it had carried...

Or it had burned away in the desert wind.

Elmon contemplated the road before him.

He had never truly traveled.

Home. The School. And Break — the place of unraveling, where arrogance cracked and something truer was born.

Beyond that, the world had been ink and parchment. A map traced by others. A song heard only through walls. Control by familiarity.

The Filí Courts were not merely distant.

They were rumor. Fire. Judgment.

And now he walked toward them — not as a master of secrets.

But as a question seeking its answer.

The Hollow Moon rose red through the dust haze, and they departed.

The desert shifted under moonlight — silver where it had been gold, cool where it had burned. Birgale had not exaggerated. The world changed its color with the hour.

They rode through the wasteland without incident and reached Sorrows Landing before the heat crested.

Elmon tried the dragon stew.

It was rich, smoky, and strangely bright — warming more than the body. He found himself smiling despite the long ride.

Afterward, he wandered the market pavilions.

Spices. Bone charms. Bladed tools. Heat-treated glass.  
One piece drew him without warning.  
An ornate dagger, its hilt carved from polished dragon bone, the grain pale and luminous beneath the lamplight.  
He lifted it.  
The market dissolved.  
Sandstorm sky.  
A vast shape turning.  
An ancient dragon's eye fixed upon him — not hostile, not kind. "Keep me safe."  
The world snapped back.  
The dagger trembled in his hand.  
He released it.  
It did not fall.  
The grip tightened around his palm like living steel.  
Elmon frowned and walked calmly to the counter.  
He attempted to lay the blade down.  
It did not separate.  
"*Is this... common?*" he asked evenly.  
The merchant leaned forward, curious.  
He reached to take the dagger from Elmon's hand.  
The blade flashed.  
Not wild.  
Precise.  
A thin line opened across the merchant's finger.  
Blood welled instantly.  
The merchant staggered back, clutching his hand.  
"*That thing is bound!*" he hissed.  
Elmon looked down at the weapon.  
The bone handle pulsed faintly beneath his skin.  
Not possession.  
Recognition.  
The manager returned with a guard at his side.  
They approached cautiously.  
Elmon stood at the counter, attempting to pry the dagger from his palm. It would not release.  
The manager stopped short. "*Why did you stab my clerk?*"

Elmon blinked, genuinely confused.

*"I did not stab him. He reached for the blade while it lay open in my hand. He recoiled before I moved."*

*"That's ludicrous,"* the manager snapped. *"His hand is bleeding."*

Elmon studied the dagger, then looked up calmly. *"Perhaps he caught the edge."*

The clerk was brought forward, clutching his hand. *"Show him."*

Reluctantly, the clerk unwrapped the cloth.

Elmon leaned in.

The wound was not a clean slice.

It was punctured.

Torn.

Four small indentations curved in a crescent, as though teeth had closed and then ripped free.

The manager inhaled sharply.

The guard shifted his weight.

Elmon's gaze moved slowly to the dragon-bone hilt.

It felt warmer now.

Not hot.

Aware.

Elmon said calmly, *"If you would, please remove it. I intend to purchase it."*

At that instant, the dagger fell from his palm and struck the counter with a sharp metallic crack.

Everyone flinched.

Elmon stared at his hand.

*"I was not aware,"* he said evenly, *"that Sorrows Landing trades in cursed relics."*

The owner bristled. *"We do not sell cursed anything."*

Elmon knelt and lifted the dagger again — slowly this time.

He closed his eyes and whispered.

A faint sphere of pale light lifted from the dragon-bone hilt, hovering between them like captured breath.

The room grew very quiet.

*"It will not harm you,"* Elmon said. *"Touch it. It will show you its echo."*

The owner hesitated. Then, cautiously, he extended two fingers.

The moment he brushed the sphere—

Sandstorm sky.

A dragon's eye.

A vast jaw descending.

He stumbled backward with a cry.

*"It is cursed!"* he gasped. *"Bound to something ancient. Take it. Take it and leave my shop."*

Elmon's pulse quickened — not with fear, but recognition.

*"How much?"*

*"Nothing!"* the owner barked. *"Just take it from my counters."*

Elmon sheathed the dagger.

As he fastened it to his belt, the bone handle pulsed once — faintly.

Later, alone beneath the Hollow Moon, he drew it again.

Runes now glimmered faintly along the blade's length.

Near the hilt — etched as if always there — was the glyph of a dragon's tooth.

Elmon smiled, quiet and reverent.

*"Another relic,"* he murmured. *"Another question."*

He slept lightly that night.

And they rode at moonrise.

Just after the moon rose, Brigale shook Elmon awake.

*"Time."*

They moved through the stable yard in low lantern light. Tack tightened. Water skins checked. Packs secured.

As Brigale lifted the last saddle strap into place, his gaze caught the dagger at Elmon's belt.

*"New steel?"* he asked with a faint grin. *"Nice souvenir."*

Elmon glanced down at it, pleased.

*"Not exactly. It's a relic. Forged from the remains of an ancient black dragon. The merchants didn't know what they had."*

Brigale's hands paused.

*"Oh?"*

*"Yes,"* Elmon continued easily. *"It claimed me, I think. When the clerk tried to take it, it bit him. Drew blood. Fascinating response. I suspect layered consciousness embedded in the bone. I'll need to test resonance patterns once we're clear of the furnace."*

Brigale studied him a moment longer than comfort required.

*"Well,"* he said slowly, *"let's hope it likes guides."*

Elmon smiled, missing the weight beneath the words.

Inside his thoughts—

A voice.

Deep.

Scaled.

Measured like heat rolling across stone.

**Temper your tongue.**

A pause.

**He walks with old hunger.**

Elmon's hand stilled briefly on the reins.

He said nothing.

The dagger rested warm against his hip.

They reached Fire Canyon just before the high moon crested the jagged rim.

The cliffs rose like blackened teeth, their edges glowing faintly where heat still bled from the stone. Overhead, shapes circled against the darkening sky — vast wings catching red light.

Brigale tilted his chin upward. *"See them? Females. Hunting mates."*

Several dragons wheeled lazily above the canyon throat, their scales flashing copper, obsidian, ash-gray.

Elmon watched, smiling despite himself. There was majesty in them. Not the terror of battle dragons — but something older. Instinctive.

They unsaddled the steeds in the lee of a basalt outcropping. The stone radiated stored heat from the day. Blankets were laid. Water rationed carefully.

Brigale spoke without looking at him. *"We leave before the moon rises tonight."*

Elmon paused, tightening a strap. *"Why?"*

Brigale adjusted his blade casually — too casually.

*"We need to reach the Courts before sunrise. They close the gate at the rising of the Fiery Eye."*

He glanced toward the east. *"That's what they call the sun here."*

Elmon nodded slowly.

The dagger at his hip felt warmer than the canyon stone.

Inside his mind, the voice did not growl this time.

It observed.

**Fire above. Fire below.**

A pause.

**Predators do not only fly.**

Elmon's fingers stilled on the saddle horn.

He looked at Brigale. The guide was studying the canyon walls — measuring distance. Shadows. Exits.

Elmon smiled faintly — but this time, he did not volunteer any information.

Morning came hard and bright.

The sun had already cleared the canyon rim.  
Brigale was gone.  
His horse remained tied where it had been left — reins loose, gear undisturbed.  
Elmon stood very still.  
He did not call out.  
He walked the perimeter once. No drag marks. No blood. No signs of struggle near camp.  
He asked the stable boy.  
The water seller.  
Two guards at the gate.  
No one had seen him leave.  
Elmon moved to the edge of the gorge and sat.  
Below, the canyon dropped in layered shelves of red and black stone. Heat shimmered upward even this early. The wind carried dust and the faint scent of iron.  
He waited.  
Nearly an hour passed.  
Then footsteps.  
Irregular.  
Dragging.  
Elmon did not turn immediately.  
Brigale staggered into view.  
His nose broken.  
Left eye swelling.  
Dried blood at his temple.  
His side soaked through at the ribs.  
He stopped several paces away.  
“*Someone,*” Brigale rasped, “*does not want you to go there.*”  
Elmon rose slowly.  
“*How many?*”  
“*Five. Jumped me before dawn. On my way to wake you.*”  
Elmon did not raise his hands.  
Did not trace a glyph.  
Did not speak a word of casting.  
Instead—  
He listened.  
Not with ears.

With weave.

Brigale's echo trembled — pain, anger, embarrassment.

Fear.

But not deceit.

The memory was raw.

The angles aligned.

The blows came from behind.

One voice had said: *Stop the wizard before he reaches the Courts.*

Elmon released the read before it deepened.

No escalation.

No intrusion.

Just confirmation.

*"You did not lead them to me,"* Elmon said quietly.

Brigale straightened despite the pain.

*"I said I was a bandit. Not a traitor."*

The dagger at Elmon's hip pulsed once.

Approval.

Or interest.

Elmon studied Brigale's wounds. *"These were not amateurs."*

Brigale gave a humorless half-smile. *"No."*

He spat blood. *"They knew exactly where to strike."*

Elmon was unsettled.

Who would want to stop him?

*"I have no enemies,"* he said quietly, more to himself than to Brigale.

Heniss?

Caldra?

How would they even know?

Master Hawthorn?

No.

Hawthorn was petty — not strategic.

This was deliberate.

He helped Brigale to the healer at Fire Canyon.

The healer worked without ceremony — stitching flesh with steady hands, pouring a viscous potion down Brigale's throat. It smelled of burnt wormwood and dung.

Brigale gagged.

*"It works,"* the healer muttered.

It did.

Within the hour the bleeding had slowed, the tremor in Brigale's hands had ceased.

Elmon sat beside him in silence.

Then—

The voice again.

Low.

Deep.

Inside his skull.

*"They fear what you carry."*

Elmon answered aloud before thinking.

*"Why do they fear you?"*

Brigale blinked. *"I did not say anything."*

Elmon closed his mouth slowly.

The dagger at his hip felt warmer than the desert air.

Night fell.

They saddled in silence.

No more talk of dragons.

No more talk of bandits.

They rode.

### ***Arrival at the Courts of Mystal***

They reached the Filí gates hours before sunrise.

The structure loomed from the volcanic rise — not ornamental, not decorative — deliberate. Stone dark as cooled lava. Towers angular and austere.

The gates opened without challenge.

That disturbed Elmon more than resistance would have.

Inside, they were escorted through long corridors cut clean and sharp. No banners. No clutter. Only geometry.

They were led into a chamber.

Large.

Spare.

A table of black stone.

Several chairs.

They were told to wait.

Elmon retrieved the Filí token and placed it before him. He aligned it precisely — rune facing outward, not toward himself.

Respect.

Precision.

Claim without arrogance.

The door opened.

Three entered.

Not robed.

Not jeweled.

Plain garments of refined make.

Behind each stood an armored guard — silent, helmed, weapons drawn but lowered.

Measured threat.

Elmon stood and bowed.

He did not speak until they were seated.

Only then did he sit.

One of them — silver hair bound tight — regarded him steadily.

“*Sir,*” she said calmly, “*what is it you seek?*”

Elmon placed the Filí key upon the stone between them.

“*I am a disciple of Micrium Ortis,*” he said. “*Instructor at the Wizard School in Scathnard.*”

A flicker passed between the three.

Recognition.

Or caution.

“*I seek the grace of your hand in the research of an ancient relic that calls me.*”

Silence.

The air itself seemed to pause.

The second Filí leaned forward slightly. “*Calls you?*”

Not mocking.

Testing.

Elmon did not flinch.

“*Yes.*”

His hand rested lightly on the dragon-bone dagger. “*And others fear what I carry.*”

The third Filí’s gaze dropped to his belt.

Very slowly. “*Of course they do.*”

The youngest of the three leaned forward slightly. “*What offering does he send?*”

Elmon did not hesitate.

“*I am an Echomancer of the First Tier. I come not bearing coin or relic tribute.*”

He straightened.

*“I have awakened the Catar city of Break.”*

A pause.

*“And I greet you in the Yowl’s name.”*

For the briefest fraction of a breath, all three Filí stilled.

Not shock.

Recognition restrained.

The one in ornate robes — the Lore Master — rose slowly from his chair.

*“That city,”* he said carefully, pacing once behind the table, *“was destroyed three Tri-Gleams past.”*

Elmon remained standing.

*“Magistrate. Archivist. Lore Master.”*

He inclined his head respectfully to each in turn. *“I understand what your records state.”*

His voice steadied. *“The city was not destroyed.”*

The guards shifted.

The Lore Master stopped pacing.

Elmon continued.

*“The Catar requested aid from their Celestial Guide — Ishan of the Night Eyes.”*

One of the Filí’s fingers tightened on the edge of the table.

*“She answered.”*

Elmon’s eyes did not waver.

*“She cast a Veil of time and reality to secure the city until the appointed awakening.”*

A silence deeper than the room settled.

*“The people — the Elna’Sha — woke through a Gate of memory and suspended hour.”*

He placed his palm flat upon the stone table.

*“We reignited the Crystal Eye.”*

His voice lowered.

*“It pierced the sky.”*

*“It beckoned Ishan.”*

*“She came.”*

*“And she blessed the city.”*

The Archivist spoke for the first time.

*“You claim a Celestial manifestation?”*

*“I do not claim,”* Elmon answered evenly. *“I testify.”*

The Lore Master’s pacing ceased entirely. *“What did she say to you?”*

Elmon met their eyes.

*“She said the Eternal Whiteheart sanctioned me for this generation.”*

He allowed the next words to fall without embellishment.

*“She said Perdina’s path awaits in the hallowed archives of the Forgotten Thread.”*

Now the reaction changed.

Not surprise.

Concern.

The Magistrate’s jaw tightened.

*“You speak words not uttered in this chamber for centuries.”*

The youngest Fili leaned back slowly. *“And you speak them as if they were given yesterday.”*

Elmon nodded once.

*“They were.”*

Silence filled the room again.

But this time it was not disbelief.

It was calculation.

The Lore Master finally sat.

*“If what you say is false,”* he said quietly, *“you will not leave these Courts alive.”*

He lifted his gaze. *“And if it is true...”*

He did not finish.

He did not need to.

Elmon did not argue further. Instead, he closed his eyes.

*“I do not ask you to believe me.”*

He lifted his hand slowly. *“I will show you.”*

The guards tensed.

The Archivist leaned forward sharply.

Elmon did not draw sigil.

He did not chant.

He exhaled.

And from his palm, light unfolded.

Not illusion.

Not glamour.

Memory.

The chamber dimmed as the projection took form — a courtyard of crystal stone beneath a fractured sky. A beam of white radiance piercing heaven. Catar kneeling in reverence.

And above it —

Ishan.

Not descending.

Already present.

Her form was not flame, nor flesh — but layered brilliance. Veil and star and witness.

Her voice did not echo in the chamber.

It resonated inside it.

*“Elmon. You are called for this generation; they need you. The Eternal Whiteheart sanctioned you and made you for such a time as this.*

*Perdina’s path awaits in the hallowed archives of the Forgotten Thread. Return to your school. Ortis waits for your heart. He has seen the archive once.*

*There is much I would teach you —*

*but your heart must learn the ways. Your memories are scriptures yet to be forgotten.*

*Mine will guide you.”*

The projection did not shimmer.

It held.

Perfectly.

When it ended, it did not collapse.

It folded inward — like a book closing.

Silence filled the chamber.

The guards had lowered their weapons without realizing it.

The youngest Fili’s hand trembled.

The Archivist’s eyes were wet.

The Lore Master did not move at all.

He finally spoke. *“That... was not crafted.”*

*“No,”* Elmon answered quietly. *“That was witnessed.”*

The Magistrate’s voice was harder now. *“You understand what you have just done.”*

*“Yes.”*

*“You have shown us a Celestial record.”*

*“Yes.”*

*“You have revealed a directive sealed before the Third Gleam.”*

Elmon did not respond immediately.

Then:

*“I was told to come.”*

The Lore Master’s voice lowered further. *“Perdina is not a path.”*

*“It is a threshold.”*

Another silence.

Then the youngest Fili whispered:

*“And if the Whiteheart has sanctioned you...”*

The Archivist finished the thought.

*“...then the Courts must decide whether to stand beside you — or stand in your way.”*

The Archivist rose to his feet.

Not abruptly.

But as one who had just seen a text rewrite itself. *“What magic is this you project?”* he asked quietly.

It was not accusation.

It was assessment.

Elmon did not shift.

*“I call it Echo View,”* he replied. *“Or Weave Vision. I have not settled on its formal name. It is not illusion. It is witnessed memory — anchored and replayed.”*

The youngest Fili’s brow furrowed.

*“You extracted a Celestial imprint?”*

*“I did not extract it,”* Elmon corrected gently. *“I was present.”*

A long silence.

The Magistrate leaned back in his chair now — not dismissive.

Relaxed.

Studying.

*“You sent notice ahead,”* he said.

*“Yes. An Echo Script message to Micrium Ortis. You should have received his verification.”*

*“We did,”* the Magistrate replied.

His gaze sharpened. *“And he did not deny your claim.”*

The Archivist spoke again, slower this time. *“You are either dangerously untrained... or uniquely sanctioned.”*

Elmon did not answer.

The Lore Master folded his hands upon the table.

*“You have been granted provisional access,”* he said at last. *“The sealed vaults of sacred histories will open to you under supervision.”*

He turned slightly.

*“Accommodations have been prepared. For you.”*

A pause.

*“And for your guide — Brigale Morngal.”*

Elmon inclined his head. *“Your courtesy honors me.”*

The Magistrate’s eyes flicked briefly toward the guards — then back to Elmon.

*“Understand this, Silverwood. The Forgotten Thread is not a library. It is a wound.”*

*“And wounds,”* Elmon said quietly, *“are not meant to be ignored.”*

The Archivist’s lips almost moved into a smile.

*“Good,”* he said.

*“Then let us see whether you are thread... or blade.”*

Elmon spent six months within the Courts of Mystal.

Six months of ink-stained fingers. Of cross-referenced ledgers. Of forgotten margins and fractured glossaries.

He searched every note, mark, and name he had ever recorded. Every dream fragment. Every whisper from Break. Every echo tied to the staff of Perdina.

The archives yielded fragments.

References to the Perdina staff. Notes of its completion.

Margins referencing Lands End. Hidden Veils. Shadow Vaults.

Never direct. Always adjacent.

One line returned again and again from an older manuscript — half commentary, half prophecy:

*“As frost settles on crystal, so will his coming settle on fire.”*

He read it so often the ink began to feel warm beneath his fingers.

Frost on crystal.

Fire.

He did not yet understand which he was meant to be.

He found formal records of Perdina’s construction. Schematics. Rune alignment diagrams. Notations of final binding.

*“So,”* he murmured one evening, tracing the margin. *“The dwarves finished the work. That is good.”*

But finished did not mean whole.

And whole did not mean present.

The staff was not in the Filí vaults.

It had moved.

Or been hidden.

Or was waiting.

When the final scroll yielded nothing new, Elmon gathered his notes with deliberate care. Every copied fragment. Every speculative diagram. Every resonance map.

He thanked the Hall Managers formally — not as a student, but as one archivist to another.

They bowed with quiet curiosity.

Brigale, meanwhile, had adapted easily.

With no ambition for scrolls or relics, he explored the lower districts of the Courts, sampling Vault Ale and the notorious Mystery Wines. He returned each night with stories, flushed cheeks, and opinions about which tavern had the strongest brew.

Six months in the furnace had not broken him.

It had softened him.

Elmon watched him carefully.

The dagger at his side remained quiet.

Too quiet.

He prepared the horses in silence, checking straps, tightening cinches, binding his notes in oilskin once more. Brigale watched but did not interrupt.

When they exited the Filí Hall and stepped into the outer courtyard, Elmon paused.

He dismounted.

Walked several yards ahead.

The air shifted.

Without flourish, without raised voice, he traced a measured arc in the space before him. The weave parted.

A Gate formed — clean, circular, its edges humming with restrained resonance rather than spectacle.

Through it, Dragon's Breech could be seen — the stable yard, sun-bleached wood, a familiar water trough.

Elmon returned to his horse.

*"You first, Brigale."*

Brigale stared.

*"What in the furnace...?"* He looked from the Gate to Elmon. *"You mean to tell me we could have skipped the three days of sand, dragons, and dying?"*

Elmon shook his head.

*"No."*

He adjusted the reins calmly.

*"A gate requires memory. A place known. Felt. Anchored in the mind. I could not have brought us here before."*

He paused.

*"Until I learn how to go where I have never been."*

Brigale snorted once, half laugh, half disbelief.

*"You scholars are terrifying."*

He stepped through.

The desert vanished.

They emerged ten yards from the Dragon's Breech stable. The scent of dust and dragon stew drifted in the air as if no time had passed at all.

Elmon stepped through last.

The Gate folded inward and was gone.

Brigale looked at him again — differently this time.

*“You walked the furnace on purpose.”*

Elmon did not answer.

Elmon turned to Brigale and inclined his head — not as a master to a guide, but as one traveler to another.

*“You walked the furnace well,”* he said. *“And you did not turn aside when others might have.”*

He drew a small pouch from his satchel and placed it in Brigale’s hand.

*“Fifty shillings.”*

Brigale’s brows lifted.

*“Elmon—”*

*“And the horse,”* Elmon continued, untying the reins and placing them beside the pouch. *“Yours. Build something with it. A caravan. A stable. A name that does not require bruises.”*

Brigale stared at the animal. Then back at Elmon.

*“You’ll need it.”*

Elmon shook his head lightly.

*“No.”*

His gaze shifted northward — toward memory, toward discipline, toward unfinished instruction.

*“I must return to Scathnard. To Master Ortis. There are places between veils and shadows I do not yet understand. I have touched gates. I have awakened cities. But I do not yet know how to walk where memory ends.”*

He looked at Brigale again — calmer now. *“I will not need a horse for that.”*

Brigale let out a low breath — something between a laugh and reverence.

*“You scholars,”* he said quietly, *“are more dangerous than dragons.”*

Elmon smiled faintly. *“And sometimes less wise.”*

He turned toward the road.

The Ravenscript Archives fell from Elmon’s list.

He could not conceive of greater volumes than those he had just witnessed within the Courts of Mystal. The Filí had preserved memory not merely as record — but as living continuity. Whatever Ravenscript held, it would not exceed that depth.

No.

The next step was not breadth.

It was origin.

The **Arcanist Vault**.

There, he had learned, were stored the histories of crafted relics — dwarven works especially. Not just descriptions, but process accounts. Forge lineages. Material anomalies. Traceability records of mystical objects whose creation could not be replicated without understanding their first shaping.

If Perdina had been completed by dwarven hands...

Its final truth would not lie in legend.

It would lie in method.

And dwarves did not forget method.

Elmon adjusted the dragon-bone dagger at his belt — feeling its quiet weight.

The Vault would not merely tell him what Perdina was.

It might tell him how it was finished.

Elmon traced the weave.

No circle drawn.

No flourish.

Just intention.

The Gate opened.

He stepped through—

—and collided shoulder-to-shoulder with a tall figure mid-gesture.

The impact staggered them both.

Mist unraveled.

A crystal sphere faltered in midair.

Twenty students froze.

The battlefield classroom lay spread around them — anchor stones marking perimeter zones, faint resonance lines humming beneath the earth. The sky above was clear.

Ortis turned.

Fast.

Too fast.

His hand cut downward, and the air around Elmon compressed into a tightening lattice of echo-binding.

The students gasped.

The sphere cracked with a soft harmonic fracture.

But Ortis did not strike.

He hesitated.

There had been no echo disturbance.

No ripple.

No warning through the weave.  
No threshold tremor.  
Elmon simply... was.  
Standing there.  
Alive.  
Breathing.  
Smelling faintly of desert wind and dragon stew.  
Ortis lowered his hand slowly. “*You did not open a Gate,*” he said quietly.  
Elmon blinked. “*I did.*”  
Ortis’s eyes narrowed. “*No.*”  
He stepped forward, placing two fingers lightly against Elmon’s shoulder.  
“*The weave did not part.*”  
Silence deepened.  
One of the students whispered, “*Master... he appeared.*”  
Ortis turned to the class. “*Lesson.*”  
His voice was steady now. “*When something enters your awareness without disturbing the weave...*”  
He looked back at Elmon. “*...it means one of two things.*”  
A pause.  
“*It was permitted.*”  
Ortis studied him longer. “*...or it now walks between.*”  
The crystal sphere above them resumed its slow rotation.  
Elmon swallowed.  
For the first time since the furnace, he did not feel like he had returned home.  
He felt... measured.  
Their eyes met.  
Stormlight and wonder.  
For a heartbeat, neither spoke.  
Ortis blinked.  
Then laughed — not scholar, not keeper of veils — just a man who had once taught a boy.  
“*So...*” he said, brushing dust from his sleeve, “*where have you been?*”  
For a moment, he forgot entirely that twenty students stood in a half-circle around him, waiting for instruction.  
He turned abruptly.  
“*Class,*” he said, voice regaining its formal register, though the smile remained. “*Allow me to introduce Young Elmon Silverwood... after whom this school now bears its name.*”

A murmur moved through the students.

Elmon stepped beside him, draped an arm lightly across Ortis's shoulder, and turned him gently so they faced the class together.

He raised a hand in greeting.

*"And I,"* Elmon said easily, *"would like to introduce you to Master Micrium Ortis."*

He stepped slightly aside, gesturing with open palm.

*"Fili Sorcerer. Orcish blood. Bound to memory and myth. The only man I know who can lecture on echo theory while simultaneously detecting a lie in your breathing."*

The class laughed.

Ortis narrowed his eyes in mock warning.

Elmon continued.

*"He taught me that echoes are not sounds — they are responsibilities."*

He looked at Ortis briefly. *"And that knowledge is not power."*

*"It is weight."*

Silence settled — not heavy, but attentive.

Ortis studied him. *"You walk differently,"* he observed quietly.

Elmon smiled faintly. *"I walked the furnace."*

The students watched — wide-eyed.

The crystal spheres hovering in the air dimmed slowly, as if recognizing that whatever had just occurred outranked their lesson.

Ortis looked at them.

Then at Elmon.

Then back at the class. *"...That will be enough for today."*

He did not explain.

He did not assign work.

He simply lowered his hand and dismissed them.

The spheres dissolved.

And for once, Master Ortis forgot the lesson — because the real one had just begun.

They walked together toward Ortis's private sanctum.

Not as Master and student.

Not as legend and scholar.

As two men who had stood on the same field and survived.

The door sealed behind them.

For several days, they spoke.

Of the awakening of the Veiled City of Break — not Breech.

Of the Crystal Eye.

Of Ishan.

Of the words spoken over Elmon.

Of the dagger.

Of the furnace.

Of Emuroil.

*“He is at Break now,”* Elmon said quietly. *“Learning. Repaying. Trying to rebuild what he fractured.”*

Ortis nodded slowly. *“That city changes those who walk it.”*

Silence followed.

A good silence.

Then Elmon tilted his head slightly.

*“Is there a new student by the name of Peter Hornal?”*

Ortis’s brow lifted. *“Hornal?”*

He searched memory. *“We have a Peter Nindler. Recently admitted. Scholarship bearing the King’s seal.”*

Elmon smiled. *“Yes. That one.”*

Ortis studied him. *“You’re building something.”*

Elmon did not deny it.

They left the sanctum together — still speaking, still recalling fragments as if no time had passed — and walked toward the Chancellor’s Admissions Office.

They did not hurry.

The school had learned how to breathe again.

And so had they.

Along the way, Elmon caught sight of Entic appearing near the rear of the dormitory.

He was alone.

A notebook in hand. Writing.

Elmon did not call out. He focused. Placed thought into action.

Words without sound.

*I see you.*

Entic stiffened.

Spun.

And there — standing beside Ortis — was Elmon.

For a moment Entic did not move.

Then he crossed the distance and embraced him.

No formality.

No rank.

Just relief.

They exchanged brief words — surface things first. Then Elmon asked the name he had been holding back.

*“Elcrull.”* Entic’s expression shifted.

*“She is at Gatar Hall. Raven Claw.”*

He hesitated. *“She mastered first year, I hear.”*

Another pause.

*“She was called to a Baron’s Pit.”* Elmon’s face did not change. *“She nearly died.”*

The words struck like iron.

*“Slavers,”* Entic continued. *“She felled four. The fifth cracked her shoulder — bone shattered. She was taken.”*

A breath. *“Recovered later by the King’s Knights.”*

Silence.

*“I do not know her current location.”*

Elmon did not move.

For a long moment he became stone.

Memories flashed.

Her laugh.

Her tail flicking at his ear.

The way she moved with blade and claw.

Love stirred. Then thunder rolled across the courtyard.

Not from the sky. From him. Anger rose — violent, immediate.

The air tightened. Ortis seized his shoulders.

*“Steady yourself,”* he said sharply. *“Before you do something you regret.”*

Elmon dropped to his knees.

Tears fell freely. *“I must find her.”*

Ortis knelt in front of him. *“The King’s Knights rescued her. They will know where she is.”*

His voice softened.

*“Breathe. There will be time.”*

He held Elmon’s gaze until the tremor passed.

Then, deliberately: *“Come. Let us see what you have built.”*

They confirmed it in the registrar’s ledger.

Peter Hornal.

Registered.

Master’s track — Aerial Studies and Administrative Cohesion.

Ortis smiled faintly.

“Good.”

They made their way to the Arcane Investigations classroom.

Master Embook Unglient was mid-lecture when Ortis lifted a subtle hand — not disruptive, just enough to request a word. Embook stepped aside, and when he saw Elmon standing beside Ortis, he stopped entirely.

“Ah,” Embook breathed. “*So the winds have shifted.*”

A brief exchange followed — low voices, quick agreement.

Embook returned to the podium.

“*Ladies and gentlemen,*” he said calmly, “*we have a guest.*”

A ripple of curiosity moved through the room.

“*In fact,*” he continued, “*we have someone who understands archives better than most who sit in them.*”

Outside the classroom door, Elmon stepped into the corridor.

He did not rush.

He traced a quiet arc in the air — controlled, deliberate.

A Gate opened — not flamboyant, not roaring with power — but precise.

On the stage, just behind the lecture dais, the air shimmered.

Students leaned back in their seats.

Ortis raised a brow. He had not expected that.

A cloaked figure stepped through.

The Gate sealed behind him without sound.

Embook folded his hands.

“Well,” he muttered softly, amused. “*That is one way to enter.*”

The figure stepped forward.

“*I am here,*” he said evenly, “*to speak to Peter Hornal.*”

The room stiffened.

“*Peter Hornal, please stand.*”

Peter rose slowly, bewildered. “*I bring greetings,*” the cloaked figure continued, “*from the Veiled City of Break.*”

A murmur spread.

“*You mapped anchor stones. You traced glyph variations. You asked questions no one thought to ask.*”

Peter swallowed.

“*You preserved the recollections of the Elna Sha Catar — missing for three Tri Gleams.*”

The figure paused. “*I witnessed this.*”

The hood fell back.

Gasps broke across the chamber.

Peter stared. "*Elmon?*"

Elmon smiled.

Peter did not walk.

He ran.

Down the steps. Across the floor.

And embraced him without decorum.

The room erupted — not in noise, but in recognition. This was no rumor. No legend. The battle survivor. The Awakener of Break.

Peter pulled back, overwhelmed. "*You sent the scholarship,*" he said breathlessly.

Elmon nodded once. "*You earned it.*"

Embook descended from the podium. "*I believe,*" he said thoughtfully, "*that Master Hornal may require... expanded responsibilities.*"

He looked at Peter.

"*The Archives Office could use a mind that asks the wrong questions at the right time.*"

Peter blinked. "*You would work under me.*"

Peter looked from Embook... to Ortis... to Elmon.

He was trying not to cry.

Embook had not yet fully recovered from the Gate.

But this—

This unsettled him more.

"*You said Break,*" he repeated slowly. "*Not Breech.*"

Elmon nodded. "*Break. The Veiled City of the Elna Sha Catar.*"

A silence fell across the room.

"*That city,*" Embook said carefully, "*was recorded as destroyed three Tri Gleams past.*"

"*It was not destroyed,*" Elmon replied. "*It was secured.*"

A murmur rippled through the students.

Embook's gaze shifted to Peter. "*You saw this?*"

"*Yes, sir,*" Peter said, steadier now.

Elmon stepped aside slightly, giving Peter the floor. "*Tell him.*"

Peter swallowed once.

"The city unveiled at the ignition of the Crystal Eye. The Elna Sha emerged through a Gate of time and memory. The Celestial Ishan of the Night Eyes manifested in material form and issued proclamation."

The room was no longer murmuring.

It was silent.

Embook's voice lowered. *"You recorded this?"*

Peter nodded.

Embrook, *"What types and how many?"*

Peter thought for a moment flexing his fingers. *"Sixty-five pages on the Unveiling alone. Twenty-two on Vault inventories. Sixteen on interviews and primary historical figures."*

Embook blinked. *"That is not a report,"* he said quietly. *"That is a Volume Archive."*

He turned fully toward Peter. *"Why did you not bring this forward?"*

Peter looked honestly confused.

*"You gave us a year-end assignment,"* he said. *"I assumed it would serve as my thesis on relic and historical convergence."*

He paused. *"It would qualify, wouldn't it?"*

Embook stared at him for a long moment. "Yes," he said finally.

*"It would indeed."*

He turned toward the class. *"Ladies and gentlemen... history has just amended itself."*

Then he looked back at Peter. *"You will not be submitting this as a student assignment."*

A pause. *"You will be cataloging it as an archival series."*

The weight of that statement settled.

Elmon did not speak.

He simply watched Peter realize what had just happened.

Elmon spent several days within the Arcane Investigation study chamber, discerning the dagger's nature — not only its runes and resonance, but its behavior.

It did not merely hum.

It responded.

The blade bore the properties of sentience. Yet its form was simple — a dark blade, a dragon-tooth handle polished by age and grip. No gem. No embedded spirit stone. No obvious housing for intelligence.

Which meant the intelligence was not housed.

It was fused.

Elmon sought material truth.

He secured an audience with Bringer Sturngravel, the King's Forge Master.

When Elmon entered, Sturngravel sat at a granite worktable surrounded by trays of metal samples — mithril shavings, star-iron fragments, blackened ore from volcanic veins. He did not rise immediately. He studied Elmon first.

*"I've heard of you,"* Sturngravel said evenly. *"Master Elmon. Survivor of the Sage Crypt."*

His eyes moved to the wrapped object at Elmon's belt. *"What relic are you trying to catalogue now?"*

Elmon unsheathed the dagger and laid it flat upon the granite.

The blade made no sound as it touched stone.

But the air tightened.

Elmon leaned close and whispered softly to it — not a spell, but a reassurance.

Then he straightened. “*Master Sturngravel,*” he said calmly, “*this blade will attack if it perceives threat. I have told it you are assisting. Still — I would advise protection.*”

Sturngravel’s mouth twitched faintly.

“*So it bites.*”

He rose and retrieved a pair of interlaced forge-gloves — thick, articulated, reinforced at the fingers.

“*I have handled worse,*” he muttered.

He sat again and laid twelve sample blocks beside the blade — steel, void-iron, dwarven darksteel, starfall alloy.

He did not touch the dagger at first.

He studied its sheen.

Its edge line.

Its shadow.

“*Interesting,*” he murmured.

He lifted a small magnetized probe.

The dagger snapped toward it.

Not attracted.

Reactive.

Sturngravel’s brows lowered.

“*Not simply forged,*” he said quietly. “*It remembers.*”

He tested the blade against mithril.

No reaction.

Against darksteel.

A faint vibration.

Against star-iron.

The dagger hummed.

Sturngravel’s eyes flicked to Elmon.

“*This is not dragon-forged steel.*”

He paused.

“*This is bonded.*”

He leaned closer, voice dropping.

“*Dragon bone alone does not make a weapon sentient. Something was sealed during forging. Something alive.*”

The dagger shifted slightly on the stone.

Not sliding.

Adjusting.

Sturngravel did not flinch.

*“You’re not holding a cursed blade,”* he said.

*“You’re holding a pact.”*

One of the metal blocks began to glow.

Not red.

White.

Sturngravel swore under his breath and knocked it aside with the back of his glove.

*“Touchy.”*

He leaned back, studying the blade differently now.

*“Does it have a name?”*

Elmon hesitated.

Then in his mind, a voice — not growled, not whispered — spoken as fact:

**Virelyndra. I am flame of the elder breath. Veil-born.**

Elmon swallowed.

*“It calls itself Virelyndra. A Veil-born dragon of the elder breath.”*

Sturngravel did not laugh.

He did not dismiss it.

His brow lifted slowly.

*“You mean to tell me,”* he said carefully, *“that this blade may be fashioned from one of the First Broods?”*

Another voice brushed Elmon’s thoughts.

**I walked with Adama in Eyona.**

Elmon repeated it.

Sturngravel nearly lost his balance.

He rose abruptly.

Then — to Elmon’s surprise — bowed.

Not to the boy.

To the dagger.

He placed his open palm near the blade — slowly — then wrapped his reinforced glove around the hilt.

The dagger did not bite.

It allowed.

Sturngravel inhaled sharply.

*“Light,”* he murmured. *“It is far lighter than it should be.”*

His vision fogged.

The forge room faded.

An immense black dragon stood before him — star-marked upon its brow, ancient, deliberate.

Its teeth showed.

Not in hunger.

In warning.

Sturngravel did not retreat.

*“Why did they take you?”* he asked the vision.

The answer resonated through him like struck metal:

**My magic binds the evil within its vault of eternal submission.**

His throat tightened.

*“Who forged you?”*

The dragon’s gaze sharpened.

**I chose this form in death. My essence lives in the frame of my ending.**

The vision snapped away.

Sturngravel placed the dagger back on the stone.

Slowly.

He looked at Elmon.

*“This is no relic.”*

He spoke carefully now. *“This is an Essence-formed choice. It was not forged. It was willed.”*

His eyes darkened. *“The dragon did not die into steel.”*

*“It entered it.”*

Elmon blinked.

*“Well,”* he said softly, *“that answers a few questions.”*

He reached for the dagger.

It spun on the table.

Blade turning — not toward Elmon.

Toward Sturngravel.

At that exact moment —

Glass exploded.

A crossbow bolt tore through the window and buried itself in the far wall, inches from Sturngravel’s shoulder.

Elmon moved instantly.

Door open.

Rooftop.

A cloaked figure retreating across tile.

Gone.

Sturngravel did not shout.

He did not panic.

He merely exhaled. *"Made enemies already?"*

Elmon's jaw tightened. *"I know of none."*

Sturngravel snorted. *"Then someone fears what you carry."*

He glanced at the dagger. *"And perhaps what it remembers."*

Elmon laid five gold coins on the granite.

Sturngravel's hand covered them before they could shift.

*"Keep it sheathed,"* the forge master said quietly. *"And do not speak its name in crowded rooms."*

Elmon secured Virelyndra at his belt.

The blade felt... pleased.

Elmon walked alone.

No escort.

No sphere raised.

Only wind and stone and the weight at his belt.

He spoke softly — not aloud, not fully inward. *"How far can you see?"*

The dagger did not warm.

It did not pulse.

But the voice came — low, ancient, steady as submerged thunder.

**As far as you.**

Elmon slowed. *"And how far is that?"*

A pause.

Then:

*"You are not walking blind, Elmon."*

The words shifted.

*"Chosen before time.*

*Created with purpose.*

*Binder of darkness."*

Elmon stopped.

Not in fear.

In recognition.

Unwanted.  
Unmasked.  
Unproven.  
He looked down at Virelyndra.  
*"I was not created,"* he said quietly.  
The blade did not glow.  
It did not argue.  
It simply replied:  
*"All things bound are chosen at some point."*  
Silence stretched between them.  
Elmon's jaw tightened. *"I have chosen nothing yet."*  
A faint sensation.  
Approval.  
Or perhaps calculation. *"You will."*  
His thoughts spiraled.  
Ishan's proclamation.  
The awakening of Break.  
The star.  
The glyphs.  
The whisper.  
Chosen before time.  
Binder of darkness.  
He was only ninety-eight.  
Barely a century.  
Barely a self.  
*"You what?"*  
It was not disbelief.  
It was a plea.  
A question from a soul that suddenly feared it had been written before it was born.  
The thought pressed against him like a tightening band.  
Was he discovering purpose?  
Or uncovering programming?  
He did not linger.  
He moved.  
The corridors blurred.

Students stepped aside without knowing why.  
He reached Master Ortis's Sanctum and entered without knocking.  
Elmon entered like a storm bottled in flesh.  
Words came layered. Urgent. Fractured.  
Fragments of prophecy.  
Fragments of dragon-voice.  
Fragments of fear.  
*"Ishan said—"*  
*"The dagger called me—"*  
*"Binder of darkness—"*  
*"Before time—"*  
*"What if I was never choosing—"*  
He paced.  
He turned.  
He spoke over himself.  
Ortis sat beside the glyphic lamp.  
He blinked once.  
Twice.  
He did not interrupt.  
He did not correct.  
He did not theologize.  
He listened.  
Only when the words thinned into breath did Ortis rise.  
He stepped forward.  
Placed a single hand on Elmon's shoulder.  
And said only:  
*"Slow."*  
Silence expanded.  
*"Start at the beginning."*  
*"If this dagger is what it seems..."* Ortis said at last, voice low — not fearful, not excited, but measured. *"...then you do not carry a weapon."*  
He retrieved a tome bound in ash-leather, its spine scarred by heat.  
*"You carry a witness. A guardian ward"*  
He opened it carefully. *"Essence-forged relics are rare. Most are bindings. Some are curses. A few are vessels."*  
He looked up.

*“But a self-chosen form? That is neither relic nor prison.”*

His finger rested on a faded line of script.

*“That is a vow.”*

Elmon nodded faintly, still catching breath. *“It knew me,”* he said. *“Before I knew myself.”*

Ortis stepped closer.

*“It may not know you,”* he replied. *“It may know what you resemble.”*

Elmon’s brow tightened.

Ortis continued.

*“Dragons older than dynasties measure time differently. A century to you is a moment to them. A pattern, once seen, is remembered.”*

He placed a hand on Elmon’s shoulder.

*“If it remembers you... it may remember your echo. Not your birth.”*

Elmon collapsed into the guest chair as though the strength had been drawn from his spine.

*“How,”* he breathed, *“could it know I am meant to bind some evil... some darkness?”*

Ortis did not answer immediately.

He walked to the sanctum window.

The battlefield lay quiet beyond it. *“Listen carefully,”* he said at last.

*“Binding darkness is not a title. It is a tendency.”*

He turned.

*“You enter to what others avoid. You ask what others refuse. You step toward breach instead of away from it.”*

His gaze sharpened. *“You awakened Break. Unimaginable.”*

*“You confronted the Chancellor.”*

*“You freed Emuroil.”*

*“You now carry a dragon who chose to become a blade to contain something worse.”*

He paused.

*“Does that sound like destiny?*

*Or choice?”*

Silence stretched.

*“Evil,”* Ortis said quietly, *“is rarely defeated by the strongest.”*

*“It is bound by the one who will not turn away.”*

He stepped closer. *“If the dagger called you ‘binder of darkness’...”*

*“...it may not be prophecy.”*

*“It may be recognition.”*

Elmon swallowed. *“So I’m not written?”*

Ortis gave the faintest smile.

*"If you were written, Elmon, you would not be this unsettled."*

He leaned back against the desk. *"Fate does not ask questions."*

*"You do."*

Ortis thumbed through the ash-bound tome, scanning until his finger paused.

*"Ah..."*

He leaned closer to the page.

*"Interesting."*

He read slowly, not as a lecturer — but as one rediscovering something long buried.

*[When the Tree was planted by Adama upon Cragnearth, Darkness arose and whispered to the soil.*

*It taught nurture without wisdom. Growth without discernment. It showed Adama how to tend the root — while feeding the SINN beneath it."*

Ortis closed the book halfway.

*"The legend says Darkness did not destroy the Tree."*

He looked at Elmon. *"It taught him how to grow it."*

Silence settled in the sanctum.

Elmon's voice was steady. *"I know what SINN is."*

He did not speak as a student.

*"Magic used for personal gain. Control. Mastery over one's environment. Power without accountability."*

Ortis watched him carefully.

*"Yes,"* he said. *"That is one face of it."*

He set the tome down. *"SINN is not magic."*

*"It is intent married to hunger."*

He moved slowly across the sanctum. *"Magic is wind. Fire. Stone. Breath."*

*"SINN is when you believe the wind belongs to you."*

He stopped. *"You asked how the dagger could know you were meant to bind darkness."*

His eyes sharpened slightly. *"Darkness does not always roar."*

*"Sometimes it offers instruction."*

Elmon felt something settle — not comfort, but clarity. *"Then why do you still teach?"* he asked quietly.

*"You once walked those older ways."*

Ortis did not deny it.

He sat opposite Elmon now, no desk between them. *"I did."*

*"I bent the weave for my own advancement. For reputation. For mastery."*

His voice did not tremble. *“But I mistook skill for purpose.”*

He folded his hands. *“I teach now because I am no longer trying to own what I use.”*

He exhaled. *“Magic is a tool.”*

*“Used at work.”*

*“For aid.”*

*“For structure.”*

*“For preservation.”*

*“It is no longer a mirror in which I admire myself.”*

He looked directly at Elmon. *“There is a Presence now.”*

He did not name it. *“But it guides my restraint.”*

*“It reminds me that power without surrender becomes SINN.”*

A long quiet followed.

Ortis gestured lightly toward Virelyndra.

*“If that dragon bound evil into itself...”*

*“...and chose a form to continue that binding...”*

*“...then it understands SINN.”*

*“And it may recognize in you someone who refuses to nurture it.”*

Elmon felt the weight of that.

Not destiny.

Responsibility.

Ortis’s voice softened. *“You are not called because you are strong.”*

*“You are called because you question.”*

*“And SINN hates to be questioned.”*

Ortis turned another brittle page.

His finger stopped.

He did not read immediately.

When he did, it was softly.

*“Whiteheart asked of His creation who would be willing to bind Dragos—for his evil had forfeited his freedom and his power.*

*The firstborn of the dragons stood tall... and bowed.”*

That was all.

No commentary.

No explanation.

Ortis closed the tome.

He stepped forward and laid a steady hand on Elmon’s shoulder.

His voice was not triumphant.

It was careful. “*May we never teach mastery,*” he said quietly.

“*Only memory.*”

Elmon left the sanctum in silence.

The corridor felt longer than usual.

Students passed.

Voices murmured.

Life continued.

But inside him something had shifted — not violently... but irrevocably.

He reached the faculty dormitory found his permanent room and closed his door.

Sat on the edge of his bed.

Hands resting on his knees.

He did not know whether he was chosen.

He did not know whether he was being prepared.

He did not know whether he was walking toward something... or being walked toward it.

Eventually, exhaustion claimed him. But memory did not sleep.

### ***The Revealing***

The dream did not unfold like a tale.

It arrived as a witness.

There was no sky.

No ground.

Only vastness.

And within it—

A dragon.

Black as obsidian under starlight.

Majestic.

Not raging.

Not broken.

Trembling.

Not from fear—

From surrender.

Its wings spread wide, not in defiance, but in offering.

Before it stood something unseen.

Not form.

Not shape.

Presence.  
The dragon's fire did not extinguish.  
It turned inward.  
Flame became veil.  
Power became binding.  
Its roar became vow.  
The world shook—not from destruction, but from restraint.  
A name echoed through the vastness:  
Dragos.  
And the firstborn bowed.  
The fire that once consumed became a prison.  
Not iron.  
Not stone.  
But living memory.  
The dragon lifted its head once more—  
Not defeated.  
Transformed.  
And somewhere in that endless dark—  
A single reddish star burned upon its brow.  
Watching.  
Waiting.  
Elmon woke before dawn.  
His hand was on Virelyndra's hilt.  
The blade was warm.  
Not hot.  
Alive.  
He did not yet understand what he was meant to bind.  
But he understood this:  
Binding is not conquest.  
It is surrender.  
And as that thought settled—  
He slipped again.  
Not into sleep. Into a weave.  
Another dragon.  
Not like the first.

This one was vast and wrathful—wings torn by battle, eyes burning with refusal.  
Its roar fractured sky and stone alike.  
It did not bow.  
It did not tremble.  
It raged.  
Around it coiled the force he had just witnessed—the same flame-veil, the same living memory—but here it did not bloom gently.  
It tightened.  
It constricted.  
It drew the dragon downward.  
Not slain.  
Not shattered.  
Dragged.  
Into a pit veiled in silence.  
The beast screamed.  
The scream did not echo.  
It was swallowed.  
Not by death—  
But by eternal submission.  
The veil sealed.  
The fire dimmed.  
The world steadied.  
Elmon stirred. Not in fear. In recognition.  
He sat upright on the edge of his bed, breath shallow, fingers curled around Virelyndra's hilt.  
He was not a student in that moment.  
Not a hero.  
Not a scholar.  
He was something far less comfortable.  
Called and confused.  
Not yet ready to answer.  
The room was quiet.  
Dawn had not yet broken.  
He whispered into the stillness: "*I did not seek this... but it found me.*"  
The words did not feel like refusal.  
They felt like acknowledgment.

A haunting thought rose again into his waking mind.

Not spoken.

Not heard.

Remembered.

*I have called. Will YOU answer? WILL you serve?*

He did not recoil this time.

He remembered.

The city awakened by his hand. Peter Hornal, now inscribing history instead of guessing at it. Virelyndra — not forged, but waiting. The scream swallowed in the veiled pit.

And Perdina.

Not a weapon.

A key.

Not to power—

But to the Forgotten Thread.

A path sealed by Whiteheart for one who would walk not in mastery...

But in memory.

### ***Understanding***

*“Why do I need Ortis?”* he asked aloud into the dim chamber.

The answer did not come as sound.

It formed.

Like ink rising in water.

*“Because even chosen threads must be woven with care.”*

He closed his eyes. Memory talked

*“Ortis has seen the archives once.”*

A pause.

*“You must learn to slide the veil.”*

The phrase settled into him.

Slide.

Not tear.

Not conquer.

Slide.

*“To walk between memory and myth.”*

*“And return.”*

That last word struck him.

Return.

Not all who walk the veil come back whole.

Elmon exhaled slowly.

This was not about being powerful.

It was about being careful.

It was not about binding darkness.

It was about knowing when to bind... and when to bow.

He rose from the edge of his bed.

The dawn had begun to gray the window.

He did not feel ready.

But readiness had never been the requirement.

Only willingness.

Elmon would spend the next several weeks not mastering the veil—

But surviving it.

Ortis called it *sliding*.

“*Never pierce,*” Ortis said quietly. “*Piercing tears. Sliding preserves.*”

The first lesson was not movement.

It was perception.

Ortis had Elmon stand still within the sanctum and close his eyes.

“*Describe it.*”

“*The room,*” Elmon began.

“*Not the room.*”

Elmon inhaled slowly.

He let the space settle.

The air felt... layered.

Like silk draped over stone.

Like two rooms occupying the same place but disagreeing about it.

“*There is... resistance,*” Elmon said. “*Not force. Density.*”

Ortis nodded.

“*That is coherence. A veil is not emptiness. It is structured memory. When you slide, you are not leaving the room. You are aligning with a different agreement.*”

### ***The Study of Veils***

For the first exercise, Ortis placed a simple object upon the central table — a small obsidian token etched with a spiral.

Then he touched it.

The token dimmed.

Not vanished.

Dimmed. “*As long as you think of this as disappearing,*” Ortis said, “*you will fail.*”  
Elmon stepped forward.  
He did not reach.  
He softened.  
He let his awareness blur at the edges.  
The room did not move.  
He did.  
Like shifting weight from one foot to the other — but inward.  
There was a sensation of cool pressure across his skin.  
His hearing dulled.  
Then sharpened.  
The sanctum remained.  
But thinner.  
Edges softened.  
Light bent differently.  
He had not entered another world.  
He had stepped between agreements.  
The obsidian token shimmered in front of him — clearer here than it had been before.  
He picked it up.  
The moment he *thought* about returning, panic flickered.  
The veil tightened.  
Ortis’s voice reached him faintly:  
“*Do not recoil. Recoiling tears.*”  
Elmon exhaled.  
He did not leap back.  
He leaned.  
And the weight of the sanctum returned fully.  
The token lay in his palm.  
They repeated the process dozens of times.  
In.  
Out.  
In.  
Out.  
Each time shorter.  
Cleaner.

Less disorienting.  
Until Elmon could slide in and out without the spike of adrenaline.  
That was when Ortis stopped nodding approval.  
And grew serious.  
One evening, Ortis placed a silver ring upon the floor.  
Then he slid into the veil.  
And did not reappear.  
No shimmer.  
No ripple.  
Nothing.  
The sanctum felt whole.  
Normal.  
Empty.  
Elmon stood very still.  
This was the true test.  
Not retrieving an object.  
But retrieving a presence.  
He slid.  
The veil this time felt denser.  
Not because it had changed.  
Because he had.  
There — faint, like light through water — stood Ortis.  
Watching.  
Not guiding.  
Waiting.  
Elmon moved toward him carefully.  
Each step required intention.  
The veil pressed against his thoughts, testing their clarity.  
“*Do you feel it?*” Ortis asked — voice present without vibration.  
“*Yes.*”  
“*What?*”  
“*If I forget why I came... I will wander.*”  
Ortis smiled faintly.  
“*Good.*”  
He placed the ring in Elmon’s hand. “*Now return.*”

Elmon did not rush.  
He anchored his purpose.  
I came for the ring.  
I am returning with it.  
The world thickened again.  
He stood in the sanctum.  
The ring in his palm.  
Ortis emerged a heartbeat later.  
“*That,*” Ortis said softly, “*is how minds are lost.*”  
Elmon’s hands trembled. “*I could feel... drift.*”  
“*Yes.*”  
“*A pull.*”  
Ortis, “*Yes.*”  
“*The longer I stayed, the less urgent my return felt.*”  
Ortis met his eyes. “*That is why you need me.*”  
Elmon slid into the veil like slipping between sheets—soft, silent, sacred.  
The object rested where Ortis had placed it.  
He reached.  
It rose.  
But would not come.  
Not heavy.  
Not bound.  
Unclaimed.  
He pushed. Pulled. Pressed.  
The veil did not resist him.  
It resisted separation.  
He let it fall.  
Slid out.  
Ortis waited.  
No rebuke. Only clarity. “*Objects in the veil,*” Ortis said quietly, “*are not carried.*”  
Elmon frowned. “*They are remembered.*”  
The next morning Ortis sat him down.  
“*Your clothes walk with you,*” Ortis said. “*Your dagger. Your belt. Why?*”  
Elmon thought.  
“*Because I do not question them.*”

*“Because you do not separate them,”* Ortis corrected.  
Elmon slid into the veil again.  
He removed his shirt.  
Instantly—  
Cold.  
Not on skin.  
In awareness.  
Something missing.  
He reached for it.  
It would not move.  
It lay where he had set it, as though it belonged to the room.  
He stopped thinking of it as fabric.  
He remembered its warmth.  
Its weight across his shoulders.  
Its familiar presence against his chest.  
The sense of being clothed.  
The shirt was no longer an object.  
It was himself.  
It lifted easily.  
Settled across him without effort.  
He did not carry it.  
It moved because it was his.  
He turned toward the apple.  
Hunger stirred.  
He did not think of lifting it.  
He thought of eating.  
Of fullness.  
Of sweetness against his tongue.  
The apple rose into his hand.  
No resistance.  
He walked forward—  
Through the wall.  
Into the hall.  
Entic stood there.  
They saw one another.

Both paused.

Both understood.

*“You’re not disappearing,”* Elmon said slowly.

*“You’re anchoring twice.”*

Entic blinked.

*“I just... fade.”*

*“No,”* Elmon whispered. *“You remain.”*

Elmon walked through the wall into the classroom, walked to Ortis’s Sanctum door. He took the handle and, to himself, disregarded it as he had done all the time; it is part of me.

He opened the door in a veil wall. Ortis spun around to see the door opening, and no one was there. He paused reading the echo and noted there was an echo of the door with a voided weave.

He stepped back and slid into the veil to see Elmon standing there holding the doorknob and an apple core.

*“You did not move the door,”* Ortis said slowly. *“You forgot it was separate.”*

He slid back out of the veil. Ortis emerged a breath later.

Elmon lifted his hand, finishing the last bite of the apple.

*“Entic veil-walks naturally,”* Elmon said. *“I ran into him in the hall. We spoke — while in the veil.”*

Ortis raised a brow.

*“But his understanding differs,”* Elmon continued. *“He doesn’t slide. He wraps. When he grabs something, he forcibly makes it part of himself — breaks its bond to the outer weave.”*

*“Like my silver chain?”* Ortis asked quietly.

Elmon nodded.

*“That chain is Quinline.”*

Ortis blinked. *“Yes. Why?”*

*“Because Quinline is MANA-full. Saturated. The veil is MANA-infused — as all things are, though in differing degrees. When we slide, we cause a minor rupture in the MANA fabric.”*

He gestured with the apple core.

*“What happens in MANA happens in reality.”*

Ortis said nothing.

*“When we pass through, the MANA refolds. Like water closing after a stone. It does not remain torn — because nothing holds it open.”*

He stepped closer.

*“But if something is MANA-dense... and you have already assumed it as part of yourself...”*

He touched the chain lightly. *“It passes with you.”*

Ortis' expression shifted — not surprise.

Recognition.

*“So Entic doesn't tear the veil,”* Ortis said slowly.

*“He overwrites proximity,”* Elmon replied.

While they spoke, a book leapt from Ortis's shelf and struck the table.

A sigil formed in the air — pale, translucent.

A ghost mark.

Elmon turned.

*“Very good, Entic. How are you holding that?”*

Entic materialized beside them, finger extended. The sigil clung to the tip of it.

*“I reversed what you said,”* Entic replied. *“Instead of binding something to myself, I let the bond hang outward. As long as I maintain contact, it holds.”*

He lifted his finger.

The sigil vanished.

*“See?”*

Ortis shook his head gently.

*“Partially true. If you wrote within the veil itself, it would not manifest in this domain. At best — mist.”*

Elmon frowned.

*“Then he isn't writing in the veil.”*

Ortis' eyes sharpened.

*“No.”*

### ***The Experiment***

*“I will place something in the veil,”* Ortis said.

He slid between layers and vanished.

Moments later he returned.

*“There is a ledger on the podium within.”*

Entic ghost-walked.

He reached.

His hand passed through it.

He tried again — slower.

It shimmered faintly — unreachable.

He uncloaked.

*“Nothing. It's like smoke.”*

Ortis nodded.

*“Good.”*

## **The Test**

*“Entic. Ghost walk. Touch Elmon’s arm. Do not seize — only rest your hand.”*

*“Elmon. When you feel him — veil walk.”*

*“Entic — maintain contact. When you lose it — uncloak.”*

Elmon swallowed.

*“Begin.”*

Entic faded.

He stepped forward and laid his hand against Elmon’s sleeve.

Elmon flickered.

Colors muted.

Edges blurred.

He was neither here nor gone.

The world shifted like overlapping glass.

Elmon tried to slide.

At first — resistance.

Then —

It caught.

Entic’s grip failed.

Elmon slipped entirely from him.

Entic uncloaked abruptly.

Elmon stood behind him.

Then vanished.

Silence.

Ortis waited.

*“Elmon. Return.”*

Elmon reappeared.

## **What They Learned**

*“What did you see?”* Ortis asked.

Entic spoke first.

*“He was... half. Like a ghost bleeding in and out.”*

Elmon nodded slowly.

*“The world desaturated. Then cleared. Like two domains trying to agree.”*

Ortis began pacing.

Then stopped.

Raised a finger.

*“He is not veil walking.”*

Both turned.

*“There is only one veil to enter from this realm.”*

He looked at Entic.

*“Ghost walk again.”*

Entic obeyed.

Ortis veil-walked and reached toward him.

At contact, Ortis exited the veil.

He turned to Elmon.

*“Do you see me?”*

*“No.”* Elmon replied.

*“Entic. Uncloak.”*

Entic blinked.

*“I don’t ‘uncloak.’ I simply stop holding it.”*

Ortis’ expression hardened into clarity.

*“You are not entering the veil.”*

He looked between them.

*“You are wearing it.”*

Silence fell.

*“You do not leave this domain,”* Ortis continued. *“You wrap yourself in its adjacent layer.”*

He stepped closer.

*“Like a man moving through water — but remaining in air.”*

Elmon whispered:

*“He isn’t veil walking.”*

Ortis nodded.

*“He is veil cloaking.”*

Ortis froze.

Then he moved — quickly — to the chalkboard.

White dust flew.

Symbols. Ratios. Spiral diagrams. Layered domains intersecting at a single axis.

Neither Elmon nor Entic understood the equations — but they felt the urgency.

Ortis spoke while writing.

*“That explains much.”*

He drew a circle. Then another around it. Then a third — offset.

*“After the Scourge War, there were those who claimed to live in what they called the Dark Light. They went mad from prolonged exposure to it.”*

He underlined *Dark Light* twice.

*“They built a citadel of light within it to survive.”*

He turned.

*“And they believed the Veil concealed them.”*

Silence.

Then his eyes sharpened. *“No... not concealed.”*

He began writing again. *“Misaligned.”*

### ***The Realization***

*“A weave,”* Ortis continued, tapping the board, *“is mental intention shaping MANA. It exists in the MANA fabric, not in the physical domain.”*

He drew a flowing lattice. *“That makes it traceable.”*

He turned slowly toward Elmon.

*“If Entic were entering the same veil you are... we would see rupture distortion.”*

He tapped the board again. *“But we do not.”*

The chalk snapped in his fingers. *“Elmon — you solved one of the oldest mysteries.”*

Elmon blinked. *“I did?”*

“ ”

Ortis stepped closer. *“Why does every veil walker enter the same veil?”*

Silence hung.

He whispered: *“Because perhaps... they don’t.”*

### ***The Shift***

He erased half the board and drew vertical planes intersecting like pages in a book.

*“What if the veil we speak of is merely the one most aligned with our cognition?”*

He drew another plane. *“What if there are adjacent veils?”*

Another. *“Shadowed veils.”*

Another. *“Star veils.”*

Another. *“Light veils.”*

He stepped back. *“What if veil walking is not entering the veil — but entering the one your mind can harmonize with?”*

Elmon’s pulse quickened. *“And Entic?”*

Ortis’ eyes gleamed. *“He does not step between domains.”*

*“He drapes one.”*

Ortis did not speak immediately.

He moved to his study table.

Opened his black ledger — the one he used only when theory bordered on heresy.  
He dipped the quill slowly.  
Wrote.  
Not hurried. Not excited.  
Measured.  
Precise.  
Elmon and Entic waited.  
Finally, Ortis spoke without looking up. *“If this is true...”*  
Scratch of quill.  
*“...then the veil is not singular.”*  
He drew a layered spiral.  
*“Which means it is navigable.”*  
He paused.  
Then added another ring inside the first. *“And if it is navigable...”*  
His voice lowered. *“One should be able to enter a veil while already in a veil.”*  
The room felt smaller.  
Entic shifted slightly.  
Elmon did not move.  
Ortis finally looked up. *“But...”*  
He underlined the word three times. *“You must believe the second veil exists.”*  
Silence. *“Not intellectually.”*  
*“Structurally.”*  
He tapped his own temple. *“If your mind does not hold the architecture of the second veil... you will not enter it.”*  
Another pause.  
*“And worse...”*  
He closed the ledger slowly. *“If you enter it without knowing how to return to the one you left...”*  
His eyes settled on Elmon.  
*“You will not be lost.”*  
*“That would be merciful.”*  
*“You will simply... not know where you are.”*  
Ortis did not pace this time.  
He sat very still.  
Fingers steepled beneath his chin. *“I wonder...”* he murmured slowly.  
*“...if that is how the Manija time-walk.”*

He looked up. *“And the Mystics.”*

*“And the Shadow Hunters.”*

His voice dropped.

*“They do not move through space.”*

*“They move through interpretation.”*

Elmon felt the room shift — not physically — conceptually.

Ortis stood abruptly. *“This is staggering.”*

He turned to the chalkboard and erased half of what he had written.

*“No.”*

*“This is not hyperbole.”*

He wrote deliberately:

Veil Walking is not traversal. It is alignment.

Then beneath it:

The Veil is not a place. It is a reflection of cognition.

He stepped back. *“If this holds...”*

He looked at Elmon and Entic both. *“Then each veil is a belief-echo.”*

*“And nested veils...”*

He underlined the next words carefully. *“...are layered truths.”*

Silence settled thick.

Elmon spoke quietly. *“So the veil is not somewhere we go.”*

Ortis nodded slowly. *“It is what we are capable of perceiving.”*

*“And what we can survive.”*

Ortis closed the black ledger slowly.

He did not look excited. He looked resolved.

*“Elmon... I believe you are ready.”*

Elmon lifted his eyes. *“To seek the Archives of the Forgotten Thread.”*

Silence held between them.

*“Some practices,”* Ortis continued, voice steady, *“are not about mastery. They are about exposure.”*

*“Some experiments do not prove theories.”*

*“They reveal realities we never understood.”*

He stepped closer.

*“You have seen how Celestials alter what is.”*

*“They do not cast.”*

*“They do not weave.”*

*“They do not force.”*

*“They align.”*

He gestured lightly toward the air.

*“Their minds are structured differently. Broader. Simultaneous. They perceive layered domains as a single fabric.”*

*“What we call miracle... is simply coherence to them.”*

He held Elmon’s gaze. *“You are not celestial.”*

*“But you are positioned.”*

*“And position grants perspective.”*

He rested a hand on Elmon’s shoulder. *“The Archives will not open to power.”*

*“They will open to alignment.”*

A pause.

*“You are ready — not because you know enough.”*

*“But because you have stopped trying to control what you do not understand.”*

Ortis’s voice was low. Reverent.

*“Elmon... I believe you are ready to seek the Archives.”*

Not because he had mastered veil walking.

But because he had begun to think differently.

To perceive reality not as fixed—

but as responsive.

*“Some practices,”* Ortis continued softly, *“do not grant power. They grant perspective. They reveal that what we call hidden... is only misunderstood.”*

He gestured faintly toward the air between them.

*“The veil is not a place.”*

*“It is a response.”*

*“Not a secret.”*

*“A mirror.”*

He studied Elmon carefully.

*“Celestials do not cast as we do.”*

*“They do not force the weave.”*

*“They align it.”*

*“Their minds are architectural. Their thought carries structure. When they act, reality adjusts—not because it is conquered... but because it recognizes coherence.”*

A pause.

*“...which is why.”*

He did not finish the sentence. He didn’t need to.

Elmon understood.

He was not ready because he controlled the veil.

He was ready because the veil no longer resisted him.

It had begun to recognize him. And that was far more dangerous.

# Those That Walked this Volume

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## **Alfred Domoris**

Gray Elf. Heir not to a throne, but to restraint.  
Roommate to the Awakener, witness to what kings fear to see.  
He carried no blade of legend, yet stood near one who would fracture history.  
Of Escarious blood — and yet, he chose friendship over inheritance.

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## **Appolice Scullcracker**

Half Mountain Dwarf Benish Human.  
Third Regiment of Siege Masters.  
A hammer in human form.  
He did not question the Veil.  
He broke what threatened those who did.  
When others saw mystery, he saw an enemy.  
And sometimes — that was enough.

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## **Bengamin Paldocker Aldern Human.**

Young scholar of Echo structure. Archeological Dig Mapper. Dig Arcane Investigator. Witness to the Unveiling.

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## **Brigale Morngal Benish Human.**

Once bandit. Later guide.  
He walked the Furnace without believing in myth —  
until myth walked beside him.  
He knew the desert.  
He did not know he was escorting destiny.

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## **Christin Maple High Elf**

Bright as dawn.  
She loved Elmon before the world claimed him.  
She offered him a future simple and warm.  
He chose a path that burned instead.

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## **Da INorgal Demon Death Ward**

Death Ward of the Fractured Covenant.  
She stood in the shadow of Dragos when the First Fall shook the weave.  
She aligned with the Coven of the Damned and whispered to a Titan of Duty — teaching it doubt.  
The attempt nearly unmade her.  
Cast into Tarturus, she learned what eternity without purpose feels like.  
Belanose summoned her back — not in mercy, but in function.  
She does not hate the light. She believes it should be tested.  
And she nearly tested the wrong one.

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## **Ebic Hendiss Fiedra Gelf**

Lore Master. Keeper of structured truth.  
He did not seek power—he cataloged it.  
Yet in recording the fracture, he became part of it.  
Some knowledge does not remain neutral.

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## **Elcrull Misters Warden Tiger Catar**

War Blade in oath before she was in title.  
She did not love Elmon softly.  
She loved him like a vow carved in steel.  
And steel remembers.

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## **Elmin Whinsho High Elf**

Archivist of silent things.  
He traced truths others overlooked.  
Not through brilliance—but patience.

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He did not uncover secrets.  
He allowed them to reveal themselves.

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**Elmon Silverwood Half High Elf**

Archivist of silent things.  
He traced truths others overlooked.  
Not through brilliance—but patience.  
He did not uncover secrets.  
He allowed them to reveal themselves.

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**Emor Silverwood Half High Elf**

Wanderer of disciplined magic.  
Teacher not by doctrine—but by presence.  
He did not shape Elmon.  
He gave him the space to become.

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**Emuroil Fethemor Falmer Elf.**

Chancellor once fractured.  
Archivist of truth.  
Accused. Broken. Not erased.  
He walked memory like a man walking shattered glass.  
And chose not to bleed others for it.

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**Entic Orisal Avian Human**

Ghost Walker.  
Child of dual resonance.  
He did not step into the Veil.  
The Veil stepped around him.  
He existed where sight failed and intent lingered.

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**Erias Silverwood Benish Human**

Druid of hearth and flame.  
First witness to the fire that answered.  
She laughed at a candle — and history listened.  
Some mothers birth sons.  
Some birth turning points.

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**Eric Tabound Gajnoma Human**

Celestial Paladin of the Second Star.  
He did not waver in the crypt.  
Where others saw death—he saw duty.  
Faith, when unbroken, becomes a weapon.

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**Galwel Heginol High Elf**

Former Chancellor.  
Seeker of structured understanding.  
He believed knowledge could contain chaos.  
Break proved otherwise.

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**Garek Holman Half Human Half Dwarf**

Sergeant of law and boundary.  
He did not inspire greatness.  
He enforced reality.  
And sometimes—that is what saves the reckless

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**Gortis Pendora Half Faey Elf Hobbit**

Assembler of the improbable.  
He saw structure where others saw fragments.  
He did not discover truth—  
he aligned it.

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**Goundom Bornt Half Ogre half Orc**

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Guardian of Break.  
He was not subtle.  
He was not meant to be.  
Some doors are not held by thought—but by force.

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**Ishan of the Night Eyes Celestial Guide**

Keeper of sanctioned memory.  
She did not descend.  
She waited.  
When Break awoke, she was already there.

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**Jurioam Smith Benish Human**

Archivist of perfect recall.  
He remembered what others forgot.  
But memory without interpretation  
is only storage—not wisdom.

---

**Justin Rindle Mountain Dwarf**

Guard in formation. Builder in thought.  
He fought where he stood.  
He dreamed beyond it.  
Not all foundations are made of stone.

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**Karid Schumer Benish Human**

Archer of Echo sight.  
He saw what moved before it moved.  
Precision is not speed—  
it is understanding.

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**Lady Estralla Kelt Human**

Healer of the broken field.  
She did not fight the war.  
She preserved what remained after it.  
Mercy is a form of resistance.

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**Lord Engles Dwarf**

High Paladin of Whiteheart.  
He did not question judgment.  
He carried it.  
Some men become law by living it.

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**Maria Hourline High Elf**

Daughter of position. Seeker of meaning.  
She stood where expectation was given—  
but looked beyond it.  
Not all inheritance is accepted.

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**Master Micrium Ortis Black Orc**

Filí Sorcerer.  
Myth-burdened mind.  
He did not give Elmon power.  
He gave him boundaries.  
And sometimes, that is the greater gift.

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**Master Morgan Half Orc half Human**

Black Cloak of the Shadow Hall.  
He trained minds for unseen war.  
What he taught was not power—  
but control of its absence.

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**Mejia Silverwood Gray Elf**

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Observer of currents beneath words.  
She spoke little.  
But what she saw... moved others.  
Awareness is influence without force.

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**Mensor Aberelli Kelt Human**

Cleric of ordered faith.  
He believed structure preserved truth.  
But truth does not always remain where it is placed.

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**Mercikom Urgal Half Catar Hobbit**

Watcher of the threshold.  
He stood where others passed.  
Guarding is not glory—  
it is endurance.

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**Mistres Elroola Emwinster Gray Elf**

Magistrate of consequence.  
She did not shape events.  
She ensured they were remembered.  
Authority is the weight of outcomes.

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**Mistress Eseeal Caldra Half Brown Orc**

Instructor of emotional axis.  
She did not teach control—  
she taught understanding of imbalance.  
Power misread becomes destruction.

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**Morian Helsper Kelt Human**

Master of Echo Hall.  
He turned ruin into record.  
Not all endings are losses—  
some are archives.

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**Nacrious SilverWood High Elf**

Watcher of oath and bloodline.  
He stood between legacy and consequence.  
Some fathers guard.  
Some prepare.

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**Parris Fluor Treant**

Ancient of rooted wisdom.  
He did not answer quickly—  
because truth does not rush.  
He reminded Elmon:  
the heart does not require complexity to be correct.

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**Peter Hornal Andarons Human**

Recorder of the Unveiling.  
He wrote what others witnessed.  
History often belongs to the one who remembers it.

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**Pranor Moring Half Dwarf Orc**

Knight of fracture and endurance.  
He stood where lines broke.  
And held—  
long enough for others to survive.

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**Qinzel Dar eye Gray Orc**

Blade of precise violence.  
He did not hesitate.  
His strike was not heroic—  
it was necessary.

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**Rann Isccraje Human**

Opener of sealed things.  
He did not understand what he uncovered.  
Few who begin discovery ever do.

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**Relis SINN Convergence**

Myst Gazer of the Third Circle.  
He walked too close to understanding—  
and did not return unchanged.  
Some truths rewrite the one who sees them.

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**Scarlet Silverwood Half High Elf**

A life that did not unfold.  
Her absence shaped more than her presence ever could.  
Not all impact requires time.

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**Sendther Mulgin Half Dwarf Human**

Keeper of the unnoticed.  
Grounds maintained. Systems held.  
Without him—  
things fail quietly.

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**Sensto Moria Benish Human**

Sigil Cleric of the Crypt War.  
He did not fall.  
He endured long enough to matter.  
Sometimes survival is the turning point.

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**Virelyndra Vil-born dragon**

Flame of elder breath.  
She was not forged.  
She chose form.  
Her edge does not cut flesh first —  
it judges intent.

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**Whiteheart The Eternal**

Source of sanction and binding.  
He does not revoke.  
He allows consequences.

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When Elmon Silverwood spoke to the flame, he did not know he was crossing a threshold older than memory.

The fire did not burn because he commanded it.

It burned because it recognized him.

And when it answered, nothing in his life would ever be small again.

This is the beginning of Elmon Silverwood—not as a master, not as a hero—but as a question the world chose to answer.

In the hidden corners of Cragnearth, ancient forces stir.

Cities long thought destroyed awaken.

Dragons whisper forgotten vows.

And a boy who only meant to ask a question becomes the hinge of history.

The Echo has begun.

### **Marks Upon the Veil**

The symbols upon this cover are not decoration. They are witnesses.

The Eye of Daron sees what others cannot.

The Hawk of the Shadow Veil walks where memory thins.

And the sigil carried by Elmon... is not a mark of power— but of forces bound to him beyond his choosing.

Some will recognize them. Most will not.

### **From the world of Whiteheart—**

a Referee-centric epic where magic has consequence,  
memory is currency, and power is never free.

**Marten Thieman**

**Lands of Whiteheart**