

The Tithe of Thorns

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Title Page

THE TITHE OF THORNS

Book One of The Thornhallow Chronicles

by Celeste Ashford

A Sample

Copyright Notice

The Tithe of Thorns

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Dedication

For everyone who built something in a place the world called cursed.

Epigraph

The most dangerous thing in the world is a woman with a trade ledger and a grudge against the way things are.

— Osteren merchant proverb, attributed (incorrectly) to the Voss dynasty

Chapter 1

Seraphine Voss

The duskling fishmonger was going to kill the grain trader, or the grain trader was going to kill the fishmonger, and either way I was going to lose a market stall and spend the afternoon redistributing perishable inventory instead of finishing the Thalecross trade projections.

I found them at the eastern edge of the market, such as it was, their argument loud enough to carry over the morning thrum of construction hammers and the deeper, steadier hum of the Hearthstone. Brask, the duskling, had his cart wedged sideways across the gap between two lean-tos, effectively blocking access to the stall that Callum had designated for grain storage three days ago. Petra, the human trader from somewhere east of the Ironblood border, vague about specifics I hadn't pressed, had her fists on her hips and was explaining, in a voice designed for projection across a battlefield, exactly what she thought of duskling spatial reasoning.

"You've got the whole northern row," Petra said. "The whole thing. And you park your cart here because — what? Because the morning shade is better?"

Brask's enormous eyes, solid black and the size of saucers, caught the early light and threw it back. "The shade keeps the catch fresh. Your grain doesn't rot in sunlight. My fish does. This is not a difficult calculation."

He was right. It wasn't a difficult calculation. But Petra wasn't arguing about fish. She was arguing about territory, and Brask was arguing about territory, and the fish and the grain were the excuse they'd both chosen because neither wanted to say what this was actually about: a duskling and a human trying to work out who belonged where in a settlement that was six months old and still making up the rules.

The root system is tangled, I thought. Two species sharing soil for the first time. The nutrients run differently underground than they do above it. You can't fix this with fertilizer. You have to reroute the water.

"Brask," I said. "If I move the fishmonger stall twenty feet north, against the Timber Hall's east wall, you get permanent shade from the overhang and access to the cold-storage trench Grenn's team dug last week. You keep the catch fresh and you're closer to the kitchen supply route, which saves your runners about ten minutes per delivery."

Brask considered this. His night-adapted eyes narrowed to assess the proposed location. His Veilprint, the low steady hum of a Common Mark related to nocturnal perception, settled from agitation into calculation.

"And Petra," I continued, "the northern row stays grain-dedicated, but I'm extending it west by three stalls. You get priority placement and a locked storage structure by end of week, which you've been requesting since you arrived. In return, you extend your surplus-sharing agreement to cover the duskling quarter during low-catch weeks."

Petra's mouth opened. Closed. She was running the numbers.

"That's a better deal than what I asked for," she said, suspicious.

"It's a better deal than what either of you asked for," I said. "Which is why I'm offering it instead of what you asked for. The market doesn't work if its two busiest vendors are at war over six feet of dirt. Roothold runs on margins, and the margin between a functioning economy and a fistfight is exactly the width of this conversation."

Petra looked at Brask. Brask looked at Petra. Some negotiation happened silently between them — the kind that doesn't require Resonance sensitivity to read. Just two people deciding they'd rather do business than make a point.

"Fine," Petra said.

"Acceptable," Brask said, which was dusking for enthusiastic agreement.

I left them to the specifics and walked north, toward the wall.

Two supply chains realigned, one cultural friction point defused, and it isn't even mid-morning. At this rate, I'll run out of problems by lunch and have to invent new ones.

You won't run out, Quill said. *You never do.*

Quill's voice arrived the way it always did — felt rather than heard, like a thought that wasn't mine but knew the shape of my mind well enough to fit. Dry. Precise. Faintly amused by everything.

"That's the most encouraging thing you've said all week," I said, aloud, because talking to the voice in my head was one of those habits I'd stopped being embarrassed about around month two.

I wasn't encouraging you. I was observing a pattern.

"Same thing, coming from you."

The wall was coming along. Grenn's team had the eastern section up to seven feet. Raw stone shaped by his Mark, mortared by human hands, a collaboration that looked exactly as elegant as a stonewrought and a dozen human laborers could make it. Functional, unlovely, and yielding a return on anxiety investment every time I walked past — seven feet of stone that converted worry into structural confidence at a rate I wished the rest of the settlement could match.

Grenn himself was chest-deep in the foundation trench, his granite-grey skin blending with the stone he was shaping. Stonewrought worked stone the way Resonance worked emotion. Through contact, through understanding, through the patient insistence that raw material could become something more than what it was. He looked up when I approached, and his expression did the stonewrought equivalent of a smile — a slight reduction in the appearance of geological disapproval.

"Northern section?" I asked.

"Three days. The stone here has a grain to it. Runs southeast. I can work with it, but it wants to go where it wants to go."

"Like everything else in this settlement."

"Like everything else."

I touched the wall. Cool stone, morning-damp, solid under my palm. Eight months ago, this was forest floor. Six months ago, it was a clearing with a Veilstone deposit and a woman with a ledger and a theory that people were worth more than the empires charged for them. Now it was a wall. Not a metaphor. An actual wall, with actual stone, built by actual people who had chosen (chosen, I reminded myself, chosen) to be here.

The ring on its cord shifted against my sternum as I leaned forward. The Voss signet. I hadn't worn it on my hand in two years. I wore it against my skin because the weight of it was useful, a reminder that sat exactly where my heartbeat could find it. *You came from people who built empires on the backs of others. You are building something else. Don't forget the difference. Don't forget how thin the line is.*

I pulled my hand from the wall and kept walking.

Roothold in the morning was a sensory education in organized chaos.

The Hearthstone dominated the central plaza, a cluster of violet Veilstone crystals rising twelve feet from the earth like the exposed nervous system of something vast and dreaming. It hummed. Not loudly. Not the kind of sound you heard with your ears so much as the kind you felt in the architecture of your chest, between your ribs where breathing happened. I'd lived beside it for six months and I still couldn't decide if the hum was comforting or unsettling. Both, probably. Like most things worth building around.

Around the Hearthstone, the market was waking. Stalls opening, awnings unfurling, the early-morning babel of five languages and three species trying to buy breakfast. A thornborn herbalist arranged dried root-bundles with the precision of someone who understood that presentation was half the sale. Two human children, refugees from the eastern borderlands who had arrived last month with nothing but their mother and a talent for finding trouble, chased a luminous beetle through the stall rows while a rivven water-trader cursed them in tonal Rivvish and then gave them honeyed flatbread when they stopped.

I felt them. All of them.

Not individually. Not at this distance, not with this many. But the Bonds hummed beneath everything else, a tapestry of emotional weather that I carried in my chest like a second heartbeat. Three hundred and twelve threads of connection, each one a person I had Named, a Veilprint I had touched, a True Name I had spoken into the space between their soul and the Veil's intention. Tavi was the warmest. The oldest Bond, the deepest root, her steady patience a bass note beneath the chorus. The thornborn from the first wave were a cluster of green-golden warmth, herbalists and healers, their Marks humming in harmony with the forest they'd grown up in. The humans were sharper, more varied, all anxiety and determination and the restless frequency of people who had bet everything on a place that didn't exist a year ago.

Tavi found me at the Timber Hall steps, because Tavi always found me at the Timber Hall steps. She had the kind of patience that made punctuality look like a personality flaw in everyone else.

"The thornborn from the deep forest sent a runner," she said. Her voice was low, deliberate, each word given exactly the weight it deserved and no more. Seven feet of bark-textured stillness, her amber eyes steady as tree sap. "Verdain's clan. Forty people. They'll arrive within the week."

"Seeking Naming?"

"Seeking safety. The Naming question will come after."

I nodded. Forty people. Forty new mouths, forty new housing requirements, forty new negotiations about cultural integration and resource allocation and where in the settlement's expanding geography to put a thornborn clan that might bring its own herbalists, its own customs, its own ideas about how a community should govern itself. I ran the numbers automatically. Food supply, strained but manageable if the rivven fishing rotation held. Building materials, meaning Grenn's team would need to shift priorities. Water was fine since the aqueduct system Maren designed was operating at sixty percent capacity. I arrived at the same answer I always arrived at: *possible, if nothing else goes wrong in the next week.*

Nothing else would go wrong in the next week. Something else would absolutely go wrong in the next week. Roothold ran on the margin between optimism and reality, and I'd learned to budget for both.

"Tell Callum to start the intake projections," I said. "Housing options, food allocation, potential Mark assessments for the new arrivals. And tell him to reserve space in the eastern quarter. The thornborn cluster there has been requesting a cultural district, and if Verdain's people integrate with the existing group, that's enough density to justify dedicated infrastructure."

"Seraphine."

"And the medicinal herb supply chain will need adjustment. Verdain's people are deep-forest gatherers, different stock than what we're cultivating. If we can get them to share propagation techniques with the existing herbalists, we double our pharmaceutical variety and—"

"Seraphine."

Tavi's hand on my arm. Warm. Bark-textured. Enormous and impossibly gentle.

"Breathe," she said.

I breathed.

"The clan will arrive in a week. Not today. You have time."

"I have a list."

“You always have a list. The list will be there after you’ve eaten breakfast.”

She was right. She was always right about the things I was always wrong about, which was why the Bond between us worked. She provided the root system I kept forgetting I needed while I was busy building canopy.

I let her steer me toward the Timber Hall’s communal kitchen. The smell hit first. Grain-bread baking, thornborn bark-tea brewing, the sharp bright scent of rivven watercress that meant someone had started the salad rotation early. The kitchen was Roothold’s actual government. Not the council table, not my ledger, not the trade agreements I kept in a locked chest under my bed. The kitchen. Where a duskling fry-cook argued with a human baker about oil temperatures while a thornborn elder supervised both with the serene authority of someone who had been cooking since before either of them was born.

I ate bread. I drank tea. I let the Bond-hum settle into its background frequency, the ambient noise of being connected to three hundred people, most of whom were having an ordinary morning, thank the Veil and any Arbiter that might be listening.

The ground trembled.

Brief. Barely enough to rattle the cups. Tavi didn’t react. Nobody reacted. The tremors had been happening since before I arrived in the Thornhallow, low rumbles that ran through the basin like the breathing of something vast and slow. They’d become normal. An overhead cost the settlement absorbed without discussion, amortized into daily life. The kind of thing you stopped noticing the way you stopped noticing the Hearthstone’s hum, which was to say you didn’t stop noticing it at all, you just learned to carry it.

But this one felt different. Not stronger. Not closer. Different in a way I couldn’t name, which was profoundly unsettling for a woman whose entire gift was Naming things. For a half-second, beneath the tremor’s ordinary rumble, I felt something else. A frequency below the Veilstone’s hum, below the Bonds, below the ambient noise of three hundred lives. Something listening. Something that had been listening for a long time.

Did you feel that? I asked Quill.

A pause. Quill’s pauses were information. Most people paused because they were thinking. Quill paused because it was deciding how much to tell me.

Feel what?

“Don’t do that,” I said, quiet enough that Tavi wouldn’t hear. “Don’t pretend you didn’t notice.”

I noticed a tremor. They happen. The Thornhallow sits on geologically active substrate.

“That wasn’t geological.”

Then what was it?

I didn’t have an answer. The frequency was already gone, dissolved back into the Veilstone’s hum, buried beneath three hundred Bonds and a morning full of logistics. I filed it. Next to the compass drift that nobody could explain, next to the distances in the deep forest that didn’t add up, next to the way the Hearthstone’s glow intensified during Naming ceremonies as if something vast were leaning in to watch.

I told myself it could wait. After the Thalecross projections. After the intake planning. After whatever new crisis was waiting in the next hour.

The Thalecross delegation was approaching from the west. A sky-kith scout, Lira, one of two in Roothold, hollow-boned and sharp-eyed and capable of spotting a caravan at twelve miles, had reported their position at dawn. Three wagons, diplomatic flags, moving at trade-speed rather than military-speed. Good signs. Probably.

I spent the rest of the morning in my quarters, a generous term for the partitioned corner of the Timber Hall that contained a cot, a desk, four crates of documents, and more maps than wall space to pin them on. The maps were the real luxury. Three of the Thornhallow’s interior, each contradicting the others on distances because the Thornhallow lied about distances. One of the eastern border region, military grade, acquired through channels

I preferred not to examine. And one, the most important, that I'd drawn myself. Roothold, as it was and as I intended it to be. Trade routes in blue. Infrastructure in black. Problems in red.

There was a lot of red.

I opened the ledger. Not the money ledger, though that one was also important. This one tracked what money couldn't. Names spoken. Bonds held. Citizens as people, each one a thread in the tapestry I was weaving between the world as it was and the world as it could be.

Seraphine Voss, Namer, Founder of Roothold. Citizens Named: 47. Total population: 312. Bonds active: 47. Bonds strong: 31. Bonds uncertain: 16.

Uncertain. I hated that column. Sixteen people whose Bonds I could feel but whose loyalty I couldn't verify through anything except the magic that had created the loyalty in the first place. Sixteen people who followed me because the Resonance said they should, and who might or might not have chosen to follow me if the Resonance hadn't spoken first.

The ethical audit again? Quill said.

"It's not an audit. It's a concern."

It's a recurring concern that you address with the same internal monologue approximately every third day. This is day three. You're on schedule.

"Your compassion is overwhelming."

I'm not here for compassion. I'm here because you need someone who tells you the truth without the Bond's coloring.

That was the thing about Quill. No body. No Veilprint. No origin I could identify or Name I could speak. Just a voice in my mind, dry and calculating and unsettling in its precision, that had been there since the first week in the Thornhallow, as if the forest itself had decided I needed an advisor and had manufactured one from ambient sarcasm and raw intelligence.

I closed the ledger. Three hundred and twelve citizens. A country the size of a large village. A Veilstone deposit worth more than most imperial treasuries. A wall going up. A trade delegation incoming. An Arbiter rumored to sleep beneath my feet. And forty thornborn arriving in a week who would need feeding and housing and answers to questions I hadn't finished asking myself.

I stood. Stretched. Walked to the window — a gap in the Timber Hall's planking that Grenn hadn't gotten around to sealing and that I hadn't asked him to seal because the draft was the cheapest amenity in my budget, carrying the Thornhallow's morning air free of charge. Wet bark, crushed fern, ozone, and something underneath all of it that smelled the way the Veilstone hummed, which was to say it smelled like potential crystallized into geography.

"We're going to need a bigger ledger," I said.

You're going to need considerably more than that, Quill said.

"Start with the ledger. The rest follows."

Below, Roothold was building itself. Hammer-strikes and market-chatter and the low, steady hum of a Veilstone deposit that remembered what this forest was before the empires named it cursed. I could feel every person in it. The shape of what it was becoming — not just a settlement, not just a market, but a proof of concept written in timber and trade agreements and the irreducible stubbornness of a woman who had burned a dynasty and built something better from the ash.

The ground didn't tremble again.

I went back to work.

Chapter 2

Seraphine Voss

The Thalecross delegation arrived at mid-afternoon, which told me everything I needed to know about their intentions before anyone opened their mouth.

A trade caravan traveling at standard pace would have arrived at noon. A military escort would have pushed through at dawn. Mid-afternoon meant they'd camped last night within easy distance of Roothold and spent the morning deliberating about whether to actually come in. Cautious. Risk-averse. Which meant they were interested enough to make the journey and nervous enough to hesitate at the gate.

I smiled to myself. Nervous buyers pay closer attention to the terms. And close attention is where I live.

Three wagons. Diplomatic flags, the Thalecross sunburst in gold on pale green, religious iconography that their theocracy stamped on everything from treaties to table linens. Six armed escorts, ceremonial rather than combat-grade. Polished breastplates, ornamental polearms, the kind of military display that said *we're important* rather than *we're dangerous*. And three envoys, dismounting at the eastern gate with the careful posture of people who had been told to expect a bandit camp and were recalibrating in real time.

I was waiting at the Hearthstone.

This was by design. The Hearthstone was Roothold's best argument, twelve feet of luminous violet crystal rising from the earth, humming at a frequency that even the Thalecross envoys could feel in their teeth. The afternoon light caught the deposit and threw prismatic shadows across the plaza, violet and amber and a deeper indigo that shifted when you moved your head. Up close, the crystal's surface was warm to the touch and faintly granular, like heated sand, and its hum traveled through the soles of your feet and settled somewhere behind your sternum. On days like this, when the sun hit it directly, you could smell it too - a sharp mineral sweetness, like lightning caught in quartz. Two thornborn children were playing in the shadows, chasing the color patterns across the flagstones, their bark-skinned feet slapping against stone still damp from the morning's dew. I'd told them to play elsewhere an hour ago. They'd ignored me. Children were Roothold's most effective propaganda, and they didn't even know it.

Behind me, the market was in full operation. Three species trading, arguing, eating together, conducting the daily miracle of organized coexistence that the empires had declared impossible for centuries.

The staging was deliberate. Every leader staged. The difference between me and the empire-builders was that my staging told the truth.

"Delegate Sorel," I said, stepping forward to meet the lead envoy. I kept my stride measured, unhurried - the walk of a sovereign, not a supplicant, though the distinction was mostly in my own head. "Roothold welcomes the Thalecross Dominion."

Sorel was older, mid-fifties, with a weathered face and the kind of deep-set eyes that spent more time reading scripture than trade reports. His Veilprint registered before his handshake did. Common Mark, minor empathic sensitivity. Too faint to read emotions directly, yet strong enough to sense a conversation's tenor. The Thalecross had sent someone who could feel, however faintly, whether I was being honest.

I adjusted my delivery. With an empath, even a minor one, the trick wasn't sincerity. The trick was making sure the sincerity registered on the frequency they were listening on.

"Namer Voss." His handshake was formal, dry, the grip of a man who touched as few things as possible. "The Dominion appreciates Roothold's... hospitality."

The pause before *hospitality* was doing a lot of work. It carried approximately nine diplomatic sub-meanings, chief among them: *we're willing to pretend you're a real nation for the duration of this visit*.

"Please," I said. "Let me show you what you came to see."

I walked them through the market.

This was also deliberate. The Thalecross Dominion was an agrarian theocracy. Their wealth was in soil, their culture was in cultivation, their religion centered on the Arbiters as sleeping agricultural gods who blessed the faithful with good harvests. Their envoys would respond to growth. So I showed them growth.

The thornborn herbalist quarter first, Roothold's pharmaceutical corridor, where bark-skinned healers cultivated medicinal roots in raised beds that used the Veilstone's ambient radiation to accelerate growth cycles. The air in the corridor was thick with competing scents - the astringent bite of bloodroot tincture, the honeyed warmth of goldseal resin, and beneath it all the green, loamy smell of soil that had been Veil-enriched until it hummed faintly to the touch. Dried herb bundles hung from overhead racks in neat rows, their leaves curling inward like fists, and the ambient violet glow from the nearby deposit gave everything the bruised-purple tint of a late autumn twilight. The root-remedies were good. Better than good. Thornborn healing traditions predated the human empires by several hundred years, and the Veilstone enhancement made them better yet. I watched Sorel's eyes as we passed the drying racks. His fingers twitched toward a bundle of silverleaf - the healer's instinct, recognizing potency even through diplomatic composure. His Veilprint flickered with what I interpreted as professional interest suppressed beneath diplomatic neutrality.

"These cultivation methods," said Envoy Cassia, the younger of the two junior delegates. Brown-haired, sharp-featured, the only one taking notes. "They're thornborn traditional practices?"

"Enhanced by proximity to the Veilstone deposit. The ambient energy density accelerates growth and increases potency. Roothold's medicinal herbs are roughly thirty percent more effective than equivalent stock grown outside the Thornhallow."

Cassia wrote this down. I could feel her Veilprint too, dormant, with no active Mark, but the unmistakable hum of someone whose mind worked faster than her station allowed. She would be the one writing the report. Sorel would decide the headline, but Cassia would write the detail.

"You've tested this potency claim?" The third envoy, Jaris, was heavysset and skeptical, his Veilprint the flattest of the three. No Mark at all, dormant or otherwise. Pure human bureaucrat. "Verified it independently?"

"We've conducted comparative trials with standard herb stock traded from your own Dominion's eastern provinces. I have the documentation if you'd like to review it."

I didn't mention that the documentation was six pages of meticulous data compiled by a thornborn healer who couldn't write in the human common tongue and a human refugee who couldn't tell the difference between a medicinal root and a tree stump. The data was sound. The research team was a cultural negotiation unto itself. Welcome to Roothold.

The market was next. I let it speak for itself, mostly because the market was a better diplomat than I was. Every stall told a story of diversity. Dusklings smoked fish beside human grain-bread. Rivven water-purified salt, cleaner than anything the empires produced, stacked next to thornborn fiber-cloth that regulated body temperature through trace Veilstone weave. The envoys' eyes widened at the Veilstone-chip currency system, standardized cuts that were weight-verified and backed by the deposit humming twenty feet away. Simple. Transparent. The kind of monetary innovation that the Gilt Republic of Osteren had been trying to develop for a decade and kept failing at because they couldn't stop adding exploitative interest structures.

They're impressed, I noted. Sorel is suppressing it. Cassia is cataloguing it. Jaris is looking for the catch.

The catch, Quill said, is that none of this can exist without you.

A useful observation and an uncomfortable one. I let the thought settle without answering. Some truths were better acknowledged than argued with, and Quill could read my silence as clearly as my words.

We negotiated in the Timber Hall.

I'd set the table with intention. The thornborn tea-service - three cups of amber-bark brew, still steaming, releasing the warm cinnamon-and-woodsmoke scent that thornborn reserved for honored guests - signaled cul-

tural respect. Roothold's preliminary trade prospectus, bound in pressed thornleaf with the settlement's seal stamped in Veilstone-chip ink, announced that we had data. Three chairs, slightly better than the ones I usually sat in, upholstered with duskling-woven fabric that was soft enough to notice, communicated that our guests mattered. Afternoon light fell through the Hall's high windows in amber columns, catching dust motes and the faint crystalline shimmer that the Hearthstone threw into everything within a hundred yards. The hum was audible through the walls, a bass note that Sorel's empathic Mark would register as ambient sincerity. I hadn't planned that. The Thornhallow had.

"The Dominion's eastern provinces produce surplus grain," I said, opening without preamble. Sorel's empathic sensitivity would read stalling as insincerity, and I needed him comfortable. "Specifically, winter wheat and barley. Your yields have exceeded consumption by roughly twelve percent for three consecutive years, which means you're either stockpiling or selling at a loss to the Ironblood Compact, who are your only current trading partner on that border."

Sorel's face didn't change. But his Veilprint rippled, the empathic equivalent of a flinch. I'd hit a nerve. The Thalecross surplus problem was a known issue in their domestic politics. Too much grain. Too few buyers. And the Ironblood Compact paying deliberately low prices because they knew the Dominion had no alternatives.

"Roothold has thornborn medicinal herbs at thirty percent enhanced potency, a growing rivven water-purification capability, and a Veilstone deposit that produces crystal of higher density than anything currently on the continental market. We have no grain. You lack pharmaceuticals. You lack clean-water technology. And the Valdren Imperium controls your eastern Veilstone supply line."

I let the math do the work. The Voss training, twelve years of watching my family's merchant empire operate and six years of active participation before I burned it down, had taught me that the best negotiation didn't feel like a negotiation. It felt like a revelation. You didn't convince people. You showed them what they already wanted and gave them a reason to admit it.

"You're proposing an exchange," Sorel said carefully.

"I'm proposing a trade agreement. Medicinal herbs, ten varieties, bulk quantities, quarterly delivery via established route, in exchange for grain seed. We'll grow our own after the first delivery, but we need the starting stock and the cultivation guidance your agricultural specialists can provide."

"Seed." Sorel turned the word over. "Not finished grain."

"Roothold doesn't want to depend on imports. We want to produce. Your seed, our soil, the Veilstone's enhancement. Within two growing seasons, we'll be self-sufficient in grain and you'll have a permanent pharmaceutical supplier that doesn't route through Valdren-controlled territory."

Cassia's stylus moved fast. Jaris leaned back, arms folded, the body language of a man who wanted to say no and couldn't find the math to support it.

Sorel was quiet. His Veilprint had settled into something I read as genuine consideration, the empathic Mark processing my words and the emotional architecture behind them simultaneously. He was feeling for deception and finding conviction instead. Which was the most dangerous thing about dealing with empathaths: you had to actually believe what you were selling. Lucky for both of us, I did.

"The Dominion will want exclusivity," Sorel said.

"On medicinal herbs, I'll offer first-right-of-refusal for two years, after which the agreement converts to preferential pricing. On Veilstone, I won't promise exclusivity. The deposit serves Roothold first, and trade access will expand as our refining capacity grows. But the Dominion will be our first Veilstone trade partner. That's worth more than exclusivity. It's position."

"Position," Sorel repeated.

"You'd be the first empire to formally trade with Roothold. When the others come, and they will, you'll have established terms and established precedent. The Dominion will have been here first. That's a story your religious council can tell. The first to recognize what grew in the Thornhallow."

I watched it land. Sorel's faith was genuine. I could feel it through the empathic Mark's ambient output, a low warm frequency of belief that colored everything he processed. The Thalecross worshipped the Arbiters as agricultural deities, and the Thornhallow, the place where one might sleep, was theologically loaded terrain. I hadn't manufactured this angle. I'd recognized it. The difference mattered.

"And the Valdren Imperium?" Sorel asked, and his voice was careful in a way that had nothing to do with trade. "Do they know you're here?"

"They know."

They knew. The Valdren Imperium was the largest military power on the continent, and Roothold sat at the geographic center of the territory they considered theirs by default. The question was what they intended to do about it, and the answer was the subject of approximately a third of my insomnia.

"They just haven't decided what to do about it yet," I said.

They've decided, Quill said, inside my head, low enough that even my own thoughts had to strain to hear it. *They're simply not ready.*

I didn't let the ice in that observation reach my face. Instead I held Sorel's gaze and let the silence do what silences do best in a negotiation: transfer weight. After a beat, he nodded. Whatever he'd been looking for in my expression, he'd found enough of it to proceed.

The agreement was signed before sunset.

Sorel set down his cup, the bark-brew dregs forming a dark ring at the bottom, and extended his hand across the table. "The Dominion will treat with Roothold," he said. The words carried the cadence of ritual - the Thalecross way of saying *this is a thing that has been decided*. I took his hand. His grip was different from the one at the gate: warmer, firmer, the handshake of a man who had stopped calculating whether to be here and started calculating what to do next.

Three copies, one for Sorel, one for Roothold's records, one for the Thalecross religious council. Thornborn medicinal herbs, ten named varieties, quarterly delivery beginning with the next growing season's harvest. Thalecross grain seed, winter wheat, barley, and a cold-weather rye that their eastern provinces had developed, to arrive within six weeks. First-right-of-refusal on Roothold pharmaceuticals for two years. Preliminary Veilstone trade consultation to begin within the quarter.

Roothold's first international trade agreement. I read through each copy twice, checking the language against the verbal terms, making sure Cassia's precise hand hadn't introduced any subtle qualifications I'd missed. She hadn't. The woman was thorough, but she was honest. I respected that. It was rarer than people assumed.

I stood on the Timber Hall steps and watched the delegation load their wagons. Sorel clasped my hand at the gate, a warmer grip this time, his Veilprint carrying the unmistakable frequency of a man who had arrived expecting a curiosity and was leaving having encountered a proposition. Cassia gave me a look that said *I know what you did in there and I'm going to write it all down*. Jaris gave me a look that said *I still don't trust this, but the numbers work*.

The numbers worked. That was the foundation everything else was built on. I had hope. I had ideology. I had the moral conviction that wildkin and humans could share a continent without one subjugating the other. But the numbers were what mattered, because the empires understood numbers. They'd dismiss philosophy and ignore sentiment, yet numbers were the one language every throne on the continent spoke fluently.

I was going to build a nation in that language. Trade agreement by trade agreement. Supply chain by supply chain. Until Roothold was so deeply woven into the continental economy that destroying it would cost more than tolerating it.

An ambitious margin to maintain, Quill observed.

"All margins are ambitious. That's what makes them margins."

The wagons disappeared into the Thornhallow's green throat, the diplomatic flags catching the last of the daylight before the canopy swallowed them. The forest closed behind them like a curtain drawn by an unseen hand, branches settling back into place, the evening chorus of insects and night-birds resuming as if the delegation had never come. Only the wheel-ruts in the mud and the lingering scent of Thalecross road-dust - dry, chalky, faintly floral from the plains herbs they'd traveled through - confirmed that the last six hours had been real and not something I'd negotiated in my sleep.

I allowed myself one moment. One breath. One second of standing on the steps of a building I'd helped raise in a settlement I'd founded in a forest the empires called cursed, feeling the Veilstone hum and the Bond-tapestry pulse and the deep satisfaction that came from having made something that worked — the rarest luxury in my inventory, and one I could never keep in stock.

Then Tavi appeared at my shoulder.

"There are people at the western perimeter," she said. "Thornborn. Verdain's clan. They're early."

Forty people. A week early. Hungry, wary, carrying whatever the deep forest hadn't taken from them.

The satisfaction drained from my body the way liquidity drains from a failing venture - all at once, leaving only the dry weight of obligations that didn't care whether you'd had a good day.

The moment evaporated. The ledger opened in my mind — the real one, the one that never closed, whose columns never balanced. Housing. Food. Water. Cultural integration. Mark assessment. Potential Naming ceremonies. The thousand small negotiations that turned refugees into citizens. The infrastructure wasn't ready. The grain seed wouldn't arrive for six weeks. The eastern quarter expansion I'd planned for Verdain's people was still a sketch on one of my maps, equity I'd drawn against a future I hadn't earned yet.

The nation was growing faster than I could build it. Which was either the best problem I'd ever had or the one that would bury me — a leveraged position where the growth was real but the foundation was borrowed time, and borrowed time accrued interest I couldn't see until the payment came due.

"Tell Callum," I said. "Tell Grenn. And tell the kitchen to double the evening prep."

I went inside, and began.

Chapter 3

Seraphine Voss

Verdain's people came out of the deep Thornhallow looking like the forest had tried to keep them.

Forty thornborn. Bark-skinned, vine-haired, ranging in height from six to eight feet, carrying everything they owned in woven packs strapped across shoulders broad enough to fill doorframes. Their bark showed the scratches and pale scars of deep-forest travel - sap still beading in fresh wounds on some of the younger ones, the amber droplets catching the light like tiny trapped sunsets. The adults were steady-eyed and careful, their pheromone communication running in frequencies I could smell but only partly decode: sap-sweet stress, bitter-green wariness, the mineral undertone of exhaustion. Beneath it all, the heavy musk of recently felled wood - the scent thornborn carried when they'd been near destroyed trees, their own kind's grief written in chemistry. The children were silent, which was worse than crying. Crying meant they still expected someone to fix it. Silence meant they'd stopped expecting.

The smallest child, barely three feet tall with vine-hair still thin and spring-green, clutched a carved root-figure to her chest. She stared at the Hearthstone with amber eyes so wide they seemed to take up half her face.

I met them at the western perimeter with Tavi.

Tavi's presence was deliberate. She was the oldest thornborn in Roothold, the cultural bridge I needed, and her Veilprint would speak louder than anything I could say. Thornborn communicated through Resonance as much as through language; they would feel the Bond between Tavi and me before I opened my mouth, and the quality

of that Bond, its depth and warmth and the absence of coercion in its architecture, would tell them more about Roothold than a month of speeches.

Using the Bond as a diplomatic tool, Quill noted. *How efficiently ethical of you.*

I ignored that. Being right about my contradictions wasn't the same as helping me resolve them.

Verdain walked at the front. Elder, the thornborn equivalent of clan-speaker, decision-holder, keeper-of-roots. Old enough that her bark-skin had darkened to near-black, its texture deep and fissured like ancient oak. Her vine-hair hung in heavy silver-green coils past her shoulders. Her eyes, solid amber with no visible pupil, the standard thornborn configuration that human children found terrifying and I found arresting, assessed me with the patience of someone who had been assessing things for longer than Roothold had existed.

She stopped three paces from me. Tradition. Close enough to smell, far enough to run. At this distance, her scent was overwhelming - old wood and deep earth and the sharp mineral tang of stone that had spent centuries underground. It was the smell of the Thornhallow itself, concentrated into a single person.

Tavi spoke first, in Thornish, the deep resonant language built for vocal cords that vibrated through bark as much as air. I caught fragments: *welcome-root*, *safe-ground*, *the-one-who-names*. My conversational Thornish was adequate for market haggling and basic courtesy, but Tavi's was native-fluent, and the pheromone subtlety she was layering beneath the words, calm and welcome and the chemical signature that meant *this place is claimed and defended*, was beyond anything I could produce with human biochemistry.

Verdain responded. I read her body language while Tavi translated. The slight forward lean of cautious interest, the way her hands stayed open at her sides rather than folded across her chest, the downward tilt of her chin that thornborn used to signal respectful attention rather than submission.

"She says they came from the deep basin," Tavi said. "Three days' walk. Ironblood expansion is pushing further into thornborn territory. Loggers and miners, not soldiers. Cutting the old growth. Breaking the root-networks that connect the clans."

Root-networks. I knew what she meant. Thornborn clans communicated through the forest's actual root systems, mycorrhizal networks enhanced by ambient Veil energy, carrying chemical signals across miles. It was the oldest communication infrastructure on the continent, and the empires were destroying it the way they destroyed everything, through indifference. The trees were timber. The roots were in the way.

"Tell her they're welcome. Roothold offers shelter and food and a place. For as long as they need it."

Tavi translated. Verdain listened. Then she spoke directly to me, in accented but clear common tongue, because of course she did. An elder who had survived decades of imperial border politics spoke whatever language the situation required.

"And the Naming?"

The question sat between us like a trade proposal with terms yet to be disclosed. Which it was.

"Naming is offered, not required," I said. "If your people choose to be Named, they become Roothold citizens with full rights and trade access under the settlement's protection. The Naming awakens dormant Marks, and most thornborn carry at least one, usually related to growth or healing. The process creates a Resonance Bond: bidirectional. I feel what you feel. You feel what I feel. Emotional weather, not thoughts. Location sense. The bond of being known."

Verdain's amber eyes didn't blink. Thornborn didn't blink. It was unsettling until you got used to it, and then it became the most honest form of eye contact on the continent.

"And if we refuse the Bond?"

"Then you're still welcome. You eat, you sleep, you trade, you live here. But I can't awaken your Marks without it. Naming requires the Bond. The gift works that way, regardless of what I might prefer."

"A gift that comes with a chain."

The words hit harder than she probably intended. Or maybe exactly as hard as she intended. Thornborn didn't waste speech any more than Tavi did, and an elder who'd survived this long didn't say things by accident.

"A chain suggests one direction," I said carefully. "The Bond pulls both ways. What you feel, I carry. Your grief is my grief. Your fear is mine. If that's a chain, it's one I wear too."

Verdain studied me. The pheromone output shifted. I caught the chemical signature of assessment, deep and mineral, the thornborn equivalent of a thorough background check conducted through olfactory channels I could barely perceive.

"How many Bonds do you hold?" she asked.

"Forty-seven."

"And do they all pull equally?"

I hesitated. Honest answer or diplomatic answer. With Verdain, those needed to be the same thing.

"No. Some are stronger. The older ones, the deeper ones. Tavi's is the first, and the strongest. Some are... uncertain. Newer Bonds that haven't settled. People whose connection is real but whose choice I can't fully verify."

"Because the Bond may have made the choice for them."

I felt the ring shift against my sternum. The Voss signet. The weight of it.

"Yes."

Verdain was quiet for a long time. Forty thornborn waited behind her, watching with amber eyes that didn't blink, breathing in the pheromone conversation between their elder and Tavi and the human woman who was offering them a home at the cost of being known.

"My people will decide individually," Verdain said. "Each person chooses, not the clan. Some will accept the Bond. Some will refuse. You will not pressure those who refuse."

"Agreed."

"And you will answer my questions about this place honestly. The real questions, not the trade numbers or the supply chains."

I knew which questions she meant. The ones I'd been filing in the ledger's margins. The ones that didn't have answers yet.

"I'll answer what I can."

We settled them in the eastern quarter, a stretch of cleared ground between the existing thornborn settlement and the forest edge, close enough to the root-networks that the clan could maintain their mycorrhizal communication with the deep-forest communities they'd left behind. The ground here was soft and dark, rich with the composted leaf-fall of centuries, and when the thornborn set down their packs and pressed their bare feet into the soil, something shifted in their pheromone output. The bitter-green wariness didn't vanish, but a new note threaded through it - warm amber, the chemical signature of relief so tentative it was almost a question. The smallest child knelt and pushed her fingers into the earth up to the second knuckle, then looked up at her mother with an expression that needed no translation.

Tavi supervised the logistics while I dealt with the infrastructure math. Forty additional people meant roughly a thirteen percent increase in food consumption, a housing expansion that would take Grenn's team four days to frame, and a water allocation adjustment that I worked out with Maren, the rivven water-engineer, in a fifteen-minute conversation covering hydraulics and Veilstone-filtered aqueduct capacity and the mineral requirements of thornborn physiology.

Maren had the kind of mind I wished I could Name twice. Analytical, precise, already designing a secondary water filtration system before I finished describing the problem. Her Common Mark hummed with the frequency

of water-affinity, a sensitivity to underground sources and flow patterns and mineral composition. The Naming had awakened it, but the talent was hers.

Twelve percent of your population now lives in the eastern quarter, Quill observed, as I walked back from the rivven aqueduct junction. *Thornborn. The same species that the Gilt Republic of Osteren classified as agricultural labor stock.*

“Don’t.”

I’m not criticizing. I’m noting that the woman who burned the Voss dynasty is now building a settlement where the people her family traded are negotiating citizenship terms. The symmetry is either poetic or a form of guilt-driven penance that you should examine more carefully.

“Why not both?”

Because both is how you avoid examining either.

Quill wasn’t wrong. Quill was rarely wrong, which was the most unsettling thing about an entity whose nature and origin I couldn’t identify. A voice in my head that arrived when I entered the Thornhallow, that had no Veilprint, no body, no Name I could speak, and that gave advice so precisely useful that I’d stopped questioning its existence and started questioning my own judgment for not questioning it more.

I told myself I’d deal with it later. The same word I used for every question that didn’t have an answer yet. The Thornhallow was full of laters. The tremors. The compass drift. The Hearthstone’s hum that changed frequency during Naming ceremonies. Quill. I was collecting mysteries the way Roothold collected refugees: one at a time, booking each as an asset and hoping they wouldn’t depreciate into liabilities before I found the time to audit them.

Verdain found me at sunset.

I was sitting on the Timber Hall steps, my unofficial office for conversations that needed air and sky rather than walls and maps. The wood was still warm from the day’s heat, radiating through my trousers, and the evening air carried the competing scents of the settlement winding down – cooking smoke from the communal kitchen, the sharp tang of Grenn’s mortar mix from the unfinished wall, the sweet bark-sap perfume that drifted from the eastern quarter where forty new residents were learning the smell of their new home. The Hearthstone glowed in the fading light, its violet luminescence deepening as the sun dropped below the canopy. The hum was louder in the evening — or maybe I was more tired and the filters were wearing thin.

Verdain sat beside me without asking permission. The step groaned under her weight. Thornborn were dense-boned, heavy in the way of old wood, and Verdain carried her decades like seasoned timber. She smelled of bark-sap and deep soil and something older, the mineral scent of stone that has been underground for centuries.

“The earth shakes here,” she said. A statement, not a question.

“The tremors. Yes. They’ve been happening since before I arrived. Geological, probably. The Thornhallow sits on—”

“Not geological.”

I looked at her. Her amber eyes were fixed on the Hearthstone, and her expression was the closest thing to fear I’d seen on a thornborn face. A deep, slow fear of something vast enough that speed was irrelevant.

“The roots speak of it,” she said. Her voice dropped to a register so low I felt it in my ribs more than my ears. “The deep mycorrhizal networks. The ones that connect the old-growth forests across the basin. They carry signals we’ve been listening to for centuries. Movement patterns. Chemical warnings. The language of soil and stone and things that sleep in both.”

“And what do they say?”

Verdain placed one gnarled hand flat against the Timber Hall step. The wood groaned softly under her palm, and I could have sworn the grain shifted, the way iron filings shift near a magnet - leaning toward her, as if the dead timber remembered what it was to be rooted.

"That something beneath the Thornhallow is dreaming. And the dreams are getting louder."

The Hearthstone hummed. The Bonds hummed. The forest breathed around us, its canopy rustling two hundred feet above in a wind that didn't reach the ground. I felt the Veil, and below the ambient density, something deeper. Something that lived in the space between the Veilstone's crystalline structure and the earth's own memory. Something that was, as Verdain said, dreaming.

"The Arbiters," I said. A statement, not a question, either.

"My people do not use that word. The human empires worship them as gods. The Thalecross build temples to their sleep. The Valdren study them as weapons. We call them the Deep Roots, the oldest part of the network, the place where the mycorrhiza begins. They are neither gods nor weapons. They are the forest's memory of what it was before anything else existed, and they sleep because waking would change the world in ways that none of us, human or thornborn or otherwise, are prepared for."

"What sleeps beneath the Thornhallow?"

Verdain was quiet. The sunset light caught her bark-skin and turned it copper-dark, the fissures deepening to shadow. Her pheromone output carried the chemical signature of something I'd never smelled from a thornborn before: awe so old it had calcified into species-memory.

"Something old," she said. "Something that was here before the forest. Before the Veil crystallized into stone. Before the first thornborn sank roots into this soil. The Deep Root networks have been carrying its dreams for longer than our histories record, and the dreams are changing. Getting warmer. Getting closer to the surface."

"What does that mean?"

"It means you should find out what sleeps beneath your nation before it wakes up."

I stared at her. The pragmatist in me — the Voss-trained merchant who ran a country on supply chain management and creative profanity — wanted to file this under local mythology, a line item in the cultural diplomacy budget, interesting but non-operational. The Namer in me, the woman who heard the Veil's frequency in every living soul, who felt three hundred people like weather in her chest, knew that Verdain wasn't speaking metaphorically.

"I don't know what's down there," I said.

"Find out. Before it wakes up."

I reached for Quill. *Tell me what you know about this.*

Silence.

The pregnant pause of calculated disclosure would have been bearable. The dry delay before a wry observation, familiar. This was neither. Silence. Complete. As if the voice that had been running commentary in my mind for six months had stepped out of the room.

"Quill?"

Nothing.

The Hearthstone hummed. The Bonds hummed. Forty new thornborn settled into the eastern quarter, their pheromone chatter carrying across the evening air like a secondary language written in chemistry. And somewhere beneath all of it, beneath the stone and the roots and the Veil itself, something breathed.

Or dreamed.

Or listened.

The evening's population count was three hundred and fifty-two citizens. Twenty-eight of Verdain's people had accepted Naming consultations. Twelve had agreed outright. They would be Named at the next ceremony, their Marks awakened, their Bonds woven into the tapestry I carried in my chest. Sixteen were considering. Verdain herself had not answered either way.

I updated the ledger. Housing allocations. Food projections. Water distribution. The numbers that kept me grounded in the concrete when the abstract threatened to swallow me. The new thornborn needed dedicated infrastructure, housing and cultural space both, a place to practice the root-tending rituals that kept their mycorrhizal connections alive. I sketched a thornborn quarter expansion in the margins of my Roothold map, the lines rough and fast, a district that would honor their traditions while integrating their economy into the settlement's broader supply chains.

The systems-thinker in me said I was building a country, and the voice sounded like my mother's trade-floor confidence and my father's brutal pragmatism and the salvage operation I'd made of myself after I'd burned both down.

The other voice, my own doubt rather than Quill who was still inexplicably silent, said I was building a country on a sleeping god. My doubt was always louder in the dark.

I closed the ledger. Blew out the candle. Lay on my cot in the dark and felt the Bonds, three hundred and fifty-two threads of connection, most of them sleeping, a few burning with the frequency of nightmares or newborn anxiety or the simple, devastating loneliness of people who had lost everything and were trying to decide if the place they'd found was safe enough to grieve in. Verdain's thread was new and unfamiliar, a deep mineral hum unlike any Bond I'd held before. She hadn't agreed to Naming. But something in the way she'd warned me felt like its own kind of trust.

The ground didn't tremble.

But I could feel it thinking about it.

Chapter 4

Seraphine Voss

The man walked out of the eastern Thornhallow alone, which was the first thing wrong with him.

Nobody walked the eastern Thornhallow alone. The deep forest was dense enough to swallow sound, Veil-saturated enough to confuse navigation, and home to fracture fauna that ranged from skittish to lethally territorial. Roothold's own patrol teams went in groups of three minimum, armed and Mark-supported. Thornborn traveled in clan formations with root-network guides. Even the dusklings, who could see in perfect darkness and navigate by starlight, stuck to established paths.

This man walked out of the tree line at mid-morning like he'd been taking a stroll. He carried a pack and a blade with the unruffled composure of someone who found the cursed forest unremarkable. His stride was steady and unhurried. His posture suggested a body that had walked a long distance and found the effort beneath comment. The morning mist still clung to the tree line behind him, threading between the trunks like something reluctant to let go, and for a moment he looked like he'd been exhaled by the forest itself - delivered rather than arrived.

Lira spotted him first, her sky-kith eyes catching the movement from her canopy perch three hundred yards out. By the time he reached the perimeter, I'd been notified, and by the time I reached the eastern gate, Callum Shore had already started the intake interview.

"Displaced sellsword," Callum told me, stepping aside to let me take the lead. "Says his name is Korven Ashveil. Claims he was working border security for a Thalecross-adjacent estate that went under when the Ironblood pushed the frontier. No references, no contract seal, but he's got the bearing and the gear for it."

I studied the man through the gate's timber frame before stepping into view. The morning light caught him in profile, and I let myself look before he knew I was looking.

Medium height. Brown hair kept short, practical rather than fashionable, the cut of someone who didn't want to be remembered by their hairstyle. Lean build, the kind that looked unremarkable until it moved, and even standing still there was something in his posture that suggested efficient motion in storage – a coiled stillness, like a mechanism waiting for the right pressure to engage. Calloused hands with the right patterns for a blade professional, grip-points and impact wear consistent with regular training. The forearms, bare below rolled sleeves, were corded with the kind of lean muscle that came from daily use rather than vanity. Face that was handsome without being striking, features assembled for competence rather than impression, though the jaw had a clean angle that the morning light was being unnecessarily generous about. Grey-brown eyes that were watching Callum with the polite attention of a man who was also watching three other things.

Something in my chest shifted. Not the Bonds — the Bonds were steady, background hum, three hundred and fifty-two familiar frequencies. This was something older and less sophisticated, a transaction the body conducted without consulting the ledger. The animal awareness of proximity to a body that moved with purpose.

He was, in a word, useful. Roothold needed security personnel the way a trade house needs a vault — the business couldn't grow without it. We needed people who could hold a perimeter and train the militia. We needed them urgently enough that a lone sellsword walking out of the forest with the right skills would be exactly the kind of windfall that a Voss merchant had been trained never to trust.

Which was exactly why my merchant instincts were humming.

Too convenient, I thought. A flag, filed for later consideration. The Voss training had taught me to mark the things that arrived at exactly the right moment, because the universe rarely delivered on schedule and the people who did were usually working someone else's timeline.

I stepped through the gate.

The morning carried the forest's breath with it – wet bark, sun-warmed resin, and the faint ozone tang that the Veilstone deposit exhaled during the first hours of daylight. A breeze stirred the canopy two hundred feet above, sending down a shimmer of green-gold light that moved across the gate clearing like something alive.

"Namer Voss," I said. "I run Roothold."

He turned to face me. Up close, the grey-brown of his eyes was more complex than I'd catalogued from a distance – flecked with amber near the iris, the color of creek stones seen through shallow water. His expression shifted from polite neutrality to measured assessment, the kind of look that calculated a person's threat level and probable intentions in the time it took to blink. I'd seen that look before, on the faces of Osteren security consultants and Valdren military attaches. It wasn't a sellsword's look. It was a professional's.

"Korven Ashveil," he said. His voice was economical, enough tone to be human but too flat to be memorable. "I was told Roothold takes in displaced workers."

"We take in everyone. Workers tend to eat better."

Something moved behind his eyes. The ghost of a smile, quickly suppressed – a brief loosening of the controlled lines, there and gone, like a crack in well-maintained armor. "I can work."

"So your gear suggests." I leaned against the gate post, deliberately casual. "Everyone who walks through that gate can work. What distinguishes your work from everyone else's?"

The ghost-smile surfaced again, barely a twitch at the corner of his mouth. "I'm still alive."

"Low bar. Most of my settlers are still alive. It's practically an entry requirement."

"Most of your settlers didn't walk the eastern Thornhallow alone to get here."

He had me there, and the worst part was that he knew he had me there, and the worst part after that was that I enjoyed being had. A clean counter, delivered without swagger. The verbal equivalent of a parry that redirected force rather than absorbing it. Voss trade-floor training had taught me to recognize negotiators who fought by yielding ground strategically, and this man bargained like he'd been born at an auction house and raised on closing fees.

“Callum says border security?” I said, giving my Resonance one more quiet reach toward the space where his Veilprint should have been. Nothing. The void held, steady and absolute, and the absence was so stark that my awareness kept circling back to it the way a tongue returns to a chipped tooth.

“Four years with the Harsik estate, eastern Thalecross frontier. Perimeter defense, patrol coordination, threat assessment. The estate folded when Ironblood border expansion made the territory untenable. I walked west.”

“You walked west.” I let the repetition do the work, the way a good auditor reads a line item back to the accountant and waits. “Through three hundred miles of contested territory, past two Ironblood garrison lines, and into a forest that eats patrol teams. Alone. With a pack and a blade.”

“Yes.”

“Most displaced sellswords take the southern road to Valgard. It’s safer. It’s paved. There are inns.”

“Most displaced sellswords aren’t interested in Roothold.”

Something in his delivery snagged on me like a thorn catching fabric. Not the words themselves but the architecture beneath them. He spoke the way a man plays a hand of cards he’s already counted: calm, because the outcome was decided before the bet was placed. That wasn’t a sellsword’s rhythm. That was something else. Something trained, and trained well, and trained by someone who understood that the most dangerous sentence in any negotiation is the one that sounds effortless.

Clean story. Coherent, verifiable to a point, specific enough to seem honest and generic enough to resist detailed checking. The Harsik estate was a real place. I’d seen it on the military-grade map of the eastern border, a minor holding that had indeed been absorbed by Ironblood expansion sometime in the last year. The kind of place that produced exactly this type of displaced professional. Good cover, if it was cover. Good truth, if it was truth.

I reached for his Veilprint.

Reflexive — the same way you’d glance at someone’s face to read their expression. Veilprints were as individual as fingerprints and as readable as body language, once you knew the grammar. Anxiety sharpened them. Calm smoothed them. Deception created a layered quality, like two melodies playing slightly out of sync.

I reached for Korven Ashveil’s Veilprint and found nothing.

Beyond absence. Beyond the dull hum of a dormant Mark or the muted frequency of someone emotionally guarded. Nothing. A void. A space in the Resonance field where a person should have been and wasn’t, like reaching for a wall in the dark and finding the room was bigger than you thought, except the room was a man standing six feet away from me and the wall was every magical sense I possessed.

My hand stopped in the middle of a gesture I hadn’t realized I was making. The words I’d been forming dissolved. For a fraction of a second, long enough to notice but short enough to control, my entire perceptual framework stuttered. And beneath the stutter, beneath the cognitive whiteout of reaching for something that wasn’t there, my body did something I hadn’t authorized. The void pulled at my awareness the way a riptide pulls at ankles, and every nerve I owned leaned toward the absence, straining to fill it. My skin registered his proximity with absurd precision: six feet of morning air, and the warmth of him cutting through it like a current in still water. The one asset I couldn’t evaluate had become the one I couldn’t stop pricing, and the merchant in me recognized the danger of that compulsion even as the woman in me catalogued the exact distance between his collarbone and my reaching hand.

Three hundred and fifty-two people hummed in my awareness. Tavi’s steady warmth at the Timber Hall. The thornborn children in the eastern quarter. The riven traders at the aqueduct. The dusklings sleeping through the daylight in their canopy nests. The Hearthstone humming and the Veil pressing against every living thing like water against stone.

I could not feel Korven Ashveil.

He stood in the center of my perceptual world like a hole cut into a painting. A human-shaped absence. The Resonance field bent around him the way a river bends around a stone that isn’t in the current but somehow displaces it anyway.

"Is something wrong?" he asked. Polite. Neutral. Watching me with those grey-brown eyes that gave nothing away because there was nothing behind them to give, nothing in the magical sense, nothing in any sense my gift could reach.

I gathered myself. Years of Voss training — the trade-floor mask, the diplomatic composure, the instinct for concealment when the terms changed mid-negotiation — all of it snapped into place like a vault door engaging.

"Just checking something," I said. "Roothold procedure."

He nodded. If he knew what I'd been checking, his face didn't show it. If he didn't know, his face didn't show that either.

I reached for Quill. *Are you seeing this?*

Interesting. Quill's voice was back. It had returned sometime in the last two days without explanation, as if the silence after Verdain's warning had been a temporary absence rather than a permanent departure. *He doesn't register.*

What do you mean, he doesn't register? Everyone registers. That's how the Veil works.

Everyone registers. Except, apparently, this one.

I looked at the man, the sellsword with the right skills and the wrong Veilprint. He was waiting with the patience of someone accustomed to waiting, his weight balanced, his hands relaxed, his expression a study in pleasant neutrality.

I chose pragmatism over caution. Roothold needed what he was offering. The eastern perimeter was undermanned. Patrol coverage was a polite fiction held together by Lira's sky-kith eyesight and the optimistic assumption that the Thornhallow's reputation was enough to keep threats at bay. If Korven Ashveil could do what he claimed, he was worth the risk of the questions he raised.

And the questions, I would file those. Next to the boots.

"You'll bunk in the barracks," I said. "Communal quarters, eastern side. Callum will handle intake logistics: housing, meal rotation, settlement orientation. Work assignment starts tomorrow. Perimeter patrol and construction support. We're building a wall. We need people who know how to build defensible structures."

"I know how to build defensible structures."

"Good. The pay is food and shelter, with citizenship if you earn it. Roothold doesn't use coin for labor. The Veilstone-chip system handles trade. Internal economy runs on contribution."

"Understood."

I studied him one more time. The gear was right for a sellsword: worn leather, practical armor, a blade that was good but not exceptional. Functional. Unglamorous. The kind of kit that said *I've worked for a living and the work wasn't pretty.*

Except the boots.

The boots were wrong. Subtly wrong, the kind of wrong that rewarded close attention and punished casual inspection. The leather was too good. The stitching too precise. The soles layered in a way that spoke to craftsmanship above the pay grade of any border estate security contractor I'd ever met, and I'd met enough during the Voss years to know the difference between work boots and investment boots.

His boots said *someone spent money on this man's feet.* Everything else said *sellsword from a failed estate.*

I filed it. A note in the margin of the mental ledger I kept for things that didn't add up, alongside the compass drift, the distance irregularities, Verdain's warning, Quill's silence. And now this: a man who didn't register and whose boots cost more than his story could explain.

"Welcome to Roothold," I said. The words came out steadier than I expected, given that my entire magical perception was currently reorganizing itself around the shape of what it couldn't perceive.

“Thank you, Namer Voss.”

His voice carried the same economical quality as before. No warmth, no coldness. A tool kept at room temperature. But when he turned to follow Callum, his shoulder passed within a hand’s breadth of mine, and the air he displaced carried him to me before I was ready. Leather and road-dust and something underneath, clean and sharp, like steel kept oiled, and beneath that a scent I had no category for: warm skin, exertion banked to coals, something that belonged to the hours between labor and sleep. It hit the back of my throat and my pulse answered before my mind could file the paperwork. The Bonds went quiet for a half-second, all three hundred and fifty-two frequencies dipping in unison like a held breath, as if the tapestry of Roothold’s emotional weather had paused to accommodate the passage of something it couldn’t name. My lungs forgot their rhythm. I took a breath that was supposed to be steadying and instead was inventory: cataloguing the air he’d walked through, the warmth he’d left in it, the specific displacement of a body moving past mine at a distance that was technically appropriate and practically devastating.

A merchant recognizing danger. That’s what this was. A merchant standing at the vault door, watching the unknown variable walk past without raising the alarm, because the unknown variable smelled like leather and clean steel and something else she wasn’t ready to inventory, and because some dangers announce themselves as opportunities and the only honest response is to let them pass and note the exit they chose.

He followed Callum toward the barracks. I watched him go, watched the void move through the Resonance field like a gap in a sentence, an excised word whose absence was louder than any presence. Three hundred and fifty-two people hummed in my chest, a tapestry of emotion and connection and the constant ambient noise of being the woman who felt everyone.

He was the silence in the middle of it.

I spent the afternoon on the Thalecross integration paperwork, the ink drying too fast in the warm air so that I had to keep dipping my pen, the scratch of nib on pressed-bark paper the only sound in the Timber Hall besides the ever-present Hearthstone hum. But my focus kept slipping east.

Away from the border. Toward the barracks. Toward the space in my Resonance where a person should have been broadcasting and wasn’t. I caught myself reaching for his frequency three times, the way you’d probe a loose tooth with your tongue, unable to stop checking whether the absence was still there. It was. Every time. A void where Korven Ashveil existed in the physical world and did not exist in the magical one.

The fourth time, Quill caught me.

That’s four, Quill said. In ninety minutes. Shall I start a tally, or would you prefer I convert it to a frequency chart?

“I’m being thorough.”

You’re being obsessive. There is a meaningful distinction. Thoroughness has a stopping condition. What you’re doing has the structural profile of a woman checking whether the bakery is still closed by walking past it every ten minutes.

“The bakery analogy is beneath you.”

The void isn’t going to develop a Veilprint because you keep reaching for it. He is what he is. Your attention won’t change the measurement.

“My attention is professional.”

Your attention has been professional four times. The fifth time, I’m reclassifying it.

I put down my pen. Picked it up again. Did not reach for the void a fifth time, because Quill was right and because spite was an underrated form of discipline.

I’d encountered muted Veilprints before. Some people’s Marks were so dormant that their frequency barely registered, a whisper in a room full of conversations. I’d encountered guarded Veilprints too, individuals whose

emotional suppression compressed their Resonance output to a narrow, hard-to-read band. Osteren intelligence operatives trained for it. Valdren military officers cultivated it.

This was neither. This wasn't muted or suppressed. This was absent. Like reaching for a note on an instrument and finding the string had been removed, cleanly and completely, as if whatever mechanism connected Korven Ashveil to the ambient Veil had been deliberately severed.

Or as if he'd never had one.

That's not how the Veil works, I told myself. Every living creature has a Veilprint. It's the first rule. The fundamental architecture. You can't be alive without one.

And yet, Quill said.

"I need to know what that is."

You need to decide whether knowing is worth the cost of investigation. He's useful. You need useful. Pursuing the void may cost you the sellsword.

"Since when do you counsel ignorance?"

Since you started treating curiosity as a substitute for caution. The void is a question. The question can wait. Roothold's perimeter cannot.

Quill was right, pragmatically. The perimeter was understaffed. The militia was undertrained. We had three hundred and fifty-three people depending on walls that weren't finished and patrols that couldn't cover the ground. The burned wildkin village that would appear in Korven's future patrol reports (though I didn't know that yet) was evidence that the forest's reputation wasn't enough to keep Roothold safe. I needed bodies and competence. I needed the thing that had just walked out of my forest wearing boots that didn't match his story and carrying a void where his soul should be.

I assigned him to perimeter duty. I assigned him to construction. I did not assign him to anything that involved close contact with the Hearthstone, with Naming ceremonies, or with the information I kept in the locked chest under my bed.

And I watched.

That evening, I opened the ledger.

The intake numbers first. Population three hundred and fifty-three, with Korven's addition. Housing allocated. Food rotation updated. Perimeter assignment confirmed for the following morning.

Then the other numbers. The ones that didn't go in the official column.

Anomalies. Active.

The tremors, ongoing and normalized, but the one from three days ago had carried a frequency I couldn't identify. Verdain's warning that something sleeps beneath, that the dreams are getting louder. Quill's silence on the subject, broken now, but the two-day gap was its own kind of answer.

The compass drift. The distance irregularities in the deep forest. The Hearthstone's hum changing frequency during Naming, as if something were leaning in to listen.

And now Korven Ashveil. No Veilprint. No Resonance. A void in the shape of a man, arriving with the exact skills Roothold needed at the exact moment it needed them.

I wrote his name in the margin. Next to the boots, I wrote: *Too good. Wrong provenance. Cross-reference with Valdren military commissary leather grades when opportunity presents.*

Next to the void, I wrote: *Unknown Mark? Unknown condition? Or something else entirely.*

The ring pressed against my sternum. The Voss weight. The reminder.

I could feel three hundred and fifty-two people settling into their evening. The thornborn elders telling stories by bark-light in the eastern quarter. The rivven children playing in the aqueduct runoff. The human traders closing their stalls. The dusklings beginning to stir as the darkness they preferred descended over Roothold like a second sky.

I could not feel the man in the eastern barracks. I could not feel his dreams, his doubts, his midnight calculations. The place where he slept was a gap in the tapestry, a missing thread in a weave I had spent six months building, and the absence was louder than any signal I'd ever received.

Quill was quiet. An ordinary silence, the silence of having nothing left to say about a thing that had no explanation.

I closed the ledger. Set the pen in its groove. Blew out the candle. The smoke curled upward in the dark, carrying the beeswax scent that always made me think of my mother's study in Osteren — a sunk cost of memory I hadn't managed to write off despite six months of trying.

In the dark, the Bonds hummed. Three hundred and fifty-two voices, speaking in the language of emotional weather, telling me that Roothold was alive and frightened and hopeful and exhausted and building something that had never been tried before.

And one voice was missing.

The void walked through my world, and I couldn't stop listening to the shape of what wasn't there.

Chapter 5

Korven Ashveil

The settlement was indefensible.

The air smelled wrong for a defensive position. Too green. Too alive. Sap and wet earth and the mineral-sweet tang of the Veilstone deposit, drifting across the clearing like a scent the forest was breathing out. A military installation smelled of oil and steel and the chemical bite of treated leather. This place smelled like something growing. Growth was difficult to defend.

I catalogued it in the first hour. The perimeter followed the natural clearing's edge rather than strategic geometry. Irregular. No chokepoints. No killzones. Three approach vectors from the east that a competent squad could exploit without breaking formation. The wall under construction covered roughly forty percent of the circumference and would take months to complete at the current pace. What they called a militia was twelve people with mixed weapons training and enthusiasm as a substitute for doctrine.

The Veilstone deposit was a strategic resource of continental value, sitting in an open plaza with no dedicated guard. It hummed. Not an audible sound so much as a pressure against the inner ear, like standing too close to a tuning fork the size of a building. The crystal threw violet light across the flagstones at midday. At night, I would learn later, it glowed with its own luminescence, painting the plaza in colors that had no business existing outside a jeweler's workshop.

I filed these observations in the professional partition of my mind, the one that wrote reports and assessed targets and maintained the operational clarity that the Imperium had spent fourteen years installing. The Harsik estate cover was clean. The intake process was lax enough that detailed verification would take weeks, if they bothered at all. By then I would be embedded.

The barracks were communal. Forty beds. Mixed human and wildkin, though the thornborn mostly slept in the eastern quarter. The air inside smelled of raw timber and curing resin and the tang of bodies living close. Canvas dividers separated some bunks. Most had none. Privacy was a luxury Roothold hadn't built yet. I was given a cot in the northeast corner, equidistant from two exits. Sightline to the door: clear. Sightline to the rear window: partially obstructed by a support beam. Acceptable. I noted this out of habit. Everything was habit. Habit was how a Houndmaster survived.

I unpacked. Bedroll. Spare clothing. Blade maintenance kit. And the pack that contained nothing of interest to a casual search and everything of interest to anyone who knew what a Houndmaster cipher-kit looked like when disassembled into six unremarkable components distributed across three separate pouches.

Nobody searched my pack. Roothold's security was built on Resonance, not procedure. They could feel people. They didn't think they needed to check them.

I understood the logic. If you could read every emotional frequency in a room, if lies tasted like dissonance and hidden intent registered as a sharpening in the ambient field, why would you bother with physical searches? The system was elegant. It was also the single largest vulnerability in the settlement's security architecture, because it assumed that everyone could be felt.

They couldn't feel me.

Operational assessment. Day one.

The target environment was Roothold. A settlement of approximately 353 occupants, mixed human-wildkin composition. Thornborn and stonewrought made up the largest wildkin contingents, with duskling, rivven, and sky-kith in smaller numbers. Geographic position at the Thornhallow basin center. The strategic value was extreme. The Veilstone deposit alone would have justified attention. Combined with trade route proximity and its symbolic position as non-imperial territory, Roothold represented a convergence of threats the Imperium could not afford to ignore.

The infrastructure was primitive but functional. The central plaza held the Hearthstone, the Veilstone deposit that served as their primary gathering point. Timber Hall served as the governance center and communal dining space, with temporary quarters for the leadership circle on the upper floor. The market was emerging, disorganized, but economically viable. The wall stood seven feet high on the eastern side, incomplete elsewhere, stone and mortar construction. The water system, a rivven-designed aqueduct, was surprisingly sophisticated. Defensibility remained poor. One competent military action would end this settlement.

The leadership ran through a single authority. No council. No democratic mechanism. Namer Voss decided, her inner circle advised, the population complied. I identified the inner circle within the first day. The thornborn healer, Tavi Greenhollow, who served as moral authority and cultural bridge. The stonewrought mason, Grenn, who handled infrastructure and defense construction. The human logistics officer, Callum Shore, who managed supply chains and intake processing. No dedicated military advisor. I noted the gap. A gap I could fill.

The population morale was high. Irrationally so. These people had followed a single woman into a cursed forest on the strength of a trade plan and a magical gift. They were building in mud and sleeping in canvas and working sixteen-hour days and somehow, inexplicably, they believed it would work.

I had seen morale before. Military morale. Institutional morale. The morale of people who followed orders because the alternative was worse. This was different. This was people who had chosen to be here. Who had nothing else and had decided that nothing else plus Roothold was sufficient.

I did not understand it. Understanding was not required for assessment.

The primary target was Seraphine Voss.

Namer. Sovereign Mark. The only known living practitioner of Naming, the ability to speak a creature's True Name and awaken dormant Marks, creating a Resonance Bond in the process. Thirty years old. Ex-Osteren merchant class, Voss dynasty, disgraced and exiled. De facto leader of Roothold. The architect of every trade agreement and governance decision the settlement had produced.

I assessed the threat level as extreme.

A Sovereign Mark operating outside imperial control was an existential threat to every power structure on the continent. The Mark hierarchy mapped directly onto the social hierarchy. Common Marks were tradespeople. Rare Marks were strategic assets. Sovereign Marks were political powers. Voss was a Sovereign operating

without a throne above her. She answered to no one. She could awaken Marks in anyone, regardless of bloodline, effectively democratizing the power that the empires had spent centuries concentrating in noble houses.

If she succeeded, if Roothold survived, the continental balance of power would shift irrecoverably.

The Imperium's assessment was correct. The mission brief was accurate. Seraphine Voss was a high-value target and Roothold was a strategic threat.

What the mission brief had not prepared me for was the way she worked.

I watched her for three days before filing the initial assessment.

Day one. She resolved a housing dispute between two thornborn families by redesigning the eastern quarter's waste-drainage system, which she apparently calculated in her head during a conversation about herb cultivation. I watched from the timber stack where I was sorting construction beams. She stood in the eastern quarter with her sleeves pushed to the elbows, gesturing at drainage angles with one hand while holding a half-eaten piece of grain-bread in the other. Her hair had come loose from its tie. A strand stuck to her neck in the heat. She didn't notice it, or didn't care, because her attention was entirely on the problem in front of her. The solution cost nothing, required thirty minutes of Grenn's stonework, and produced goodwill worth more than any diplomatic expenditure I'd observed in fourteen years of operational intelligence. The two families left her presence laughing about something. I couldn't hear what. The laughter carried across the plaza anyway, and three people at the market stalls looked up and smiled. The effect rippled outward like dropped stone in still water.

Day two. She negotiated the final terms of a secondary trade agreement with a rivven water-trading collective, leveraging Roothold's Veilstone-chip currency as a de facto reserve standard. The negotiation lasted forty minutes. The rivven got favorable water-access terms. Roothold got a trade relationship that would, within six months, make it the sole provider of purified water to three border settlements that currently depended on Ironblood supply lines. She did this while eating breakfast. I watched from a construction platform sixty feet away, ostensibly stacking timber. She never once looked in my direction. She didn't need to. She knew where everyone was. Everyone except me.

Day three. A thornborn child fell from a construction scaffold. Minor injuries. Tavi healed the physical damage. Voss handled the structural response. New safety protocols for the construction sites. A review of ladder design with Grenn. Compensation for the child's family in the form of priority housing allocation. The response was systemic, not performative. She didn't just fix the problem. She redesigned the system that produced the problem. I watched her crouch beside the child while Tavi worked, her hand on the thornborn's bark-ridged shoulder, and the expression on her face was the same one she wore during trade negotiations. The same focused attention. No difference between comforting a child and restructuring a supply chain. Both were infrastructure. Both mattered.

She looked up once, while crouching. Not at me. At the construction platform where I'd been stacking timber. Her gaze passed over the spot and moved on. A sweep, not a search. The kind of ambient awareness that checked an environment without being aware it was checking. I had stepped behind the beam two seconds prior. She would not have seen me. But the fact that she'd looked - that the sweep included the corner where I worked - was worth noting.

I noted all of this. The way she moved through the settlement, purpose in every step, awareness radiating from her like ambient heat. She touched the wall. She checked the market stalls. She stopped to talk to a duskling fishmonger about his morning catch and somehow turned the conversation into a supply-chain optimization that would save the kitchen two hours of prep time per day.

She was, by any operational metric, the most dangerous person in the settlement.

She was also, by any operational metric, the reason it existed.

A Houndmaster does not editorialize.

The way she tucked the loose strand of hair behind her ear before speaking to the rivven engineers - practical, automatic, the gesture of someone who had stopped performing for audiences long ago - was not operationally

relevant.

I noted it anyway.

The Resonance was the vulnerability.

She could feel everyone. Three hundred and fifty-two emotional frequencies, broadcasting constantly, giving her a real-time emotional map of the entire settlement. Lies registered as dissonance. Anxiety registered as sharpening. Loyalty registered as the warm, steady frequency that the Bonds generated.

She could not feel me.

I ran cold. The Veilfade, my Rare Mark, suppressed my Veilprint to near-total invisibility. It wasn't conscious effort. The suppression was passive, a low-level state I maintained the way others maintained a heartbeat. Full activation made me invisible to magic entirely. No Bond could locate me. No truth-reading Mark could grip my emotional state. No Naming could reach me. At low suppression, I registered as ordinary. At full suppression, I didn't register at all.

With Voss, I ran at medium suppression. Enough to be invisible to her Resonance. Not enough to seem like I was trying.

She had noticed. At the gate interview, I'd watched her reach for my Veilprint. Watched the micro-expression when she found the void. Surprise, quickly controlled. I had seen that reaction before, on other missions. Most people flinched. Most people looked away and forgot about it within the hour. Voss had not flinched. Voss had filed the absence and continued speaking without breaking rhythm, which told me more about her operational intelligence than anything in the mission brief.

She had noticed, and she had filed it. I knew because she'd checked three more times in the two hours after the interview. I could feel the probes the way you'd feel someone trying to pick a lock you were standing behind. Gentle. Persistent. Professional.

She noticed the boots, too.

The boots were the one mistake. Standard-issue Houndmaster field gear, engineered for long-duration infiltration, the leather treated with a proprietary process that the Imperium's quartermasters had spent years developing. Comfortable. Durable. Too well-made for a border estate sellsword.

She'd looked at them exactly once. Her eyes had stayed for 1.3 seconds. I counted, because a Houndmaster counts. Then she moved on. She hadn't mentioned them. She hadn't reacted.

She had filed them. I was certain of this.

The target's awareness of my cover was moderate. Not compromised. But the margin was thinner than the mission brief had anticipated.

I adjusted. I would scuff the boots. I would wear them harder. I would drag them through construction mud and nick the leather on rough stone until they looked like what they were supposed to be rather than what they were. It was standard fieldcraft. The kind of adjustment I'd made a hundred times on a hundred operations. The boots were a variable I could control.

What I could not control was the quality of her attention. The way she'd looked at the boots and then at me and then away, all in 1.3 seconds, with a mind that processed information the way a river processed stone. Smoothly. Relentlessly. Without apparent effort.

The first report.

I assembled the cipher-kit at midnight, when the barracks population was asleep. The kit was designed for silent operation. No light. No sound. The components clicking together through muscle memory alone. Fourteen years of training meant I could compose and transmit in the time it took a civilian to tie their shoes.

The report went as follows.

Houndmaster designate K-7. Reporting. Target environment confirmed. Roothold settlement, Thornhallow basin center. Population 353. Mixed human-wildkin. Strategic assessment, high value.

Primary target, Seraphine Voss. Sovereign Mark, Naming. De facto sole authority. Threat assessment, extreme. Capabilities confirmed per mission brief. Additional note, target demonstrates unusual integration of strategic and interpersonal competencies. Settlement morale appears primarily personality-driven rather than systemically sustained. Removal of primary target would result in structural collapse within estimated thirty days.

Infrastructure assessment. Veilstone deposit, grade exceptional, estimated value exceeds Valdren treasury reserve. Defensive capability, negligible. Wall construction ongoing, estimated completion four months. Militia, informal, undertrained, no command structure. Water system, unexpectedly advanced, rivven engineering, Veilstone-filtered.

Cover status, intact. Assigned to perimeter patrol and construction. Inner circle access, not yet. Timeline, proceeding per operational parameters.

Recommend continued observation. Full vulnerability assessment to follow in thirty-day initial phase.

K-7 reporting complete.

I disassembled the kit. Stowed the components. Lay back on the cot.

The report was accurate. Thorough. Professional.

It did not mention the boots. It did not mention that the target had noticed the boots. It did not mention that she had checked my Veilprint four times in two hours and that the quality of her attention had carried something I couldn't classify. Not suspicion exactly. More like the focused interest of a woman accustomed to reading everything who had encountered the one thing she couldn't.

These omissions were not operationally relevant.

A Houndmaster who tells himself something twice is a Houndmaster who didn't believe it the first time.

I lay in the dark. The barracks smelled like timber and sweat and the sweetness of thornborn bark-resin that the eastern quarter residents carried in their skin. The cot frame dug into my shoulder blade at the third rib. Standard military tolerance - discomfort noted, filed, dismissed. Somewhere outside, the Hearthstone hummed. A low, persistent frequency that I couldn't feel the way Resonance-sensitive people felt it but could hear the way you heard a building settle. Not sound. Presence.

A thornborn in the next bunk was humming in her sleep. Not the Hearthstone's frequency but a lullaby. Something old and slow and structured like a root system, the melody sinking and branching rather than rising and resolving. The kind of sound that belonged to a place rather than a person.

Environmental noise. I closed my eyes. I did not close my ears, because the Veilfade didn't work that way. It suppressed what I projected, not what I received. I could still hear everything. The breathing of forty people. The creak of timber settling. The lullaby, branching downward into something that sounded like roots finding water in dark soil.

I should have slept. Operational protocol dictated eight hours when circumstances allowed, and circumstances allowed. Instead I lay still and listened to a stranger's lullaby in a settlement I had been sent to help destroy, and I told myself that listening was intelligence gathering.

The report was complete. The cover was intact. The mission was proceeding.

I did not think about the way the target had looked when she reached for my Veilprint and found the void. The fractional stutter in her composure. The way her hand had paused mid-gesture, as if the absence where I should have been had physically arrested her motion.

I did not think about this because it was not operationally relevant.

The lullaby continued. The Hearthstone hummed. I lay in a place that was becoming something, surrounded by people who had chosen to build it, and I catalogued the sounds of a settlement settling into sleep. Precisely. Professionally. With the clinical distance that fourteen years of training had made as natural as breathing.

The distance held.

It held.

Thank You for Reading

You stood at the eastern gate with Seraphine while the Hearthstone threw violet shadows across the plaza. You watched her read the envoys' posture before they opened their mouths. You smelled the mineral sweetness of Veilstone on the wind and felt the hum climb through the soles of your feet.

You saw the thornborn children arrive silent from the deep forest, carrying everything they owned. You watched her kneel.

The full story has twenty-nine chapters. A cursed forest that turns out to be the most honest place on the continent. A spy who was sent to dismantle a nation and found his hands building walls instead, mortar dust in the creases of his palms, the cover story becoming the life. A woman who reads every soul in the room except the one standing at the optimal vantage point, arms crossed, giving nothing back.

Korven's reports got shorter. The cup stayed on the shelf. The cipher-kit gathered dust beneath the cot.

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