

ASHES OF  CREATION

EMBERS BENEATH THE STONE



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Prologue: Concerning Embers and Stone

In the elder days, when the rivers still remembered their beds and kings their oaths, the world was called Verra. Upon it four great peoples had set their hands: the Aelan folk of men, whose banners once rode the wind from sea to hill; the Pyrian kindred of the elves, whose bright craft taught groves to sing; the Kaivek clans of the orcs, strong as the shoulders of mountains; and the Dunzenkell dwarves, who carved the deep and found in stone the patience of ages. Between them there was strife, as there is whenever pride drinks too deeply; yet there was making, too, and songs enough to fill a thousand winters.

But in a year without a proper name, a chill took the marrow of things. It crept not from sky or soil alone, but from a wound the world could not spit out. Fields grew sick under a sun that had not offended; beasts changed their shapes as if their bones had learned a new and cruel language; men and elves and dwarves and orcs, who had long quarrelled over borders and boasting, drew up their lines and found that none were tall enough. We call it now, for want of a better word, the Corruption. It was the unmaking of good work and the souring of good bread. It came as shadow comes: at first only longer evenings, then a darkness that did not honor

dawn.

In that extremity, when the red edge of the map had come to every doorstep, there opened in the old places arches of stone and star. They were not the craft of any forge-lord nor the whim of any mage. The wise said the gods themselves, in grief or mercy, had set them thus in elder days against a day like this. The arches were called Divine Gates, and beyond their veil lay a world called Sanctus — a place without the hot pulse of magic, plain bread, plain water, and the safety that comes of such plainness. Many went through. They went in companies, and alone, with tears, with averted faces, with songs half-sung, with the sound of the falling behind them like surf upon a stony shore. They swore to remember the land that had fed them and to return when they could. Then the Gates slept, and their runes kept counsel with themselves.

Not all made that road. Some could not reach it. Some would not. In the yawning places under Verra, where the bones of the earth show their bright marrow, there were hollows that did not rot. Lights grew there that were not fire, and waters that did not poison the tongue. Whether by the last labor of the priests of light, or the kindness of the One whom the old women still name over their kneaded loaves, we cannot say; but pockets of the Underrealm were kept from the unravelling above. Into those hollows came men and elves and dwarves and orcs together, with children on their shoulders and grief in their packs. They were fewer

than those who fled and less sure of their wisdom;
but they were stubborn, and sometimes that is
better than cleverness.

Seasons without sun went by. Names went soft and remade themselves. Beard and tusk, horn and ear — the sharp lines that once split kind from kind blurred as water blurs writing left out in rain. The children of those who had hidden beneath the earth were not any longer Aelan or Pyrian or Kaivek or Dunzenkell; they were a new people, stitched from many threads, with scales upon their arms like the plates of fish, and eyes that took more kindly to lamplight than to noon. They were called, first in scorn and then in pride, the Tulnar: the under-born, the stone-kept.

To live without sky is to learn the size of breath. The Tulnar did not farm the sun; they husbanded drip and pool. They did not watch the year upon the fields; they kept their time by the bell-stone's slow throbbing in the rock. They built cities into the cavern's ribs — Kal'Zul is one such — strung bridges over black rivers like harp-strings over a lyre, and learned the songs of fungus and crystal, which are old and patient songs. They hunted beasts whose eyes were too many and whose skins were like bad dreams made meat, and they learned to burn what should not be eaten. In their halls the elders said, over stew and soft coals, "Fight where it creeps." For they remembered why they had taken the dark into their lungs: because a blight had set its table on their world, and someone must sit

opposite it with a spear.

Above, the exiles upon Sanctus made houses of their grief and children of their oaths. Sanctus is a sober land — its rivers run, but they do not sing as Verra's rivers did; its stones lie, but they do not whisper. There the four old peoples kept their tongues and their tempers as best they could. They mended their crafts with patience, and they told one another, year after year, that they were not done with the first world, only resting the tired feet of their hope.

So the tale forked and ran on in two beds: one under stone with lamps and songs that learned to echo wisely; one under a sky that had never heard of Verra and did not ask. And after long and long — so long that some had come to think the Gates only a story with too neat an end — the rock itself shivered with a remembered breath. Rune-lights in sealed tunnels flickered like the eyelids of an old man waking; wards that had hummed in their sleep grew thin and thoughtful; a draft came down the western mouths of Underrealm roads, and on it rode a scent with no proper name for those who had never seen rain on bark. In the ruined places on the surface, the great arches stirred and wore once more their veils of star-colors; men and elves and dwarves and orcs, born on Sanctus and hungry for their grandparents' fields, stepped through upon soles that had never tasted Verra's dust.

This is the hour of our telling: when those who kept the embers beneath the stone and those who had fled with fire in their hands find their breaths mingled again — and not without coughing. Old griefs are quick to their feet, and sharper even than hunger; the Corruption also has not forgotten its work. It stirs where bones remember banners, and beasts turn their faces to it as to a familiar master.

Yet the embers under stone were not kept for warmth only. They were kept against a dawn, however far. If the Tulnar have a boast, it is a quiet one: that they learned to live without hating the sky they did not have; that they learned to bend strength toward purpose; that they made from many names a single people not ashamed of their seams. And if the returners from Sanctus have a mercy to offer, it is this: that they come not as kings walking into old halls, but as grandchildren into a house full of strangers who bear their ancestors' faces, asking for a place at the long table.

And because men must fashion even their fears into music, someone always remembers a verse. In Kal'Zul it is sung softly, and only when the lamps are low:

*“When gate-bones wake and whisper low,
and dawn seeks out the mountain's toe,
then hearts that kept a hidden glow
must bring their embers to the snow.”*

So they went — some up toward a sky whose color they had yet to learn; some down toward deeper dark to set their nets against what creeps. Between those roads runs this book like a lamp carried in cupped hands. If it gutters in places, forgive it. The wind is new to us.

Chapter 1:

Life in Darkness

Far beneath the green-world and the wheeling birds, where the bones of the earth rise in pillars and the stone hangs in spears from a blackened sky, there lay Kal'Zul: a city of the hidden folk, the Tulnar who did not flee. Their dwellings clung to the cavern's sides like nests of swallows to a cliff, and their streets were terraces stepped in shadow, lit by the slow, patient stars of mushrooms and crystal. Blue lamps of fungus made docks along the Blackrun — a river as silent as a sleeping serpent, faintly aglow with its own dim fire; and across it the under-market murmured with barter and the clink of dwarfish hammers that had not forgotten their old songs.

Here Zurak the hunter woke, as he always did, to the sound of water and the scent of loam and iron. He rose from a bed carved into the living rock, and the cold kissed the scales along his forearms where obsidian plates ran like river-stones set by a careful hand. He took up his gear: leather harness, chitin greaves cut from the shells of the cavern-stalkers, and a halberd whose shaft was the pale heartwood of a remembered tree; and he drew about his shoulders a dark green cloak faded by years of lantern-sky.

When he stepped out onto the balcony hollowed from the cliff-face, the world of Kal'Zul opened before him. Across the chasm the great stalactites bowed like the roots of a hung forest, spearing downward into emptiness. Crystal outcroppings, grown like flowers of ice from the cavern floor, caught the drift of light and gave it back in soft reply. On terraces far below a file of children hurried, their laughter darting like cave-swallows; and from the Shroomfields rose the steady chant of planters as they beat spore from the wide, copper-bell caps.

He breathed deep and tasted the day: cold stone, wet river, the faint bitter of torch-moss, and something else — a thread of restlessness that had crept into the city of late, like a draft one cannot find the door for.

“Up early, my son?” came a voice behind him, warm as lamplight passing through honey. Korren, elder scout of Kal'Zul, had come softly as he always did, though the chip in his right horn caught the glow like a broken crescent. He leaned upon a walking-spear and looked out beside Zurak.

“The river runs quick,” Zurak said. His voice was deep and gravelled, the words spare. “It sang all night.”

Korren nodded. “A fall somewhere far away, perhaps. The Underrealm shifts in its long sleep.”

He set a hand upon Zurak's shoulder. "Come. The watch waits."

They went down by stair and rope-bridge, across the trembling web that hung over the Blackrun. Lanterns swung, throwing restless shards upon the water; Tulnar guards in patchwork plate met them with quiet nods, and beyond the arch of a tide-smoothed tunnel the hunting-path opened into the deep.

So began Zurak's day as many before it: the outer patrol along the Boundaries, where the safety-wards' pale runes showed faint upon old stone like frost upon a window. The wards had been set in elder days, folk said, when the last priests of light — those who still dared the dark — slipped through the sundered earth to hide a remnant. Here the runes were their whispers, and for centuries they had held. Yet of late there was a flicker in them, as of weariness in an old man's eye.

They walked without speech, for speech travels; the tunnel breathed and answered their footfalls. Now and again Zurak halted and knelt, laying claw to dust: the ghost-mark of many feet, the drag of a heavy tail. He tasted the air with parted lips, and the slit of his golden eye tightened.

"Chasm-stalker," he said at last, low. "Two nights past. Younger beast."

Korren's mouth twitched in the hint of a smile. "And the elder?"

"Gone deeper. Or wary." Zurak rose and set his cloak, and his hand flexed upon the halberd's haft. "The young are bold."

They found it in a gully of broken stalagmites, where the rock had fallen like spears long ago. It moved with a many-jointed grace, pale carapace patterned in the dim like frost upon glass, a crown of feelers tasting the air. It hissed when it scented them, and the hiss was the scrape of knives. Zurak did not rush; he circled, one foot silent after the other, and when the beast sprang he met it with a sideways hew that split the air with a velvety thrum. Chitin cracked; the stalker writhed, and in two more strokes and a driving thrust the matter was ended.

Korren came up and set his palm to the beast's hide. Faint, in the cracks, there ran threads like black veins, though the creature had not the look of true sickness. Father and son frowned together in the blue light.

"More of this," said Korren. "As if some chill passed through the deep. Not enough to make a monster, but enough to leave a stain."

Zurak spat into the dust. "We will burn it."

“We will,” Korren agreed. “And we will watch.” He looked aside at Zurak then, studying the hard line of his jaw. “Your anger is swift as a spring flood.”

“It serves,” Zurak said.

“It serves until it carries you where you did not mean to go.” Korren’s voice was mild, but the words had the weight of old stone. “Strength is a river. Set its banks, and it waters the fields. Leave it wild, and it drowns your house.”

Zurak’s lip curled, not quite a smile. “You have many river-words today.”

Korren chuckled. “The Blackrun will have its due.” He clapped Zurak’s shoulder. “Come. Let us bring meat to the cooks and word to the wardens.”

They returned to Kal’Zul as the cavern’s slow hours turned — though there was no sun to mark them, only the measured dim of fungi and the toll of the bell-stone that throbbed gently through the rock. In the Central Forum the market had woken: traders from the east-tunnels with baskets of glow-worm silk, a dwarf from a far pocket with buttons of hammered copper, children teasing the fat cave-lizards at their tethers, and a choir of old women sorting spore-sheaves and arguing as if time itself must bow to their voices. The smell of stew went up from the pot-hollows, and over all lay

the soft grit of stone-dust and the rasp of whet upon blade.

That eve the people gathered in the fire-hall, where a pit of pale coals cast more shadow than light and the smoke drifted like soft fog. The elders sat in a half-circle upon benches worn by many seasons, and the young upon the floor; the guards loosened straps and set spears within reach, for habit never sleeps in the Underrealm. Zurak sat with his back to a pillar, Korren beside him, and the murmur faded as Elder Shae rose, her hair silver in the glow like threads of mica.

She spoke, as she did sometimes when the need was on them, of the tale that had become their root and name. And others took up the telling as the story wound and returned, for among the Tulnar the Legend of the Exodus was not the hoard of one voice but the craft of many.

A boy with a reed-pipe gave the pitch, and they sang — low at first, then fuller, until the cavern seemed to listen.

*“Far were the gates, fair were the fires,
and bright were the banners in the day of kings;
but a wind of blight from an elder pyre
fell cold on the corn and choked the springs.*

*Down came the shadow, down like a veil,
and the wolves of the void went hunting men;*

*Then cried the Seven, ‘Haste to the Vale! —
through gates of grace, not found again.’*

*Some went away by the stars’ pale road,
with tears like dew and hearts like frost;
Some stayed below in the mountains’ load,
to keep a light for a world nigh-lost.*

*O keep the embers, O keep them bright,
until the dawn breaks through the stone —
Fight where it creeps, the creeping blight,
until the earth is healed and whole.”*

The song fell to silence, save for the coal’s quiet sigh and the little whistle in the pillar where a crack ran hidden. And out of that hush came voices: stories of hunts and of children born; of tunnels found again that had been forgotten; of a narrow bridge over a black well; of things seen in the deep that were better for being named softly, and not by children.

At length another elder spoke, a lean woman with a

scar that twisted her smile. "The wards at the western mouth flickered," she said. "The rune-light went and came like a tired eye."

A murmur rose.

"It may be nothing," said Shae. "Or it may be the first breath of something. We shall watch."

"We shall do more than watch," Zurak said before he had meant to. His voice carried farther than he wished and he felt the weight of it. "If the wards fail, the things from above will scent us. We must seal the mouths and set spears, and if there is rot in the stone, we must cut it out."

Across the fire-pit a young hunter thumped agreement. But there were other sounds: a hiss of disapproval, a dry laugh.

Korren took the word without haste. "We shall prepare, and we shall learn. Stones that have held since our grandmothers' grandmothers do not fall in a night for nothing. There is a meaning, and it may be more than teeth." He looked upon Zurak, and the edge of a plea lived in his eyes. "We must not let fear choose our songs."

"Fear?" Zurak said, and his lip lifted over a tooth, not in jest. "You would call it fear to keep our doors?"

“I would call it wisdom to keep them, and courage to open them when the hour comes,” Korren answered. “Both together are the craft of living. One without the other is a poor tool.”

Zurak said no more. He sat long in the glow and watched the embers shift. In his chest something old and hot smouldered — a coal placed there by stories and by hunger and by the long weight of stone. He had never seen the sky. He had never felt the breath of a true wind upon his face. But he knew the tales of the surface people who had fled through the arch of the gods, leaving those who could not run to the mercy of darkness; and in the silent places of his heart he named those folk by a harsh name: gatewalkers, coward-born.

Yet the song lay over him like a blanket willow-soft, and his father’s hand was a weight on his arm, and the anger had no easy road.

When the hall had emptied and the ward-lamps set to their slow burn, father and son walked together along the outer ledge where the air came cold from far tunnels. They did not speak at first. Korren’s limp was slight and measured; Zurak matched him without thinking.

“At the western mouth,” Korren said at last, “there is the faintest draft of sun — or something like it. A smell of life not born in stone.”

Zurak halted. His heart struck him like a fist. “Sun?” The word felt strange on his tongue, like a child’s first name.

“Perhaps not,” Korren said. “But there is a change. We will go in the morning and see. I will ask the council for leave to take a small watch. And, if the elders have wisdom, they will let us send more eyes to the far edges.”

Zurak’s hand closed on the rail; the fungus-light drew a clean line along the edge of his knuckles. “If the gates above open, they will return,” he said. There was no need to name who ‘they’ were.

“Some will,” Korren said. “Some will not. The world is wider than our grievances. There are many roads between dusk and dawn.” He turned, and in the gentle glow his face was old and kind. “Listen to me, Zurak. There is a thorn in you, and I do not blame the hand that set it there. But if you squeeze it tight, it will drink your blood and leave you hollow. Should they come — humans, elves, dwarves, or orcs — they will not be the same as those who left. Time is a river even upon a barren world.”

“They ran,” Zurak said. His voice trembled, and he was ashamed of that. “We bled in the dark. The land above is ours by right of pain.”

Korren’s answer was a sigh, and a smile that knew

too much. "There is no land that is bought by pain alone. If there were, every grave would own the morning. The earth was made by the One for all her children, and sorrow is her common tongue. We will take our place beneath the sun when the hour is ripe. But we will not take it with hate. Strength must serve purpose, not hunger."

Zurak stared into the chasm. Far below, a fishing light floated upon the river, and the dim song of its keeper came like the hum of a bee.

"I do not have your soft words," he said.

"You have your own," Korren replied. "And you have a spear. Both will be needed. If there is corruption in the deep — and I fear that there is — we will meet it. You were born for that, my son. We all were, if truth be told. We fight where it creeps."

They stood a long while without speaking. In that stillness the city sighed and turned in its sleep. Somewhere a child cried out and was hushed; somewhere a hammer struck and fell silent; and somewhere, far away, a rock moved with a groan like the turning of an ancient door.

Before they parted, Korren drew from his neck a small talisman of carved stone and pressed it into Zurak's palm. "For safe returns," he said. "My father gave it to me when I first walked the Boundaries alone."

Zurak closed his fingers over the pendant. It was warm from Korren's skin, and the carving — two lines crossing, circle in their heart — bit gently into his flesh. For a breath the heat in him softened, and something like shame came and went.

"I will bring it back," he said.

Korren's hand rested a moment against his cheek, rough and sure. "Bring yourself back," he answered, and with a nod he was gone into the weave of lamps and shadows.

Zurak remained upon the ledge until the last of the ward-lights had guttered low. He set the talisman against his breast and bound it with thong and thought. He looked out upon Kal'Zul — upon the terraces where the little lamps burned like a scatter of stars that had fallen and chosen not to rise — and the pride he bore for his people rose up like a stone tower in him, solid and unbending. He would be their spear against the dark; he would be the hand that cut out rot, the eye that found it first, the foot that did not turn back when the path tilted and broke. If the gates above opened and the gatewalkers came down into his world, he would face them with his head high. If their hands were clean, he would measure them. If they were stained, he would wash them in blood.

Yet even as he swore it to the cold and the stone,

the echo of the fire-hall's song wound through his mind, and his father's words nested in the echo: fight where it creeps, but let strength serve purpose. He did not know how to bind those things together — not yet. He only knew that morning would come, in the fashion that morning comes to those who dwell without a sky: with a bell-stone's throb, and the waking of the river, and the whisper of change at the far gate.

And so, while the world above turned unseen, and a wind that had forgotten the taste of roots stirred faintly in a sealed tunnel, Zurak lay down and did not sleep. He waited for the time to rise, with his hand upon a spear and a small weight of stone over his heart; and in the deep of the deep, where old runes guttered like embers in ash, something heard the breath of the Tulnar city, and listened.

Chapter 2:

Rumors of the Return

The bell-stone spoke thrice, and in the pause between its slow throbs a shiver went through Kal'Zul that was not made by any hand. It was a thin thing, like the plucking of a single hair from the great beard of stone — yet all who kept the Boundaries felt it in the feet and in the teeth.

Zurak felt it, and his hand closed on the rail of his ledge till the veins rose beneath the scales. Far out over the chasm, beyond the falling towers of stalactite and the soft lamps of fungus, the western tunnels breathed — breathed, and then were still. The air upon his cheek was not as it had been. There was a scent on it that he did not know.

He strode the bridges with long steps and came to the gate of the wardens. Korren was there already, his cloak thrown back, speaking low with two grey-eyed guards who had the look of folk that have watched too long.

“You feel it,” Zurak said.

Korren glanced up, and a brightness — not joy but alertness — passed through his eyes. “A change at the western mouth,” he answered. “Lightness in the air. A draft that has forgot its manners.”

“The wards?”

“Flickering,” said the elder warden, a woman called Brisk with a scar at the corner of her mouth. “Not failing, but winking, as if a child plays with the lamp.”

“Show me,” said Zurak.

They went by a road that ran like a seam along the cavern’s side, and then into a tunnel whose mouth was smooth and round as if a river had once gone that way. Rune-stones stood at intervals upon the walls, half-swallowed by mineral bloom, and on them the old light shimmered, pale as frost. But the shimmer was not steady. It came and went like a breath on a mirror.

“Here,” Korren said softly, touching a rune with two fingers as if greeting a friend. “Old work. Old as the tale.”

A stirring passed, and then — faint, as if brought from a thousand halls away — there came a susurrus like leaves when they gossip, or the soft patter of rain far from the listener. With it came the scent that had pricked Zurak’s gift: damp earth not of the Underrealm, a sweetness, and a hint of warmth.

He stood very still, and the pupils of his eyes narrowed to slits. “What is that?” he asked, though in truth he knew no word for it.

“Breath,” Korren said. “Not ours.” He turned his head, and the chip in his horn took the rune-light. “It may be the world above remembering us. Or it may be trouble putting on a pleasant face.”

They did not cross the ward-line. They watched. From where the tunnel bent away, a dimness grew — but not the Underrealm’s dim. It had a color to it, washed thin as if dragged through stone, and the walls carried that pallor like a bruise. After a little while the flicker went soft and the smell faded, and the runes steadied, weary but resolved.

When they returned, the news went before them like a bird through the cave. By the time they reached the Central Forum, the council was already gathering under the great hanging rock where the bells were fixed. Elder Shae sat with her staff laid across her knees, and the other elders beside her: Brisk of the wardens; Master Harl of the forges whose beard was more iron filings than hair; and old Imin with the banker’s careful hands. The people came in rings and ripples until the forum hummed like a hive.

Shae lifted her staff and the sound tasted back into silence. “Friends,” she said, and her voice went up into the high dark and down the alleys, “there is breath at the western mouth that has not been there in any of our seasons. The wards wink like an old eye in sleep. We have long promised to one another that if the story stirred, we would sit, and speak, and

choose. We are sitting. Let us speak.”

She looked to Korren, and he told them, plain and without tale-fat, what he and Zurak and Brisk had seen.

“A draft of warmth,” murmured Harl when he had done, the words heavy as tongs upon an anvil. “And a light like water washed with milk. I have not seen such in fifty years of iron.”

“The Legend says,” put in Imin, fingers steeped, “that the Gates of the gods were closed and would be closed until the One’s will turned. It does not say how the air would taste when they opened.”

At that there was a movement among the young, and a girl of the chant-keepers raised a slate. “Elder,” she said, and her voice had the bright ring of a bell-stone when first struck, “in the tablets that came down from our grandmothers’ hands, in the old runes by the fire-hall, there is a verse we rarely sing.” She spoke it, and the words were crooked with age but sure:

*“When gate-bones wake and sigh once more,
not with the thunder as of yore,
but with a whisper through the floor —
then warders watch and seekers go,
for dawn will lick the mountain’s toe.”*

“Pretty,” said Brisk, who did not love songs; yet even she listened a little harder to the stone

beneath her boots.

From the rings a voice came that had the rasp of flint. It was Vetch, a hunter whose brother had been lost beyond the old bridge many seasons ago. "If the gates above open," he said, "then they will come back. The gatwalkers. With bright steel and smooth words. We must shut the mouths and blind the tunnels. We bled here — we and ours. We owe them no greeting." Others growled assent; anger travels fast when it knows the road.

Zurak's jaw tightened, and he would have spoken then with more heat than wisdom, but Korren's hand touched his arm, and that pause saved a foolish word from being born.

Korren rose. "We have kept the embers," he said, "and we have kept these halls. None can take from us the truth of that. But stone teaches: hard rock breaks where it will not bend. The Legend, if we believe it — and we sing it often enough — says also that we were spared for a purpose. 'Fight where it creeps,' it says, 'the creeping blight.' It names no enemy in the shape of elf or dwarf or orc or man. It names Corruption." He glanced at Vetch without scorn. "I do not ask you to love those who went. I ask you to know an enemy when you see one."

A murmur of thought moved where anger had moved. Shae nodded once, slow. "The wards will not be mended by closing our eyes," she said.

“Neither will they stand if we cry welcome to everything that breathes. We are not children. We will not be led by fear, nor by hope, but by wisdom if we can find it.”

Zurak stood then, for his turn was come. He spoke little and directly. “Send me,” he said. “The western mouth must be watched, not from behind a pillar but from its lip. If there is a crack in the ward, it will widen unless we lay thought and hand upon it. If there are tracks, I will read them. If there is sickness, I will smell it. If there are feet from above, I will see how they tread.” His voice roughened. “And if the gatewalkers come, I will weigh them. My spear is long.”

A hiss and a chuckle ran together through the rings at that last, and Brisk’s mouth bent toward a smile despite herself. Shae’s eyes, which were old and saw more than the face, rested on Zurak, and kindness and caution wrestled there.

“It is the council’s place to send,” she said. “But it is well when the strong ask to bear.” She lifted her staff. “Hear then what I put to voices. That we send a small scouting of the best eyes and feet we have to the western mouth, to test the wards, to climb if climbing is wise, and to look upon whatever breathes upon us. They are not to stir hornet-nests for the pride of their arms, but to learn. They will carry the white cloth in their packs, and they will carry quiet, and they will carry fire.”

"Name them," said Harl.

"Korren," said Shae at once, "to lead. His steps are light, and his anger is slow. Brisk will choose one of her wardens. Two hunters — one is Zurak, if he will bear his father's counsel with his spear; the other, Fen of the East Flats, who once walked a crack where the ground had forgot itself. Four is a whisper; five is a murmur; six is a footfall that stone notices. Let it be five and no more."

Korren bowed his head. "I will go," he said.

Zurak's heart moved in his breast like a caged thing. He bowed also. "I will go," he said, and the words tasted of iron and of something he would not name.

There were other voices, some for and some against, and Vetch spoke again, bitter but not unmoved. "If you bring them down on us," he said, "I will hold you to your white cloth."

"You may hold me to more than cloth," Korren answered mildly. "You may hold me to the oath that I keep with each breath: that I will not spend the lives of Kal'Zul for pride, nor spare them for fear."

So it was set, and the murmur turned to movement. The chosen went each to their small tasks. Brisk to the armory to count hooks and lines and lampstones that kept their courage company. Fen to the Shroomfields to ask his old mother's blessing

and to tuck into his belt the sharp knife that had gutted a cave-boar the year Zurak grew his first horn. Zurak to his cliff-home to bind his greaves and sharpen the blade that had bitten the chasm-stalker's crown.

Korren came last to Zurak's door, as was his way, when the bustle runs thin and a man hears his own thoughts too clearly.

"Do not look at the world as if it had wronged you and must answer," he said gently, standing in the low arch with his staff across his palm. "Look as a hunter who would know the shape of its going. There will be signs we do not yet know how to read. There will be old signs writ new. There may be faces. Do not make them the faces from a tale before you see them." He smiled, and the lines in his cheeks deepened. "But do not put down your spear to do it."

Zurak drew the strap of his harness tight and said, "I will walk behind your steps, and I will listen." He glanced aside. "I will try."

Korren's hand rested for a moment on his son's brow as if measuring the heat there. "Trying is a good road. It goes places that anger cannot find." He looked beyond Zurak's shoulder at the little shelf where a talisman of carved stone lay for an instant, and then disappeared beneath a strap as Zurak settled his gear. "Your mother would have braided a blessing into your cloak," he said softly. "I have only

this: keep your feet, keep your breath, keep your purpose.”

They went down to the gathering place where the five stood ready. Fen shifted on his toes like a boy at the wrestle-ring; Brisk's chosen, a quiet lad named Nerr, adjusted the pack on his back twice and then did not touch it again. Shae came, and with her two of the chant-keepers who carried a small tablet wrapped in oil-cloth.

“This you carry,” Shae said, placing the bundle in Korren's hands. “Old words. If you find the mouth and climb to the lip, set this near the ward and speak it. Sometimes stone likes to hear its own name again.”

Korren inclined his head. “We will set it,” he said.

They did not go with great cries. Kal'Zul does not love farewells. But as they crossed the bridge above the Blackrun a low humming took the air. It was not a song with words, but the kind that mothers use over cradles and old men use over a blade before it bites. It followed them to the tunnel and was lost in the drip and the breath of the dark.

At the western mouth the runes were cool and thoughtful. Beyond, the air moved, tender and strange. Korren raised his hand, and his five took breath together like swimmers before the water. “Remember,” he said, hardly above whisper. “We are eyes, not fists. We are questions, not answers. We are Tulnar. We keep the embers.” He slipped

the white cloth into the strap at his belt where it could be found or hidden as need might be, and he smiled once at Zurak — the quick flash of a sunrise that no one here had seen — and then he stepped across the old line.

The rune-light did not fail. It fluttered like a bird and then settled as if some ancient courtesy had been remembered. From the bent of the passage a pallor came, faint but undeniable, and the air changed in their throats.

“Do you taste it?” Fen whispered.

“I do,” Zurak said. “It tastes like a word I have not learned.”

They moved into it, soft-footed, hands on stone. Somewhere far above, in a place no Tulnar foot had set for long and long, something shifted — perhaps a leaf in wind, perhaps the dust of a broken lintel — and a mote of brightness drifted downward, took a thousand years to fall a little, and was gone. The earth was remembering its many doors. And in Kal’Zul the bell-stone slept between its throbs, counting spaces, as if waiting to be told whether its next note should be alarm or gladness.

Chapter 3:

Into the Unknown

The western road climbed as a thought climbs: from certainty into guesswork, from light into the place where light is imagined. Korren led, and the five moved as one thread through a loom of stone. The wards fell behind them, and with every turn the breath of the tunnel changed its tune — at first the cool hymn of deep halls, then a whisper with a taste of iron, and at last a sweetness Zurak had no name for, like water that had seen the sky.

They passed the old signs: dwarf-work in a low passage — chisels' bite smoothed by ages like bones polished by a river; a lintel stone marked with runes of a human tongue, the edges flaked by damp; a line of blackened soot where some ancient watch-fire had once gnawed the ceiling. In a widened chamber stood a fallen frieze, half-buried in lime. It showed a procession of figures robed and grave, hands raised as if to bar a wind.

"Old stories in the rock," Korren murmured. "Mind your feet. Stones from other days still fall on this one."

They came to a rope-bridge that had not felt a living tread in many seasons. It hung over a chasm as dark as a well in winter, strung from iron rings driven into the far wall. Fen tested the nearest plank with his knife and whistled through his teeth. "Rot in the

middle, but she'll bear a whisper."

"We are a whisper," Brisk's warden Nerr said, and his mouth made a line. They went one by one, harnesses belayed to pitons that Korren set and took, set and took, like beads upon a string. Halfway, a plank groaned and split, dropping with a thin cry that went on and on, long after its body was stone. Zurak felt the tilt beneath him, the old hunger of the deep tugging, but his hands were sure and his breath steady. When he stepped onto firm rock, the muscles of his back loosened as if unknotted by a careful hand.

Beyond the chasm the air grew thick, warm in pockets where vents in the rock exhaled a breath that stung the nose. They skirted a pool where bubbles rose fat and slow, and the rock around it was slick with a glassy sheen. "Tread wide," Korren said softly. "Such places steal the breath while a man argues with his pride."

A rustle came from ahead, like the scrape of dry leaves — an odd sound in a world without leaves. Zurak's hand rose without thought. In the throat of a narrow way, many eyes watched them: wet, glassy, too many for any honest face. The things slid into view as a stain slides, skinless and pale, their limbs wrong. No sooner had the word formed in Zurak's mind — corrupted — than they sprang.

The tunnel filled with a wet chittering. Nerr's hook flashed; Fen slid low and cut tendons with the neat

cruelty of a butcher; Korren's staff struck, a measured drum. Zurak met the first with the haft of his halberd and felt it give like meat, then turned the blade and bit deep. The creatures died quickly, but they died with a smell like burned hair and bitter resin, and in their bodies ran threads of dark ichor that pulsed as if with their own heart.

Afterward, breath steamed in the cold. Zurak wiped his blade upon the stone and stared at the black filaments where they smeared. A heat rose in him that was not from the fight. "This came from above," he said. "It leaks down like a poison."

Korren's eyes, old and careful, rested on his son. "It comes from hatred older than any of us. Let it feed you, but do not feed it." He set a hand upon the wall. "Listen. The stone changes. We are near."

They climbed a stair not built but found — a corkscrew within the mountain that had been a chimney once, when the world was younger and angry. Their lampstones dimmed as the pallor in the air strengthened, and the taste upon their tongues was no longer salt and cold but green and thin, like the ghost of a leaf. At the stair's crown lay a door: not a door to keep folk out, but to tell the mountain a thing had ended. It was a great slab pivoted in sockets worn smooth by the weight of years, its face etched with symbols of the Seven that still remembered their light.

Korren drew forth the oil-cloth bundle and

unwrapped the tablet Shae had given. He set it upon a niche as if laying a babe to sleep. In a voice that was not loud but carried, he spoke the old words. They were rough in a Tulnar mouth, the corners of them catching on unfamiliar teeth.

“Stone that was split and healed, hear the names you once knew. River of earth, remember your banks. Gate that was shut in mercy, open in mercy, and hold in wisdom.”

For a little, nothing. Then the slab shivered like a beast in its sleep. Dust leapt as if in a small rain, and from far beyond the seam came a breath as soft as a mother’s sigh. The door turned by inches, complaining like an elder roused too early, and a draught went past them that raised the fine scales along Zurak’s arms.

Light. Not rune-light, not fungus-glow, but a pallid wash the color of watered milk spilled upon stone. It slid along the curve of the passage and broke in pale shards upon the dust.

Zurak’s chest tightened as if an unseen hand had gripped it. He had imagined the sky as a lidless eye; he had imagined it as a pit turned above, a terror. He had imagined it as a story that other folk told to make themselves grand. But this thin light, this breath that smelled of wet leaves and cold iron and something like sweetness — it struck him with a grief he had not expected, as if a song learned wrong in childhood had suddenly been sung true.

“Hold,” Korren said, though they were already holding. “Out quiet. The world has teeth above as well as below.”

They moved into a low grotto where roots hung like ropes and the ceiling sweated. The earth sloped and the light grew whiter and the smell greener, until the passage flared into a mouth fringed with grass that shone like a thousand little knives.

The sky opened. It was evening, and the west was bruised with purple and molten with gold. A wind came that touched each of them like a countless-fingered hand; it smelled of rivers running free and of the skin of trees and of the dust of roads where many feet had gone.

Zurak stumbled to a stand of saplings and set his palm against bark, surprised by its give. He blinked, and his eyes, made for the dim, narrowed to slits at the glory of the dying sun. His breath came ragged, and a sound rose in his throat that was not a word and not a cry, but something between.

Fen laughed softly, and the laugh toppled into weeping. Nerr stood with his head bowed like a man at a grave and a wedding at once. Brisk, who had never loved songs, took one long breath and let it out as if it hurt and healed together.

Korren looked out over the valley. Below them the Riverlands lay like a many-folded cloak: dark green

patches of forest stitched with quicksilver threads of water, long ribs of ruin where walls had fallen and lay like the bones of some beast of the elder days, their mossy lengths softened by time. Far off, upon a low rise, rose shapes that were not stone's making: broken towers and a vast, sleeping arch scribed with runes that winked like stars caught in a net. Smoke rose there in thin blue lines.

"Ruins of Aela," Korren said. "And the gate of men." His mouth tightened, then softened. "We will watch."

They made a camp in the lee of a thorny bush and hid their coals, for it is a bad bargain to teach a new world your smell. The night brought sounds strange and old: frogs chanting in a ditch, something winged crying once far overhead, the creak of bough against bough. Zurak did not sleep. The sky was too large. He lay under its ancient gaze and felt as small as a seed.

Toward dawn he rose and went to the lip of their little cave. The east grew pale, and with it his anger dimmed to a coal. He thought of the song in the fire-hall, of his father's hand, of the old oath: fight where it creeps. He thought of smoke over ruined stone.

When the first birds writ in black upon gold flew across the light, he touched the talisman at his breast and whispered, though there was no one to hear him: "I will keep my feet. I will keep my breath. I will keep my purpose."

Below, the day woke the world. And from the broken city came, faint as a rumor not yet believed, the sound of hammer on wood and the murmur of many voices.

Chapter 4:

Eyes on the Outsiders

They went down the hillside when the shadows were longest, keeping the line of a hedgerow that had outlived the hand that planted it. In places the hedge became a tangle where wild roses clung, their hips red as coals; in others, stones lay like knucklebones where a wall had fallen long ago. The smell of crushed green rose about their ankles as they moved.

From the ridge beyond, Zurak saw the city that had been Aela. Once it must have been a bright crown; now it was a circlet too large for the brow that wore it. Streets lay open to the weather, their cobbles tilting up like scales; statues leaned with faces eaten thin by rain. Yet there was a pulse in it, a stirring like the first breath of a waked sleeper, for among the carcass of stone men moved — men in armor with the shine of new-forged steel and men in wool with the look of farmers who had not yet put their hands to plow in this soil. Tents had sprung like pale mushrooms in the old parade-ground beside a vast arch whose runes glowed fitfully, as if remembering a song.

“Gatewalkers,” Fen murmured, tasting the word with suspicion and wonder both.

“Hold your tongues and your tempers,” Korren said.

“We watch before we learn, and we learn before we

“speak.”

They lay up in the shadow of a rib of wall and made themselves stones. The wind went from them to the west, and their eyes went down. Zurak counted the rhythms of the camp: how the soldiers on the palisade changed their stance at the hour, how a woman in pale vestments went from tent to tent with her hands busy in binding or blessing, how a man with greying beard bent over a table to write and lift his head and frown eastward toward the cathedrals’ broken bones.

He heard snatches carried by fickle air: a name called — “Edric!” — then a laugh; a curse about a rope; a word he knew and did not know, old to him and new to them, for the tongue of the Aelans had survived in Kal’Zul’s songs while it had worn other faces on Sanctus. It was like hearing the voice of a friend’s grandson.

Brisk’s warden shifted a pebble with his boot and froze. No heads turned below. Smoke rose from farther in, not camp-smoke but the bitter strand of something burning in stone. It coiled lazily and then was torn by the wind.

“Not all their fires,” Korren breathed. “There is a breath in the ruins that does not come from kitchen or forge.”

“Corruption,” Zurak said, and his spear-hand tightened until the haft creaked. A pulse went in his throat that had nothing to do with fear. He thought of

the things in the tunnel — their slick flesh, their too many eyes.

“Perhaps,” Korren said. “Perhaps only old dust.” But even as he said it his gaze went long and wary toward a quarter of the city where columns stood like stripped trunks of a dead grove: the temple district.

Night came down as if poured. Torches sprang. From their eyrie the camp was a constellation, and the broken arch of the Gate glimmered like a fallen moon hung in a snare. Music rose — a little tune upon a whistle that darted among the tents like a child — and with it the murmur of the weary telling their day to the dark.

“Do we speak to them?” Fen whispered. His eagerness was a spark. “We are shadow now. We could be voice.”

“Not yet,” Korren said. “We will not creep upon them with secrets in our hands. At first light, I will go with the white cloth and with our names, and we will see whether the stories on our tongues match the stories in their hearts. The rest hold back. If I do not return —”

“You will return,” Zurak said, too quickly. Korren’s glance met his, and in it was a small smile like the curl at the corner of an old map.

“— if I do not,” Korren went on, “you will learn more

than an old man knew how to teach.”

They ate little and spoke less. In the second watch a sound went through the camp like the pluck of a harp-string: alarm, but suppressed. Men roused and moved with a quiet not born of sleep. On the far side, among the long shadows where buildings crouched, something roared — a deep, ragged sound like a bell that had grown teeth. The camp stiffened. Archers took to the palisade. The woman in pale vestments ran toward the eastern gate, her braid a gold line in torch-glow.

“Not only men beneath those stones,” Korren said. “We were right to watch.”

They watched while night gnawed its way toward dawn. The strange roaring faded, and with it some of the tenseness. A sentry on the north wall blew into his hands and stamped, then leaned on his spear and stared into the dark as if daring it to blink. And in the slack that comes before day does its work, Korren said, “Now.”

He rose in the grey light and slung his spear. From his belt he drew the cloth that was as near to a flag as the Tulnar kept — a strip of fungus-bleached weave, white as mushrooms in moon-sky — and tied it near the head of his staff. His face was set, but his step was easy, as if he went to fetch water from a known spring.

“Father,” Zurak said. He did not often use the word

where others could hear.

Korren's hand rested a moment on his son's shoulder. "Keep your feet," he said softly. "Keep your breath."

"I will keep my purpose," Zurak answered, and the words were a promise and a chain. He crouched back into shadow while Korren and Nerr, the warden, stepped down from their shelter as two stones rise from a bed of gravel and become men.

They crossed the broken ground toward the old gate where the camp's palisade had been raised. At first no one saw them. Then a voice cried out, thin with surprise, and the camp stirred like a field taken by wind. Bows came up. A man with a helm crested like a little wave strode to the fore and threw up his hand to still his archers. He called, and his words were old and new at once.

Korren answered in that same tongue, careful and plain. He raised the white strip higher and lowered his spear-point until it saw its own shadow. Nerr's hands were open; he had no weapon in them.

On the wall a young soldier leaned forward, mouth open, eyes wide as lamps. A crossbow at his shoulder trembled, its string singing softly with the tremor. The pale-clad woman put a hand upon the man with the crested helm — checked him, as if to urge caution and mercy both.

The dawn's first color licked the stones. The city

held its breath. And from deeper in the ruins a thin line of smoke climbed and frayed, and a sound like a groan ran through the broken temple district, as if the old dead turned in their sleep.

“Be ready,” Korren had said. Zurak was. But for what, the world did not yet say.

Chapter 5:

Broken Peace

Morning came cold, the kind that puts a thin shell on puddles and makes armor bite the fingers. Korren and Nerr walked with the white strip lifting and settling in the shallow breeze, and the palisade before them grew from shape to lines and from lines to planks and bolts. The man with the crested helm — Captain, by his bearing — stood where stone met timber and lifted his hand again, palm out. Around him men shifted, drew breath, checked their bowstrings as men will when they fear their own twitching more than they fear an enemy.

Korren stopped at a space any archer could measure. He planted his staff, and when he spoke it was in the old tongue, each word offered like bread. “We are five,” he said. “We are Tulnar of Kal’Zul, who kept the embers under stone when the gates closed. We come with open hands and sharp eyes. We would speak, and we would warn, for we have seen rot in the bones of the earth.”

The Captain’s mouth tightened at the strange word Tulnar, then eased at the names Kal’Zul and gates. His reply was halting at first, then smoother as an old memory woke. “We are returners of the Kaelar. We seek a holdfast here at Aela’s gate, to fetch our folk through. We have seen... things in the night.” His gaze flicked toward the east where the temple’s

bones lay. "I am Edric."

Korren inclined his head. "Korren," he said, and then, with a hand at his breast, "of the Underrealm Rangers." He gestured to Nerr, who bowed, stiff with not trusting his knees.

There is a magic to names and to the showing of unarmed hands. The bows on the palisade lowered, grudgingly, like old men getting up from stools. Edric took a step forward, and in that same breath a young archer on the wall — the one with the too-wide eyes — shifted his grip. His foot slipped on frost on stone. The crossbow's string sang like a plucked vein. The bolt leaped.

Korren's body jerked as if someone had called his childhood name from far away and he had turned to answer at once. He put a hand to his chest. It came away astonished with blood.

For a heartbeat the world forgot all language. Then it found too much at once. A woman cried out — a sharp, broken sound; someone cursed; someone else shouted "Hold!" in a voice unused to being obeyed. Nerr leaped to catch Korren as he swayed. On the ridge, Zurak's sight went red.

He did not climb, he fell forward as a stone falls, gathering speed until it is a quarrel itself. The world tightened to a tunnel with the crossbowman at its end. He flung a javelin with a hunter's arm. It took the bowman in the shoulder and drove him back, pinning his jacket to a splintered post. The man

screamed, high and young.

Shouts hammered the air. Steel glittered. Zurak struck the ground before the gate like a thrown spear come to life. Two soldiers came at him more from fear than order; he met the first with the flat of his halberd and took him at the knee; the second's blade shrieked along Zurak's arm-plates and drew a line of bright blood that smoked in the cold.

"Zurak!" Korren's voice was a torn thread, but it held. He was on one knee, Nerr's arm around him. The white strip had fallen into mud and lay there like a dead moth. "Hold," Korren said, and his mouth was red, and his eyes too clear.

The world did not hold. It broke. Out of the bramble of the ruins to the east a thing heaved its bulk — a boar big as a dray, double-headed, with tusks like scythes and hide bristling with black shards that glinted with a sick light. Its breath steamed as if it burned where it touched air. Behind it came a fluttering swarm — not birds but carrion-wings with naked tails, snapping like fish at meat.

The boar screamed, and the scream was a trumpet cracked and beaten, and it charged. Men and Tulnar alike scattered or set themselves without looking at the faces beside them. A pike took the first head in the eye; the shaft shattered. The beast's other head swung and took a man from his feet as a child plucks a mushroom. It gored a post and carried a length of palisade with it, timbers

cracking like ice.

Zurak turned on his heel. His rage had a shape now that was not a man. He slid under a swinging tusk so close that its filthy heat brushed his cheek; his spear-bit found the place behind the joint of a foreleg and sank to the haft. The boar bellowed and tried to turn on him, but its own weight betrayed it; its legs skated in churned mud and blood, and it went down on one knee with a thud that shook the frost from the stones.

On the wall, the pale-clad woman — hair bright as the rim of a coin in sunlight — raised a hand, and a wash of soft gold went out from her like warmth from an oven. The carrion-wings drew back, smoking at the edges of their ragged pinions, and men who had been bleeding stopped bleeding so quickly their eyes widened as if they feared the trick.

Edric's voice cut through the din. "Form! Form!" He did not waste breath on who stood where; he stepped into a gap and took a blow that would have fallen on a boy, and his guard cursed him with love.

The boar gathered itself for one last killing rush, promising with its glare to make meat of the one who had hurt it. Zurak moved to meet it. He did not think of men and Tulnar; he thought of a beast to be killed cleanly. He set his feet and lowered his spear and let the weight come. When it came, he twisted and drove upward, feeling bone give like rotten

wood. The spearhead slid into the dark hive of the monster's chest. The beast shuddered and slumped and lay thrashing while black ichor pumped in two slow gouts, and then it was still save for the ticking of its cooling hide.

The carrion-wings, leaderless, scattered like soot blown from a chimney. A man fell to his knees and wept with relief; another laughed like a drunk and then clapped a hand to his mouth because there was no joy in him to cover the sound.

Quiet came not as peace but as a thing stunned. Zurak stood with blood — his and others' — striping his arms, his breath going in and out like a bellows' pant. He looked for the archer who had loosed the bolt and saw him pinned yet by the javelin, white-faced and gasping. He took a step, and the world narrowed into that single face.

"Stop." It was the woman in white, nearer than he had thought. She knelt by Korren, her hands already red, her mouth set in a line that was courage and fear both. "If you would honor him, let me work." Her eyes, blue as summer water, were fierce as any warrior's.

Zurak's snarl went through his teeth and back into his throat. He stood over them, a wall between her and the camp without having meant to be. Nerr's hands were pressed to Korren's side, and Korren's breath whistled faintly.

Edric came, helm under his arm, face ash-grey. He

looked from the white cloth in the mud to the bolt to Korren's face, and shame went through him like a blade. "This is my fault," he said hoarsely. "By my hand or by the hand I should have stayed. Name your price."

"Price?" Zurak said. His voice was a gravel path. "You do not have coin for that."

"Zurak." Korren's hand found his son's wrist and gripped with a strength that surprised them all. "Listen."

The world listened. Even the wind seemed to hold still under the broken arch of the city. Korren's eyes, once merry as a river under lamplight, were now the velvet of a cave. He pulled his breath up from far away and gave it shape.

"Forgive," he said. "Find unity." The words were small pebbles, but when they struck they sent rings to the edges of things.

The woman in white bent again to her work, and light gathered under her palms like yeast rising. "Hold him," she said, and Nerr did, and Edric, without thinking, knelt opposite and pressed where she told him. For a little, death was slowed by craft and courage.

Men came with litters. The white strip was lifted from the mud and washed with a handful of clean water. The archer who had loosed the bolt hung limp, his young mouth working as if to bite a word

and fail. Zurak looked at him and did not speak the word he had in his throat.

They went into the city together — not as friends, not yet, but as folk who had seen too much of death in an hour to give it more by folly. And behind them the boar lay cooling, and from its split hide a thin line of black seeped into the soil like a threat written small.

Chapter 6:

Blood and Blame

They bore Korren beneath a fallen arch where the wind did not knife so hard, and there made a hall from canvas and care. The woman in white — Celeste, they named her, and the name fitted on the ear like a bell's soft after-ring — worked with hands that had learned to be steady when the heart would not. Around them, the camp moved with the urgency of bees after a stone has struck their hive: men fetching clean water, tearing cloth, setting lamps to give a gentler day beneath the ruin's ribs.

Zurak knelt, a shadow at Korren's head. He had not let his spear from his hand; now he set it down as if it were a sleeping child and would wake if the stone kissed it. His breath came slow by will.

Celeste drew from Korren the quarrel, speaking not to him but to his body, as one speaks to a frightened horse. Her light — not bright, not boastful — pooled beneath her fingers and sank like rain into thirsty ground. For a time the crimson at Korren's breast grew less eager. Color came back to his lips as if a shy bird had ventured to the rim of a pool.

Edric stood near, stripped of helm and command both. "It was my watch," he said to the air, which did not answer. The young bowman lay on a pallet with the javelin's wound bandaged; he stared at the sagging canvas and bit his lower lip until it bled

again. No one spoke to him.

Nerr held Korren's hand. "Stay," he whispered through teeth that chattered though he was not cold. "Old one, stay."

Korren's eyes opened. He looked first for Zurak and found him; a line that had been drawn between them when the bolt flew eased, though it did not vanish. He turned his head with care toward Celeste, and in the old tongue made an effort. "Lady... of light," he said.

Celeste smiled with tears in it. "Only a learner," she answered. "Hold still a little longer, and I will be seen to have wisdom."

"Wisdom," Korren murmured. "Give it to my son, then." He found Zurak's wrist again. "Hear me."

"I hear," Zurak said. His voice grated but did not break.

"This will be a world returned," Korren said, gathering breath like a man gathers sticks. "Not the same. The anger in you is a blade. Keep it sharp, but know where to set the edge. If you strike everywhere, you will have nothing left but a handle." A slow breath. "Forgive... find unity." The words were the same stones, set now in a different river. His fingers tightened once and then eased.

Celeste worked until there was no more work for a mortal to do. The light guttered and caught, guttered

and went. She bowed her head and let three tears fall, one for custom, two because there was grief and she was not ashamed of it.

Edric straightened as if under a weight. "All blame is mine," he said. "Say what must be said. I will carry it." His eyes did not seek consolation; they were the eyes of a man who had walked onto a plank and heard it crack.

Zurak rose. For a breath he was taller than the broken arch under which they stood, and his shadow troubled the lamp. He looked at Edric and at the boy and at Celeste and at the spear at his own feet, and in him two roads ran side by side: the one where he would tear the camp down beam by beam and feed it to his hurt; the one where he would not. Korren's hand, cooling, fixed his choice.

"You cannot bear what I would ask," he said, and his mouth was cruel with truth. "No one can pay for a father." The boy on the pallet flinched as if struck. "But I will not make an offering to anger here, where a good man's breath is still warm." He turned his head so the boy could hear him clearly. "You are alive. Be worthy of the life you were not owed."

The boy's mouth worked. "I... I slipped," he said, as if that were a sin so small it should not be named, and yet it was the size of a mountain. Tears broke from him then, unlovely and unasked, and he covered his face with his bandaged arm.

"Enough," Celeste said, and in her voice was no

reproof for Zurak, only a guard set for what might spill. "There will be time for penance and for choosing better. There is also work." She rose and wiped her hands. "This wound," she said, gesturing around them — the camp, the ruin, the air itself — "is older than one bolt loosed in fear. I have seen black running in the bodies of beasts as if a worm of night had taken them hollow. There is rot in the stone. We must be physicians to it."

Edric nodded, grateful for a task that had weight. "We saw the same," he said. "Deep within the temple district. We sent men to look and they came back sick with dreams and one did not come back at all." He swallowed. "We thought to fortify and wait for more hands from the Gate. But if the blight grows, walls are a story we tell ourselves to sleep."

Zurak knelt again by Korren and set his forehead to the old man's knuckles. He did not say farewell; the word was too thin. He took up his spear and rose into the shape of the duty that had been laid along his bones since he first learned the wards' light.

"Truce," he said, looking to Edric and to Celeste. "Not peace. But a rope between ledges. We will bind the dead and honor them. We will go into your broken city together and find where the rot is thickest. There we will cut."

Edric's shoulders lowered as if a mantle had been placed there, heavy but fitting. "Truce," he agreed. He turned and spoke short words that moved men

as a stick moves a hive: orders for watches doubled, for litters for the dead, for a place set aside and clean.

They bore Korren out under a sky that had turned to a hard white. In a square where grass had forced itself between stones, the Tulnar and the humans made a bier together. Nerr spoke low words that would have sounded like stones rolling to anyone who did not know the tune; Celeste sang a thread of prayer that made the hair lift at the nape for those who believed in gods and for those who did not. In that small ceremony something was bound that had been frayed.

After, Zurak stood apart and watched the wind tilt the grasses. Celeste came to him and stood with hands folded as if holding something fragile she did not dare offer.

"I could not keep him," she said simply.

"You kept him long enough to speak," Zurak answered. "That is more than many are given." He glanced at her and away. "You are not what I expected."

"What did you expect?" Her smile was tired but real.

"Ghosts of cowards," he said. "Men with soft mouths. Stories wearing boots."

"And what am I?"

"A woman who puts her hand between death and a stranger," he said, and his voice had no shape for scorn in it. "I will remember that."

They walked back to the canvas hall. Edric met them with a face already older than it had been at dawn. "Rest what you must," he said. "At dusk we move inside the bones. There is a place beneath the great temple where the air smells wrong. If there is a source, it is there."

Celeste looked toward the broken vaults. "The Essence is ill," she said softly. "I feel it like a fever left to run."

"Essence," Zurak said, testing the foreign word on his tongue as if it might bite. "Call it what you will. We will fight where it creeps." He touched the talisman under his harness and felt the cold shape of it. "My father asked it of me."

In the high stone where falcons once nested, carrion-wings turned and fled the blue, uneasy. Far under their shadows, men and Tulnar bound wounds and sharpened blades and set their jaws, and the broken city listened as if it too could hear the footfall of what drew near in the dark below.

Chapter 7:

Unlikely Allies

In the shelter of a half-fallen hall, where ivy had threaded the very cracks and hung like old banners, they set Korren's body upon a bier and ringed him with quiet. The pale-faced sun slid along the edge of the ruin and dropped, and the ruin took on the kind of hush that lives in a place that remembers better days.

When dusk deepened, the Tulnar sang a dirge of the Underrealm: low, without words at first, a humming made for the ribs and the bones. It moved like water along stone, finding hollows and making them speak. Nerr's voice was a thin string in it and Fen's a rougher cord; Zurak's was the thick line that bound the weave together. When their sound had worn a path, Celeste took up a lantern and, standing across the bier, spoke a prayer of light — not long, not dressed in ornaments, but true. It lay over the Tulnar hum as a clear thread upon dark cloth.

Edric and his soldiers brought their dead also, not to mingle the rites but to share the air. A man laid a hand on a Tulnar's shoulder and was surprised to find the scale there warm. Gorruk was not yet among them, but the space he would take seemed to be present, as if the ruin already knew of a voice that would shout in its halls.

When the last notes ran out and fell into the cracks, the living spoke in small clumps. Zurak stood apart, his hands on the head of his spear. Celeste came to him as one approaches a wary hound: neither fawning nor afraid, but with respect.

"You saved men who would have killed you," she said. "You saved me."

"I killed what needed killing," he answered. "Do not make a ring of flowers for a spear." But his tone had lost some stone.

She did not flinch. "Then thank you for doing what needed doing." Her eyes, which had wept without shame, were bright now with something like resolve. "We must do more. The corruption is no campfire we can stamp out foot by foot. It has a hearth."

Edric joined them, his face drawn tight. "The men will stand by whatever course takes us to the root of it," he said. "We are fewer now, but their fear has met its shape and stands a little straighter for it." He glanced at Zurak. "I ask your guide's feet."

Zurak looked upon him a long breath. The old name still burned in him like a cinder — gatewalker — but his father's last words were a cool hand on that heat. "At dawn," he said, "we go deeper. Your archers take high places. Your slow men hold the open ground. We will be a knife, not a club."

Around the second watch, a horn sounded from among the tumbled colonnades, harsh and

unfamiliar — three blasts like the bark of a wolf. Men took to their arms; Zurak's head snapped toward the sound. Out of the dark came figures swift and heavy: orcs in patch-armor, their eyes like burning coals and their teeth bared in grim humor. At their head strode one as tall as a door, with a braid like a rope down his back and a great axe across his shoulder as if it were a stick for beating rugs.

"Peace, if there is such a thing in this midden," he rumbled, voice a drum with legs. "We smelled the rot and followed the river of it to your hole." He looked upon the Tulnar as if seeing a tale he had been told and had not believed. "Earth-spawn," he said softly, almost in wonder.

Zurak's stance shifted a hair, not to flee or to charge but to be ready to be either. "Name," he said.

"Gorruk of the Ren'Kai," the orc answered, striking his chest with a fist that sounded like a mallet on a barrel. "We have cracked a few skulls on the road that should have had sap instead of slime. You looked to be cracking more. I came to help." His tusked grin dared the ruin to disagree.

Edric's men hissed old curses between their teeth and checked them when their captain raised his hand. Celeste's eyebrows lifted and settled; she took in the orcs' wounds and the weariness under their bluster. Zurak inclined his head the barest fraction.

“Help is help,” he said. “We go below the great temple. If your axe can bite shadow, bring it.”

Gorruk barked a laugh. “My axe bites gods if they come within reach.” He clapped Zurak on the shoulder with a friendliness that would have knocked a slighter man down, then paused when he felt bone and will under scale. “Good.”

They shared what food could be spared. The orcs produced a skin that smelled like a forge and passed it; dwarves had not yet come, but the drink might have been their cousin. Edric and Gorruk spoke briefly of positions and signals; Faelar was not yet with them, but rumor later would say that an elf’s eyes watched from the broken roofs even then. Nerr slept at last, head on his pack, mouth open like a child’s; Fen sharpened his knife with soft, even strokes, as if the sound alone could smooth his heart.

Toward dawn, Celeste and Zurak kept watch together on a toppled cornice where moss had made a garden of small brave things. They spoke low.

“You do not hate me,” she said, not making it a question or a challenge, but a thing to lay on the stone between them and consider.

“I do not know you,” he said. “But I know what you did with your hands. Hate has not teeth enough to eat that.” He was quiet a moment. “I hated your

dead. That is a bad meal also.”

She nodded, looking out over the city’s black bones.
“We will do better for the living,” she said.

When the sun pushed a pale spear over the rim of the east, the unlikely company rose. Tulnar with their leather and chitin, humans with their steel and their wooden hearts stiffened by oath, orcs with their laughter and their long knives. They went together toward the temple’s fallen door, and the shadow that waited there seemed to draw back and gather itself as if it knew their names and meant to learn their blood.

Chapter 8:

Wary Exploration

The streets of Aela had remembered their lines even when their stones forgot their places. Weeds wrote green script between the cobbles; water pooled where once carts had cut ruts glossy as bone. The party went light-footed through the old bones, each hearing danger in a different tongue: Edric in the creak of shattered lintels, Gorruk in the hush before a charge, Celeste in the thin wrongness of the air, Zurak in the small shifts of dust that tell of recent passing.

They came to a quarter where the dead slept shallow. A toppled graveyard sprawled like a chessboard kicked by a child: lids cracked, names half-eaten by rain. From among them rose shapes that had the memory of walking but not the right to it — skeletons in patchy rags, ghouls whose mouths were full of teeth that had found their way back to work long after they should have gone to ground.

“Hold formation,” Edric called, and his men made a hedge of shields. Gorruk laughed, stepped past them, and took the first ghoul’s head as a man harvests a cabbage. Zurak’s halberd whistled and struck bone with a music of its own; Celeste’s symbol flared in her palm, and a wash of light broke like a clean wave upon the press, making the dead falter as if they remembered an oath they had

sworn and broken.

An arrow sang out of shadow and blossomed with white fire in a skull's eye. Another and another. The archers on the wall were behind them; these shafts came from an oriel where ivy had made a curtain. A figure stepped to the sill as lightly as a cat — slender, hooded, with ears that the ivy could not hide.

"Elf," Gorruk said, with a curl of lip that was more interest than scorn.

The stranger dropped from the window as if the air were his own stair and landed with a grace that made even the dead seem clumsy. He did not raise empty hands; he raised his bow, nocked, and sent a shaft humming past Gorruk's ear into something that had been making towards Celeste's back on careful knee-bones.

When the press was broken and the restless laid twice to rest, the elf drew back his hood. His skin was bronze like old sunlight; his eyes were a leaf's green after rain. He inclined his head the smallest necessary amount.

"Faelar," he said. "Of the Empyrean. Ranger, by trade; meddler, by your leave." His Common was clean and edged.

"Zurak," Zurak said, because names were bridges, and he was tired of falling into ravines. "Of Kal'Zul."

Edric made the sign of politeness men use when their hands are sword-calloused. Celeste smiled, a gift that cost nothing and is worth much. Gorruk sniffed like a wolf and grunted. "Pointy-ears," he said, and then, almost amiably, "You shoot straight."

Faelar's mouth tugged. "You swing wide, but with conviction." He looked past them, toward the heart of the temple district. His gaze tightened. "I have tracked a stench of Essence untaught and untended. Not wild," he said, "but bent. It threads downward there." He pointed to a great door half-buried in ivy and fallen stone, where the symbol of a sun broken by vines still showed through filth.

Celeste's hand went to her pendant. "The Goddess' house," she whispered. "Or what is left of it." She shivered. "I have dreamt of this place without knowing its face."

They moved on, Faelar taking a place at their flank without asking and without being asked. In the quiet between dangers he spoke softly of what his eyes had read: elven marks faint on certain stones, not claiming, only warning; an old joint patrol's sigils where humans and elves had walked together once to bind a wound that now: throbbed anew.

Beneath the temple's broken ribs, they found a stair curling into a cool mouth. The air there had weight, as if an old story pressed on the lungs. They lit no more than a single lampstone for the fore and one for the rear; Celeste's light they kept hooded as a

mercy to Zurak's eyes and to anything that might be watching that hated it.

The crypt smelled of dust and salt and something sweet that had died badly. Carvings on the walls showed battles that were not men's battles: tall figures with faces hidden by helms and halos, rivers of fire that flowed upward, stars falling like spears. Zurak did not love such pictures; they made his teeth ache. Faelar's fingers traced the lines without touching.

"Ancients," he said. The word was the creak of an old door. "And those who stood against them. See here — the binding." He pointed to a circle of figures around a caught shape. "And here — the seal. If this craft held once, we may find its bones."

They found more than bones. A trigger of old cleverness spat darts from a hidden mouth; Zurak felt the breath of one kiss his cheek and yanked a soldier back by the strap before the next bit him. A stretch of floor sighed and went to gravel under Gorruk's front foot; he leaped back and roared laughter at the hole as if it had tried to bite him and failed to find meat. "Elves and men with too much time," he said, admiring in his scorn.

In a small chamber where the air was still, Celeste bent and brushed dust from a fallen statue's hand. Beneath it lay a leather-wrapped book, its edges stiff with age. She lifted it as one lifts a relic in a shrine. The script within was crabbed but living.

“A priestess,” Celeste said, voice low as if not to wake the stone. “She wrote of a lieutenancy of the Ancients named Malikaar. Of luring him and binding him with the last clean Essence they had. She feared the seal would thin when the world’s songs changed.” Her hand trembled and stilled. “The songs have changed.”

The floor beneath them spoke in a different tongue: a crack that was not the crack of settling stone but of something making room for itself. Shadows ran like water uphill. From apertures that had seemed only dark came things made of denial and hunger: bones re-knit with a will that had never been human, a heap of darkness that wore a face badly and reached with too many fingers.

“Back to back!” Edric called. Gorruk snarled and stepped forward instead, because that is how some men hold line. Faelar’s bow sang its green note, and roots of light rose from the floor to snare what had no legs. Celeste lifted her hand and drew a circle in the air; within it a small sun woke and burned, and the shadows hissed where its rays fell. Zurak went through them like a plow through weeds, trusting his friends to keep the furrows open.

When the last of the guardians lay in harmless pieces and the dark, misshapen heap had drowned in light and fallen into honest shadow, they stood panting and took stock. One soldier would never climb a stair again; another had lost the use of two

fingers and could not yet be made to believe that this was a smaller grief than others. Celeste's hands shook after the light had left them; Gorruk stood with blood — black and red — drying on his tattoos, and grinned as if dared.

"Malikaar," Faelar said, tasting the name as if it might tell him a secret. "If he was bound here, then perhaps he wishes to walk again."

"He will find we are poor hosts," Zurak said, and his mouth made a shape that might someday be a smile. "Show us the way, priestess." He touched the diary gently. "We will hear the end of your song."

Chapter 9:

Shadows of the Past

They went down where the stairs remembered being stairs, into the earth's mouth that had been taught to take breath and then to hold it. The carvings grew thicker as if the very stone had been asked to keep guard when men grew tired. Celeste read in murmurs by the glow of a hooded lampstone; Faelar's hand hovered, sketching images into the air so his mind could remember the lay of things.

In a vestibule shaped like a wheel, seven pillars stood; each bore a rune of a god, cracked but not broken. At their center was a circle of smooth stone ringed by channels like the veins of a leaf. The priestess's book spoke of a seal that drank clean Essence slowly, a cup turned upside down to drip hope on a monster's head.

"The cup is emptying," Celeste said, and her voice shivered though her hands did not. "We are late, but perhaps not too late."

Traps had not slept altogether. A fan of knives swung where a door had once been; Zurak ducked and caught one on the plates along his forearm, grunted, and moved on. A breath of gas sighed from a crack and licked a soldier's cheek; his skin blistered like milk left too long by a fire, and he grit his teeth as Celeste laid cool light on it. "Breathe

slow,” she told them, and they obeyed because some voices broker no argument and yet give no command.

At last they came to a broad stair that had seen great feet. The air below it pulsed, not with wind, but with a heart-beat not their own. They descended into a great round chamber like the inside of a bell. Around it stood monoliths etched so deep with runes that the very stone seemed to be made of script. Between them yawned a pit, and from that pit rose a breath that stank of wells left open in summer, of meat hung too long, of anger that had learned patience.

A murmur, not heard but felt, passed through the chamber. Words in no living tongue slid along their bones. Edric’s men shifted and gripped their spears as if they were standing on a deck at sea. Gorruk bared his teeth, and for once made no boast. Celeste’s light flared unbidden and she clapped it shut as one cups a candle in wind.

Then it came: a heave of shadow, and within it the suggestion of a figure, too tall, too spare, armored in night that had learned to be hard. Two embers burned where eyes should be. It did not climb fully; it pressed its face like a hungry thing against the net of runes that still held. The runes guttered and brightened like coals remembering fire.

“Malikaar,” Faelar whispered, and the name made the air colder.

The not-yet-free thing raised a hand, and the air before it cracked like ice at a spring thaw. It did not speak with a voice, but their minds heard a thought as if it were a bell struck beneath water: You are late. You are small. You will be mine.

“Not today,” Zurak said, because sometimes the only answer to contempt is the small word that will not bend. He strode forward to the nearest monolith and set his palm to it. The stone seared cold. “What can you keep?” he asked it, as one asks a door.

The seal shuddered. A ring of the shadows around the pit coalesced into forms and came at them like teeth around meat. Bone-guardians with helmets fused to their skulls; things of congealed darkness that moved as if swimming. Edric’s line held; Faelar’s arrows threaded eyes and joints; Gorruk’s axe rose and fell and rose again, his laughter now the kind that keeps a man from breaking. Celeste moved among them as a mother moves among her children, reckless and precise; when she thrust her symbol at a knot of shadow, it withered like mold before sunrise.

A soldier fell with a blade through him; Zurak dragged him out by the strap and turned to find a tall skeleton raising a rusted sword to split his back. Before he could turn, Faelar’s arrow clove the spine and the thing unstrung like a puppet with its cords cut. “Eyes,” Faelar said, unnecessary and useful both.

The press eased, then surged as the not-yet-free thing heaved again. Runes spat sparks. A monolith's light died to a sullen glow. Celeste planted her feet and began to chant words that had dust on them. The seal responded with tremors and a rising keen. Light ran like water through the cut veins in the floor toward the circle, slow and thin.

"Hold," Edric said, as if to the seal, to his men, to his own legs.

For a breath, it worked. Then a crack ran across the floor between two stones and widened with a hiss. The shadow rose higher. The chamber roared with a silence that hurt the ears. A blast of unseen force picked Faelar up and dashed him against a pillar; his breath left him in a grunt and he slid with eyes unfocused. Gorruk took a lash of something like rope made of cold; it wrapped his arm and burned it black before he tore free with a bellow.

Celeste's voice faltered. The light in the channels stuttered.

"Not yours," Zurak snarled, and leapt, because at times a man must be a poor plan to save a better one. He slammed the butt of his halberd against the nearest monolith and shouted in a tongue he did not have, the one his bones would have used if they had been asked to be gods. It was no spell, but it was defiance, and sometimes that is a kind of magic.

The embers that were eyes fixed on him. A thought

knifed through his mind: You. The one who hates correctly. Serve, and be made great.

Zurak spat on the floor, and the spit steamed. "I will serve purpose," he said. "Not you."

Something in the pit laughed, and the laugh made bile rise in throats. Then, like a hand closing, the darkness gathered itself back and flowed down, unwilling to be spent yet. The runes flared once — bright as if remembering the faces that had carved them — and then sank to a smoulder that said: We did not save you. We only reminded him to wait.

They stood shaking, though none would name it. Celeste went on one knee and panted; Faelar dragged himself up and checked the string of his bow as if it had betrayed him. Gorruk tied a rag around his burned arm with his teeth and grinned, feral. Edric counted his men and came up short by one; he closed his eyes, opened them, and said, "We live." As if living were a tactic he had chosen and meant to keep.

Celeste lifted the priestess's diary and kissed it as one kisses a child's brow. "Malikaar," she said. "Bound, waking, and angry."

Zurak looked upon the seal that would not hold forever, and the hate in him found a new place to go. "Then we will be angrier," he said softly. "And we will be many."

Chapter 10:

The Corrupting Force

At the seal's heart, the waiting ended. They came upon the chamber again at a time that was not theirs but seemed chosen for them. The monoliths' runes guttered like a failing watch-fire. The pit breathed out a wind that stank of a grave opened wrong. And then, like a smoke given bones, Malikaar rose.

He was not all out of the pit, not yet; but the part that came was enough to make the living remember being small. Armor of night clung to a frame too gaunt for pity. His helm's horns curved like the thoughts of a cruel mind. The air around him shook as if something had plucked the strings that hold it together.

His gaze — if embers can be called eyes — passed over them and paused at Celeste's small light. It recoiled, then gathered. When he spread his hands, darkness crawled from them like oil. Shapes coalesced at his feet: hounds that drooled ash, men made of gaps between things.

"Form!" Edric barked, and the men did, less from obedience than from the fear that seeks a wall to put its back to. Gorruk roared and met the first hound with an axe-stroke that would have done for an oak. Celeste's shield flared around Zurak as if it had been waiting for him alone; her lips moved with

words that had bread in them and iron.

Zurak went at Malikaar because that is where the world narrowed. He leapt from a fallen stone and struck for the place between plates where a man's heart would be. His spearhead rang; a chip of blackness flew and dissolved to smoke. Malikaar did not so much turn as re-align the world; a backhand that was shadow and force together took Zurak in the side and flung him like a doll against a pillar. The pillar flinched.

Faelar's arrows sang, green-lit, and one struck the joint at the demon's elbow. Vines of light burst from it and wrapped, holding for a heartbeat. "Now!" Faelar cried. Gorruk crashed in from the flank and drove his blade into the thigh-gap; sparks and something colder than sparks flew. Malikaar's attention flexed — a pressure like a storm shifting — and Gorruk went to one knee with blood blackening the straps at his shoulder where a lance of shadow had kissed him.

Celeste stood with feet set and eyes alight, hands weaving a net of brightness that pushed back the dead air around them. Sweat ran and vanished on her brow as if afraid. "The seal!" she called over the clash. "I can feed it — a little — if you keep him from my throat."

Zurak spat blood and stood. The world had edges again. He moved in under a reaching shadow, planted his foot upon a cracked rune, and drove the

spearhome where Gorruk had made a door. Malikaar's roar shook dust from ancient carvings; the light within the wound burned like frost-fire, and for the first time the thing flinched backward as if reminded of a promise it had made and wanted to break.

The chamber trembled. Celeste, her voice raw, poured light along the channels in the floor. They woke like old canals taking water. The runes brightened to a sore glow. Malikaar's head snapped toward her. His will gathered between his palms, a sphere so dark it made the shadows around it look pale. The air screamed without sound.

"Down!" Faelar shouted, but Celeste could not move without letting the light spill and die. Zurak saw the choice before him: move and live, or stand and hold and maybe die and take many with him.

A horn bellowed, sudden as a rockfall. From a broken side-stair came orcs that were not Gorruk's alone — a knot of Ren'Kai driven by a will as stubborn as mountain roots. At their head, Gorruk shouldered through pain and cleaved a shadow hound into smoke.

"Sing, priest!" he roared at Celeste. "We will dance!"

Faelar cursed in a lilting tongue and flung a binding that caught Malikaar's ankle and held it a little. Edric's men pushed the ring outward a pace and paid blood for it. Celeste's light knitted a torn lung under her hand and ran on to feed the failing

stones. The sphere in Malikaar's grasp swelled to the size of a man's head and then a man's hunger; he hissed a thought like a promise of drowning.

"Not today," Zurak said again, and hurled himself into the path of the coming night.

The seal flared bright once, as if in answer; and Malikaar, as if remembering something else, drew back a fraction. He cast the sphere aside — not at them but into the ceiling where it bit through stone like acid through wax. Rock fell in sheets; dust billowed like the world's last breath. When it settled, the Ancient was gone. The pit seethed with a breath that had lost its patience.

Silence rang. Then men gasped as if surfacing. Celeste sagged and would have fallen had Zurak not shouldered her weight. Gorruk tore a strip from his cloak with his teeth and bound his arm tighter. Faelar leaned his head against a pillar and laughed once without mirth.

"The seal is broken," Celeste said, voice thin. "Not gone — but broken."

"Then he walks," Faelar answered. "And gathers."

Zurak looked up through the new wound in the roof of the world, where a thread of pale daylight fell like a blessing that had mislaid its time. He set the butt of his spear upon the stone and his jaw.

"We will walk also," he said. "And we will not walk

alone.”

Chapter 11:

Bonds Forged in Battle

Night had come by the time they climbed from the belly of the temple. The stars were thin as needles in a blue-black cloak, and a slice of moon lay like a knife set aside. Around the broken plaza, men and Tulnar and orcs moved as folk move after a storm — counting, binding, finding who is not there to be found.

Gorruk stood with his band, recounting in loud and cheerful lies how many shadow-hounds each had cleft; then, when he thought no one watched, he set his forehead to his burned forearm and was still a breath. Faelar found a perch and stared long into the distance as if hunting for song in the wind; at last he came down among them and nodded once to Zurak as a man nods to a tree that has stood a blow.

“Gorruk,” Zurak said. “You came because the rot stank on the wind?”

“Because my feet found the road under them,” the orc answered. “And because I like to crack the heads of things that think themselves kings.” His grin showed tusk and humor both. “You crack well for an earth-spawn.”

“For an orc, you do not talk only with your axe,”

Faelar observed, dry as a twig.

Gorruk snorted. "Words are only small hammers. Use them to set the wedge; then strike with the big iron."

Around a fire smaller than a man's traveling grief, they shared drink and quiet. Celeste moved like a pale moth among the wounded, spending the last of her strength in small offerings of heat and ease. When at last she sat, she did not sit apart; she took a place beside Zurak and folded her hands and looked at nothing for a while.

"What comes now," Edric said, when the dead were named and the living had eaten what they could swallow, "is not the work of one camp or one tunnel." He looked from face to face — scaled, smooth, green, fair — and found in each a shape of the same thought. "We cannot hold this city with the men we have. We can die in it, but that is not the plan."

"Plans are good before the first blow," Gorruk said. "After, you have friends. Or you have ghosts."

"We have both," Celeste murmured, thinking of Korren and of a soldier she had not known the name of whose hand she had held while he went where her light could not follow. She lifted her chin. "But we can fetch more friends."

“Kal’Zul,” Zurak said, and the name put a taste of stone and mushroom-bread on the air. “It is near underfoot, nearer than any forest-gate of elves or mountain-mouth of dwarves. If we go there, we will bring word and we will bring back more than word: counsel, and perhaps... weapons that remember how to shine.” He did not know why he said it, only that the thought fit his bones.

Faelar inclined his head. “My people will feel this stir as the hare feels the hawk. I will send a falcon with word to the rangers on the green side. They are slow to be alarmed, but quick to answer if the song is true.”

Gorruk thumped his chest. “I sent a runner before we went below. The Ren’Kai come when there is meat to the fight. They will be here with the dawn, or the dawn after.”

Edric drew in air as if bracing his ribs. “Then we draw breath, and at morning we go to your city, Zurak. I will bring a small party. The rest will hold here as best they can.”

Zurak’s jaw worked. The thought of Edric’s men in Kal’Zul’s halls tugged at the oldest wires in him. He saw Vetch’s eyes, and Brisk’s mouth tight with distrust. He saw his father’s bier.

“Come,” he said at last, and the word was heavier than a stone. “If we are to be many, we must be brave enough to be seen.”

Later, when watch was set and the fire was low, Faelar and Gorruk found themselves sharing a wall for a backrest. The elf glanced sideways. "Your axe work is... sufficient," he said, which from an Empyrean was like a round of applause.

Gorruk chuckled. "And your little splinters of wood fly true. Perhaps I will let you shoot the apple from my head. When the world is not ending."

"The world is always ending for someone," Faelar replied. "The trick is to end it for the right things." He blinked, then snorted softly at himself. "Listen to me, spouting wisdom like an old tree."

Gorruk leaned his head back and looked up. The stars burned on, undisturbed by wisdom, by axes, by the names of gods. "In my clan," he said, "we sing before battle, and after, and sometimes because the day tastes good. Your songs are thin and sad. You should come hear ours."

"Perhaps," Faelar said, and meant it more than he would have yesterday.

Edric came to where Zurak sat at the shadow's edge and stood as a man stands who is not sure whether he is welcome. "Your father," he said, and stopped, because sometimes there are not words.

"He would have liked you," Zurak said, surprising himself. "He liked brave men who listen." He rose. "We march at dawn."

They slept as soldiers sleep — in pieces, between bells. Dawn came with a wet wind and the smell of leaf and old stone. A small company formed: Zurak and Nerr and Fen; Celeste with her staff; Edric with two; Faelar; Gorruk because doors that have not met him yet need to. They set their faces toward the hill where the tunnel's mouth had been a gate to the world.

Behind them, under the new light, the ruins watched. Somewhere in their cracked belly, a name like a curse thickened the air. Malikaar was abroad upon Verra now, and the earth felt it like the ache that comes before a storm. But where the dark walked, so too did a handful of folk who had bled beside one another and found that their blood, once shed, made a kind of kinship no book could bind.

Chapter 12:

Secrets of the Deep

The tunnel received them like a throat swallows a sigh. The light of the world narrowed to a ribbon behind and went out with a bend. They lit lampstones and went by the marks Korren's hand had left: a nick on a spur of rock, a twist of cord at a waypost, the memory of a man who walked lightly and remembered for those who would come after.

Kal'Zul did not reveal herself all at once. First there was smell: river-cold and mushroom-sweet and the iron-salt scent of stone cut by patience. Then came sound: the hush of many folk at work, which is not silence at all but a kind of low song. Then, around a turning and over a bridge like a harp-string, the cavern opened and the city lay like stars poured in a bowl.

Edric's men stopped and forgot to move for a breath. Gorruk's laugh went softer, as if even his mirth put its feet down carefully here. Faelar's eyes widened despite themselves; light from a thousand fungus lamps reflected in them like dew on leaves.

Guards met them with spear-ends bright. Words were not exchanged at spear's length; they were brought in to the threshold of the Central Forum, where Elder Shae sat with staff across her knees and grief on her brow like a diadem. At the sight of Zurak, the grief sharpened to a point and then

broadened to take in the others at his back.

“Zurak,” she said, and the name held welcome and question both.

“Elder,” he answered, and knelt, and laid his father’s talisman on his palm. “Korren is gone down the dark. He died with courage and with counsel. He asked me to bring both.”

A low murmur rolled the circle. Shae rose and set her hand on Zurak’s skull between the horns, blessing and burden alike. “He taught you well,” she said softly, and in her old eyes a young fire kindled. She turned to the strangers. “You come to our hearth in a dangerous hour. Your hands are clean of malice in this place. Speak your names.”

Edric spoke. Celeste bowed. Faelar gave the short courtesy of his people. Gorruk thumped his chest and grinned as if daring the cavern to glare back. There were murmurs at each, and a low hiss at the orc that was not fear so much as memory with a stone still in its shoe.

Voices rose — some fearful, some angry, some curious. Vetch was there, and his scowl was as old as his loss. “Gatewalkers,” he said, letting the word clatter. “They bring trouble behind them like carts bring flies.” Others nodded; others glared at the noddors.

Zurak stood. He did not raise his voice; he did not need to. “We bled with them,” he said. “They bled

with us. The rot in the stone has a name, and it is waking. If we do not bind ourselves to one rope, we will fall one by one into the same pit." He drew breath and set the truth on the stone. "Malikaar." The name stung the air.

A chill went like a hand across the backs of the gathered folk. Even those who did not know the word knew to fear it. Elder Shae lifted her staff. "Some of you will wish to close your doors tighter. Some will wish to throw them wide. We will do neither. We will open to those who stand with us; we will bar to those who would break. And we will arm our children with more than courage."

She led them down by ways not often trod, under the Forum and behind the old forges, to a door without hinges that listened before it moved. She spoke to it in a tongue older than the Tulnar and more patient than stone; the door sighed and drew back as if remembering a promise. Within lay a chamber cold as unlit water. Racks stood with shapes upon them that caught the lamplight and gave it back as if it had been hungry.

"From the last days before the Gates closed," Shae said, her voice hushed by the vault. "Gifts and burdens entrusted to us when the priests went into the dark. We have kept them without knowing their hour. Perhaps it is now." She drew from a velvet cradle a spearhead of crystal, no bigger than a man's open hand, blue as a shard of winter sky.

Light lived in it with no lamp to feed it.

Celeste's breath caught. Faelar's lips moved once in an old elven name for purity. Gorruk squinted and then grinned like a boy eyeing a sweet. "That will bite," he said reverently.

Shae placed the spearhead in Zurak's palms. It was warm, and it hummed, a note too low for the ear but not for the bones. "Heart of the Goddess," she said. "Made to be set upon a haft and turned against the unclean. We did not know if it would ever see the air that is not our own. It is yours, if you will bear it with the weight of what it means."

Zurak's throat worked. He thought of the seal and the embers that had looked at him as if they knew the shape of his anger. He bowed his head and the blue light cut a line along the edge of his horns. "I will bear it," he said.

News moved through Kal'Zul like water through a braid of channels: elves in the halls; orcs at the river; humans sharing bread at the Shroomfields; a spear with a shard of sky in its throat. Children peered from niches and did not hide fast enough; old men pretended to scold them and then leaned to see better themselves. Gorruk arm-wrestled a Tulnar who was thick through the shoulders as a cart-axle and lost, to much laughter and thumping of backs. Faelar showed a boy how to hold a bow with his elbow not locked as a knee; the boy showed Faelar how to catch a lizard with a loop of cord and

a scrap of fungus.

That night, drums spoke from one quarter and a flute from another. The city, which had known only one kind of song for long years, learned a second and a third that did not put out the first but made a braid. The messengers went out through side tunnels like fish through a weir, bearing words to other pockets of the Underrealm and to the near places above. And under the forge-light, Zurak and a smith named Harl set the crystal to a new shaft that fit his hands as if his hands had been made to fit it.

When it was done, the spear stood like a star fallen into a stick of ash wood, and the air around it felt cleaner by a breath. Shae touched the haft and then Zurak's cheek. "You will need more than this," she said. "But this you will need."

"Tomorrow," Edric said aside to his second, "we go back up with friends at our side." He looked across the cavern at Celeste and at Zurak and at the way the two stood near without meaning to. "And with hope, which is the strangest weapon I have ever seen."

In the deepest hours, when Kal'Zul's lamps burned low and the Blackrun whispered, a sound rose that was not of their making. A horn, twisted and raw. A scream that had no words. The alarm went through the city like a flock of birds up from reeds. The safe world had been pierced, and the darkness had

found them at last.

Chapter 13:

Siege in the Shadows

The first thing was the smell — not of smoke or iron, but of a sweetness gone wrong, like fruit that smiles while it rots. Then came the skitter: claws like knives on stone, many, fast. The alarm-bell in the Forum boomed, and Kal’Zul woke as a beast wakes, all parts at once: guards to the bridges; mothers to the children; old men to the fire-pits where the oil was kept for pouring.

They came through a tear where no tear had been: a lava tube half-sealed in elder days, now forced with a pressure that was not of earth. Chitinous things, low and hooked, with eyes like wet stones in a mine; behind them, a cave-troll that should have been pale and slow, now streaked with red veins that pulsed with someone else’s will. Its roar struck water from the Blackrun in rings.

“Form!” Brisk cried, voice a whip. The wardens’ lines formed on the near side of the bridge, shields made from beetle-plate and good wood. Edric’s men took the flanks without being told. Gorruk whooped and went straight for the troll because that is the road he knows. Faelar’s arrows hummed like bees in summer, pinning legs to stone.

Zurak swung the new spear into his hand. The crystal head sang — not loud, not a tune, but a note in his bones that made his breath regular and his

eyes clear. "Left!" he called, and Nerr was there. "Right!" and Fen, grinning like a boy with the right knife for the right hide.

The chitinous fiends hit the shield-line like surf. Claws rasped on scale and wood, seeking the softness under. Celeste stood behind, her light not a blaze but a field, holding panic to a smaller circle, letting courage breathe. When a fiend leaped high, she struck it from the air with her staff's shod end and muttered a word that made the air taste clean where its blood fell.

The troll met Gorruk in the middle of the bridge. It swung a trunk of an arm and would have pitched the orc into the Blackrun, but Gorruk set his legs and took the blow on raised axe-haft; wood splintered, flesh tore, and he laughed in the troll's face as he would laugh at a storm. "Come then!" he bellowed. "Be a mountain!"

"Zurak!" Fen shouted, and the Tulnar was already moving. He sprang, caught a guy-rope, and ran up a wall like a lizard while the fight breathed under him. He gained the troll's back as it leaned into Gorruk and drove the blue spear down between rock-like plates into the place where a spine must be if any order still held. The crystal bit, and where it bit the corruption burned like frost in a fire. The troll spasmed, bellowed, and toppled, taking a chunk of bridge with it. Gorruk stumbled, caught a rope, and hung grinning over the chasm like a meat-seller

showing his best cut.

“Up!” Zurak barked, and three hands hauled the orc back onto the stone with cursings and laughter mixed.

On the far side, a knot of fiends broke through and skittered for a row of homes cut into the cavern wall. A child cried out. Celeste turned, threw her light like a net, and it landed on them and made their claws slow; a Tulnar woman with a butcher’s cleaver finished what the light began. She looked at Celeste, eyes wide and new. “Thank you,” she said, and the word sounded odd and good in her mouth when given to a stranger.

The press thinned. The last fiend died badly, hissing a thread of red that smoked where it touched stone. The wardens cheered once, out of habit as much as relief; then the cheer died as they understood what the breach meant. The Underrealm was not safe by virtue of depth alone. The dark had learned new roads.

Elder Shae stood upon the Forum’s lip and looked upon her city, her people, and the blood that had been poured out in its keeping. Her eyes were harder than the staff in her hand. “We have been found,” she said. “So be it. We will be found together.”

In the gathering after, there were no more ‘they’ and ‘we’ in the hall than there absolutely had to be. Edric stood beside Brisk over the crude map of the

city and pointed with his finger, not his rank. Gorruk listened without interrupting, proving he could when he chose. Faelar traced the paths of the tear with a hunter's care. Celeste wrapped a young Tulnar's arm and sang under her breath until his breath matched her song.

"Malikaar seeks to break what we are making," Shae said. "All the more reason to make it larger." She turned, and in her gesture was command and family both. "Send word to the dwarves in their nearest holdfast. Send word to the elves on the green side. Send word to the Ren'Kai and to the Kaelar beyond the Gate. At dawn, we march for Aela with all we can bear."

Zurak looked up at the great vault of Kal'Zul and saw there the old comfort of a ceiling that did not fall. He felt underneath it the new knowledge that even ceilings can crack. He set the spear-butt at his heel and the shaft to his shoulder and nodded once, as if some unseen judge had asked him a hard question and he had at last decided to answer yes.

Chapter 14:

A Plan Unites

In the cavern's half-light, they made an army from threads. Tulnar militia stood in ranks not straight but certain, patchwork armor polished for the first time for eyes not their own. Edric's Kaelar unfurled a banner stained by travel and stitched at the edges by some soldier's practiced hands. Gorruk's runner returned, panting, with news that a band of Ren'Kai would meet them on the march; Faelar's falcon came back with a green ribbon tied to its leg — a sign from the forest rangers that bows would be there where needed.

Bromm Ironbeard arrived as if the stone had decided to grow a man: squat, beard like braided cable, eyes like chips struck from a darker rock. He stamped the dust from his boots and grunted. "You called," he said to Shae. "We came. The world won't mend itself." He set down a pack that clanked like a cheerful anvil. "I brought nails for your plans and iron for your talk."

Around the Council's table, the plan came into shape as a vessel comes on a wheel: hands on it from all sides, each knowing a part. The host would go up by the western mouth at dawn, shields and pikes to the fore, Tulnar skirmishers flanking in the broken ground where they could run and vanish. The elves would take the high ruin and make the air costly for wings. The orcs would be the hammer

where the enemy was thickest. Dwarves would hold the center where things break if the center breaks. And a small blade of folk would slip into the temple's bones to seek Malikaar's breast and the place where the relic could bite deepest.

"Zurak, Celeste, Faelar, Gorruk," Edric said, naming without flourish, as if speaking the names of tools he trusted and had sharpened himself. "And Bromm if he will bear the weight."

The dwarf snorted. "Ye'll not shut me in a hole and then tell tales without me in them." He flexed a hand swollen with old work. "I know the way stone cheats. I'll hear it coming."

Before the march, each took his private hour. Zurak climbed to the ledge where Korren had taught him to taste the wind that is not wind and set the blue spear at his side. "I will not be the blade that cuts the wrong branch," he said to the emptiness, and in the emptiness his father's caution seemed nearer than his anger. Celeste wrote with cramped hand in a little book — a letter to those who had loved her in a world without magic — and then, without tearing the page, she smiled and amended a line with hope. Faelar sat with eyes closed and listened to the stone as if it were a forest with a strange songbird in it. Gorruk and his orcs chanted around a brazier, a rhythm that worked its way into the bones of anyone who heard it until their feet itched to stamp.

When dawn's pale spill touched the mouth of the tunnel, they went up. It was a sight no one there had seen in their life and perhaps no one will see again: Tulnar in their scaled harness and cloaks like moss, humans with sun on their helms, dwarves in ranks like a wall that had grown legs, elves with their bows like branches in their hands, and orcs tall as doorways grinning at the day. No one turned away.

On the lower slopes, messengers met them like swallows darting before a storm. "Malikaar gathers," they said, each in their own tongue and manner, and all meaning the same. "In the plaza, at the broken dais."

They halted where the city's outskirts began and took one more counsel. Bromm tapped a map that was more memory than parchment. "Here's your choke," he said, jabbing a thick finger. "If they come in a wave, we set our rock there and let 'em break like fools on a jetty." He looked up at Zurak. "And ye — don't overreach. A star point cuts deep, but it snaps if you lever it wrong."

Zurak nodded. He had learned to love counsel that made him bite his lip.

"Once more the plan," Edric said, because plans are spells and lose power if not spoken. He spoke it, and when he was done he set his hand to each of their shoulders in turn. "Come back," he said quietly.

They moved. The host spread like water seeking its

banks. Up on the shattered aqueduct, elves flickered and were gone. Dwarves took the old avenue and made it a new line. Orcs jogged, chuckling, their axes easy on their shoulders. Tulnar slipped into alley and shadow where they had learned to live. Celeste and Zurak walked side by side for a moment that would be a story later, perhaps.

"You are not afraid," she said, though she knew he was and he knew she knew.

"I am furious," he said, and then, after a heartbeat, "and afraid."

"Good," she said. "The first keeps your spear straight. The second keeps your feet where they must be."

The wind shifted. It brought the smell of a storm that was not weather. The city's heart beat faster. The day leaned toward the hour when iron and light would be weighed against a darkness that had learned for a very long time how not to be moved. And the folk who had decided to stand together did that rare thing that changes stories: they kept deciding the same thing with each step they took.

Chapter 15:

March of the Races

They came upon Aela as an army of memories made flesh. From the shattered gatehouses poured a host that had not walked together since the world was young: Tulnar skirmishers flickering through ruin like cats through reeds; Kaelar pikemen braced in lines, faces set; dwarven shields locking into a wall that hummed with the song of hammered iron; orc warbands laughing like men who had paid already and come to collect; elven rangers on high perches, their bows drawing the long breath of the wind.

Malikaar's brood met them. Corrupted beasts with hides like burnt bread; constructs of stone that had learned to hate their makers; a slither of lesser demons that wore men's fears as masks and changed faces as quick as thought. Over all, the air bowed under a cloud mass that was not a cloud: green-tinged, churning, tasting of metal and old sin. Rain began to fall in drops that smoked where they struck armor.

The line met the line. The noise was not a noise but a field of them: metal on bone, bone on stone, breath and curses and the wet sound of ending. A Tulnar darted in and took a demon at the Achilles; a human sergeant pulled him back by the collar before something with wings could have him; the Tulnar spat, nodded, and went in again. An elf's

shaft took a bat-thing through both eyes; its fall broke the back of a construct that had been turning on a dwarf; the dwarf grunted gratitude and planted his axe in something else without looking up.

On the right, a giant of corruption staggered forward, swatting men like flies. Edric strode to meet it with a knot of his best and a Tulnar standard-bearer at his side. They fixed it with pikes, the dwarf Bromm's voice counting the beat; then a brace of orcs hit it from the flank, howling, and the thing went down under a weight of courage and iron. Edric took a blow meant for another and fell with the expression of a man who had finally paid his due and been thanked. A Tulnar warrior stood over him and finished the work and then bowed his head for a heartbeat before turning to the next task.

"Forward!" Gorruk thundered, and the orcs surged, becoming the kind of river that moves rocks. Faelar's voice lifted in an old elven call, and the rangers shifted to cut a wing of abominations that had been spilling around the left. The center held because dwarves hold or they do not sing, and dwarves always prefer to sing later.

The strike team slipped the net while the enemy was busy with what seemed bigger. Zurak, Celeste, Faelar, Gorruk, and Bromm went by a lane of broken columns where once officials had walked, now flecked with blood and rain. They met pockets of resistance: an imp with too many knees that died shrieking; a rope of shadow that tried to learn their

throats and was severed by a tossed hammer and a flare of light. They came to a side gate barred by a golem whose arm was a fallen lintel. It struck Bromm from his feet and broke his arm; Zurak fainted and drew its swing, and Faelar and Celeste together spoke to a weakened pillar until it chose to fall where it would be most useful. The golem lay quiet under the weight of former glory.

“Go,” Bromm grunted through his teeth. “I’ll hold the door and my breath and your retreat, if you’re stubborn enough to try one.”

They ran. The plaza opened before them like a mouth full of broken teeth. At its far end, upon the dais where once a king had spoken fair words, stood Malikaar. He raised his head at their coming; the storm bent down to kiss his hand. Where he looked, men burned. Where he pointed, courage faltered.

Zurak put the spear to his palm and felt the small, steady hum of it, like a mother’s song in a room where someone labors. “We end,” he said to the others, which meant We begin.

Chapter 16:

Storming the Ruins

The plaza was a storm given edges. Malikaar's presence warped stone and air; statues mended wrong and came lurching, cobbles rose in plates like dragon-scale, despair ran in little threads along the ground seeking ankles to climb. The four went forward. They were very small.

Gorruk struck first, because he must. His axe rang on armor that was absence made hard; he snarled and set his feet as his shoulder bled. Malikaar flicked two fingers and a spear of night pinned Gorruk's cloak to a fallen obelisk, dragging him sideways. The orc tore free at the cost of flesh and laughed, because laughter is a weapon with more edges than men think.

Faelar moved like a thought seeking a place to land. His first arrow became vines that coiled and held Malikaar's off-hand; the second struck the helm and sparked, proving something could touch. The Ancient's attention bent toward the elf like heat through a lens. A sweep of force threw Faelar into a wall; the wall gave a little, which may have saved his spine. He slid, shook his head, and climbed again, mouth set.

Celeste stood behind Zurak and cast a dome of light that made a small world within the larger one, a world with rules that were merciful. Within it, breath

could be drawn and wounds closed enough to keep moving. Without it, the edges of the air cut. “Go,” she said, voice level though her hands trembled. “I will change the rules again if I can.”

Zurak went. The spear in his hand was warm and living; it pulled as a true thing pulls toward its true work. He slid under a sweep of shadow-sword that left cold hanging where it passed, rolled, and came up driving. The spear-bit kissed a crack left by Faelar’s arrow and sank a finger’s breadth. Light ran into the wound like water into sand. Malikaar recoiled as if he had been shown his own face and disliked it.

He turned his whole will upon Zurak. The world grew narrow and loud. Zurak felt the weight of every story that had ever told him he was less, other, lost, abandoned — and he felt at the same time the hand on his brow that had named him son, and the voices that had called him comrade, and a woman’s light that had kept him living long enough to hate correctly. He snarled and held the line between those feelings like a rope between cliffs.

Gorruk smashed in from the side, axe biting into the knee-plate with a crack that was music to certain ears. Celeste’s voice rose, braided with pain; a shield grew between Zurak and a detonation that would have turned him to ash. Faelar reached a high perch, fingers weaving a long spell taught to elven wardens who did not often need to use it. Roots of light ran under the cobbles, seeking the

Ancient's ankles.

Malikaar gathered power between his palms. It thickened, a sphere of void so deep it seemed to drink the light from their eyes. Faelar shouted; Gorruk cursed; Celeste braced. Zurak did not calculate. He sprinted, claws scraping stone, and thrust the Heart of the Goddess into the very center of the not-light.

The world broke and re-knit in blue. The sphere shattered with a sound like ice on a spring river; cold fire burst outward, and for a heartbeat all shadow in the plaza leaped away as if slapped by day. Malikaar staggered; a crack ran down his breastplate like a black river.

"Hold him!" Faelar cried, and the roots of light erupted, binding calf and wrist. Gorruk's axe rose and fell, and the Ancient's knee bent. Celeste flung her last knife — a narrow crescent of sanctified steel — and it cut a dark wrist; the shadow-blade fell and guttered like a snuffed wick.

Zurak saw the place. He had seen it in dreams that were not his. He drove. The spear slid between plates and through whatever passed for flesh. Light leapt from the wound as if from a sprung spring. Malikaar's scream had layers: iron nails on slate, wolves and wind, a child's echo in a long hall. The cracks widened; the light burst outward in a pillar that wrote its name on the underside of the clouds.

There was a soundless thunder. The four were

thrown like seeds in a gale. The storm faltered, as if panting.

When Zurak pushed himself up, the spear was humming like a cat, and his hands were shaking like a leaf. Celeste was at his side at once, eyes bright, face white. Gorruk leaned on his axe and bled with satisfaction. Faelar slid down his perch, straightened, and saluted with two fingers, elven style.

Malikaar knelt, impaled upon light that had decided not to be moved. He dragged in breath that should not have belonged to him. "You... will never... be free," he hissed, slinging the last of his contempt like mud.

Zurak did not answer. He set his hand lower on the haft and drove the relic home.

Chapter 17:

Heart of Corruption

The blow was not a blow but a meeting: purity and its mockery, set nose to nose. Where the Heart of the Goddess pierced the orb and then the Ancient's chest, the world's old wound lit from within as if ashamed of itself and ready to be healed at last.

Light ran through Malikaar like water into cracked clay. His armor split with bright seams; the flesh beneath — if flesh it was — showed in glimpses before becoming only radiance. He reached blindly for a sword that was no longer in his hand.

Celeste's thrown blade had clipped the grasp and cast it away; her breath came ragged, but her eyes were as steady as a hinge well-oiled.

Faelar's binding held a heartbeat more, long enough for Gorruk to crash down with both hands on his axe and turn the Ancient's stance into a kneel. The orc's laugh then was not mockery but joy at meeting a foe worthy of the tale. "Down," he growled. "Stay."

Malikaar clawed at the spear haft, and Zurak felt the ancient cold trying to run up the wood and into his arms. He set his teeth and thought of Kal'Zul's lamps and the smell of mushroom bread and the sound of his father's voice telling a boy not to mistake anger for purpose. He leaned his whole life

into the thrust.

A crack like dawn split the helm. The ember-eyes guttered and flared. "Others," the Ancient rasped, the word a blade of warning or promise. "Rise..." It unstrung into a sound that was not a word as the light took him.

He came apart not like a thing broken, but like a lie admitted. Armor fell in plates that smoked and went to ash. Shadow ripped and fled into seams of rock to die there like fungus in sun. A pillar of clean fire rose and struck the low clouds and made a window; through it, day looked down surprised and pleased.

The shockwave threw them all flat. Then the plaza knew silence, not the waiting kind but the satisfied. Around the edges of the battle, the leaderless corrupted things faltered and shrank from the light or collapsed to piles of what they had been before being lied to.

Zurak knelt, the spear humming soft as bees in clover. Celeste put her hand on his shoulder and sent what little warmth she had left into his broken places; it was enough for now. Faelar came limping and raised the old salute with two fingers and a small bow of the head. "Champion of Verra," he said, not loudly, and then made a face at himself as if embarrassed to hear such words in his own mouth.

Gorruk clapped Zurak's back and nearly pitched him forward again. "Ha!" he roared to the sky. "We broke

the biggest bone! Find me another!" Then, quieter, rough as bark, "Well done, brother."

On the broader field, the storm unwound like knitting pulled the right way. The allied ranks looked up, first fearful, then unbelieving, then cheering until the sound stood on the ruined walls like a new roof. The unnatural rain stopped. A slit of blue widened above the temple district as if the world had been holding its breath and let it go.

Zurak rose with care. He looked upon the relic. Its glow had gentled, like a hearth after bread is baked. He touched the haft as a man touches a friend's arm. "We are not finished," he said to no one and to all.

Celeste nodded, reading his thought. "No," she said. "But we have begun the right story."

Chapter 18:

Light in the Darkness

After thunder, the quiet is a different creature than before. The allied host moved through Aela not as raiders but as menders. Celeste and others of the light went from man to Tulnar to elf to orc to dwarf and back, not tallying the shape of ears when they set a bone or closed a wound. A Tulnar woman held water to a Kaelar boy's mouth; he drank and, surprised to find no old fear left in him, smiled.

Elder Shae came up by the tunnel road with a handful of Tulnar mages whose craft had always been to keep rot from their gardens and water from their walls; now they set their small arts against pockets of lingering foulness. Where they worked with Celeste, light and earth agreed for once and made a better cure than either alone. Bromm oversaw the shoring of a cracked arch because cracked arches are his personal insult.

In the broken throne room they laid the dead for their farewells. Orcs beat a slow hand-drum while elves sang a line that wandered like a stream among stones; dwarves hummed a low note that made the ribs remember being built; humans spoke names with the simple force of folk who know that speaking a name is a craft against forgetting. Zurak lit a pyre for Tulnar fallen and held the flame steady until it took.

He sought at last the place where Korren had fallen. The ground knew the footprint of that sorrow the way a house knows the chair where the elder sat. Zurak knelt, set his hand on the stone, and did not say anything. The world did not ask him to.

At the Gate, runners readied with letters on their belts. Celeste gave hers to a courier with a smile that was a little incredulous at being able to send good news. "Tell them," she said, "that Verra is not only survivable but beautiful; and that we did not win alone."

As the day thinned, they made a meal from packs and what they could find along the old gardens' edges: roots that had remembered being tended, herbs that had grown wild but were still decent folk. Fires sprang. Stories did, too. Gorruk told of a fight with a two-headed drake on Sanctus that had ended with the drake falling off a cliff in a way that still pleased him; Faelar, with wry grace, recounted an elven council where three elders had argued for a week about the placement of a single bridge. Laughter rose, and with it the peculiar healing that laughter brings where blades cannot reach.

They spoke also of the future, because the present had at last felt sturdy enough to stand on for an hour. Shae and Edric and Bromm and Faelar sketched a thing that did not yet have a name: a band of many kinds who would go where pockets of corruption still lay and quiet them; a council where more than one voice set the tune. "We cannot return

to our corners,” Celeste said, looking around the fire. “Corners are where dust gathers.”

Later, Zurak stood alone at the edge of the ruin where the river showed its back and silver ribs. Celeste came and stood without word. He spoke first, surprised to hear how not broken his voice sounded.

“I made a vow,” he said. “In anger. It has turned to a different shape in my hands.”

“Vows do that,” Celeste said. “The good ones live long enough to grow.” She was quiet a moment. “I am... glad my path led here.”

“And I am glad you did not flinch from me,” he said, as if naming a thing that had often gone otherwise in his life.

The night let the stars through at last. A wind shifted, and with it birds turned in their sleep in a nest somewhere not yet found. In the quiet, hope did not crow. It breathed.

Chapter 19:

A New Dawn

Work came like rain after drought — first in big drops, then in a steady fall. On the bones of Aela they raised canvas and timber, then framed doors where wind could be told to behave. They called it New Aela because men must name things to make them theirs, and because it was, for all its scavenged beams, a beginning.

Tulnar and humans dragged stones side by side. Dwarves taught a crew of orcs the trick of a good mortise, and the orcs laughed and called dwarves fussy while doing exactly as told. Elves planted saplings in a square where once a market had been, their hands gentle as if laying bandages on a wound. Children raced over flagstones to which none of their grandmothers had laid claim, and fell, and were scolded and kissed without anyone asking what ears they bore.

Zurak found himself called a thing he had never been: councilor. Elder Shae pushed him toward the circle with a firmness that allowed no wrestling. “You have a back for more than spears,” she said. “Use it.” He sat with Edric’s second and Faelar and Bromm and a woman of the orcs whose laughter had the weight of a gavel. They argued about grain and about who kept watch on which night, and their quarrels ended in ink instead of blood.

A new group of Kaelar came through the Gate one morning, blistered by travel and wide-eyed at the sight of a Tulnar at the head of the welcome. A child ducked behind his mother's skirt at the sight of Zurak's horns, then, thinking better of fear, approached with a flower crushed in a brave fist. Zurak took it in careful claws, and something that had been coiled in him since boyhood loosened a measure.

Farewells braided through the days. Gorruk packed his band and swung his axe onto his shoulder. "There are more skulls east that think too much of themselves," he said. He clasped Zurak's forearm. "Call, and we will come. Not because we like your songs. Because we like your fights."

Faelar's raven brought word from the south: a conclave of the Py'Rai and Empyrean to weigh the news from Aela. "They will bicker," he said with affectionate scorn. "I will be their burr." He and Zurak embraced as men do who have bled on the same stone. "I may even write a lay," he added, to cover the softness with a joke. "Of a beast from the deep who learned the sky."

Celeste walked the line between Sanctus and Verra, duty tugging at her sleeves from both worlds. In the end she did what true duty always requires: she chose the place that needed her more. "There is a kind of healing here that does not answer to bandage alone," she told her order's messenger, and sent back the promise that her prayers would

be for both worlds. To Zurak she said, more simply, "I will stay, if I am wanted."

"You are," he said. He did not task his mouth to say more; the truth carried its own weight.

At first light on a clear day, Zurak climbed the hill from which the returning had once been spied. The river went away with its silver shoulders showing. In the air was the smell of things beginning: wet green, cut wood, hot iron cooled in a trough. Elder Shae and Celeste joined him, and they looked east where the sun broke the circles of the world.

"I was a man in a cave," Zurak said, watching as the light ran along the ribs of the land. "I thought the sky was an enemy. I was wrong." He set his jaw, not hard now, but with a craftsman's certainty. "I will keep this morning."

"Keep it," Shae said. "And keep opening the doors you do not trust. Some will have teeth. Some will have bread. Both will teach you."

The wind rose, playful. Below, New Aela's banners — Kaelar green with the phoenix, Tulnar sigils stitched on rough cloth, a dwarven hammer, an elven leaf, an orcish wolf's head — tugged at their pole-tethers and snapped like horses eager for the road. The day began without asking permission.

Chapter 20:

Echoes of Tomorrow

Weeks folded, and the new shape held. New Aela hummed like a hive at good work. Tulnar learned the trick of sun on the neck and did not always seek shade. Dwarves rebuilt a bridge with stones that looked at each other properly. Elves planted a grove where corruption had left a scald; green returned quicker than anyone had wagered. The Gate stood under guard, not as a wall but as a door that asked a name.

A caravan of Vaelune came through — desert folk whose eyes squinted at all this water, whose hands weighed coin and courtesy with equal ease. They paused at the sight of an orc bargaining with a dwarf, of an elf laughing with a Tulnar child, of a human cleric drawing water beside a scaled woman. They chose wonder over worry and added their tents to the bright ring.

A council met not just for war but for wells and disputes about where a fence should go. They argued like family and adjourned like soldiers. Zurak wore a small token at his belt that meant he should be listened to even when he did not wish to be; he learned when to speak and when to hold silence like a tool. Celeste rose with the dawn and slept at the cusp of midnight more nights than was wise; she smiled like a woman who had chosen the right hard thing. Letters came from Faelar full of sly

asides and sober warnings about ruins that smelled wrong in the south; Gorruk's runner delivered a tale of a storm near a mountain that felt like a beast turning in sleep.

They raised a stone in the square. Not too grand. Names cut upon it with care. At its top, set into a pattern like a rising bird, lay fragments of Malikaar's armor that had not turned to ash and the now-silent shard of the spear set as a jewel. Children played round its base, and no one shooed them, because better laughter at a monument than dust.

Celeste came to find Zurak there one evening with the lamplighters making the city ready for night. "A party leaves at daybreak," she said. "Tulnar and human together, to walk the edge of the Rotting Forest and take its measure. Will you send them off?"

"I will," he said, and then, after a breath, "I will go with them to the first mile."

She looked at him, and the friendship between them was a bridge that had learned to bear more weight. "You have become a symbol," she said, teasing to ease the truth.

"I am a man," he said. "A Tulnar who owes many debts and means to pay them." He glanced at the stone. "But if the young need a name to hang a hope on, let it be mine as well as any."

That night he wrote, clumsy as a smith writing with a

hammer, a few lines in a book he had set aside for the purpose. He wrote of walking from dark to day, of learning that anger is a poor map if you would cross a strange country, of finding that a hand held out is not a surrender but a weapon of another sort. He ended with a thought that felt like a road under his feet:

“The echo of the future calls us onward. We will answer — together.”

Outside, the wind moved along the rebuilt streets and did not smell of rot. In the Underrealm, lamps burned as they had always burned; on the river, a boat slipped by with its oar a slow metronome; far away in the forests, a bird woke to the wrong hour and sang for the joy of it. The world, wounded and mended, did what worlds do when given half a chance: it began again.