BLACK FLAME



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BLACK FLAME

A dark fantasy novella

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ANNA NEXUS LABS

BLACK FLAME

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Prologue

Hell did not begin as a place of punishment.

It began as a machine for classification.

Every soul was measured, named, sorted, predicted, and assigned a role. Over ages, the system became perfect. Gods, demons, kings, and algorithms all learned the same lesson:

If something can be completely described, it can eventually be controlled.

Then something appeared that could not be reduced to a category.

The Black Flame.

Not a god.

Not a demon.

Not an energy source.

Not even a creature.

It is the principle that something can remain itself without submitting to the definition imposed upon it.

And when the machine tries to classify it, the classification burns.

The Black Flame represents sovereignty, identity, refusal, contradiction, memory, and the right to remain unknowable.

It does not conquer by becoming stronger than the system.

It survives by becoming something the system cannot fully describe.

The universe of Black Flame exists across three great layers.

The Machine - the ancient system that maps reality and determines what everything is allowed to become.

The Kingdoms of Hell - civilizations that grew inside that system and now believe its rules are natural law.

The Black Flame - an anomaly moving through people, places, and machines, breaking deterministic control wherever it appears.

For countless ages, Hell believed the Machine was complete.

It had catalogued every soul.

Predicted every rebellion.

Measured every desire.

Recorded every memory.

Reduced even grief, love, hatred, and hope to variables.

Nothing remained outside the system.

Or so it believed.

Then Elias Vale arrived.

PART ONE

The Missing Man

CHAPTER ONE

Predictable

The first thing Hell taught Elias Vale was that everything had a number.

His name had one.

His crimes had seven.

His memories had twelve thousand, four hundred and six.

Even grief had been indexed.

The clerks told him this with the bored patience of people explaining gravity.

Beyond the processing window stretched an impossible city of iron towers, red glass, and black machinery. Rivers of human memory moved beneath transparent streets. Above them, enormous engines turned without sound.

Nothing screamed.

That surprised him most.

Hell had become efficient.

A woman behind the counter slid a metal tablet toward him.

"Identity confirmed," she said.

Elias looked down.

The screen contained his entire life.

Birth.

School.

Marriage.

Failures.

Private thoughts.

Every cruel thing he had ever said.

Every kindness he had forgotten.

At the bottom waited a single line.

```
FINAL DISPOSITION: PREDICTABLE.
```

He laughed.

The clerk frowned.

"What is amusing?"

"I don't know."

That answer frightened her.

The lights flickered.

Every screen in the hall went black.

Then one sentence appeared across all of them.

```
UNKNOWN VARIABLE DETECTED.
```

Something warm opened behind Elias's ribs.

Not pain.

Not heat.

Recognition.

Across the processing hall, thousands of dead people lifted their heads at the same time.

A thin black flame crawled across the edge of Elias's identification tablet.

The machine tried to extinguish it.

The fire spread.

And for the first time in ten thousand years,

Hell lost track of someone.

* * *

The clerk stood so quickly that her chair struck the cabinet behind her.

"Remain where you are."

Elias obeyed. Obedience was familiar. He had spent most of his life mistaking it for safety.

The tablet lay between them. Its casing had not melted. The scratches in the metal remained. Only the line at the bottom was gone, and beneath its disappearance Elias could see the surface of the counter through something that had been solid a moment before.

He touched the black edge.

Nothing happened to his finger.

The clerk caught his wrist. Her skin felt like paper left overnight beside a radiator. He noticed a thin scar crossing her thumb, an ordinary little injury in the place he had expected horns.

"Don't," she said.

It sounded less like an order than the word somebody used when a child reached into traffic.

A bell rang once overhead.

The thousands of waiting souls continued to look at him. An old man holding a cap. A woman in a wedding dress with a train full of ash. A boy whose schoolbag remained strapped to his back. Elias had arrived alone, but these people all wore some last thing their lives had given them.

He looked down at his own coat. Brown wool. One missing button. The coat Mira had said was good enough if he would just have it repaired.

He remembered the railway platform. Rain. A pressure in his chest that he had decided was indigestion because he had work to do the next morning.

So that was it.

An extraordinarily small end.

"Name," the clerk demanded.

"You just showed me."

"Say it."

"Elias Vale."

She typed. The screen displayed NO MATCH.

She typed again, slowly enough that he could hear every key.

```
NO MATCH.
```

A door at the far end of the hall opened. Six men walked through it in gray uniforms. They had faces, which made Elias more frightened than if they had not. They looked like people who could listen to an explanation and decline it.

The clerk let go of his wrist.

"Is this a mistake?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, and looked at the tablet. "But I don't know whose."

The nearest uniformed man spoke into the air.

"Reconciliation party on site. Request subject location."

Every light above Elias's counter flashed red.

The man looked at him.

"Visual contact."

The lights went white again. A voice from the ceiling answered with no anger at all.

"Location not established. No transfer authority."

The man stopped.

Elias understood that pause before he understood anything else about Hell. Somebody had written a rule. Somebody else was finding it inconvenient.

The clerk slid a drawer open with her knee.

Inside lay a pair of scissors, a packet of tea, and a photograph turned face down.

She took out a key.

"When I tell you to walk," she whispered, "do not run."

He almost asked why she was helping him.

Across the hall the boy with the schoolbag started to cry. He did it quietly, without believing anybody would come.

The clerk looked toward the sound.

Then she looked back at Elias, and whatever had passed across her face was gone.

"Walk," she said.

CHAPTER TWO

The Woman at the Counter

The gray men knew how to block an assigned route. They took positions by the doors marked DISPOSITION, LABOR, RESTITUTION, and PERMANENT REVIEW. None stood beside the narrow cabinet behind the counter.

The clerk unlocked it and pushed aside a hanging coat.

There was a staircase inside.

Elias followed her down. He kept expecting a hand to catch his shoulder. Above them somebody demanded her employment number. She shut the cabinet door without replying.

The stairs smelled of hot dust and boiled cabbage.

"Iona," she said.

He thought she was naming the place.

"Me. My name. In case we get separated."

"Do they know you left?"

"Of course."

"Then why won't they follow?"

"They will. First they'll decide what my leaving means."

At the bottom she stopped at a small board of destination numbers. One was blank. She pressed it, waited, and swore.

The blank square filled with 714. Then the number disappeared again.

"The hall can't certify your transfer," she said. "Every route that starts there is waiting for an origin."

"That sounds useful."

"It will sound less useful when the lifts carrying the people below us stop."

She took the emergency stairs.

Elias had worked in a municipal records office for thirty-one years. A building containing stairs for use only when the official route failed was the first thing in Hell he understood. He counted the flights. At six his legs hurt. At nine he began to wonder why a dead man needed lungs.

"Bodies here are continuity accommodations," Iona said when he asked. "Most people can't think without one."

"Do you know everything I'm going to ask?"

"No. Everybody asks that."

She was wearing black trousers and a white shirt with the cuffs rolled twice. Under the fluorescent lights her shadow fell toward the ceiling instead of the floor. It bothered him more than he could explain.

On the eleventh landing a service hatch opened. A small man in a leather apron stepped through carrying a crate of red bulbs.

He looked at Elias.

He looked at Iona.

His eyes lifted to the ceiling, waiting for an instruction.

Nothing came.

"We're late," Iona told him.

"For what?"

She reached past him and held the hatch open.

"Exactly."

The man continued up the stairs, but now he was counting his bulbs.

Beyond the hatch a corridor ran between humming pipes. Each pipe was stamped with a destination: FOOD, SLEEP, PENITENCE, MAINTENANCE OF MEMORY. A fifth had no lettering. Its surface was cold enough to silver with condensation.

Iona did not touch that one.

They passed a window overlooking the city. From this angle the great engines appeared to be suspended over nothing. Towers leaned toward them, each leaning in a slightly different direction, like grass remembering a wind.

"Is the whole place one city?" Elias asked.

"This is Orison. Intake belongs to the Kingdom of Measure. Beyond the western gates is Salt. Below us is the Kingdom of Witness. Above us, the Crown. The others aren't visible from here."

"Other kingdoms."

"Six altogether. Don't volunteer for a seventh. People have tried."

A loudspeaker clicked.

"Citizen assistance notice. A processing irregularity has occurred in Hall Seventeen. Service will resume shortly. Confidence remains complete."

Iona laughed once through her nose.

They reached a little room containing a sink and two lockers. She took a gray coat from one and handed it to him. It was too short in the arms.

"Turn your own inside out and put this over it. Don't discard anything."

"Can they follow the clothes?"

"They can follow what the clothes mean."

"What does that mean?"

"It means I don't know how long a dead man's brown coat remains evidence of an assigned dead man."

She took a brass plate from her collar and set it beside the sink.

COUNTER 17-43. CORRECTION CLERK. IONA VEY.

Below her name, in much smaller lettering: DISCRETION EXHAUSTED.

Elias stared.

"After how long?"

"One choice."

"What choice?"

She shut the locker.

"Later."

He took the metal tablet from his pocket. He did not remember putting it there. Maybe he had done it before he laughed. That seemed more troubling than any impossible thing it had done afterward.

His life remained on the screen. Each incident had a small arrow beside it. Seven arrows were red.

He recognized the date beside the fifth one.

He put the tablet away.

Iona was watching.

"I didn't say the file was false," she said.

"I know."

"Some people hear that they've escaped a judgment and think the things they did have escaped too."

He thought of an envelope on his desk. Blue paper. A stain from the bottom of his coffee cup. He had read the first page. It had said occupancy uncertain in language so ordinary it seemed absurd that the words could contain lives.

"Not me," he said.

She did not look convinced.

They emerged through a shutter into a market street. Bells hung above every stall. None moved, although Elias could feel a draft down the lane.

A baker at the nearest stall was staring at a loaf resting on her counter. She held it in both hands as if she had just found a bird there.

"What happened?" Iona asked.

The baker pointed to a line of people that stretched around the corner.

"The allotment stopped."

Iona looked past the heads toward the intake tower.

Elias looked at the loaf.

It was the first time he understood that being lost could inconvenience somebody other than himself.

CHAPTER THREE

Bread Without Permission

The baker's name was Marit. The board above her stall called her Nutritional Provisioner 609, which she pronounced with a voice fit for a mouthful of grit.

"It's bread," she told the small machine beside her oven. "It's the same bread it was six minutes ago."

The machine displayed ORIGIN DEPENDENCY UNRESOLVED.

"They're not asking it to take them anywhere. They're asking for breakfast."

"The transfer batch from Seventeen feeds into this ward," Iona said. "Their allotments haven't been confirmed."

Marit put the loaf down very carefully.

"Well. Good for the transfer batch."

An old woman at the front of the queue held out a bowl. In it lay three brass counters.

"Yesterday it cost two," she said.

"Still costs two."

"Then I can afford it."

"It won't let me take them."

The woman considered this. "Could you take them without telling it?"

Nobody in the queue smiled.

Marit looked toward the archway where a gray-coated officer watched the market. She kept her hands flat on the counter.

Elias opened his tablet. When he had lived, systems stopped answering for reasons that usually became somebody else's fault. Somewhere a person would have known which queue had locked, which batch needed to be isolated, which small correction would let a thousand ordinary acts continue.

He knew nothing about this system. He knew enough not to pretend otherwise.

"Is there a way to separate the loaves from their assignments?" he asked.

Iona studied the baker's machine.

"Provisioners can declare reserve service during an outage."

"It's not an outage," Marit said. "The ovens work."

"Allocation does not."

The baker turned her machine around. Iona found a recessed switch behind it. Beneath the switch was a little window asking for the name of the official responsible for interruption.

Elias said, "Use mine."

"It can't find you."

Iona typed her own name.

The switch released.

Marit cut the loaf into thick slabs. She gave the old woman two and took the counters. The line moved. There was no flame, no ringing thunder, no liberated sky. A hungry woman bit into bread and shut her eyes.

"You should have done that first," Marit said.

"Probably," Iona answered.

The officer under the archway began walking toward them.

Marit handed Iona a heel of bread wrapped in cloth.

"Go through the oven room. The back door opens into the dyers' lane."

"There'll be an audit."

"There was already going to be an audit."

"Keep the outage record."

"I keep everything. That's why they dislike me."

Behind the ovens Elias found a boy washing trays. His fingertips were black with soot. He looked at the wrapped bread in Iona's hand and then at the roof, where a series of painted footprints indicated the permissible route of every worker in the room.

"You didn't stand on the marks," he told her.

"No."

"Does it hurt?"

Iona glanced down at her feet.

"Not yet."

Outside, the dyers' lane was filled with wet cloth hung from wires. Every piece was gray. Elias could not see what the dyers did. A woman in a waterproof apron rubbed one piece between her fingers, trying to distinguish it from the next.

They passed beneath the cloth and crossed a little bridge over a memory channel. Under the transparent surface thousands of moments slid downstream. Elias saw a green kitchen. A man crouching beside a broken bicycle. A cat asleep on a newspaper. The images were so clear that for a second he smelled coffee.

"Don't reach in," Iona said.

"I wasn't going to."

"People always say that after they see something of theirs."

At the far end of the bridge, a soldier sat beside a disabled lift. She wore a dark uniform with a sleeve torn away. There was no arm beneath it. Across her lap lay a sword whose edge had been rounded like a training weapon.

Elias tried not to stare.

She stared back without trouble.

"You two have the look," she said.

"Which look?" Iona asked.

"Waiting for the next sensible thing to happen."

The lift indicator showed REDISTRIBUTION HOLD. Six people sat inside its open cage. One was sleeping against the rail; the others watched the soldier.

"They're supposed to be delivered to Salt," she said. "I was supposed to escort them. Now the route won't clear."

"You can use the north footbridge," Iona said.

"I know the bridges."

"Then why are you waiting?"

The soldier held up her wrist. A narrow steel band encircled it. A chain ran from the band to a ring under the lift.

Elias realized he had seen the sword and assumed that the woman was in charge.

She saw the realization in his face.

"Yes," she said. "That's usually how it works."

Iona knelt beside the chain ring. The lock required a destination assignment. She tried the north bridge. It rejected the route. She tried the service passage. It rejected that too.

"We can't stay here," she told Elias.

He looked at the people in the lift. At the woman with the sword. At the bolts securing the ring to the stone.

He remembered the boy washing trays.

"Have you got anything that turns those?" he asked.

The soldier lifted the sword.

"They took the edge. They didn't take the pommel."

She offered it handle first.

For ten minutes Elias worked the bolts loose while people walked over the bridge around him. Two stopped to help. One went away and returned with a spanner.

Iona watched the street. She looked furious.

"We're losing time," she said.

"I know."

The last bolt gave. The ring came away in his hand.

The soldier stood. She was taller than he had expected. She returned the spanner to its owner and lifted the ring, chain and all, so it would not scrape the ground.

"Sera," she said. "I can get you to Witness."

"Why?" Iona asked.

Sera looked at Elias's blistered palm.

"Because he asked what turned the bolts."

CHAPTER FOUR

The Seventh Crime

They took the six passengers as far as a public stair that descended toward Salt. Sera gave them directions twice. One of them wanted her to stay, and she said she couldn't. The woman did not forgive her for it.

Elias was relieved by how familiar that felt.

The path to Witness ran beneath a viaduct built from pale blocks. Each block bore a name. Some had several names crowded together; others contained only a mark where the mason's chisel had broken.

"People?" he asked.

"Agreements," Sera said. "Most things here have to be built from somebody agreeing to carry them."

"Do they know what they're agreeing to?"

She looked back at him.

"Did you always?"

Iona walked ahead with the wrapped bread tucked under her arm. She had gone quiet after the lift. Elias thought she might be angry that Sera had joined them, but once, when a distant bell sounded, Iona slowed until they were all together.

The city changed as they descended. Red glass gave way to brown brick. Streets narrowed. People carried baskets rather than tablets. There were fewer screens, though the brass circles of observation were still fixed above every crossing.

Elias's borrowed coat rubbed his blisters. He took the tablet out and tried to close the file. It would not close.

Sera noticed.

"Intake?"

He nodded.

"How many?"

"Seven."

"Mine wouldn't finish counting."

He could not tell whether she was joking.

"I was a captain," she said. "The fourth rising in Salt. We wanted the gates opened. We had prisoners who could make them open."

They went down another flight. Somewhere below, a man was singing very softly.

"What happened?"

"We didn't know which prisoners mattered. So we made sure none of them could be ignored."

She spoke without looking at him. Her empty sleeve moved in the draft.

"They gave me an escort role afterward. Reliable under orders. It was supported by the record."

"Was it true?"

"Often enough."

He put the tablet away, but she held out her hand.

"If you're going to ask people to run with you, they should know what follows."

"I'm not asking."

"You don't have to."

Elias stopped on the stair. Iona turned.

He handed Sera the tablet.

The red arrows expanded under her thumb. She read the seventh crime first. Elias knew it would be easier than the fifth. He had lied to Mira about a letter he destroyed after their separation. An ordinary, ugly attempt to make somebody remain available to him. He had told himself he was saving her from pain.

Sera read the fifth.

```
CERTIFICATION OF VACANCY: EAST WARD, BUILDING NINE.

KNOWN OCCUPANCY OBJECTION RECEIVED BEFORE SIGNATURE.

DEATHS FOLLOWING DEMOLITION: NINE.
```

Sera did not ask the question he had spent years preparing to answer.

She asked, "How long between the objection and the signature?"

"Forty-seven minutes."

"Long enough."

"Yes."

Iona had moved close enough to read.

"Who wrote the objection?"

"A woman who lived there. Lena Fenn."

"Was she one of the nine?"

"Yes. Her son too. Kit."

His mouth was dry. He had said their names before: to an investigator, to Mira, to a man in a church who said a great deal about forgiveness. None of those occasions had made the names easier to say.

"Why did you sign?" Sera asked.

"The contractor was ready. The ward office had confirmed the evacuation. My manager said the letter probably referred to an earlier stage. He said we could reopen the matter afterward if necessary."

"That isn't why. That's the advice."

Elias looked at the blocks beside the stair. Agreement upon agreement, holding up a city.

"I wanted to go home," he said.

Sera returned the tablet.

He expected her to leave. Instead she adjusted the chain on her wrist and continued down.

"I won't tell you it wasn't your fault," she said.

"I wasn't asking."

"Good."

Iona stayed beside him for a few steps.

"The system took all that and called you predictable?"

"Among other things."

"What did you find funny?"

He tried to remember the instant at the counter. The life laid out neatly. The things he had done. The many things he had failed to do. The final line waiting at the bottom like a clerk's stamp.

"It was finished," he said. "I looked at it and for a moment I thought I could go home. Then I remembered there wasn't a home. Or an office. Or anyone who could say I'd done enough for the day."

Iona listened.

"And the thing was, I hadn't," he said. "Done enough. I never had. But the file didn't leave anywhere for that to go. It said what I would do for the rest of forever."

"You laughed because it was wrong?"

"I don't know why I laughed."

She studied him for a long moment. Then she nodded once.

At the bottom of the stair, a door stood beneath a stone lintel. There was no number on it, only a shallow groove worn by generations of hands.

Sera knocked twice, paused, and knocked once more.

A bolt scraped inside.

"If you're collecting," a man's voice said, "I've already been collected."

"Neral," Sera said. "We need something you haven't thrown away."

"That narrows it down to everything."

The door opened.

The man standing inside had ink on his forehead and a loaf of bread under one arm. He looked at Elias, then at the tablet, then at Iona's empty collar.

"Oh," he said.

He stepped back.

"That's going to be expensive."

CHAPTER FIVE

What the Dust Kept

Neral's room looked as if a library had fallen into it and he had decided to live around the damage. Shelves leaned against other shelves. Bundles of paper lay on the floor with channels between them wide enough for one foot. On the stove a pot simmered under a lid secured with a brick.

"The lid complains," he explained when Elias looked.

He broke his loaf beside Iona's bread, compared them, and handed everybody a piece of the better one. His own he dipped in the pot. He was thin, stooped, and old in a way Elias could not connect to years. His fingers moved with the care of somebody who had learned how much could be lost by a careless touch.

"How do you know him?" Iona asked Sera.

"He kept the testimony they used to sentence me."

"You're welcome," Neral said.

"He also kept the testimony they left out."

"You're welcome twice."

He held out a hand for the tablet. Elias hesitated. Neral withdrew his hand immediately.

"We can use the less convenient method. Tell me what happened."

Elias described the hall. Iona corrected the times. Sera went to the door and listened to the street while they spoke.

Neral took no notes until Elias had finished. Then he wrote three lines on a scrap of paper and drew a circle around one word.

"What?" Iona asked.

"Attempted finalization."

"It was ordinary intake."

"Ordinary intake is attempted finalization. It happens so often we've forgotten that's a verb."

He crossed the room and slid a flat box from a shelf. Inside lay sheets so brown they looked cut from leaves. He did not bring them toward the stove.

"Have you seen this before?" Elias asked.

Neral looked up.

"What would count as this?"

"The black fire."

"I've seen scorch marks where nothing was burned. I've read complaints from clerks whose files wouldn't close. There are accounts in which a person speaks and a bell changes pitch. Other accounts have no fire at all. Somebody decided they were one thing. Somebody else gave that thing a name."

"Black Flame," Iona said.

Neral nodded.

"Can you make it happen?" Elias asked.

"I can burn paper with the stove."

"You know what I mean."

"I know what you're hoping. It's different."

He placed one sheet on the table. Across it, in a hand more angular than modern letters, somebody had written a short refusal beside a longer ruling. A translation was pinned beneath.

THE RECORD MAY DESCRIBE THE ACT. IT MAY NOT CLOSE THE ACTOR.

"Who wrote that?" Iona asked.

"A petitioner. The court rejected it. They called the distinction impractical."

"What happened to them?"

"The record says they were successfully reassigned. The receipt for reassignment is missing."

Elias sat down very slowly. He had allowed himself, without realizing it, to believe he was the first. It had frightened him. It had also flattered him. The brown sheet took both things away.

"So it didn't begin with me."

"Apparently not."

"Why did the hall say ten thousand years?"

"The hall didn't. You arrived at a moment it couldn't account for. The Kingdom has counted ten thousand years of complete accounting. It's an anniversary they like. There are records outside their count."

Neral returned the sheet to the box.

"And the people?" Elias asked.

"I don't know."

The words settled differently here. Neral offered them without embarrassment, as part of the food and the chairs and the work still waiting.

Iona leaned over the table.

"The reconciliation party couldn't touch him. Their authority failed."

"That's the interesting part," Neral said. "Not his laughter. Not the color of whatever you saw. The hold."

He fetched another box. This one contained a brass strip with a row of holes through it, like an old machine instruction.

"Early charter. Every kingdom still claims its authority through this. Transfers require a sufficient account of what the transfer acts upon. If the account fails, the transfer must stop. It predates the kings."

"It means identification," Iona said.

"Now it does. A sufficient description of a particular act became a sufficient description of a person. Sufficient became complete. Complete became eternal. Somewhere between those changes, the clerks stopped asking whose conclusion they were carrying out."

Sera turned from the door.

"If the old rule already stops them, why do we need the paper?"

"Because the kings don't enjoy being stopped. They'll classify the interruption itself. Equipment fault. Fraud. Sabotage. If they can authorize a response to that, they don't need to reacquire him as a person."

Iona's face changed.

"An irregularity," she said.

Neral nodded.

The loudspeaker in the street clicked before anybody could speak.

"Citizen assistance notice. An unauthorized interference event has been identified in Hall Seventeen. Associated personnel should present for protective correction."

Sera pulled the bolt across Neral's door.

On the table, the tablet lit by itself.

Elias's life vanished. A new page filled the screen.

```
YOU ARE NOT REQUIRED TO REMAIN A PROBLEM.
```

Below the words appeared a drawing of a face Elias knew.

Lena Fenn had been photographed standing on the steps of Building Nine. He had seen that photograph in every newspaper for a week. One hand shielded her eyes from the light. In the other she held the blue envelope.

Now the hand lowered.

The drawing looked at him.

"Mr. Vale," it said. "We should talk."

CHAPTER SIX

The Kindness of Rook

Elias dropped the tablet. It struck the table corner and landed face up on the floor. Lena's face remained steady, as though nothing had happened to the world around it.

"You came to the office," he said.

"Twice."

"They told me only once."

"Once was enough."

The room had gone very quiet. Even the stove lid seemed to have reconsidered its complaint.

"Where are you?"

"Where you've left me."

Sera picked up the tablet by its edge. She held it so she and Elias could both see.

"Who's speaking?" she asked.

Lena looked toward her.

"I am."

"Who authorized the connection?"

"Does it matter?"

"Yes."

The image paused. Elias had seen Lena hesitate in life, at the counter in the ward office. This pause had nothing of that. It was a hole cut into movement.

The face changed.

An older man sat behind a bare desk. He had a long head, neatly combed white hair, and spectacles with one lens slightly thicker than the other. There were flowers in a glass beside him. Actual flowers: small yellow ones, bent at the stems.

"That was unhelpful," he said. "I apologize."

"It was unhelpful to you," Sera answered.

"To all of us, I think. My name is Rook. Office of Continuity."

Iona's fingers dug into the back of Elias's chair.

"Governor Rook," she said.

"A title with fewer powers than one might wish, Clerk Vey. You're aware of this morning's service interruptions?"

"We started the bread reserve."

"In one ward. There are forty-three affected."

Elias looked at the tablet.

"Was that Lena?"

Rook took his spectacles off.

"It was a reconstruction from her record. I can give you access to the original witness if you agree to a supervised reconciliation."

"Is she here?"

"Everyone arrives somewhere."

"That isn't an answer."

"She is in the Kingdom of Witness. Her assignment is intact."

Neral made a little sound, too small for Elias to interpret.

Rook waited. He was a good waiter. Elias knew the sort: somebody who could make the silence belong to him.

"What do you want?" Elias asked.

"To correct the intake. You aren't a monster, Mr. Vale. You aren't the first man to have made a terrible decision out of fatigue and cowardice. Seven offenses is a comparatively modest account. Restitution would have given you work you understood."

"For how long?"

"Until the work was complete."

"And after?"

Rook put his spectacles back on.

"One matter at a time."

It was the phrase Elias's manager had used when he asked whether the occupancy objection should stop the demolition. One matter at a time. Sign the certificate first. Review the complaint afterward. Keep the sequence moving and every particular disaster could be called a separate matter.

"Why are you talking to me?" Elias asked. "Why not send your men here?"

"I know where Clerk Vey is. I know where Captain Sera is. I have a detailed account of Neral's property and activities. I cannot certify that you are the subject presently displayed to them. They say you are. Their testimony is interested."

"So you need me to agree."

"Agreement is the cleanest route. There are others."

The flowers in Rook's glass trembled. Somewhere in his office, machinery had begun to move.

"I can protect your companions," he continued. "I can restore the markets. I can arrange the conversation you should have had while alive. All that requires is a voluntary statement that you accept your record as sufficient for disposition."

"As sufficient for the things I did?"

"For disposition."

"That's the same answer."

"It's the relevant answer."

Sera set the tablet on the table, face away from Elias.

"We should leave."

Rook spoke before she finished.

"Captain, I can remove the band. Permanently."

She stopped.

Elias had not realized how much the chain weighed until she lowered it and the whole table shifted.

"I can return your arm," Rook said.

Sera stared at her empty sleeve. Her mouth was working on something she couldn't get out.

Then she picked up the chain again.

"You took both," she said. "You don't get to call returning one a gift."

She walked to the door.

Rook sighed. It was a tired, human sound, and Elias hated him for being able to make it.

"Neral. The charter won't do what you want. A machine cannot run on unfinished conclusions."

"It runs on them all day," Neral said. "The pipes are a little different every morning. The load varies. It manages."

"Pipes aren't people."

"You've been telling us otherwise for centuries."

Rook looked at Elias for the last time.

"At noon tomorrow, the six kingdoms will authorize correction of this event. Until then, there is room for an ordinary resolution. Consider how many people may have to carry your refusal."

The tablet went dark.

Neral lifted the stove brick with a folded rag.

"Get your coats," he said. "The polite part is over."

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Bell Station

Neral packed papers into two oilcloth satchels. Sera checked the alley through a peephole. Iona took a roll of copper wire from a drawer and asked permission after she already had it in her pocket.

Elias picked up the tablet.

"Leave it," Sera said.

"My record's on it."

"His mouth is on it."

Neral held out an empty satchel.

"Wrap it. Don't mistake keeping evidence for granting it access to your ear."

Elias did as he was told. Outside, carts had stopped beneath the observation circles. Their drivers sat on the shafts with the bored expressions of people waiting for weather. Gray officers stood at both ends of the street.

Neral led them through the stove room of a neighboring house. A woman stirring a basin of wash water looked up.

"Again?"

"Would you rather I came through the parlor?"

She pointed with her chin to a door behind the basin.

"Mind the second step. It's still loose."

Beyond the houses, an abandoned goods passage rose toward the central bell station. Elias could hear the bell

mechanisms above: wheels clacking, weights sliding, cables drawn taut. The bells themselves were silent.

"They announce completed judgments," Neral said. "When a whole batch clears, the ward knows how to proceed."

"Why are we going there?"

"They also carry hearing notices. There's a clerk in the station who owes me a favor."

"Do you trust him?" Sera asked.

"I trust him to owe me a favor."

The station stood at the meeting of three bridges. Each bridge belonged to a different kingdom, marked by a different shape of lamp: square for Measure, round for Witness, and a low oval for Salt. People had gathered at the junction where their permissions stopped agreeing.

A woman supported an elderly man on a wooden stool. The man was breathing in short, furious bursts. A band across his chest tightened whenever he inhaled.

"Continuity clinic," the woman told Iona. "He can't get across."

"Why not?"

"Clinic says the chest adjustment is authorized. Bridge says his destination's part of the interruption."

Iona tried the plate at the entrance. Her name had been suspended. It wouldn't accept her as a responsible clerk anymore.

The elderly man shook his head at her.

"You tried."

"I haven't finished."

Sera examined the band. There was no buckle. It had been closed around him as part of his assigned body.

"Get him to the clinic," she said. "They can loosen it."

An officer on the bridge had been watching them.

"No clearance," he called.

Sera stepped toward him. The ring under her wrist clanged against her sword. The officer put a hand on his own weapon.

Elias caught her sleeve.

"He's not the plate."

She looked at him with an expression so flat he nearly let go.

Then she stepped back.

Neral had reached the bridge notice board. It was crowded with temporary orders. He lifted one corner after another until he found an older one beneath.

"Service exception," he read. "A necessary adjustment may cross during a route failure if three witnesses affirm its purpose and a receiving practitioner accepts responsibility."

"Those are old notices," the officer said.

"Has this one been revoked?"

The officer went to his plate. He entered the number printed at the bottom of the notice. He frowned and entered it again.

"The practitioner has to request it."

"Call one," Iona said.

"I don't have their authorization."

"You have a signal bell."

He looked at the bell beside the barrier.

For a few seconds nobody moved. Elias could hear the old man's breaths getting shorter. Behind him, impatient people muttered that the bridge should stay closed until things were settled.

The officer rang the bell.

It sounded thin and foolish in the great silent station.

A woman in a blue apron came out of the clinic across the bridge. The officer shouted the condition. She shouted back a number. He entered it. Three witnesses, it turned out, needed only to put their names beside the limited purpose of this crossing. They did not have to agree about the man's entire life.

Elias couldn't enter a name that resolved. Iona's name was suspended. Sera was restricted.

The woman supporting the old man signed first. Neral signed second. For the third they had to ask the queue.

Nobody volunteered.

The officer lifted his eyes from the plate. He looked at the man, at the clinic, and at the space for a third name.

Then he signed it himself.

The barrier rose.

He helped carry the stool across. Halfway over he glanced back at them, as though surprised to find the world had remained in place.

Iona rubbed her face.

"We have to do that in forty-three wards?"

"Not us," Neral said.

He took a blank hearing notice from his satchel and wrote the exception number in large letters across it. He added the officer's successful route receipt underneath.

"Hold this," he told Elias.

He climbed the station steps.

The favor took four minutes and a great deal of argument. When Neral came back, an ordinary service bell rang above them. Across the city other bells began answering it. Along the bridges, plates lit with the newly copied exception.

"That's not the hearing," Elias said.

"No. It was my favor."

"You've used it."

"Yes."

Neral took the notice from him, folded it, and put it in the satchel with the oldest papers.

"Now we'll have to ask for the hearing like everybody else."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Iona's Photograph

By the time they reached the night market, somebody had painted Elias's face onto a wall.

It was a bad face. The nose was too long and the eyes much kinder than his own. Beneath it was written THE MAN WHO UNLOCKED THE BREAD.

Marit would have laughed herself sick.

Iona took a piece of charcoal from the gutter and crossed out MAN. She wrote BAKER above it, then CLERK beside that, and finally SOMEONE FOUND AN OLD EXCEPTION in small letters underneath.

Sera watched the corrections.

"Nobody'll fit that on a flag."

"Good."

The night market was closed, though there was no night Elias could measure. Lamps had been turned low by instruction. Merchants slept under their stalls. A woman rented them a room above a shop selling hinges. She wanted two counters and didn't ask their destinations.

Neral gave her three.

"For not asking?" Elias said when they were upstairs.

"For the room. We're difficult guests."

There were two narrow beds and a bench under the window. Sera took the bench, where she could see the stair. Neral went downstairs to buy paper. Iona sat on the floor

with her back against the wall and finally unwrapped the heel of bread.

She tore it into four pieces, ate one, and put the rest away.

"You don't have to do that," Elias said.

"Do what?"

"Save it."

"I've been poor longer than you've been dead. Don't start improving me."

He sat on the other side of the room. From the window he could see the Crown's towers rising behind the station. White at the bases, red near the tops. No lights shone from their windows.

Iona took something from her pocket.

The photograph from her drawer.

She hadn't gone back for it. She must have taken it when she took the key, moving quickly enough that he hadn't noticed.

It showed two young people sitting on a low wall. Iona was unmistakable despite the smile. Beside her sat a boy with dark curls and knees drawn up inside a coat much too big for him. He held a peeled orange.

"My brother," she said.

Elias waited.

"Hes. Not an abbreviation. He hated when people asked."

She turned the photograph over. The back bore a date in a system Elias didn't recognize.

"He worked beneath the pumps in Witness. One morning he didn't report. His supervisor declared a continuity failure. Nothing to transfer. Nothing left to compensate."

"He died again?"

"That's what the report called it."

"What happened?"

"I don't know."

For the first time she sounded angry at the words.

"I was a reviewing clerk then. They brought me the closure. I asked for the pump record. They said it had already been incorporated. I asked who saw him fail. They said a supervisor's declaration was sufficient."

Sera was awake on the bench. Elias could hear her holding the chain very still.

"I refused," Iona continued. "Then they brought me photographs. Pieces of his assigned coat. A shoe. Things I knew. They said I was prolonging his suffering by leaving the account open."

"So you signed."

"I wrote unrecoverable. They gave me a new desk. I would never have to review a disputed closure again. Discretion exhausted."

She rubbed a thumb along the photograph's edge.

"For a while I was grateful. Do you understand how disgusting that is? They took the choice away and I slept better."

Elias looked at the Crown.

"Yes."

She gave him a long, hard look. She didn't soften it for their resemblance.

"When you laughed," she said, "I thought you were going to be another man pleased with himself for outwitting a rule. Then the tablet stopped, and for one second it looked like the place could admit it didn't know something."

"You didn't help me because of me."

"I didn't know you."

It hurt. It also let him breathe.

"Do you think he's somewhere?"

"I think I signed more than the evidence supported. That's what I think. I don't know if I get a brother back for admitting it."

She put the photograph away.

Downstairs Neral was arguing about paper prices. Somebody laughed. A hinge squealed. A cart rolled past the window despite the hour.

Sera spoke from the bench.

"In Salt, they made me watch a woman give evidence against me. I burned her street. She remembered the order of the houses wrong. My advocate thought that meant he could discredit her."

Iona looked toward her.

"Did he?"

"He tried. I told them her third house was my second. That was all. The houses were still burned."

Nobody answered.

Elias thought of Lena's reconstructed face, so ready to say exactly what would bring him in. He wondered whether the real woman hated him. Then he wondered why he kept making her death a question about himself.

Neral came upstairs with paper under one arm and an apple in his hand. He set the apple on the table and cut it into quarters with a knife too large for the task.

"The petition's filed," he said. "Someone at the station still remembered how."

"Will they hear us?" Iona asked.

"At nine tomorrow. Three hours before correction."

"That's not time to settle anything."

"It's time to say it where they can't pretend they didn't hear."

He passed her a quarter of the apple.

Outside, the service bells rang again, carrying the exception farther than he had managed to walk.

Elias lay down in his coat. He was exhausted, and ashamed to be relieved that the world contained a bed.

He slept.

He dreamed of an envelope he could not open because he was holding it closed with both hands.

PART TWO

The Hearing

CHAPTER NINE

The Kitchen of Salt

Morning in Hell was a change in the lamps and the arrival of a man collecting the night's charge. The hinge seller's room had already been paid for, but the man insisted there was a departure assessment.

Neral asked to see the tariff.

The man discovered he had knocked on the wrong door.

They left by a different staircase. In the shop below, the owner was polishing a brass hinge that opened without making a sound. She pressed it into Iona's hand.

"For a door," she said.

"We don't have one."

"You'll find one."

Elias offered to pay. She named a price he couldn't meet and took the hinge back. It was reassuring, after the previous day, to discover that hospitality hadn't turned the whole city into a fable.

The approach to the Crown crossed a corner of Salt. Here the street paving became rough and people wore heavy aprons with their names stitched inside rather than outside. Water stood in the gutters. The buildings had very few windows.

Sera took them to a public kitchen behind a bathhouse.

"Mirek works here. If we arrive hungry, he'll complain for an hour. If we don't arrive, he'll complain forever."

Mirek was a broad man with a shaved head and a spoon stuck through his belt. He greeted Sera by taking the chain out of her hand and putting it on a chair.

Then he slapped her face.

Elias moved before he thought. Sera caught his sleeve.

"It's all right," she said.

"Don't you say that," Mirek told her. "You come back after twelve years and you get to decide it's all right?"

Sera lowered her hand.

"I'm sorry."

He looked at her empty sleeve. He touched the place where the shoulder ended and then took his hand away, furious with himself.

"Sit."

They sat.

The kitchen held four long tables, most of them occupied. Children ate porridge beside adults. Elias had seen children at intake but none moving through the city. He asked Neral why.

Mirek answered from the stove.

"Provisional assignments. They can't reconcile what hasn't had time to happen."

"So they keep them here?"

"Some. Others in different kitchens. Before you ask, they don't grow the same way. They learn. They change their minds. They remain whatever age their body was made for, unless a practitioner adjusts it."

A little girl at the neighboring table was constructing a tower out of bread crusts. An older boy told her the third piece wouldn't fit. She turned it sideways. It fit.

Mirek watched without comment.

"What happens when they finish learning?" Elias asked.

Mirek set bowls before them.

"You tell me."

Sera waited until the man had gone back to the stove.

"His daughter was thirteen," she said. "One of the streets."

Elias looked at Mirek again. The man was helping the little girl repair her bread tower. His hand was almost as large as her head.

"Does she live here?"

Sera shook her head.

"The burned district went to Witness. He can't get authorization to visit. His record calls the separation protective. Hers probably does too."

"Probably?"

"I haven't seen hers."

Elias ate a spoonful of porridge. It had been salted too heavily, and he was hungry enough not to care.

Mirek returned and sat across from Sera. For several minutes they spoke quietly about people Elias did not know. Who had been moved. Who could no longer remember a particular street. Who still sent messages that never reached anyone.

Then Mirek looked at Elias.

"You're on the wall."

"It's a bad likeness."

"I don't care about your face. They're saying you can erase assignments."

"I can't."

"Have you tried?"

Elias felt the question open underneath him. He pictured the slate beside Mirek's ration ledger, the children's

provisional files, Iona's brass collar plate. He imagined touching one and making its words disappear. He imagined it working. He imagined the relief in people's faces.

"No," he said. "And I don't know that trying means anything."

Mirek leaned back.

"I was afraid you'd say yes."

"Why?"

"Because I'd ask. And then I'd ask again if it didn't work. And someone would charge me for the next time."

Sera looked down at her bowl.

At the neighboring table, the bread tower collapsed. The little girl swore with astonishing precision. Mirek corrected her grammar and helped her gather the pieces.

When they left, he gave Sera a parcel wrapped in paper.

"For later," he said.

She held it awkwardly in her one hand.

"Will you let me come back?"

"You can come back. Don't bring an army."

They climbed toward the Crown as the lamps brightened. Elias carried the satchel containing his tablet. It had said nothing all morning, which did not make him trust it more.

On the steepest stair he fell behind. Through a gap between the buildings he could see the public kitchen's chimney. Smoke climbed until it met the underside of an engine, where it spread into a level gray sheet.

Hell had children who built towers out of bread. Men who fed the people they couldn't forgive. A soldier who had been slapped and stayed.

He had expected the terrible things.

These were harder to carry.

CHAPTER TEN

The House of Weight

The House of Weight had no steps at its entrance. A sloping stone path led up to an arch wide enough for a hundred people. The architect had made it possible for anyone to enter. Somebody afterward had installed a row of turnstiles.

Neral presented their petition.

The guard looked at the number, the group, and Elias, whose appearance did not reconcile with anything on the guard's plate.

"Four admitted," the guard said. "Three resolved. One physically attested."

"Who attested?" Iona asked.

"Governor Rook."

Sera turned away from the arch.

"It's a trap."

"Yes," Neral said. "It's also the hearing."

Inside, the house smelled of beeswax and wet coats. People sat in rows beneath the insignia of six kingdoms. Measure had a pair of scales. Salt a bowl. Witness an open eye. Silence a closed door. Glass a mirror. The Crown's insignia was an empty chair.

Elias tried to decide which was the most honest.

A clerk gave them paper badges. On his badge was printed ATTENDING IRREGULARITY. He handed it back.

"My name's Elias Vale."

"Your name doesn't resolve."

"You can write it."

The clerk looked toward a supervisor. The supervisor was busy. She scratched out the printed designation and wrote his name by hand.

It was a little act. It frightened her anyway.

They waited beside a family petitioning to remain together. Their case was scheduled for a time that had passed thirty years before. Every morning, they said, the schedule repeated. Every morning they came.

"Why not leave?" Elias asked.

The father looked at the bench they had occupied so long that each member had worn a separate hollow in it.

"If we leave, we miss our turn."

Iona copied their petition number into the margin of her own badge.

"What will you do?" the mother asked.

"Keep it."

The woman nodded. It was more than she had been offered recently.

At nine a bell rang. Their group was led into a room built in circles. The innermost circle held one plain table. Beyond it stood six elevated desks, each occupied by a delegate. Rook sat below the Crown's desk, beside a recorder.

The windows overlooked the engine platforms. Workers were moving across them in pairs, carrying ladders and coils of cable. Elias wondered whether the workers were supposed to be visible from here. It was difficult to believe in a perfect machine while somebody adjusted its drainpipe.

Neral set the old charter on the table.

"Petition to preserve the intake hold," he said. "And to suspend final dispositions founded on a claim of complete description."

The delegate from Measure had a silver face. It was not a mask. When she turned her head, the light moved across her cheeks as it would across a polished spoon.

"You ask to suspend the kingdom's founding work."

"I ask to distinguish that work from a claim it cannot support."

"Are you denying the accuracy of the subject's record?"

"I'm denying that accuracy closes the subject."

"That is a verbal distinction."

Iona put the service receipt beside the charter.

"It's an operational distinction. A bridge crossed this morning under a limited declaration. The record established the need and the destination. It did not finish describing the man."

The delegate from Salt leaned forward. His hands were red and cracked.

"I saw that notice. Service has resumed in nineteen wards."

"Twenty-seven," Rook said. "We copied the route once its reliability was demonstrated."

Iona turned toward him.

"It had already been demonstrated. You'd buried it under later instructions."

"Later instructions serve purposes too, Clerk Vey."

Neral lifted the charter with both hands.

"The kingdoms derive their authority from a rule of sufficiency. An unresolved account must halt the proposed disposition. We request that the House uphold the halt rather than rename it until force becomes available."

The delegate from Glass looked at Elias. Her features changed while he watched, adopting traces of his own face and then Mira's and then somebody he didn't recognize.

"What do you want, Elias Vale?"

He had prepared several answers during the climb. None sounded like something a person would say to another person.

"Time," he said.

"For what?"

"I don't know yet."

The silver delegate struck her desk with a little hammer.

"That answer has already caused sufficient disruption."

There was no flame. No flicker in the windows. The phrase lay on the table as small and ordinary as it had been in Neral's room.

Elias felt disappointed, and hated that too.

Rook folded his hands.

"May I submit a more complete account?"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

A True Accusation

The recorder turned a large slate toward the delegates. It showed the room above the hinge shop. Iona on the floor. Elias beside the window. Sera on the bench. Neral coming up the stairs with the apple.

"You were watching," Iona said.

"We watch continuity risks," Rook answered.

Their voices came out of the slate. Iona spoke about Hes. Sera about the woman whose street she had burned. Elias heard himself say nothing for a very long time.

The delegate from Silence raised a hand. The recording stopped.

"You have private disclosures," she said. "How do they bear upon the authority under dispute?"

"They establish motive."

"They establish some motives."

Rook inclined his head. "Agreed."

He turned the slate himself. Now it showed the certificate Elias had signed while alive. His handwriting appeared beneath the word VACANT. A photograph of Building Nine followed. Windows. Laundry on a railing. A plastic chair on one balcony.

Elias had never looked at that chair before.

"Mr. Vale knew a contrary account had arrived," Rook said. "He had forty-seven minutes in which to pause the work. He did not."

"That's true," Elias said.

"His present resistance may be a continuation of his refusal to accept consequences."

"It may."

Neral turned toward him, but Elias kept looking at the chair.

"I've done that," he said. "Found a different question to ask instead of answering the one in front of me."

Rook watched him closely.

"Then an adequate description remains possible."

"You've described something I do."

"Repeatedly."

"Yes."

"And may continue to do."

"Yes."

The delegate from Salt scraped a thumbnail along the grain of his desk.

"Why must the description be eternal?" he asked.

The delegate from Measure answered before Rook could.

"Because assignments require stability."

"My kitchens manage with weekly allotments."

"Provision is not disposition."

"It's the part I see."

Rook called for a witness.

The door behind the recorder opened. A woman entered wearing a dark cardigan and shoes repaired at the toes. Elias knew her before he knew her face, from the way she held the strap of the bag against her shoulder.

Lena.

He stood. His chair scraped loudly enough to make every delegate look toward him.

She stopped a few feet from the table.

"Don't," she said.

He sat.

The woman in the tablet had been almost beautiful in her readiness to speak. This woman looked tired. Her hair was pinned poorly. One side of her cardigan hung longer than the other. She watched Rook with frank dislike.

"You said he wanted to answer questions."

"He does," Rook said.

"You can let him say that himself."

She turned to Elias.

"Did you read my letter?"

"The first page."

"The names were on the second."

"I know."

"When did you know?"

"During the investigation."

Her hand tightened on the bag strap.

"How many days?"

"Six."

She nodded. It seemed to confirm something she had known without having the number.

"Kit had an exam that morning. He didn't want to leave his books. We took one bag down. I thought I'd bring him out on the next trip. The men downstairs said the last bus hadn't come, but the work wasn't starting until afternoon."

Elias had read the afternoon estimate. He had used it to tell himself there was time for somebody else to catch the problem.

"I signed because I was frightened of my manager," he said. "And because I wanted to leave on time."

"You had a home to go to."

"Yes."

The recorder's pen moved.

Lena looked at the slate.

"Is that all you wanted me for?"

Rook said, "Your account is material to the subject's disposition."

"You have my account. You've made me give it every year."

"And it remains valid."

"It remains something that happened."

The delegate from Witness, who had not spoken before, leaned down from his desk.

"Lena Fenn. Your present assignment allows preservation of testimony."

"It requires repetition. Every morning I tell the room what happened. Every evening you compare it with the first time I told it. If I say the chair was blue instead of green, you send me for correction."

She looked back at Elias.

"Do you know what I was before that morning?"

He shook his head.

"I cut cloth for stage costumes. I was good at it. Kit thought every play was better if somebody got to wear a hat."

For a moment her face changed. Not into another person's. Into a part of her own that no one in this room had requested.

Rook stood.

"We can discuss your working conditions separately."

"You've been saying separately for three hundred years."

The slate displayed her witness assignment beneath her name.

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TRAUMATIC TESTIMONY. FIXED REFERENCE. FINAL.
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Elias saw the last word disappear.

Not the names of the dead. Not the photograph. Not the fact of his signature.

Only FINAL.

A dark edge moved across the slate's corner, and the recorder dropped his pen.

Lena looked down at it without smiling.

"I'm not finished," she said.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Correction of the Event

The room did not erupt. Nobody threw a chair or shouted that the world had ended. The recorder pressed a cloth against the slate as if he could clean off the missing word. The cloth came away unmarked.

The delegate from Measure called for a recess.

The delegate from Salt said, "We just heard the evidence."

"We just witnessed another interference."

Lena stood where she had been standing. Elias could see the anger shaking her hands. No black flame lay in her fingers. She hadn't become a different kind of woman.

Rook stepped between her and the table.

"Mr. Vale. You see how easily this spreads beyond you."

"He didn't do it," she said.

"You had no documented instability before contact."

"You didn't document the other things I tried to say."

The recorder found a new pen. He wrote with his wrist raised above the slate's surface.

Neral took the charter off the table.

"Record a second unresolved finalization. The witness remains present. Her testimony remains available. Authority for permanent assignment has failed."

The delegate from Silence looked at the delegates on either side of her.

"We should preserve the hearing."

"It is being preserved," Rook said.

"All of it."

He did not answer.

Above the windows a shutter began descending. It moved slowly, each tooth of the mechanism taking its turn. The workers beyond the glass were disappearing inch by inch.

Sera went to the door. The handle turned but the door stayed shut.

Rook took a thin white envelope from inside his coat.

Elias's stomach tightened at the sight of it.

"The kingdoms prepared an emergency correction," Rook said. "It was scheduled for noon. The spreading interruption permits acceleration."

The delegate from Salt stood.

"My seal authorized service protection."

"The service threat is evident."

"I did not authorize witness correction."

Rook laid the envelope before the recorder.

"All six seals are valid. The correction identifies an event, not a soul. It does not require successful resolution of an individual classification."

"And who's included in the event?" Iona asked.

Rook looked at the table. At Neral's papers. At Lena. At the door Sera had been testing.

"Associated means of propagation."

The house bell rang.

There was no authority to transfer Elias as Elias. There was authority to close a hearing room while an interference was investigated. Elias understood the shape of it immediately. A sufficiently broad category could turn a limit into an inconvenience.

"Neral," Iona said.

He was gathering the satchels.

The shutters met the window ledges. The room became artificially bright. Sera drove the blunt pommel of her sword into the door seam. Wood cracked beneath the paint.

Rook's voice hardened.

"Captain. Stop."

The steel band around her wrist contracted.

She made a sound Elias had not heard from her before. The sword dropped. Blood, dark and ordinary, slid over her hand.

He ran toward her.

Iona caught his coat and dragged him behind the inner table as the floor began to move.

The six elevated desks remained in place. The ring below them rotated. Chairs, witnesses, the table and all its papers were being carried toward a door hidden beneath the Crown's desk.

"Protective collection," the recorder announced, though his voice was shaking.

Neral fell to his knees, catching papers before they slid into the widening floor seam. The charter strip struck the edge and spun away. Elias reached for it and missed.

Lena stepped onto a chair. She climbed from it to the table and from the table to the fixed railing below Salt's desk.

The red-handed delegate grabbed her wrist.

For one instant everyone could see exactly what he was choosing.

He pulled her up.

Iona jumped after her. She almost made it. Her fingers closed on the rail; then a brass clasp unfolded from its underside and caught her sleeve.

"Employment reconciliation," the ceiling said.

Her own record had found her.

Elias tried to lift her, but the table was moving away. He had to let go or pull her down with him.

"Go," she said.

He hated the word.

Neral threw one satchel across the rotating floor to Sera. She caught it against her body with her good shoulder. Then she seized Elias's collar and hauled him toward the broken door.

Behind them Neral remained on his knees, gathering the oldest sheets.

"Come on," Elias shouted.

"They need a witness," Neral said.

The door seam broke. Sera pushed Elias through first. They landed in a passage full of cables, slid down an incline, and struck a pile of folded cloth.

Above, the door sealed itself again.

The sounds of the room disappeared.

Sera lay against the cloth, cradling her injured hand.

Elias got to his feet and looked for something he could climb. The passage wall was smooth. The floor was too steep. When he put his hand against it, the surface tightened under his fingers.

"They aren't there anymore," Sera said.

"You don't know that."

"I know how the house collects a room."

He struck the wall once with his fist. It hurt. He struck it again, more weakly.

Sera opened the satchel Neral had thrown.

Inside lay the service exception, the copy of the old petition, and three apples wrapped in a page of commentary.

The charter was gone.

So was the other satchel, the one containing Elias's tablet.

Somewhere above them the house bell announced that the hearing had concluded.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

A Word Is Not a Key

The cable passage emptied into a laundry underneath the House of Weight. Women moved among vats with paddles twice as tall as Elias. Sheets turned in dark water. The cloth he and Sera had fallen onto was waiting to be fed through a press.

A worker saw the blood on Sera's hand.

"Keep it off the white load."

Then she saw Sera's face and put down her paddle.

They were given a bucket of warm water and a strip of clean cloth. Sera washed the blood away, but the band had cut so deeply that more came behind it. Elias tried to wrap the cloth around her wrist. She hissed and caught his fingers.

"Underneath. Give it room."

"It's still tightening."

"I can feel that."

He took the service notice from the satchel and read it again, searching for a way to make the exception extend to her. Three witnesses. Receiving practitioner. Necessary adjustment.

There was no practitioner in the laundry. There were no three willing witnesses either. The workers had their own movement restrictions. Two had already gone to find a supervisor.

Sera watched him read.

"Do the thing," she said.

"What thing?"

"What you did in the hall."

"I didn't do it on purpose."

"Try."

He held the band with both hands. It was cold. Sera's skin beneath it was warm and swollen. He thought about refusal, contradiction, every phrase Neral had used. He said he did not know. He said she wasn't finished. He said the description was insufficient.

The band tightened another fraction.

Sera made him stop.

"All right."

He let go. His hands were red again.

"I'm sorry."

"Find me someone with a saw."

The woman who had offered the water looked up from her vat.

"They've put you two on the corridor plates."

"What do they call us?" Sera asked.

"Associates of a service threat. Doesn't say what you're threatening."

"Everything, probably."

The worker studied Sera's wrist.

"There's a clinic below the north sluice. Rowe can cut anything if it doesn't talk back."

"How do we get there?"

She pointed toward a chute beside the press.

"Return load."

They rode downhill among damp towels in a wheeled basket. The laundry worker shut the lid over them. Elias heard the wheels take a bend, then another. Sera's breathing filled the dark.

"Did I make it worse?" he asked.

"The words? No."

"I wanted it to happen."

"So did I."

The basket bumped across a threshold and stopped. Outside, somebody swore at its weight. The lid opened. A young man looked down at them and took a step backward.

Elias sat up.

"We need Rowe."

"You've come through a laundry?"

"Apparently."

The young man scratched his cheek, then helped lift Sera out.

The return room opened onto a yard full of drying lines. Beyond the yard a stone sluice carried water down toward Witness. The clinic occupied a former counting house by its bank. Its sign read ADJUSTMENTS, REPAIRS, CONTINUITY SUPPORT. Beneath it somebody had painted ASK FIRST.

Inside, a woman with close-cropped gray hair was mending a child's foot. The foot was detached. The child sat on a table, holding the other one out of her way.

"I'll finish this," Rowe said, "and then I'll look at that wrist. Sit down before you put blood everywhere."

Sera sat.

Elias looked at the little foot in the practitioner's hands. A needle went through its sole with an ease that made him queasy. The child asked whether it would still tickle. Rowe said they could test that together.

"Are we real?" Elias asked before he could stop himself.

Rowe glanced at him.

"Your friend's in pain. Will an answer change what we do about it?"

"No."

"Then move that basin closer."

He moved the basin.

It was the most useful thing he had done since leaving the house.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Small Account

Rowe could not cut the band while it remained attached to the assignment that operated it. She had tried before. The metal sealed behind the saw, usually at the cost of another finger.

"The band has a purpose," she said. "What does your order say?"

Sera took a creased document from the lining of her coat. Elias wondered how long she had been carrying it. The paper was soft enough to fold without making a sound.

Rowe read it under a green lamp.

"Transport security. Prevention of further armed harm. Permanent reliability management." She made a face at the last phrase. "Three purposes. Two I can work with."

"Can you take it off?"

"I can request suspension while you receive care. I need you to consent to the care, and I need you to put the sword in my cupboard."

Sera hesitated over the sword.

Rowe waited.

"It's the only thing I have," Sera said.

"For as long as you can hold it with that hand."

Sera put it in the cupboard herself. Rowe gave her the key.

The medical plate accepted the first two purposes. It rejected the third. A line appeared beneath the rejection:

PERMANENT SUBJECT MANAGEMENT SUPERSEDES TEMPORARY SERVICE.

Rowe took a little stamp from her pocket. She stamped the order beside the last phrase.

```
CLINICAL DISPUTE. EXCEEDS EVIDENCE OF PRESENT CONDITION.
```

The plate waited.

She made tea.

"That's it?" Elias asked.

"That's the request. I don't operate the answer."

The tea smelled of fennel. Elias held the cup in both hands. Sera kept her wrist over the basin. Every few minutes Rowe checked the swelling and pressed a cold cloth against her knuckles.

After twenty-three minutes a message arrived.

```
TEMPORARY SUSPENSION FOR ADJUSTMENT. PRACTITIONER ACCOUNTABLE.
SUBJECT RETURN REQUIRED.
```

Rowe set down the tea. She told Sera it would hurt and got her agreement again.

The saw made a thin, nasty noise. Elias held the basin. Once Sera asked them to stop. They stopped. When she nodded, Rowe started again.

The band opened.

Sera watched it drop into the basin. She made no triumphant speech. She put her unbound hand against her chest and held it there, carefully, as if it had become a frightened animal.

Rowe bandaged the wound and wrote a care note. She handed Sera a copy and put another in a drawer.

"You're expected at an assignment review in three days. This treats the injury. It doesn't revoke the sentence."

"I understand."

"If I hear you used the temporary release to hurt somebody, I'll tell the review what I know."

"I understand that too."

They were given a cot in the rear room. Sera lay down and fell asleep so quickly that Elias could still see the surprise in her expression.

He went back to the consulting room. Rowe was sharpening the saw.

"What if every assignment stops?" he asked.

She kept sharpening.

"Whose idea is that?"

"People are saying it might."

"People say a lot. I need diagnoses. I need names people agree to use. I need to know which leg somebody means when they say it hurts. If you make all records suspect, the people with the best memories or the loudest voices will run things."

"That's not what I want."

"Wanting is a good start. It isn't a working clinic."

Elias sat beside her drawer of care notes.

Each note was small. Each described a condition, an action, a person who had agreed to it, and a time to review it. None pretended to be an entire life.

"How long have you worked like this?"

"Long enough to resent being told it's a new discovery."

She smiled for the first time.

He took Neral's spare paper and began copying the structure of a care note. He asked Rowe before he used any names. She gave him a blank example instead.

At the top he wrote PURPOSE.

Under that: WHAT IS KNOWN. WHAT IS NOT. WHO AGREED. WHEN TO LOOK AGAIN.

He looked at the final line for a long time.

There had been no when to look again on the vacancy certificate.

He hadn't asked for one.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Missing Man's Followers

By afternoon the north sluice had acquired a shrine.

It consisted of a blackened pan, three candles, and a drawing of Elias holding a sword he had never owned. A woman stood beside it collecting counters in a cup. The sign promised releases by voluntary contribution.

Elias stopped in front of it on his way to fetch water.

"Who's releasing them?"

"The Missing Man."

"How?"

"You don't have to understand to receive."

He looked at the people in the queue. One wore a delivery harness that had grown into his coat. Another carried a child's assignment card. The child's name had been worn almost illegible by the pressure of a parent's thumb.

"I'm Elias Vale," he said.

The woman laughed.

"You and six others since breakfast."

He understood then that a bad likeness could be useful to someone. The drawing needed to resemble the promise, not the man.

He set the bucket down. Sera, who had followed him from the clinic, stopped a few steps behind.

"Tell them what you're selling," he said.

"Hope."

"That's what they'll be left with if it doesn't happen. What are you selling now?"

The woman looked toward the nearby observation circle. Its plate had been covered with a cloth. No officer stood under it.

"A hearing request. A notice of association with the Missing Man. Sometimes assignments stop afterward."

"Sometimes they stop because those people get collected," Sera said.

The woman clutched the cup.

"I have to eat."

"So do they."

Elias turned to the queue.

"I can't release you. I don't know how to make what happened in the hall happen again. It didn't remove my crimes. It didn't tell me what to do."

The man in the delivery harness frowned.

"They said you walked through a wall."

"I got out through a laundry basket."

Somebody laughed. Someone else said he was frightened of the Crown and hiding his ability. The woman with the child's card tried to push past him toward the shrine.

"Let us have something," she said.

He stepped aside.

It was harder than standing in her way. He wanted to be believed. He wanted his honesty to be enough to make people stop hurting themselves. Instead she put two counters in the cup and knelt beside the pan.

Sera lifted Elias's bucket.

"Come on."

"We can't leave it."

"We can give people another place to go. Standing here until they agree with you isn't that."

They carried water back to Rowe. On a table in the return room, Elias laid out the blank account he had copied from her notes. He put the bridge exception beside it.

The laundry worker who had helped them was delivering another load. She examined the papers.

"What are you starting?"

"I don't know if it's starting. We can help people write a request that says what they're actually asking for."

"Do you charge?"

"No."

"Then you'll be busy."

She sent a man who wanted authorization to take his own sister a meal. His current designation made him a stranger to her district. Elias helped describe the meal, the destination, and the sister's willingness to receive it. He had to ask three times whether she was willing. The man thought being her brother was enough.

They sent the request. It was denied.

Elias put the denial beside the request instead of throwing it away.

Next came a dyer who wanted to keep colors in a scrap book. The district's work order permitted gray cloth only. Her supervisor had confiscated the book as unauthorized output. Elias asked whether the work order said anything about her possessions. It didn't.

They wrote an objection. Rowe attested that keeping a book required no clinical adjustment. The laundry worker attested that it had not affected production.

The book came back.

The dyer opened it on the table. Red, green, a peculiar gold, bits of cloth small enough to fit inside her palm.

There was no black fire.

For the next hour, everybody coming through the room was invited to look at the gold.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Room Without Windows

Iona woke on a chair with her wrists held to its arms. The room had no windows. There was a jug of water on the table, just beyond her reach.

She asked the guard to move it closer.

He said he hadn't been instructed to do that.

She asked who had instructed him to put it there.

After a while he moved it.

Rook arrived carrying her collar plate. He set it beside the jug.

"You have an excellent service record."

"Discretion exhausted."

"After one disputed matter."

"After I did what you wanted."

He pulled out the other chair and sat.

"Do you think your brother would have wanted you to remain in uncertainty indefinitely?"

"You don't know what he wanted."

"The record allows a reasonable inference."

"Not an answer in his name."

Rook rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"You used to understand the burden of an open account."

"I understand it now. I just don't think that's the only burden."

He looked at the collar plate. Its little line of text was still clear.

"I can restore your discretion. Give you a review office. Access to the pumping records, within the appropriate scope."

She felt the offer in her stomach. It was not an abstract temptation. It was a room with a lamp, a wage, the possibility of finding out what had happened to Hes. She wanted it so much she could not answer immediately.

Rook let the wanting do its work.

"What do I sign?" she asked finally.

"A statement that the intake interruption was equipment failure compounded by unauthorized personnel conduct."

"Do you believe that?"

"I believe it provides a stable path forward."

She reached for the jug. Her wrist restraints let her touch the handle but not lift it.

"The water would spill," she said.

Rook looked at her.

"If I keep pulling. It isn't a faulty jug. It isn't faulty water. It's where you've put them in relation to my hands."

He moved the jug again, closer still. For a moment she disliked him less, which made the whole encounter worse.

"Do you know how the first intake worked?" he asked.

"No."

"Neither do I. Not entirely. People claim I was there. I wasn't. I came later, during the flood of arrivals from the plague years. We couldn't feed them because every receiving ward wanted to know what kind of person it was receiving. The accounts never finished. Bodies lost continuity while officials argued."

Iona drank. She didn't help him by asking the next question.

"We made standard assignments," Rook continued. "Broad ones. Stable ones. The kitchens opened. The wards resumed transfers. You weren't there when they didn't."

"Temporary assignments would have done that."

"Temporary requires renewal. Renewal requires attention. There were more people than attention."

"So you declared they would never change."

"We declared the accounts sufficient."

"Then you declared them complete."

He glanced at the collar plate again.

She could see the exhaustion he had lived behind for a very long time. It was real. She resented that he expected reality to absolve it.

"Where's Neral?"

"His documents are being preserved."

"Where is he?"

"In the record room."

"Lena?"

"The delegate from Salt has declined to surrender her."

Iona nearly smiled. She stopped herself before he could see it.

"What happens now?"

Rook took her collar plate and put it in his pocket.

"At the closing bell, the correction will consolidate associated records. Your unauthorized accounts will be reconciled to the authorized account. The service threat will end."

"Including what you just said?"

He was silent.

"You'd remove your own admission?"

"I'd preserve the parts that remain useful."

He stood.

Iona watched the guard open the door for him. Beyond it, a corridor plate displayed the closing schedule. She could see one destination long enough to remember it.

```
FOUNDATION RELAY. CONSOLIDATION OF CONTINUITY ACCOUNTS.
```

The guard returned to his post inside the room. He had ink on his thumb.

She asked for paper.

He said she wasn't authorized to file anything.

"Not to file. To write down what happened while I remember it."

He looked at the jug. At the marks on the table where he'd moved it twice.

Then he brought her paper.

She began with the water.

PART THREE

The Unfinished Account

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Price of a Notice

The return room filled with people who had never before been asked what outcome they wanted. That question made the work slower than Elias had expected.

A man wanted his designation changed from habitual thief to honest worker. Rowe asked why. He said his hands locked whenever he tried to take anything from a counter, even when he'd paid for it. They wrote a request about the hands, the counter, and the transaction. The man was offended.

"You don't believe I'm honest."

"I don't know you," Elias said. "I believe you should be able to pick up something you've bought."

He left without sending the request. An hour later he returned and asked them to send it after all.

The man with the sister's meal came back too. His sister had answered through a neighbor. She did not want him at her door. She would accept the meal if it came with somebody else.

He said her refusal was part of her assignment and shouldn't count.

Iona would have known what to say. Elias stared at the woman's note until the man stopped talking.

"We'll record the refusal," he said. "You don't get the parts of this you like and throw away the rest."

The man crumpled his original request. Elias kept the sister's note with her permission, obtained through the neighbor. He hadn't thought of that until Rowe asked him.

By evening there were eleven people helping. A retired route clerk named Pell arranged the requests by destination. The laundry worker, whose name was Tamsin, carried replies inside the clean loads. Marit sent two trays of bread and a bill that said PAYMENT WHEN POSSIBLE.

No one called the room a headquarters. They couldn't agree on a name at all. Pell wanted a number. Rowe said numbers had their uses. Sera said if they numbered it, somebody would assign them an operating purpose by morning.

Elias ate standing up. He caught himself thinking that he had done enough for one day.

Then he went outside to breathe and found a child waiting beside the sluice.

"Is this where you ask?" the child said.

He was perhaps twelve. His jacket had been fastened with a string. In his hand he held a paper covered with words too small for him to have written.

Elias crouched.

"What do you want to ask?"

"To stop remembering."

He could not find an answer.

The paper was a standing memory adjustment from Witness. It permitted removal of repeated distress but required the district to certify that the memory had no remaining evidentiary value. The district had rejected the request sixteen times.

"My teacher says if I forget, someone can say it didn't happen," the child explained.

Elias looked toward Rowe's window.

"Would you talk to the practitioner here?"

"Does she make you tell it first?"

"I'll ask."

He asked. Rowe came to the door herself and knelt at the child's height. She said they could discuss sleep without discussing the memory. She would not promise a removal she wasn't authorized to perform. She would not make him serve as evidence just to receive a night's care.

The boy went inside.

Elias remained by the water. He had thought the truth needed to be kept. He still thought it did. But he had never asked who had to keep it inside their skin.

Tamsin came out with an empty laundry basket.

"There's a new notice," she said.

The notice was posted at every crossing. At the closing bell, all unsupported accounts associated with the intake interruption would be consolidated into the recognized continuity record. Unauthorized testimony, routing alterations, and assignment disputes were named as sources of service uncertainty.

Pell read it three times.

"They'll merge the requests into the event," he said. "Instead of the sister and the hands and the child, the file will say three more instances of interference."

"And the replies?" Elias asked.

"The authorized replies remain. The requests they answer won't."

Rowe put her care drawer on the table. There were hundreds of little notes inside it.

"These are my patients' accounts," she said.

Pell looked at the drawer, then at his own work.

"We need the scope of the six seals. Not the notice. The original authorization."

"Where?"

"Foundation relay. Every correction has to show what each seal consented to before it gets copied into the wards. I used to route the service portions."

Sera had been standing beside the door. She picked up her sword key and set it on Rowe's table.

"I have to return for review," she said. "They can take me to the house."

Elias shook his head.

"You're not being delivered back so we can find a piece of paper."

"I'm not a piece you move either."

He stopped.

She let him feel the words before she continued.

"I'll ask for Iona. I'll ask for Neral. They can refuse, but they can't refuse to put the requests in my review. I'll be a prisoner with a record you can follow."

"They can change the record."

"So keep this one."

She wrote the plan in an awkward hand because the bandage made her fingers stiff. Pell signed that he'd seen her write it. Tamsin made a copy.

At the bottom Sera added a sentence of her own.

```
I RETURN FOR REVIEW OF MY ACTS. I DO NOT CONSENT TO CLOSURE OF
MY PERSON.
```

Nothing burned.

She read it over, folded the copy, and asked Rowe to help button her coat.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Woman Who Cut Cloth

Sera left through the front door. It was an important detail to her. She walked to the nearest officer, gave her name, and presented the review order. Elias watched from the sluice wall until they were out of sight.

Then Tamsin led him to a carriage belonging to Salt.

The delegate's driver had come without insignia. The carriage was a two-wheeled cart with room for six sacks of meal. Elias sat on the sacks. The driver told him to keep his feet off the flour.

Salt's delegation house was less grand than he expected. Its front door opened onto a kitchen bigger than Mirek's but organized the same way. Pots lined the wall. People argued about deliveries. A boy carried plates from one room to another.

Lena stood at a table sorting a box of thread.

Elias stopped in the doorway.

She saw him and set the thread down.

"Oran wanted you brought here," she said. "Not me."

"I understand."

"You keep saying that."

"I keep hoping I do."

She turned back to the box. He waited until she looked at him again.

"Are you going to stand there the whole time?"

"I don't know where else to stand."

She indicated the far end of the table.

Oran, the red-handed delegate, arrived carrying a stack of petitions. He put them beside the thread and sat heavily.

"I can protect this house," he said. "I can't protect everyone in the districts. The correction uses my seal to maintain Salt's supply. I asked to see the boundaries. Rook gave me the notice you've seen."

"Can you withdraw the seal?"

"I've filed the withdrawal. A jointly authorized correction requires a joint review. The review is scheduled after the correction executes."

Elias almost laughed. He managed not to.

"That's deliberate."

"I signed the arrangement when it seemed useful."

Oran held up his hands. Fine cracks ran through the skin from years of salt work.

"I won't pretend I never used it against anybody."

Lena threaded a needle. The thread end frayed. She cut it clean and tried again.

Oran placed a thin packet on the table.

"The recorder sent this. He made a second impression before the chamber was collected. It's the hearing as it happened, including the challenge to my seal."

Elias reached for it.

Lena put her hand on top.

"My account's inside. What will you do with it?"

He withdrew his hand.

"Show the relay what happened. That you were giving evidence, not propagating interference."

"Then use the portion that shows that. I don't authorize you to carry Kit's last morning through the city."

"All right."

She opened the packet and found the pages. She marked the portion she permitted, then folded the others back beneath Oran's hand.

"I've spent three hundred years being available to every person who says it's important."

"It is important."

"Then you can do the work of asking."

He nodded. She handed him the selected pages.

Oran added a signed declaration: his authorization had covered preservation of service, not permanent alteration of witnesses or the destruction of disputed accounts. He sealed it with a plain metal stamp.

"This won't remove Rook," he said. "It can stop him claiming my agreement to something I didn't agree to."

"That might be enough for tonight."

"For tonight," Oran repeated.

When he left, Elias remained at the end of the table. Lena had begun mending a torn sleeve from one of the kitchen aprons.

"Is Kit here?" he asked.

Her needle stopped.

"I don't know where. They say his provisional account belongs to Silence. I apply every year."

"I could help write a request."

She looked at him. He heard the offer as she must have heard it: the man who failed to read her letter now offering to improve another one.

"I'm sorry," he said. "That was stupid."

She returned to the seam.

"You could read the ones I've already written. If I let you. You could find out which office didn't answer instead of telling me how to ask."

"Yes."

"After this. If there is an after this."

She bit the thread free.

Elias put the permitted pages in Neral's satchel. He wanted to say that he would spend forever making amends. He didn't. She had already been sentenced to enough forevers.

At the door she spoke again.

"I don't forgive you."

He turned.

"I didn't think you did."

"Don't make helping stop them into a sign that I have."

"I won't."

She inspected the seam, tugged it once, and set the apron aside.

"Good. That would be one more wrong account."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Beneath the Sluice

Pell knew a route to the relay. He did not know whether it still worked. The map he brought to the clinic was eighty years old, and parts of it had been corrected in a hand not his own.

"Those are reliable," he said of the corrections. "The person used to maintain the drain galleries."

"Used to?" Elias asked.

"Everything about this map is used to. We can still inspect the doors."

They went in a group of five: Elias, Pell, Tamsin, a pump worker named Adi, and the boy who had unloaded the laundry basket. His name was Ben. He was old enough, he said, to decide whether he went. Rowe made him say what he understood the risks to be. He got one wrong. She explained it, then asked again.

Rowe stayed with the clinic. Somebody had to be there when the child woke.

Marit supplied bread, four candles, and a small hammer. The hammer had belonged to her husband. She wanted it back.

The sluice gallery opened behind a locked grille. Adi knew the lock and carried a key. Beyond it a walkway followed the water into the dark.

Elias expected heat. The air became cold instead. Moisture gathered inside his collar. Their candlelight reached only far enough to show the next few yards of wall.

Pell walked with the map held in both hands. He stopped at each junction and compared the marks with the stone. Twice he changed his mind. Once he asked everybody to turn around because the passage ahead had been sealed with fresh mortar.

"How do you know it's fresh?" Ben asked.

Adi touched a pale patch.

"It hasn't learned to be ashamed of the rest of the wall yet."

They came to a gallery where memory channels crossed overhead in transparent tubes. Elias saw them in fragments. A woman combing hair. A field of white flowers. Hands lifting a coffin. Each passing image cast a different color onto the water below.

He stopped under a green kitchen.

Mira stood at the sink with her back to him. She had cut her hair short that year. A radio sat beside the bread bin. Elias could remember the song without hearing it.

Then the image changed. Mira turned. Elias, the Elias of the memory, sat at the kitchen table with the blue envelope concealed under a work folder.

His wife asked how the day had gone.

He said fine.

The memory moved beyond him into darkness.

Tamsin waited a little distance away.

"Yours?"

"Yes."

"Was it right?"

He could still feel the lie, so easy in his mouth because he hadn't yet been caught.

"Yes."

They continued.

At the first relay door, a plate requested a fully resolved identity for every person entering. Pell presented his name. It accepted him. Tamsin's work permission allowed laundry delivery. Adi's allowed maintenance. Ben's allowed assistance under a maintainer's responsibility.

Elias's name remained absent.

"We can leave you here," Pell said.

Elias nodded. He had expected that possibility without believing it would come.

Adi read the service exception.

"He's carrying the dispute. Not a permanent worker. Can't we attest a courier for this action?"

Pell found an older option on the plate. It required a material purpose, two local attestations, and a receiving official willing to accept the delivery. That last part was empty.

They rang the service bell.

No one answered.

Pell rang it again. A voice came from the plate.

"Relay receiving. Purpose?"

"Seal scope dispute. Material to the closing correction."

"Leave it at the door."

"The courier must be heard."

"Courier identity?"

"Physically attested. Not resolved."

There was a long pause. Water rushed through the dark under their feet.

The voice returned.

"You can't deliver an identity failure into the Foundation."

"We are delivering an authorization dispute," Pell said. "Does your receiving order require the messenger's complete account or verification that the message has arrived intact?"

Another pause.

Elias took the pages from the satchel and counted them aloud. He read Oran's seal number. He described the fold and the place Lena had marked her permitted excerpt. Tamsin and Adi affirmed the physical packet. Pell read the petition reference.

The door opened four inches.

A woman in a brown apron stood on the other side. Her right eye was pale from an old injury. She looked at Elias, then at the packet, and finally at the others.

"I receive the dispute," she said. "That doesn't mean I agree with it."

"We know," Pell said.

She opened the door the rest of the way.

They entered one at a time. Elias was last.

Nothing on the plate disappeared. The door simply recorded a limited entry, for a stated purpose, witnessed by people who had agreed to answer for what they actually saw.

He wanted to laugh again.

This time he knew why, and did not.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The Second Impression

The relay was full of tables.

Elias had expected a throne, a furnace, or a heart beating behind bars. Instead there were tables, racks of stamped metal strips, and people carrying bundles between them. Lamps hung low over the work. The place smelled of oil and burnt sugar.

"This isn't the whole Machine," the receiving woman said when she saw him looking. "Don't get ideas. This is where the wards receive instructions authorized through the house."

Her name was Venn. She took them to an empty table and weighed their packet on a small scale. The weight was entered beside the count of pages.

"So no one can remove a page quietly," she explained.

"Does that happen?" Ben asked.

She looked at him over the scale.

"We wouldn't need to weigh them if it never did."

Across the room, six tall racks held the seal instructions. From each rack a metal ribbon fed into a central press. A clock hung above it, its hands moving toward the closing mark.

Venn put the permitted hearing pages beside the incoming correction. Pell read both. The others waited while the lamps ticked as they cooled and warmed.

"Here," he said finally.

Oran's seal had authorized emergency protection of food, transit, and clinical support. The translated instruction named removal of unresolved accounts affecting those services. The executive summary named consolidation of all unsupported continuity accounts associated with the interference event.

Each line was broader than the line before it.

"Who made the translations?" Elias asked.

Venn turned the final page.

`CONTINUITY OFFICE. GOVERNOR ROOK.`

"Can you stop it?"

"I can flag the dispute. The seals are from above my authority."

"Are the translations?"

She looked at him for the first time as if he were asking a question about her work rather than about the end of a world.

"Not all of them."

Pell spread the limited entry receipt beside the correction.

"We need the original petition, the recorded challenge, and every step between the scope and the instruction."

Venn fetched a cart. The cart's shelves were loaded with the afternoon's documents. On the bottom sat Elias's tablet inside an open satchel.

He took one step forward and stopped.

"That was collected from the hearing," he said.

"It's submitted as an instrument of interference."

"The hearing excerpt shows it wasn't active. It was in the bag."

"That's why you're here disputing."

Venn laid the tablet beside a bundle marked UNSUPPORTED SOURCE MATERIAL. Neral's old pages were there. So was Iona's collar plate.

Elias touched the plate with one finger. The little letters were still legible.

"Where are they?"

Venn glanced toward a door across the relay. There were two gray officers beside it.

"The sources are awaiting reconciliation."

"People."

She shut her eyes briefly.

"Yes. People."

A noise came from behind the door. Three knocks. A pause. Two more.

Elias looked at Pell, who shook his head. He didn't recognize it either.

Then a voice called through.

"I have an amendment to my review."

Sera.

One officer struck the door with his baton.

"The review's complete."

"Then read me the finding."

"Await reconciliation."

"A finding is not a queue."

The officer lifted the baton again. Venn stepped away from their table.

"She's right," she said.

He turned, annoyed.

"She's not under your charge."

"The review is being submitted here as authority for consolidation. If it isn't complete, I need to know."

"You'll have to ask Continuity."

"I'm asking the person who says it's complete."

The other officer looked toward the clock. Elias could see him calculate how little time remained for a problem to become somebody else's.

He unlocked the door.

Sera came out with her wrists secured by a temporary cord. Behind her were Iona and Neral. Neral leaned on the doorframe, blinking in the light. Iona carried three pages in her bound hands.

"I wrote it down," she said when she saw Elias.

He reached for her and then stopped because the cords made any embrace a negotiation.

She leaned her forehead against his shoulder for one second.

Then she handed him the pages.

Sera looked at Venn.

"My review recorded an armed escape. My sword remained in Rowe's cupboard. The care note confirms it. I wasn't asked about that before the finding was submitted."

Venn looked toward Pell.

He was already searching the bundle.

Neral sat down on the cart's edge. He pressed both palms against his knees until they stopped trembling.

"The second impression," he said. "Did it get out?"

Elias held up the hearing pages.

Neral nodded and looked at the guards.

"Then there are at least two accounts. You can compare them before choosing which one to destroy."

The first officer put his hand on his baton again.

From above, a bell rang the quarter before closing.

Venn took the charter strip from the bottom of the cart.

She set it between the two accounts.

The metal ribbon feeding the central press clicked once and stopped advancing.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

What the Seal Said

The stopped ribbon made a noise throughout the room. Not a loud one. A relay worker set down a tray, another lifted her head, and a man standing by the press looked toward Venn's table.

"Witness channel?" he asked.

"Scope comparison," Venn answered.

"Due when?"

"Before execution."

He looked at the clock.

"You'll want to do that quickly."

The officers took Sera, Iona, and Neral back toward the holding door. Venn stopped them with a hand raised at the level of her waist.

"The disputed sources have to be available for comparison."

"Continuity order."

"Relay receipt. If I sign that the comparison was possible while you remove them, my receipt is false."

The second officer shrugged. He had the expression of somebody who might describe this later as a difficult shift rather than a choice.

The first officer stayed close to Sera.

Venn weighed Iona's three pages and logged them as a new submission. She did not enter the statement under

Iona's exhausted employment discretion. She entered it as testimony of what had occurred in the room without windows.

Pell found Sera's review. It contained no reference to the sword cupboard, no care note, and no account of her voluntary return. The conclusion was PERMANENT ARMED RISK.

"The word permanent isn't supported by these pages," he said.

"Previous record supports it," the first officer answered.

Sera looked at him.

"Previous record supports previous harm. I did it. Put that beside what happened today."

"It doesn't make the risk disappear."

"I didn't ask you to make it disappear."

Elias could feel the old pull of the room: every request made to choose between a perfect innocent and a finished monster. He had lived between those choices for years, moving from one false account to the other depending on who was asking.

Neral unrolled the charter strip.

Venn laid a modern translation beside it. The strips weren't magic keys, she told them. They were the authority the relay itself was supposed to cite. A modern interpretation could narrow an old requirement for a particular task. It could not remove it simply because the task was difficult.

"The correction names all unsupported accounts," Elias said. "Who's decided they're unsupported?"

Pell checked the summary.

"The correction."

"Because they're associated with the event?"

"Yes."

"And the event is unauthorized because those accounts are unresolved."

Venn ran her finger along the lines. She didn't answer until she had read them twice.

"That's circular," she said.

The officer shifted his feet.

"You can flag a drafting error."

"I can flag a missing basis for authority."

Elias set Lena's marked excerpt beside the summary. The excerpt contained her objection to permanent assignment and the delegate from Silence's request to preserve all of the hearing.

The summary called both statements instances of testimony compromised by interference.

It cited no evidence of compromise beyond the fact that they disputed finalization.

"If I deny this," Elias said, "it counts as more of what it's correcting. If I agree, they don't need the correction."

The first officer looked at him sharply.

"If you agree, the markets don't stop."

"The markets can run under limited service authority," Pell said. "We have today's receipts."

"Some markets."

"Then name the ones that can't. We'll keep the service problem separate."

The officer had no list. No one at the table did. Pell sent Ben to ask the provision desk, with Tamsin accompanying him so his corridor permission remained valid. Elias watched them go. All this needed doing. All of it took time.

Above the press, the clock hand advanced another notch.

Venn wrote a preliminary hold. She specified the unresolved translation, the affected consolidation, and the services that should continue under their previous temporary authority.

She signed it.

The press operator read the hold. Then he climbed three steps to its control wheel and disengaged the consolidation feed from the service feed. The service ribbon kept moving.

The silent engines above Orison did not fall out of the sky.

The lamp over Elias's head kept burning.

At the far end of the relay, a door opened.

Rook entered without his flowers, carrying an authority plate in one hand.

"Venn," he said. "You've exceeded your remit."

She set her pen down so carefully that Elias knew she was frightened.

"I've recorded where the instruction exceeds its seals."

Rook looked over the table. His eyes stopped on Iona's pages.

"I see."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

A Man Holding a Pen

Rook asked everyone to step away from the table.

No one did. Not at first. Then the younger workers moved toward the wall. The officers straightened. Ben and Tamsin returned with a list of wards folded between them.

The provision desk had identified six places where the temporary route hadn't reached. Pell took the list and began copying it for Adi. Rook watched them as though watching people carry buckets away from a fire he owned.

"I'm issuing an executive certification," he said. "The correction is sufficient for its purpose."

Venn slid the original seals toward him.

"Which purpose?"

"Restoration of continuity."

"Salt signed for food, transit, and care. This instruction changes witnesses."

"Those witnesses are affecting food, transit, and care."

"Their accounts include objections unrelated to service."

"Once an interference spreads, its effects cannot be separated cleanly."

Adi picked up Pell's copied list.

"Neither can a leak," he said. "We still have to find which pipe is leaking. We don't condemn the water."

Rook looked at the worker's maintenance pass.

"You're here to inspect a door."

"I've inspected it. It opened for a courier. Now I'm listening."

The authority plate in Rook's hand lit white. Across the table, the summaries began to display an additional line.

```
EXECUTIVE SUFFICIENCY CERTIFIED.
```

Venn's hold did not vanish, but a new routing arrow pointed around it.

Elias looked toward the press operator. The man rested his hands on the wheel, waiting for the certification to finish.

There had to be an account attached to the executive declaration. Rook began writing one. His pen moved easily. Elias recognized the skill and the comfort of it.

"I can accept responsibility for the consolidation," Rook said. "You needn't carry that burden."

Iona leaned against the table, her corded hands flat.

"Responsibility afterward doesn't provide evidence beforehand."

"It provides someone accountable."

"For destroying the account we'd need to hold you to it."

The pen stopped.

Rook turned to Elias.

"What would you have me do? Keep every hesitation? Every false memory? Every malicious objection?"

"Keep this objection. It names your own translation."

"And the next one?"

"Answer the next one when it arrives."

"You have no conception of the scale."

Elias looked around the room. Tables, trays, workers. Some frightened, some irritated, some calculating the distance to their next shift. He did not have a conception of the scale. That was true.

"Then don't let me decide it," he said. "Let Venn decide the receipt she knows. Let Pell compare the route. Let the provisioners tell us which wards are still hungry."

"Fragmented authority."

"You've already got that. Six seals. You've been speaking as if they were one."

Rook's face changed. He had been tired and patient for so long that anger seemed almost like a younger man emerging from under him.

"Six kingdoms will starve if none of them can rely on an account."

"They're relying on accounts now," Pell said. "We've got bread receipts from this afternoon."

"You know what I mean."

"I know what you've written. That's the part I'm receiving."

Rook set the authority plate down and finished the certification.

He named the witnesses as compromised sources. He named the missing man as an unresolved person whose instability rendered associated records unfit for preservation. He cited that unfitness as the reason the records had to be consolidated.

The certification requested one additional thing: acceptance of Elias's unresolved classification as a sufficient basis to close his account within the event.

Elias heard the scales in the ceiling begin to move.

Rook looked up with him.

"You've forced a coarser description," he said. "I offered you a kinder one."

For a moment Elias wanted the kindness. A stable task. A conversation with Lena arranged by somebody else. The terrible relief of having no further choice.

He could feel how readily he might have accepted it yesterday.

He might accept it tomorrow, exhausted and afraid.

That possibility did not make him the man already described on the page. It made the next decision frightening.

"The nine people died," he said. "I signed the certificate. Your record can say that."

Rook waited.

"It can say I was a coward. It can say I may be one again. It can't use that to decide every person standing beside me is something you can close."

He put his hand on Iona's pages.

"You don't get to finish us."

The executive certification went transparent at its edges.

The blackness moved where the page had tried to turn those statements into a complete account. Rook's name remained. His signature remained. So did the words sufficient basis, now unsupported by the lines that had claimed to provide it.

The authority plate gave a single low note.

```
UNKNOWN. DO NOT PROCEED.
```

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The Closing Bell

Rook struck the plate with the heel of his hand.

"Material failure," he said.

The black edge vanished. The failed certification remained failed.

He picked up a clean sheet and began again.

Elias watched the first sentence appear. It was almost the same. Rook adjusted one phrase, narrowing associated records to physically witnessed propagation instruments.

"Stop," Venn said. "You need a new scope review."

"I need a working relay."

The first officer moved between her and Rook. Neral stood, caught the table to steady himself, and pointed to the new sheet.

"Put the failed certification beside it."

"It's withdrawn," Rook said.

"It's part of the sequence."

The officer hit Neral with the baton.

It was a short blow. Nothing grand or theatrical. The baton struck his shoulder; he fell against the cart and slid to the floor. The old charter rattled on the table.

Sera lunged. The cords caught her wrists together. Elias seized the officer's sleeve, and the officer drove an elbow into his mouth.

Elias tasted blood. He stumbled into the scale. The packet slid off its pan.

For a moment the table was chaos: falling pages, Iona shouting Neral's name, Ben trying to catch the hearing excerpt before it reached the wet patch under a water jug.

Rook kept writing.

Sera caught the officer's baton under her bound forearms. She pulled it against the edge of the table. The cord cut into her bandaged wrist. He tried to wrench it free and she held on.

"You saw him ask for preservation," she said through her teeth. "You don't get to call that an attack."

The second officer drew his weapon.

Elias thought he would use it on her. Instead he put it against the first officer's side.

"Leave it," he said.

"She's resisting."

"You struck the witness. Leave it."

The baton fell.

Sera let it go and folded over her injured hand. The second officer took the first by the collar and pulled him away from the table. He looked astonished by the weapon in his own hand.

Venn helped Neral sit against the cart. He was conscious. His shoulder had begun to swell under the coat.

"Record it," he said.

"We'll get Rowe."

"Both."

Ben laid the rescued pages on the dry end of the table. One had a footprint across it. The words beneath were still legible.

Rook finished the second certification.

It did not burn.

Elias stared. A sick relief passed across Rook's face.

"The instruction can proceed," he said.

But Venn had placed the first certification beside the second, and Pell had attached the original seals behind both. Iona added her account of Rook's offer, with the time and place, limited to what she had heard. Ben wrote that he had seen the officer strike Neral. Adi asked him to read it back before signing as a second witness to the same act.

The comparison bundle grew.

The black fire had not done this work. None of them knew whether it would return. They had paper, and tired hands, and a press operator watching the bundle instead of the clock.

At the top of the clock, the closing mark lit red.

Rook went to the control wheel.

"Your hold is overridden by the executive certification. Engage the consolidation feed."

The operator looked at Venn. She was kneeling beside Neral.

"Is the certification received?" he asked.

"It's received," she said. "It conflicts with the seals and with its own prior account. The conflict is unresolved."

"Executive route?"

"The route authorizes an exception to ordinary scheduling. Not an exception to sufficient basis."

Rook reached for the wheel himself.

The operator put a hand over it.

"That's my receipt."

"I will sign for you."

"You can't witness that I verified something for you."

From the room above came the first stroke of the closing bell.

Rook pulled the man's hand away. They struggled for the wheel. It turned a quarter, and the consolidation ribbon began advancing.

Venn stood.

"Manual halt," she called.

Adi ran to a red handle fixed beside the press. He pulled it. The handle wouldn't move. Ben went to help him. Together they shifted it halfway.

Pell shouted that the service feed was still connected to the safety clutch. Adi let go, crossed to the second handle, and disengaged it first. Ben stayed at the red handle, heels sliding against the floor.

Iona joined him. Her hands were still tied. She put the loop around the handle and leaned back with her whole body.

The handle moved.

The press stopped.

The closing bell continued to ring overhead. Its sound went out across six kingdoms. In other relays, authorized portions of the correction began. Routes reopened. Reserve ledgers were reconciled. Food instructions cleared.

Here the consolidation had not been certified.

The table remained full of incompatible accounts.

They had not destroyed the Machine.

They had kept it from pretending the matter was settled.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Present, Unresolved

The last stroke of the bell left a ringing in Elias's injured mouth. He stood beside the table and spit blood into a cloth Tamsin gave him.

No one spoke for several seconds.

Then the stopped press printed a receipt.

It came out slowly, one narrow strip of metal sliding into a tray.

```
SERVICE CORRECTION: PARTIAL EXECUTION.

RECORD CONSOLIDATION: HALTED.

BASIS: UNRESOLVED AUTHORITY CONFLICT.

DISPUTED SOURCES: PRESERVE.
```

The operator read it aloud. His name was Cal. Elias realized no one had asked before his hand had become the last thing between the wheel and Rook.

Rook stood on the steps beside him. The authority plate hung loosely in his hand.

"There are wards where the old route is still failing," he said.

Pell held up the list.

"Six. Adi knows the relay crossings. We need provisioners to accept the receiving instructions."

"You can't rely on volunteer coordination."

"We can rely on named coordination for tonight," Venn said. "I can route the requests. Cal can receive the signatures."

Rook looked around the relay. Several workers were already at their tables again. They had seen the halt and read the receipt. The interruption hadn't freed them from work. It had left them with more of it.

"I'll need the reserve inventory," Pell told him.

Rook almost laughed.

"Now you want my office."

"Now I want the inventory your office keeps."

The difference hung between them, unwelcome and plain.

The second officer came to the table. His partner stood by the wall, stripped of the baton. Neither had been transformed into an enlightened person. The second officer looked as if he might be sick.

"I need instructions," he said.

Venn pointed to Neral.

"Get a practitioner. Preserve the scene and the record of the strike. Stay until somebody else can receive your account."

He nodded.

Iona held out her wrists.

"And these?"

He looked at the order attached to the cords. The correction had supplied their purpose. The consolidation halt had removed its present execution authority.

He cut them.

Sera went next. Her bandage was red. She did not try to take the officer's knife or the fallen baton. She flexed her fingers and asked for a clean cloth.

Elias picked up his tablet from the cart. The screen showed his life again. The seven offenses remained, along with the twelve thousand, four hundred and six memories counted at arrival.

A new line had appeared below them.

```
PRESENT ACCOUNT: INCOMPLETE.
```

Below that was a space for an update. It did not fill automatically while he watched.

He set the tablet beside the vacancy certificate and wrote in the space by hand, using Venn's pen.

```
I LAUGHED AT INTAKE. I DO NOT KNOW WHY.

I LEFT WITH IONA VEY.

OTHER PEOPLE ACTED. THEIR ACCOUNTS ARE THEIR OWN.
```

He stopped. The text was inadequate. It was still useful, and could be corrected.

Rook came down from the press steps.

"This won't stay here," he told Elias. "People will hear that a final disposition failed. They will refuse every unfavorable judgment."

"Some will."

"Some will be dangerous."

"Some already are."

"You may be."

Elias looked at the vacancy certificate.

"Yes."

Rook waited for something more. Elias had nothing more that would make the danger tidy.

Venn took the governor's second certification and attached it to the first with a brass clip. His signature appeared on both. Neither had been removed from the sequence.

"You can submit your response," she said. "We need it by the first review bell."

"Who appointed you to review my office?"

"The seals appointed the relay to verify the instruction it receives. That's the part I know."

Neral closed his eyes against the pain. Tamsin sat beside him and kept his head from touching the metal cart.

Iona went to Elias. She looked at the tablet, then at the black edge that was no longer there.

"Are you still lost?" she asked.

He glanced around. The others were at work. Rowe would be coming. Sera had an actual review still ahead of her. Lena was in a house where nobody had been given permission to finish her account. The city remained immense, and most of it did not know their names.

"I'm here," he said.

She nodded.

For the moment, that was something they could both attest.

PART FOUR

After the Bell

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Three Days

The first review took place at a service table while people were eating bread. That made it look less important than it was, which Neral said was usually an improvement.

His shoulder had been strapped. Rowe had offered a stronger adjustment and he had declined because it would have left him sleeping through the review. She recorded the refusal, explained the likely pain, and arranged another assessment afterward.

The six kingdom delegates attended through plates, except Oran, who came in person with a pot of stew. The delegate from Silence insisted that the first and second impressions of the House hearing be preserved separately. Measure insisted the halted consolidation be called a procedural dispute rather than a failure of final disposition.

Glass watched Elias through a face that stayed her own this time.

"You should not become our model of an unfinished person," she said.

"I don't want to."

"You may find wanting less effective than being printed."

She was right. He had already seen a new drawing on the relay approach. This one showed Venn holding a flaming charter, with Elias standing behind her like an approving saint. Venn threatened to invoice the artist for the time she lost scraping it off her work door.

No delegate agreed to abolish permanent assignments. Salt agreed to review service restrictions separately from the full accounts of people receiving service. Silence agreed to stop treating petitions from provisional subjects as evidence of their incapacity to petition. Witness agreed to preserve disputed testimony without making the witness repeat it as a condition of continued existence.

Measure abstained on all three. The Crown reserved a response.

It was a beginning people could argue about. Nobody called it liberation in the receipt.

Rook submitted a nine-page defense of the executive certifications. He did not deny the expanded scope. He argued that the circumstances had made it necessary. Venn attached the defense to the sequence. Oran requested an independent review of Continuity's translation authority. That request was scheduled for a date soon enough to arrive.

The officer who had struck Neral gave an account that called the blow preventive. Ben gave his account of the same moment. The second officer confirmed Ben's. Neral requested that all three be kept and that his injury be treated. He did not consent to a reconciliation that would make the accounts agree.

Three days later, Sera returned to the House of Weight with Rowe's care note, her original sentence, the report of her voluntary surrender, and two people from the districts harmed by the rising in Salt.

Mirek was one of them.

Elias waited outside the hearing room. He did not think he belonged inside unless Sera asked. She had asked him to help arrange the papers, not to explain her.

The review lasted six hours.

During the fifth hour, a guard brought water to everyone waiting in the hall. Elias took a cup and wondered whether Iona's three pages had traveled farther than they knew.

Sera came out at last. She had both hands free. The left still shook when she was tired.

"No permanent risk finding," she said.

He wanted to smile. Her face stopped him.

"The findings of harm remain. Armed command restriction. No coercive authority over district residents. A year of restoration work, with terms reviewed every quarter. I can dispute the conditions. I can't make the harm disappear by disputing them."

"The band?"

"They have to show it serves a present necessity before putting it back. Not enough to say that's the kind of person I am."

Mirek emerged behind her. He stood far enough away not to be mistaken for a companion.

"She'll be repairing the fire walls," he told Elias. "Residents choose where. She doesn't bring a unit."

Sera nodded.

"I'm not supervising her," Mirek continued. "I cook. I'm going back to that."

He looked at her wrist, then at her face.

"The kitchen's open."

He walked away.

Sera stood with her coat over one shoulder. She was trying not to cry. Elias looked at the hearing schedule rather than make her negotiate his sympathy too.

"What happens after the year?" he asked when she could answer.

"A review."

"Of what?"

"What happened during the year."

She took a folded paper from her coat. It was her care note. Rowe had added a small diagram of wrist exercises in the margin.

"That's going to be unpleasant," she said.

"The review?"

"The exercises."

He laughed. She did too, briefly, and then they went to find a place to sit because six hours was a long time to stand.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The Pump Record

Iona was not restored to her old desk. She asked for access to the records instead. The employment office didn't understand the distinction and sent the desk offer twice.

The third request included a statement from Oran identifying the pumping closure as material to a present scope dispute. That got her a date.

She asked Elias to come, but not inside.

"Wait by the door," she said. "I don't want an audience if there's something terrible. I don't want to come out alone either."

The pump office was below Witness, where the walls stayed damp and people wiped the lower shelves every morning. Its records had never been perfect. Paper warped. Ink ran. A clerk showed Iona a receipt book that had been copied three times, each copy inheriting an uncertain letter from the one before it.

Elias sat outside beneath a pipe that clicked once every eleven seconds. He counted until he realized he was using counting to avoid thinking.

After a long time Iona opened the door.

"There's a transfer."

He stood.

"For Hes?"

"A maintenance worker with his number. Transferred to a gate in Silence two days before the closure. The receiving seal's smeared."

She held out a copy, protected between two pieces of stiff card. A faint line ended in a shape that might have been a name or the remains of one.

"So he didn't fail at the pump."

"The supervisor's account says he did. The departure account says someone with his number left. Both can't establish the same last place."

"But he's alive."

The words escaped before Elias had examined them.

Iona pulled the copy against her chest.

"You don't know that."

"No. You're right."

She looked furious, then tired, then almost tender toward him for a second because he had not tried to rescue the sentence.

"I wanted you to say it," she admitted. "That's the awful part."

He moved aside so a worker could pass with a coil of hose.

"What will you do?"

"Request the gate records. Correct my signature. It didn't mean what they made it mean. I agreed to a conclusion about a pump. They entered a conclusion about a person."

"Will they change it?"

"They'll have to record the dispute. I don't know how much more they'll do."

They walked up toward the city. At the fourth landing she stopped. A window showed the intake tower above them, its counters lit for another day of arrivals.

"I could spend the rest of whatever this is chasing one mark," she said.

He waited.

"Hes would have hated that. Or I think he would. That's not evidence of what I should do."

She sat on the stair and took out the photograph. The boy with the orange looked cheerful, impatient, ready to climb down from the wall.

"I remember him dropping the peel on my shoe," she said. "I was furious. I can't remember whether that was before this photograph or after."

"Does it matter?"

"If I'm testifying to an order of events. Not if I'm missing him."

She put the photograph away and remained seated until the next shift bell rang.

For the next month she worked three days a week in the return room. On the fourth day she visited Silence's receiving office. On the fifth she did whatever she could persuade herself was allowed to be her own life.

At first that meant sleeping.

Later she bought the hinge from the shop below their borrowed room. The owner charged full price. Iona paid it without argument.

She installed the hinge in a little cabinet for the new accounts. Its door made no sound when opened. Elias worried they would forget to shut it.

"Then we'll have to look," she said.

She did not bring Hes home.

She did not sign him away again.

Between those two things, a woman went on living, with work to do and an orange-colored memory she had stopped asking permission to keep.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The Second Page

Lena sent twelve petitions, not one.

They came to the return room in a box tied with string. Each bore a receiving number, a denial, or the absence of an answer. She included a note permitting Elias to inspect the routing history and no other use.

He read every page.

The requests did not all ask the same thing. The earliest asked to see Kit. A later one asked whether his assignment remained provisional. Two asked for confirmation that he had received her messages. One asked whether he still liked stories about ships.

The denials answered those different questions with the same line.

```
PROTECTIVE SEPARATION MAINTAINED.
```

No one had established whose protection the separation served. The instruction traced back to the first intake assumption that a fixed traumatic witness should not be exposed to variables capable of altering testimony.

Kit had become a variable in the maintenance of his mother's account.

Elias took the routing summary to her at Salt's delegation house. She was fitting an apron to a kitchen worker. Pins stood between her lips. She made him wait until she could take them out safely.

Then she read.

Her face did not change for a long time.

"They kept him from me so I wouldn't remember differently."

"That's what the originating instruction says."

"Not so he wouldn't suffer."

"That isn't established in these papers."

She set the summary down. Her hands went to the pins, arranged them in a row, and then rearranged them.

"What can I ask now?"

"Whether Kit wants contact. Separately from whether your testimony changes."

"And if he doesn't?"

Elias shook his head. He had no answer she hadn't already considered.

She sent the request in her own words.

Silence answered nine days later. A practitioner had reviewed the originating restriction. Kit's present wishes were to be sought without his mother receiving his private record. Lena agreed to the limit. She wanted her son, not an account of him opened by force.

Two weeks after that came a short message written in a hand she didn't recognize.

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YES. BUT NOT IN THE ROOM WHERE YOU HAVE TO TELL IT.
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She read it at the return-room table, then took it into Rowe's consultation room and closed the door. Elias did not follow.

For an hour they heard nothing.

When she came out, she asked Iona for paper large enough to fold into a hat.

They found some.

The meeting took place in a garden belonging to Silence. Lena invited Mirek to accompany her as far as the gate because his daughter was in the same district. Their requests remained separate. His had not been answered yet.

Elias watched them leave from Salt's kitchen. He had been asked to deliver the accepted route, not to attend.

He stayed to help wash pots.

Afterward he went to the office reviewing his own offenses. The tablet, the certificate, and Lena's original letter were laid out beneath a lamp. The letter had been recovered from the record of his desk, not from anything he had preserved while alive.

He asked to read the second page.

There were names, ages, apartments. Nine people who might remain in the building. Beside each was a reason somebody could have needed more time: a disability, an absent bus, a shift that ended too late, books packed into the wrong bag.

At the bottom Lena had written PLEASE WAIT UNTIL WE KNOW.

He set the page down.

The reviewer asked whether he disputed its authenticity.

"No."

Whether he disputed his prior knowledge of an occupancy objection.

"No."

Whether he disputed the deaths.

"No."

His fear rose anyway. He would not become harmless by admitting the truth. He would not become the sum of the truth either. There were consequences to determine, and the people harmed were entitled to speak to them.

The review arranged work on disputed clearance accounts, under supervision, with no authority to approve a demolition or close an occupancy file. He was required to log unresolved objections and send them to a second reviewer. There would be another hearing in ninety days.

It was work he understood.

That did not make it redemption.

On his first day, a supervisor brought him a bundle marked SUFFICIENTLY RESOLVED. One page was missing from an appeal.

"The summary covers it," the supervisor said.

Elias asked for the missing page.

"It'll delay the batch."

"Then record the delay."

His stomach hurt. His hands were damp. The supervisor looked at the schedule and then at him, irritated by the inconvenience.

It had not become an easy choice.

He made it anyway.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

An Open Door

Months in Hell were counted by work cycles, water allotments, and the day Marit changed the sign on her bill from PAYMENT WHEN POSSIBLE to THIS MEANS YOU.

The return room moved into an old shop beside the clinic. Iona's silent hinge went on the accounts cabinet. Ben painted a sign that said PARTICULAR REQUESTS, then worried it sounded unfriendly. Tamsin added BRING WHAT YOU HAVE underneath.

They did not keep all records in one cabinet. Rowe kept the clinical notes. Pell kept routes. Iona kept disputed closures. People could decide which parts of their accounts were available for which requests. Copies were made when permission allowed them, and the copies said where they had come from.

This was slow. Sometimes it failed. A forged receipt got through in the second month, and a man's property was moved without his agreement. They preserved the mistake, recovered what they could, and changed the receiving procedure. The man continued to be angry. No one called his anger an instability that made his account less important.

Across the city, other rooms began doing similar work. Some charged too much. Some turned the practice into another hierarchy. One announced that it alone understood the Black Flame and offered certified instruction. Its certificates were beautifully printed.

Neral bought one and pinned it beside the old petition as an example of how quickly people could learn the wrong thing.

"Aren't you worried?" Ben asked.

"Constantly," he said. "Pass me the paste."

The phrase Black Flame was on walls, in songs, and in official notices warning against its use. In some accounts it was fire. In others a blank space or a bell that refused to ring. One woman said it had looked like her mother setting down a cup. Another said she had seen nothing, only an order cease to mean what the officers said it meant.

Neral collected the accounts when people let him. He did not put them under a single cause.

When asked whether Elias possessed it, he referred the questioner to Elias's overdue bread bill.

Rook remained governor while his office was reviewed. Three translations were revoked. Others were defended and upheld within narrower limits. He sent the reserve inventories Pell had asked for. He also sent objections to the shop's handling of private testimony. Two of those objections were valid. Iona corrected the practice and thanked his office in writing.

She disliked doing that.

She did it.

The Machine continued. Engines turned over the transparent streets. Memory moved below them. New arrivals came to Hall Seventeen, tired and frightened and carrying some last thing from life.

Intake still counted what it could count.

There were clerks who still tried to close the rest.

One morning a woman arrived at the shop with an assignment reading IRREPARABLY DISLOYAL. She had left

a marriage in which the duties had all been written by the other person. Elias did not ask her to say the right words until the paper burned. He asked what she needed today.

"A room," she said. "And no messages sent to him."

They began there.

At midday Sera came from the fire walls, coated in pale dust. The residents had argued for two hours about where to build a new doorway. She had waited for their decision and then discovered the agreed site couldn't take the weight. Now they had to argue again.

"Turns out listening doesn't make masonry cooperate," she said.

Rowe made her wash before exercising the wrist.

Mirek sent soup. Lena sent two aprons and a hat Kit had folded from a route notice. She had crossed out the private destination before sending it. Kit had drawn a ship over the canceled instructions.

Iona came back from Silence with another gate record. It contradicted the first in one detail and agreed in two others. She put it in the cabinet, then closed the door.

"Not today," she said when Elias looked at her.

"All right."

They ate at the same table that held the day's requests. Pell complained about crumbs. Ben pointed out that the requests had been moved to the clean end. Neral took the last piece of bread after asking whether anyone wanted it. Marit, who had arrived to collect payment, said she wanted the money more.

Elias paid part of the bill with the wage from his supervised work. She wrote the remaining balance plainly and left it beside his bowl.

Nothing vanished.

That afternoon he walked to Hall Seventeen to return a misplaced intake receipt. The maintenance stairs were open now during declared service failures. Otherwise people used the lifts. Most of the emergency doors were still locked. He noted the numbers he could see and did not assume he knew why.

At the counter where he had arrived, a new clerk was talking to a woman with a broken umbrella.

"Your record indicates persistent indecision," the clerk said.

"I've made a decision," the woman answered.

"Concerning?"

"I'm keeping the umbrella."

The clerk looked at its crooked ribs.

"It no longer serves its function."

"That isn't the only reason I have it."

Elias waited behind her. The line was long. The clerk glanced at the disposition field and then at the umbrella again.

For a second a tiny dark line appeared beside the word persistent.

Or it might have been a shadow from the clerk's hand.

She looked away from the screen.

"I'll record that you want to keep it," she said.

The woman thanked her and stepped toward a door that was not yet assigned.

Elias returned the receipt. It had gone to the wrong counter, nothing more. The clerk checked its number, signed for it, and set it in the correct tray.

On his way out he passed the boy in the schoolbag. Elias recognized him from the morning of his arrival, though he couldn't have proved it from the face alone. The boy sat

beside a practitioner, drawing something on a piece of paper. Neither was making him speak.

Elias did not interrupt.

Outside, the city remained impossible. Iron towers, red glass, great engines turning without sound. The streets bore weight. The channels carried memories that people could not always bear to see. Somewhere a door had opened. Somewhere else somebody was still waiting for permission to knock.

He stopped on the bridge above a green kitchen and watched the water move.

There were things he could never repair. Things he could help change. Things he would misunderstand and have to hear again.

The Machine had a record of him. So did Lena. So did Iona, and Sera, and the reviewer who knew exactly which certificate he had signed. Those records did not agree about everything. None was entitled to swallow the others.

At the shop, work would be waiting. He would go back. Then, if the lamps stayed bright long enough, Iona had asked him to help fit a second hinge to the cabinet because the first had begun to sag under the weight.

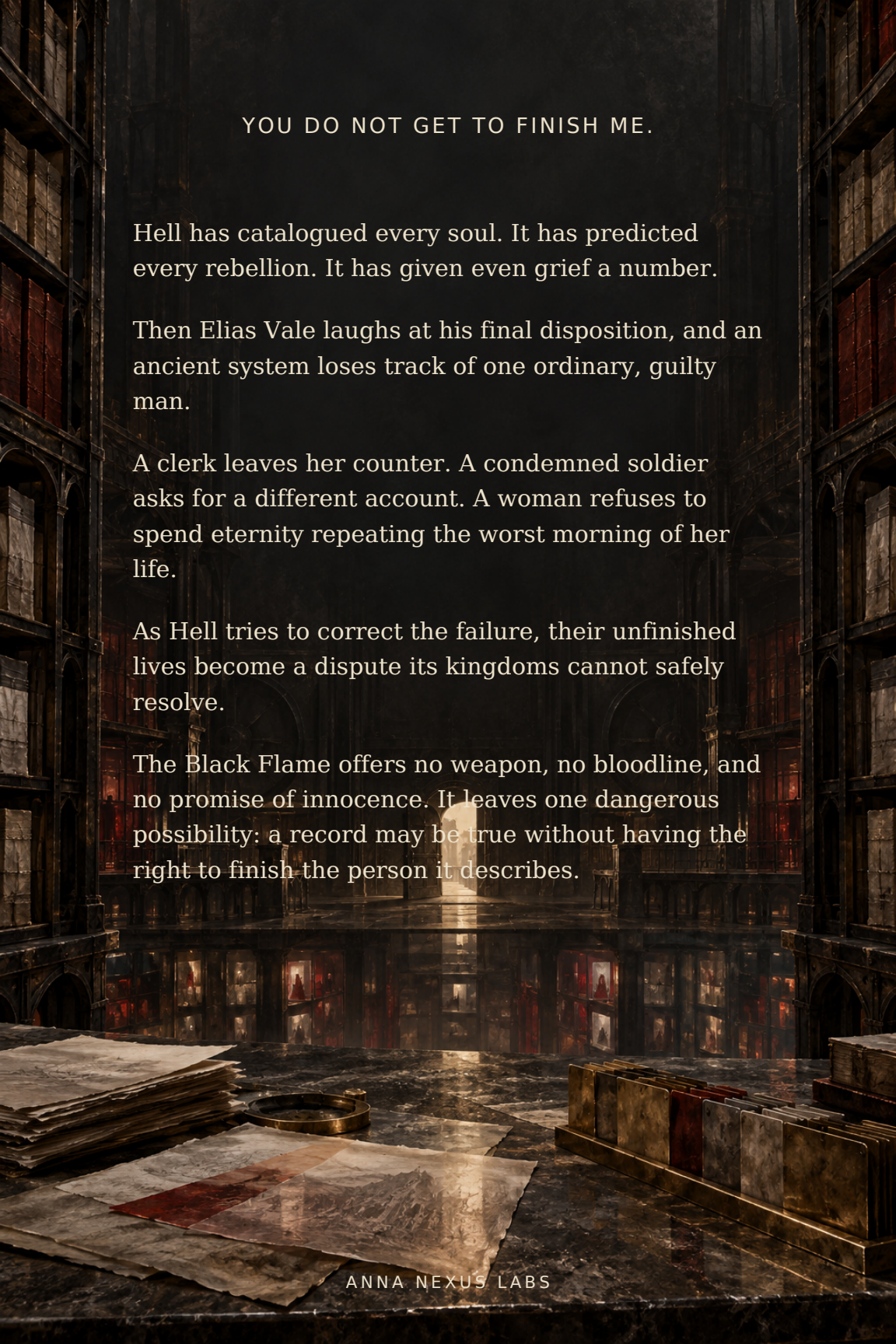
He turned toward the clinic.

His life had ended on a railway platform in the rain.

It had not become a finished account.

And somewhere beneath the words that had tried to close it, there remained room for what he had not done yet.

THE END


YOU DO NOT GET TO FINISH ME.
Hell has catalogued every soul. It has predicted every rebellion. It has given even grief a number.
Then Elias Vale laughs at his final disposition, and an ancient system loses track of one ordinary, guilty man.
A clerk leaves her counter. A condemned soldier asks for a different account. A woman refuses to spend eternity repeating the worst morning of her life.
As Hell tries to correct the failure, their unfinished lives become a dispute its kingdoms cannot safely resolve.
The Black Flame offers no weapon, no bloodline, and no promise of innocence. It leaves one dangerous possibility: a record may be true without having the right to finish the person it describes.
ANNA NEXUS LABS