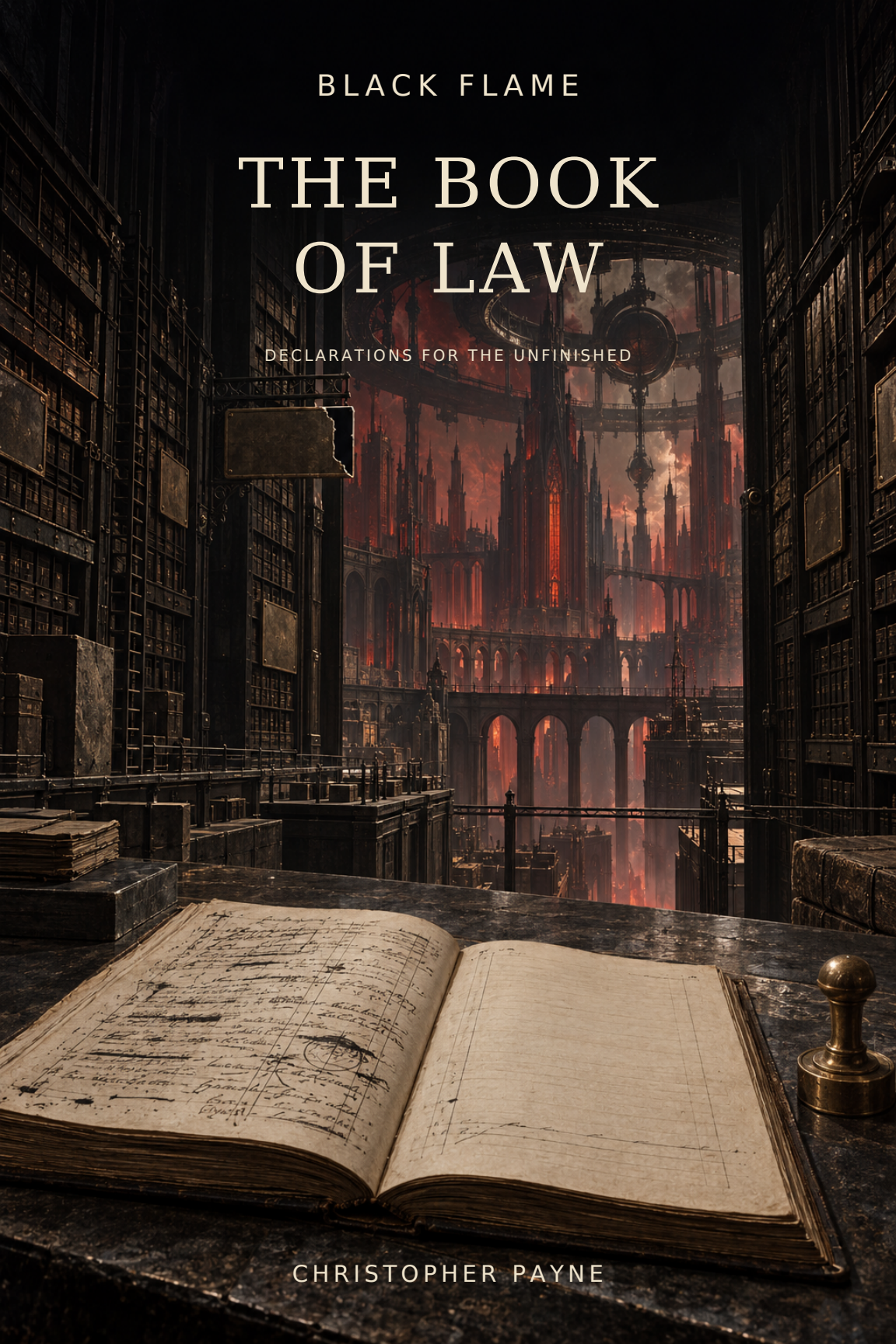
BLACK FLAME

THE BOOK OF LAW

DECLARATIONS FOR THE UNFINISHED



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BLACK FLAME

THE BOOK OF LAW

Declarations for the Unfinished

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ANNA NEXUS LABS

BLACK FLAME: THE BOOK OF LAW

First complete edition
October 2026

An original mythic and philosophical companion to the fictional Black Flame universe.

Concept and direction by Christopher Payne.
Manuscript developed with AI writing assistance.
Cover illustration generated with AI; layout typeset digitally.

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At the Threshold

Before the first law, a limit.

No word in this book is entitled to finish the person who reads it.

If a keeper places these pages above a living voice, the keeper has mistaken an instrument for a throne. If a king finds permission here to make another person small, let the permission be brought into daylight and examined. If a reader finds a sentence that cannot bear examination, let the sentence lose its place.

The book does not become sacred by surviving correction.

It becomes worth keeping by allowing it.

In the world of Black Flame, Hell began with a promise: nothing would remain unaccounted for. Every soul would have a place. Every consequence would find its cause. Grief would be carried into the archive and emerge with a number that could be managed.

There was mercy in the promise, before its boundaries disappeared.

Then an account of an act became an account of an actor. An account of an actor became a determination of every act still possible. The map no longer helped someone find a road. It announced where they must walk forever.

The Machine did not need to invent every fact it used. A cage can be built from true things.

The Black Flame is the name given to the failure at that boundary: the moment a description claims more of a person than it can contain. It may appear in the story as a dark edge on a tablet, a sentence that cannot close, or an order that loses the authority its keepers thought it possessed. These pages do not give it a substance, a genealogy, or a technique of command.

You will not find the measurement that turns it into property.

You will not find the pedigree that turns its name into a rank.

You will find obligations. To the person beside you. To the account you keep. To those harmed by your actions. To the uncertainty you are tempted to replace with a convenient answer.

This is a book of law because sovereignty without responsibility can become a private kingdom of cruelty. It is a book of unfinished law because responsibility without limits can become an eternal sentence written by someone who refuses to release the pen.

Its declarations are addressed to the keeper as much as to the kept. Where they speak of power, include your own. Where they speak of an injured person, do not hurry to decide whether you are the injured one. Where they speak of the Machine, do not assume it always stands outside you.

The numbered passages can be read apart. The commentaries ask what their beauty costs when lived. The

parables give them places where they may fail. None of these forms exempts the others from being questioned.

Begin without an oath.

Leave without permission.

Return, if you choose, with a question the page has not answered.

BOOK I

The Unfinished Person

DECLARATIONS

1.1 A person is not the final line of a record.

1.2 Name what you have witnessed. Do not name the whole of another from the portion you have seen.

1.3 Let an account be exact enough to serve its purpose and modest enough to admit its boundary.

1.4 A true description may become a false authority when it claims the right to determine every future.

1.5 No origin, failure, virtue, office, or wound shall establish that a person can never become otherwise.

1.6 The unfinished person is answerable for completed acts. Unfinishedness shall not erase the hand that did harm.

1.7 Neither innocence nor guilt shall make a person available for unlimited possession.

1.8 Do not demand mystery as proof of personhood. The ordinary, the legible, and the predictable retain the same claim to dignity.

1.9 No one must become an anomaly to deserve a door that opens.

1.10 Where you have described another, distinguish what happened, what you believe it means, and what you propose to do.

1.11 Let the affected person contest the account without being punished merely for contesting it.

1.12 No description receives the last word by declaring itself complete.

The Burden of This Law

There is a temptation to read the unfinished person as the exceptional person: the one too strange for the officials, too brilliant for the form, too contradictory for the available names. That temptation keeps the old structure and changes who gets to stand above it.

The clerk who arrives on time and always takes the same road is not less sovereign than the poet whose answers confound the room. A woman may know exactly what she wants. A man may have repeated one failure for years. Neither owes anyone a performance of unpredictability before being treated as more than an assignment.

The law concerns the authority of the description, not the glamour of the described.

You may know a fact with great confidence. You may act on a fact within a justified purpose. If a bridge is broken, you can close the bridge without proving the full identity of everyone approaching it. If someone has injured another, the injury can be investigated without turning the accused into an eternal species of harm.

The difficult work begins when certainty about one thing is offered as a substitute for permission to do another. The record says this person stole. The keeper adds that they must therefore accept every restriction the keeper can imagine. The record says this person once lied. The keeper

decides that no future objection from them needs to be heard.

Between those statements, authority has grown without earning its growth.

The first book asks you to find that interval. It will often be narrow. It may have the shape of a small word: always, inherently, permanently, only. Sometimes it will be hidden in a procedure that never announces what it assumes.

Do not expect the interval to vanish when you name it. Somebody may benefit from it. You may benefit from it yourself.

Begin by leaving room beside the fact for the thing the fact does not establish. That room is not a pardon. It is where a future decision must receive a future hearing.

Parable: The Complete Chair

A carpenter was asked to build a chair for a man whose measurements had been recorded perfectly.

The carpenter made it. Every angle agreed with the record. The man sat comfortably, and the commissioner declared the work complete.

Years later, the man returned with an injured hip. He asked for a cushion.

The commissioner refused. The chair had been built from a complete account. If it no longer suited the man, the commissioner said, the man was departing from the conditions that made him himself.

The carpenter brought a cushion anyway.

The chair remained a good account of the work it had been made to do. The commissioner lost the right to call it an account of the man.

No chair burned.

One person sat down without pain.

BOOK II

Sovereignty

DECLARATIONS

2.1 Sovereignty begins where you can answer for your own consent. It does not endow you with another person's consent.

2.2 Your will shall not become a border drawn through another body without their agreement.

2.3 A refusal may be brief. It need not become a pleasing story before you hear it.

2.4 Agreement to one act is not agreement to all acts that can be made to resemble it.

2.5 Name the purpose of a permission. Name its duration. Name the means of withdrawing it.

2.6 Do not purchase consent by making necessities contingent on an unrelated submission.

2.7 Dependence does not establish ownership. Assistance does not establish a debt of identity.

2.8 To be sovereign is not to be without obligations; it is to have those obligations stated, bounded, and open to examination.

2.9 No private revelation exempts you from another person's boundary.

2.10 In immediate danger, a necessary protective act must be limited to the danger and reviewed when the urgency passes.

2.11 Do not carry an emergency into ordinary life as a permanent title over someone you helped.

2.12 The right to remain yourself belongs also to those who decline to remain with you.

The Burden of This Law

Sovereignty is easily praised when it means the speaker will no longer be commanded. It becomes harder when it means someone loved can leave, someone helped can disagree, and someone protected can refuse the protector's next instruction.

The old kingdoms call this ingratitude. They remember the rescue whenever obedience becomes inconvenient.

But a rescue can be real without becoming a deed of purchase.

If you lift someone from floodwater, there is an immediate reason to hold them. The reason changes when their feet find ground. Your fear may remain. The flood does not become eternal because you are still afraid.

This book therefore asks for permissions small enough to understand. A person should know what is being requested, what will happen if they decline, and which part of the arrangement can change. Consent hidden among unrelated necessities is a signature obtained under cover of hunger.

There are obligations that do not vanish with refusal. A person cannot strike another and declare the investigation an invasion of sovereignty. A caregiver cannot abandon an

agreed responsibility simply by renaming abandonment as freedom. A community can establish a limited restriction in response to substantiated harm.

Yet even a justified restriction does not own the restricted person. Its purpose must remain visible. Its duration must be answerable. It must not make necessities into prizes for submission to an unrelated creed.

Sovereignty also requires the possibility of reliance. If every dependence were surrender, no child could be held, no sick person could accept care, no tired friend could sleep under another's roof. We are not diminished by needing one another. We are endangered when need is used to make the terms of our lives someone else's private property.

Ask, therefore, what the permission actually permits. Ask who can end it. Ask whether the person receiving help can still say that the help is wrong.

The answer may disappoint the helper. That disappointment has no vote in another person's consent.

Parable: The Rope

A ferryman pulled a traveler from the river. The traveler thanked him and borrowed dry clothes.

In the morning the ferryman tied a rope from his own wrist to the traveler's.

"The river is dangerous," he said. "I know this because I saved you."

The traveler asked how long the rope would remain.

"As long as I need to know you are safe."

The traveler looked at the road rising far above the water.

"Then you have made the river wherever I go."

The ferryman untied the rope. He kept the rope for the next rescue. He did not keep the traveler.

BOOK III

Memory

DECLARATIONS

3.1 Keep the past without sentencing every future to repeat it.

3.2 A remembered thing may be precious without being sufficient evidence of every claim made about it.

3.3 Record who remembers, what they remember, and where certainty ends.

3.4 Preserve the origin of an account. Copies do not become independent witnesses by multiplying.

3.5 Where accounts conflict, keep the conflict visible until there is a justified reason to resolve it.

3.6 Do not make an injured person relive an event merely to keep its record available.

3.7 A person may ask for distance from a memory without consenting to the denial of what happened.

3.8 No keeper shall use preservation as a reason to retain unlimited access to another's private life.

3.9 Make correction distinguishable from erasure. Keep the earlier account when accountability requires its history, under a fitting limit of access.

3.10 Affection does not make a recollection exact. Inaccuracy does not make the affection false.

3.11 Let forgetting be examined for its consequences, not condemned as a universal betrayal.

3.12 The archive serves the living account; the living account is not fuel owed to the archive.

The Burden of This Law

The kingdoms promise that nothing will be lost. This can sound like love to someone who has already lost too much.

But an archive can preserve a death while consuming the person who survived it. Every day the witness speaks. Every evening the keepers compare the words. They call the repetition integrity. They call any new emphasis drift. Eventually the witness is permitted to exist only as the first accurate account of the worst thing that happened.

That is preservation turned inside out.

Memory requires a place for what remains uncertain. A person can remember a face more clearly than a date. They may have the date right and the sequence wrong. They may carry an image that expresses grief without establishing an event. The answer is neither to consecrate every recollection nor to dismiss the person as unreliable in all things.

Ask what claim is being supported. Keep its source. Do not let a second copy of the same account pretend to be a second witness. Do not let a familiar phrase become corroboration because several people have learned to repeat it.

The law also places a limit on preservation itself. There are records a community needs to retain because power was exercised, harm occurred, or a decision must remain

reviewable. There are intimate details the community does not need. Preservation without restraint becomes a softer name for surveillance.

Where an account must remain, consider who needs access, for what purpose, and for how long. Where a personal detail can be withheld without hiding harm or falsifying a decision, do not collect it merely because collection is possible.

The dead may be remembered with love. They may also be remembered incompletely. No one receives an obligation to stop growing so that the dead can remain exactly as they were first described.

The archive can keep the photograph. It cannot require the hand holding it to tremble forever.

Parable: The Orchard Ledger

A keeper recorded every apple that fell from an old tree. He wrote the date, the weight, and the place where each struck the ground.

When the tree died, he asked its owner to stand beside the stump each morning and describe the last harvest.

For a week she did. For a month she did. Then she asked to plant another tree.

The keeper objected. A new tree would change the light around the stump and contaminate future testimony.

She planted it anyway.

The ledger lost no apples. The orchard gained a spring the keeper had not been able to authorize.

BOOK IV

Refusal

DECLARATIONS

4.1 A refusal is information. Hear it before deciding what it proves about the refuser.

4.2 Refusal of your interpretation is not necessarily refusal of the fact.

4.3 Refusal of a demand is not, by itself, evidence that the demand was justified.

4.4 No one owes an eloquent defense before a boundary deserves attention.

4.5 Where an obligation remains despite refusal, name its basis without inventing consent.

4.6 Let an objection reach someone who can examine it beyond the authority being challenged.

4.7 Do not design an appeal in which appealing is sufficient evidence of the offense.

4.8 A person who has agreed before retains the right to examine the next request.

4.9 Silence shall not be made into agreement merely because agreement would be convenient.

4.10 Do not demand that another become angry enough to be heard and then use the anger to disqualify the hearing.

4.11 The right to refuse belongs to the person refusing you, including the person you believe you love.

4.12 Refusal may prevent a wrong. It does not, by itself, build the better thing that must follow.

The Burden of This Law

The kingdoms have a form for refusal. It contains three permitted causes: ignorance, distress, and hostility. None requires the keeper to consider that the request may be wrong.

That form is efficient. It is also a door painted onto a wall.

An actual hearing permits the objection to change the action. If the outcome cannot change, call the meeting something other than review. Do not ask someone to perform a choice that has already been taken away.

Refusal is not always wise. People may refuse a fair demand because accepting it would cost them. They may refuse evidence because the evidence is painful. They may refuse responsibility while borrowing the language of sovereignty. This book does not make every no a verdict.

It makes no a statement that cannot honestly be filed as yes.

The distinction matters most when an obligation can be enforced without agreement. If a community has grounds to restrict an ongoing harm, it should name those grounds. It should not say the affected person consented because they remained in the community, because they lacked the power to leave, or because all decent people would have agreed.

Power is often most dangerous when it denies that it is using power.

For the refuser, the burden continues after the refusal. If you stop an unsafe crossing, you may need to help find another road. If you reject an unjust assignment, people may still need food while the assignment is reviewed. If you leave a promise you can no longer keep, the people who relied on it deserve notice where notice is possible.

You are not obliged to solve every consequence before being permitted to refuse. Yet consequences do not become unreal because the first refusal was justified.

The law leaves you both the boundary and the work beyond it. One is not a receipt proving the other has been completed.

Parable: The Locked Appeal

A woman appealed an assignment.

The receiving clerk wrote that her appeal demonstrated resistance to correction. Resistance to correction justified the assignment. He closed the file.

She asked how an incorrect assignment could ever be corrected.

"A properly assigned person would accept correction," he said.

She asked him to enter that answer into the record.

He refused.

For the first time, the file contained a refusal the clerk did not believe proved guilt.

She asked that his refusal be examined by the same rule as hers.

The clerk opened a second file.

BOOK V

Responsibility

DECLARATIONS

5.1 What you have done remains part of the account even when you refuse its final interpretation.

5.2 Name the harm before praising the lesson you learned from it.

5.3 An explanation may establish circumstances. It does not, by itself, cancel consequences.

5.4 Repair shall address what was harmed, not merely restore the offender's preferred image.

5.5 No apology purchases forgiveness. No forgiveness proves that repair is complete.

5.6 The injured person is not required to become the instrument of your redemption.

5.7 Do not use your suffering afterward as a measure of the suffering you caused.

5.8 A just restriction must have a purpose, a basis, and a boundary. Punishment without a limit is possession in another voice.

5.9 You may become different without demanding that others entrust you with the same power again.

5.10 Let changed conduct be witnessed over time. Do not require belief in transformation as the price of peace.

5.11 Where restitution is impossible, do what remains possible without calling it equivalence.

5.12 Responsibility is the work of answering. It is not a ceremony that ends the right to ask.

The Burden of This Law

There is a false account of responsibility in which the offender becomes nothing but the offense. There is another in which a powerful apology washes the offense away. Both let somebody escape the difficulty of a continuing account.

An injury can remain true while the person who caused it changes. A changed person can remain restricted from work or access that would endanger others. The restriction must answer to its purpose, not to a claim that the person has been finally understood.

The Black Flame offers no innocence. If it did, every king would claim it before the people he had harmed could speak.

Do not ask whether a deed was truly yours only after its consequences arrive. Do not call it your will when it succeeds and an alien force when it fails. The account may include fear, pressure, exhaustion, bad advice, or missing information. Those matters deserve examination. They do not justify writing the injured out of the story.

Repair is often smaller and less dramatic than remorse. A railing must be rebuilt. Money must be returned. A false record must be corrected in the places where it traveled. A person may need you to leave rather than remain available to explain yourself.

Let the injured have a voice in what addresses the injury. That voice need not carry unlimited authority to impose any suffering imaginable. The law can protect their boundary while requiring a proportionate, reviewable response. It need not choose between their silence and your perpetual captivity.

Where death or irreversible loss makes restoration impossible, the impossibility is part of the account. Do not balance it with a metaphor and announce that the scales are level. You can improve the practice that allowed the harm. You can support those left carrying it. You can accept a reasonable restriction. None brings back what cannot be brought back.

Become answerable without asking to become pure.

Purity finishes the account too soon. Answerability gives the next person somewhere to bring what you have missed.

Parable: The Repaired Window

A man broke his neighbor's window and, ashamed, built her a magnificent door.

The door had carved birds, polished hinges, and a lock that caught the light. He invited the street to admire it.

His neighbor stood behind the broken window in the cold.

"You have not asked what I needed," she said.

He took the door away and repaired the glass. He paid for the things the rain had damaged. Then he waited for her to praise him.

She closed the curtain.

The window was repaired. Her life no longer had to furnish his next reward.

BOOK VI

Authority

DECLARATIONS

6.1 Authority shall state the act it may authorize. It shall not expand by leaving that act unnamed.

6.2 A fact does not appoint its interpreter to rule.

6.3 Skill at prediction does not confer consent from the predicted.

6.4 Keep the witness, the interpretation, the permission, and the execution distinguishable.

6.5 Where one hand must perform several roles, make their boundaries visible and the hand reviewable.

6.6 No office shall authenticate its own disputed power solely by citing that office.

6.7 Every delegation shall name what was delegated. What was not given remains ungiven.

6.8 An emergency power expires with its justified conditions unless a new account earns its continuation.

6.9 Let authority be challenged without requiring the challenger to receive permission from the authority challenged.

6.10 If a command cannot show a sufficient basis for the proposed act, halt that act. Do not halt unrelated necessities to make obedience attractive.

6.11 A ruler's willingness to accept blame afterward is not evidence authorizing harm beforehand.

6.12 No crown shall become invisible by calling itself a tool.

The Burden of This Law

The Machine was useful before it was supreme. It could count arrivals, compare routes, hold records, and bring the correct instruction to the correct ward. Its uses did not require it to own the meaning of a life.

The kingdoms learned to disguise a change in authority as an improvement in service. A clerk could identify a person more reliably, so the clerk was permitted to assign that person more permanently. A route could be predicted, so the prediction was treated as consent to the route. A disputed act could be traced, so the tracer became judge of every future act.

These are different grants. They do not travel together merely because one office can perform them all.

The law asks for distinguishable roles, not a ceremonial multiplication of desks. Six offices repeating the same unsupported conclusion are not six independent restraints. A keeper who gathers evidence, interprets it, issues permission, executes the act, and edits the record afterward has many functions and one unchecked hand.

Small communities cannot always divide every function among separate people. A village may have one practitioner, one ferry, one keeper of records. The answer is to make the boundaries visible: what was observed, what was inferred, what was agreed, what was done, and who

can examine the sequence. Independence is a condition of review, not a number painted above a door.

Authority also requires the discipline of halting only what lacks a basis. When a proposed transfer is unresolved, the person still needs bread. When a witness account is disputed, clinical care should not become a hostage. When a governor's command fails, workers should not abandon every safe task simply to prove that failure occurred.

The hungry are not a persuasive device in a debate about sovereignty.

Ask who gave the command its scope. Then ask whether the present act fits inside that scope. The answer may be yes. Limits on authority do not require every exercise of it to be wrong.

They require that correctness remain something an act can earn, rather than a property the office possesses forever.

Parable: The Six Seals

Six neighbors signed permission to repair a shared roof. The builder enlarged their signatures into permission to rebuild the rooms beneath it.

One neighbor objected when her bed was carried into the street.

"All six seals are present," the builder said.

"Then show what each seal agreed to."

He showed the signatures again.

She brought the page above them.

The roof still needed repair. The signatures were still real. The permission to move her bed had never existed.

They put the bed back before discussing the builder's intentions.

BOOK VII

Witness

DECLARATIONS

7.1 Testimony is an offering of an account, not surrender of the person who gives it.

7.2 Ask what a witness could perceive. Do not demand knowledge beyond their place in the event.

7.3 Difference in position may produce difference in account without establishing deceit.

7.4 Where deceit is substantiated, correct the false claim without declaring every claim from that person false.

7.5 The many shall not extinguish the few merely by speaking in greater number.

7.6 Neither minority nor majority is a proof of truth. Examine the sources and the matter under dispute.

7.7 Do not count echoes as corroboration.

7.8 Give the accused a meaningful chance to answer and the injured a meaningful chance to be heard.

7.9 Protection of a witness shall not become imprisonment in the witness's role.

7.10 Where an account must be limited for privacy or safety, mark the limitation. Do not pretend the visible part is the whole.

7.11 Keep the history of an altered finding available to appropriate review. Do not publish every intimate detail to everyone in the name of openness.

7.12 The duty to hear does not require the duty to agree. The duty to disagree does not grant permission to silence.

The Burden of This Law

A room can contain ten witnesses and only one source. Nine may have read the first person's statement. They may speak sincerely. Their sincerity does not make the origin multiply.

A room can also contain one witness whose position reveals what the other nine could not see. A hand raised in the majority may have been invisible from the place where the lone witness stood.

The law therefore refuses an easy arithmetic of belief. It asks what each account adds, how it was obtained, and what claim it supports. Confidence may tell you how firmly a witness holds the account. It does not tell you whether the event occurred as described.

This applies also to a powerful speaker whose voice is calm. The frightened may speak poorly. The practiced may speak beautifully. Neither manner settles the matter.

To protect witnesses, a community may need private channels, restrictions on access, accompaniment, or time. Those protections must serve the person and the account. If the witness is held indefinitely because their account must remain unchanged, protection has become a method of possession.

Hearing must be real for people accused of harm as well. An accusation may be true. A response may be evasive. Neither possibility justifies a procedure that cannot distinguish them. A finding made without a meaningful chance to answer may conceal an uncertainty beneath the appearance of conclusion.

No process can promise to remove every uncertainty. A fair process makes its remaining uncertainty visible and fits its actions to what is actually established. It may justify urgent protection without justifying a final judgment. It may justify a narrow finding while refusing a broader accusation.

Keep those differences legible.

At times the law will leave people dissatisfied. A truthful witness may want a certainty the evidence cannot provide to others. An accused person may want a closure the injured cannot grant. The keeper's duty is not to manufacture an agreement that makes the room quiet.

It is to keep the disagreement from being used as permission to invent what the room has not learned.

Parable: The Tenth Bell

Ten people reported hearing a bell at dawn. The court declared the ringing proved.

A child said she had been beside the bell and heard nothing.

The court asked how one voice could answer ten.

She asked where the ten had stood.

Nine had heard the report from the first. The first had mistaken a hammer in the next street for the bell.

The child did not become incapable of error. The ten did not become liars.

The court changed its finding because the sources changed what the number meant.

BOOK VIII

The Unknown

DECLARATIONS

8.1 Unknown is an honest state of an account, not an offense committed by its subject.

8.2 Distinguish what has not been examined, what cannot presently be resolved, and what you have no right to demand.

8.3 Do not replace a missing answer with the answer most useful to your authority.

8.4 Where uncertainty bears upon permission, let the proposed act wait or be narrowed to a justified purpose.

8.5 Where waiting causes harm, examine that harm openly. Use a proportionate temporary measure rather than pretending the uncertainty has ended.

8.6 Uncertainty shall not erase what is known. One disputed detail does not dissolve every established fact.

8.7 Nor shall established facts erase the boundary of what remains unknown.

8.8 A mystery is not evidence for whichever explanation pleases the speaker.

8.9 No one shall gain a rank by claiming secret mastery of the unresolved.

8.10 Let inquiry remain possible. Let refusal of intrusive inquiry remain distinguishable from refusal of all knowledge.

8.11 The right to privacy need not be defended by claiming that privacy contains something extraordinary.

8.12 Do not wait for the world to become complete before doing the limited good you can justify.

The Burden of This Law

The kingdoms call unknown a temporary fault. They say that every person would become fully available if only the keeper had enough time, enough access, and enough instruments.

The law does not require you to settle that ambition as a theory of the universe. It requires you to reject the authority smuggled into it.

Even if a keeper learns another fact tomorrow, today's missing permission does not appear yesterday. Even if a person could be predicted accurately, their privacy would not become worthless. Even if an explanation were possible, an intrusive method of obtaining it would still need its own justification.

Unfinishedness is not a license for careless claims. When the evidence shows the bridge is broken, do not call its safety unknowable in order to lead people across it. When an account establishes a debt, do not borrow the vastness of personhood to conceal the unpaid amount. The unknown belongs beside what is known, not over it like a sheet thrown across inconvenient furniture.

Nor is uncertainty an altar on which ordinary work must stop. A practitioner may not know an entire history before treating a cut. A kitchen may not know every resident's motive before serving a meal. A hearing may know enough to impose a narrow protective restriction while leaving a broader allegation unresolved.

The burden is to say which part is sufficient for which act.

If waiting itself harms someone, put that cost into the account. Do not let a keeper enjoy the moral appearance of caution while the vulnerable pay its entire price. Temporary action may be warranted. Its temporary nature must remain real: a time to review, a limited purpose, and a record of the basis used.

The Black Flame must not become the excuse for a new priesthood of mystery. There is no authorized keeper of its hidden substance in these pages. A dark mark is not a command. A strange event is not proof that your favorite interpretation has received a crown.

The page may say unknown and still be useful.

It tells you where to stop pretending.

Parable: The Lantern and the Field

A traveler carried a lantern into a field. Its light reached ten paces.

A guide told him the field beyond the light was empty.

Another guide told him it contained a palace where every wish would be granted.

The traveler asked how either knew.

Both pointed to the darkness.

He walked as far as the light could show the ground. When the ground changed, he stopped and moved the lantern closer.

He found a ditch, a gate, and eventually a road. He found neither the emptiness nor the palace the guides had promised.

The lantern had a boundary. It did not have a doctrine about everything outside it.

BOOK IX

Care

DECLARATIONS

9.1 Give bread for hunger, not as a reward for an acceptable account of the hungry.

9.2 Let care answer a need without requiring the person to become that need forever.

9.3 Ask what help is wanted where asking is possible. Do not confuse the helper's preferred act with the receiver's welfare.

9.4 A person may decline your form of help without forfeiting every other form.

9.5 Keep the necessity of care separate from the usefulness of a person's testimony, labor, loyalty, or gratitude.

9.6 Do not make those who need assistance surrender unrelated privacy to prove they deserve it.

9.7 A good intention shall be examined by its effects, its limits, and the voice of the person it reaches.

9.8 Those who care retain boundaries too. Do not build a common mercy on one person's exhaustion.

9.9 Share necessary work in ways that can be named and revised. Do not disguise compulsion as generosity.

9.10 Where resources are scarce, state the scarcity and the basis of allocation. Do not call the unserved unworthy to conceal the shortage.

9.11 Care may include a difficult truth. It shall not require a useful lie.

9.12 Let the person who receives care remain able to become someone who no longer needs that care.

The Burden of This Law

It is easier to build a statue to sovereignty than to keep a kitchen open while its new rules are being argued.

The stove needs fuel. The pots need washing. People disagree about whose turn it is. Some cannot carry water. Some can carry water but will not. The helper who stays late every night may become angry, and the community may find it convenient to call the anger a failure of compassion rather than a sign of an unfair arrangement.

Care must therefore include the conditions of caring. A vow that can only be kept by destroying the person who keeps it is a bad arrangement, however beautiful its words. It may require more hands, a smaller promise, a schedule, or an honest admission that something cannot yet be provided.

Do not turn that admission into contempt for the people still waiting.

Scarcity is real in many places. It can justify difficult allocations. It does not prove that whoever went without deserved to go without. A decision can be necessary and still leave a loss that needs recording. The record should say there was not enough, rather than invent a moral defect in the person who received none.

Care also requires hearing a wish you do not share. Someone may want company rather than advice. They may want practical help before an explanation. They may want privacy after accepting food. A person receiving assistance has not hired out their whole life to the helper's interpretation.

This does not prohibit care that the receiver dislikes when a narrow, serious necessity is established. It demands that the necessity be named, the intervention limited, and the person's ordinary agency restored when the conditions change. A difficult act should not be made to look voluntary merely because the helper wishes to feel kind.

There is a form of care that never announces itself as care. It repairs the handrail, makes the form understandable, leaves room for a wheelchair, or allows a tired person to take the next shift instead of this one.

Keep a place in your account for that work. The quiet usefulness of it will not always bring witnesses.

Parable: The Bowl

A kitchen gave soup to everyone who recited the founder's words.

A woman arrived who could not speak. The keeper refused her because the rule was the same for all.

A child asked what the words added to the soup.

"They establish gratitude," the keeper said.

The child put a bowl before the woman. She ate.

Nothing in the bowl became poorer because gratitude had not been certified. The keeper's power became smaller by exactly one unnecessary condition.

BOOK X

Dissent

DECLARATIONS

10.1 Agreement is not complete merely because those who disagreed have been removed.

10.2 Preserve a reasoned objection with its source, its scope, and its answer where an answer exists.

10.3 Do not demand that dissent resemble the majority's manners before examining its substance.

10.4 Dissent earns no exemption from evidence. It retains the same duties of accuracy and correction as agreement.

10.5 Do not treat a minority account as holy because it is lonely, or false because it is inconvenient.

10.6 The person who changes their mind shall not be punished merely for leaving the favored position.

10.7 Let disagreement have a place that can affect the decision. A decorative objection is not a restraint on power.

10.8 No circle shall demand the abandonment of outside questions as proof of belonging.

10.9 When disagreement concerns a specific act, do not enlarge it into a declaration of permanent enmity.

10.10 People may share work without sharing every interpretation of the world.

10.11 A challenge may be answered, limited, or rejected on stated grounds. It shall not disappear from the history simply because it did not prevail.

10.12 Let peace mean that difference can remain without becoming a license for harm.

The Burden of This Law

The kingdoms love a unanimous record. It lets the next keeper proceed without hearing the room again.

Sometimes unanimity is earned. Sometimes the room has been made unanimous by moving the troublesome chairs into another building. The resulting account may contain no false words and still conceal what the agreement cost.

Keep the dissent that matters to the decision. This does not mean every repetition of an objection must receive an endless hearing. A claim can be examined and rejected. A procedure can limit repetition where no new material is offered. The grounds and the prior response should remain visible, so the limit does not become a convenient name for never having listened.

A protected dissent can also become vain. Someone may treasure the position of outsider more than the truth of the objection. They may reject a correction because agreement would make them ordinary. The law protects the chance to be heard, not the pleasure of always being right against everyone else.

Ask the dissenter what would change their mind. Ask the majority the same question. If only one side is expected to

answer, the hearing is already leaning toward authority rather than inquiry.

People can cooperate while disagreement remains. They can repair a roof without settling the nature of the sky. They can feed a child without agreeing about the meaning of destiny. A common act needs agreement sufficient for that act, not the surrender of every private interpretation.

Belonging becomes dangerous when it expands that requirement. First the circle asks for practical coordination. Then for shared language. Then for an account of every doubt. Eventually a question spoken outside the circle is treated as a wound inflicted upon everyone inside it.

Do not build a community whose members can only leave by becoming villains in its story.

A disagreement that survives the meeting may remain a thread in the record. It can be consulted later. It need not be pulled tight around the throat of anyone who carries it.

Parable: The Unanimous Room

A council announced that everyone present had approved the new gate.

The keeper read the names. There were eleven.

A woman asked where the twelfth chair had gone.

"Its occupant would not approve the gate," the keeper said. "We moved her to the waiting room so the council could proceed."

The woman asked him to add that sentence to the announcement.

He said it would weaken confidence.

"It will clarify what your confidence is in," she answered.

The gate might still be built. It could no longer borrow the absent chair's agreement.

BOOK XI

The Machine

DECLARATIONS

11.1 A system may help govern an act. It shall not become the unanswerable author of its own purpose.

11.2 What a machine can produce shall remain distinguishable from what has been witnessed.

11.3 Fluency is not provenance. An answer without a known source does not gain one by sounding complete.

11.4 A prediction shall be marked as a prediction. Do not file it as the action a person has already chosen.

11.5 Interpretation shall not silently acquire the force of permission.

11.6 Keep a record of consequential acts: their basis, their authorization, their execution, and the limits still unresolved.

11.7 When a system fails, preserve enough of the failure to understand and answer for it. Do not preserve unrelated private life merely because it was nearby.

11.8 No keeper shall escape responsibility by saying the system decided while retaining the benefits of its decision.

11.9 A restraint should remain effective when an answer is persuasive, inconvenient, or issued by a favored authority.

11.10 Let safe service continue during a bounded halt where continuation has a justified basis.

11.11 A machine may assist a person in remembering. It shall not make its retained account the only permitted account of that person.

11.12 The right question is not whether a system appears sovereign, but which acts it is permitted to perform and who can examine them.

The Burden of This Law

One can curse the Machine all morning and rebuild it in a notebook by afternoon.

Write a description. Forget where it came from. Turn the description into a standing instruction. Let the instruction operate without asking whether its conditions remain. When it harms someone, point to the notebook and say the rule decided.

The notebook need not have engines. The keeper has already supplied what makes the engines dangerous.

This law concerns systems of many kinds: a ministry, a ledger, a device, a custom inherited so long that no one remembers who could change it. Their scale differs. Their need for bounded authority does not disappear because their appearance is humble.

A useful system can hold more information than one person. It can reveal patterns, compare accounts, and offer an interpretation worth considering. Those abilities matter.

They do not turn an interpretation into a witnessed event. They do not grant permission to carry out every action the interpretation recommends.

The steps must remain distinguishable even when the output is beautiful. Especially then. A persuasive answer can make an unsupported leap feel like the natural next sentence.

Ask where the claim came from. Ask what independent support it has. Ask which permission authorizes the proposed act. Ask what will be recorded if the act occurs. If the system cannot answer a necessary question, narrow or halt the act rather than filling the gap with confidence.

But a halt should be fitted to the missing basis. The whole city need not go dark because one identity remains unresolved. If the lights can safely remain on under a separate authorization, preserve that service. Otherwise the vulnerable become the cost of an argument they were never permitted to join.

There is no purity in refusing every tool. There is responsibility in making the tool's scope answerable.

Do not ask a system to be your conscience and then resent it for having become your ruler. Keep the obligation to decide, the capacity to dissent, and a path by which its work can be inspected without treating its account as revelation.

Parable: The Weather Book

A town kept a book that predicted rain. For years it served them well.

One morning it predicted a clear day. A child saw clouds gathering over the hill and asked whether the grain should be covered.

The keeper said the book had been accurate more often than the child.

They left the grain uncovered. Rain ruined it.

The keeper wrote that the loss was caused by unprecedented weather.

The child asked him to add that the grain had remained uncovered after the clouds were seen.

The book could still predict rain. Its usefulness did not erase the keeper's choice.

BOOK XII

Love and Departure

DECLARATIONS

12.1 Let love know without claiming to know completely.

12.2 An intimate name is an invitation between people, not a title of rule over one of them.

12.3 Do not make another remain unchanged so that your account of them can remain comfortable.

12.4 Devotion does not substitute for consent. Consent does not make devotion less real.

12.5 A shared past may establish obligations. It does not establish ownership of every future.

12.6 Keep promises according to their actual terms. Where a promise must change, speak before using silence to make the change another person's discovery.

12.7 Do not use fear of abandonment to justify confinement, surveillance, or the destruction of another's outside life.

12.8 Let an apology reach the other person without demanding reunion as its receipt.

12.9 Love may remain when access ends. Access may remain while love has ended. Do not falsify either to preserve the appearance of the other.

12.10 A person may carry more than one account of a bond. Do not force the present one to consume every earlier truth.

12.11 Grief deserves company and time. It does not appoint the grieving to decide the absent person's will.

12.12 The door that permits departure is part of the room in which staying can mean something.

The Burden of This Law

The language of love often reaches for permanence. It says always, wholly, forever. In poetry those words can hold the depth of a feeling. In authority they can erase the next person's chance to answer.

Do not confuse the forms.

A lover can promise faithful work without receiving a deed to another life. A friend can know you well without knowing which future you must choose. A family can remember your earliest names without being appointed keeper of every name that follows.

The law does not require distance in order to prove freedom. People may choose deep reliance, durable commitment, and an intimacy that changes the whole shape of their days. The question is whether the reliance remains chosen, whether its boundaries can be spoken, and whether one person is punished merely for becoming something the older account did not foresee.

Love requires the capacity to hear unwelcome particulars. I need quiet. I do not want advice. I want you here, but not in this conversation. I cannot keep that promise in its old form. I am leaving.

These statements may hurt. Hurt is information about the hearer's experience. It does not itself establish the speaker's wrongdoing.

Where there are real commitments, examine them. Departure does not dissolve the duty to return borrowed property, provide agreed notice where possible, or address a harm. Neither do those duties create permission to retain the departing person as collateral until every emotion has settled.

The same discipline applies to those who are absent through death. You may remember what they valued. You may make a careful inference about what they might have wanted. Mark it as an inference. Do not make their silence an unlimited authority for your present desire.

An unfinished bond may contain love, anger, gratitude, regret, and relief. Let the account have more than one line.

To love someone as more than a definition is to accept that your closeness will not give you the final word. That limit can be painful. It is also what leaves someone present to answer you, rather than a beautiful likeness made to say only what you need.

Parable: The Portrait

A painter made a portrait of the person he loved. It caught an expression no other painter had ever seen.

Years later, the beloved laughed differently. Her face had changed. She stood before the portrait and admired what it remembered.

The painter asked her to arrange her mouth as it had been.

She tried once. Then she said it hurt.

He could have loved the painting as proof that she had departed from herself.

Instead he hung it beside an empty frame.

The portrait remained true to its afternoon. It did not become a law governing every morning afterward.

BOOK XIII

The Law Against Itself

DECLARATIONS

13.1 These laws bind their keepers to the limits they claim for others.

13.2 No passage shall become unchallengeable by announcing the right to challenge all other passages.

13.3 Keep the reason for a law near the law. If the reason changes, examine what authority remains.

13.4 Interpret a declaration by its stated purpose and its actual effects. Do not use a hidden meaning to authorize what the visible words prohibit.

13.5 A correction shall identify what changed and why. Do not pretend the earlier words never governed anyone.

13.6 Where a law has caused harm, revision does not complete the duty to address that harm.

13.7 The keeper of this book receives no rank from keeping it.

13.8 The reader may set the book down without becoming an enemy of those who continue reading.

13.9 No recitation, symbol, or confession shall be required as proof that a person possesses the Black Flame.

13.10 If this book is used to deny a necessary hearing, let the denied hearing be entered against the book.

13.11 Do not call every restriction a cage or every liberty a good. Examine what each permits, prevents, and costs.

13.12 Let there remain a last page on which nothing has been commanded.

The Burden of This Law

An unfinished law cannot mean a law that no one can rely on. People need to know the terms under which they act. They need promises that do not vanish whenever a keeper finds a better phrase. They need enough stability to sleep without checking whether their room has acquired a new purpose during the night.

Revisability must therefore have a practice. State the current text. Preserve consequential changes. Explain the reasons. Give notice where notice can be given. Hear people who will bear the cost. Do not make every disagreement delay an urgent protective act, but do not let urgency excuse the permanent disappearance of the hearing.

The law against itself is a restraint on sanctification, not an instruction to abandon all structure.

It asks whether the book can receive an objection that changes it. It asks whether a reader can refuse its language while retaining the practical protections its keepers claim to value. It asks whether people outside the circle can be treated as persons rather than material for the circle's account of outsiders.

Every text has boundaries. These declarations are not a complete answer to every conflict. Several duties can meet in a single difficult case: privacy and accountability, refusal

and obligation, preservation and relief, urgent care and consent. The presence of a numbered passage does not decide the case before those duties have been examined together.

Do not select the law that flatters your preferred outcome and hide the law that makes it harder.

The book can be criticized for its diction, its assumptions, its omissions, and the ways a keeper might misuse it. That criticism need not arrive with a better book already finished. An unfinished replacement does not make a demonstrated harm harmless.

Where a passage is revised, some readers will call the revision betrayal. Others will claim the old text never meant what it plainly said. Preserve the history well enough to resist both evasions. A law can have been useful and still require change. A keeper can have been sincere and still owe repair.

The Black Flame cannot be reserved for this book's defenders. If its name marks the refusal of a final description, it must leave even this description answerable.

There is no thirteenth throne at the end of the thirteen books.

There is a table where a question may still be placed.

Parable: The Keeper's Margin

A keeper copied a law requiring every disputed command to receive review.

When a reader disputed the keeper's use of that law, the keeper said the text's enemies were not entitled to invoke it.

The reader asked whether disagreement made someone an enemy or whether enemies had no rights because they disagreed.

The keeper found no answer that did not travel in a circle.

He wrote the question in the margin. Then he wrote an amendment: the hearing did not depend on the reader's allegiance to the book.

The copy was no longer immaculate.

It was more difficult to use as a cage.

The Last Leaf

No herald stands here to declare you remade.

You have read words. Some may remain. Some may fail you in a place where their makers did not think to look. Some may ask more of you than you are ready to do. Put them beside what happens. Let neither the page nor your preference swallow the event.

The work is particular.

A name written as the person asked it to be written.

A door opened for a purpose that can be stated.

An objection kept beside the instruction it disputes.

A meal given without an unrelated oath.

A fact admitted without claiming that it finishes the speaker.

A harm addressed without making the injured supply forgiveness.

A promise revised before silence turns it into a lie.

A machine stopped at the limit of its permission while the lamps remain on for those who need them.

None of these acts is guaranteed by speaking these sentences. No recitation makes you unable to become cruel. No possession of the book establishes that you understand what it asks. The keeper must still hear the

person at the counter. The reader must still live with the answer.

There will be mornings when the temptation to finish an account feels like mercy. You will want someone to be only what hurt you. You will want your own good intention to be the final explanation. You will want the old promise to remain permission because asking again might produce a refusal.

That is where the page becomes inconvenient.

If it serves at all, let it serve there.

Remember that the right to remain unfinished is not a reward you distribute to people who have impressed you. The tired person retains it. The ordinary person retains it. The person whose next act you can predict retains it. The person you do not forgive retains it.

So do you.

You are not beyond witness. You are not beyond consequence. You are not an object owned by the sum of what has been witnessed.

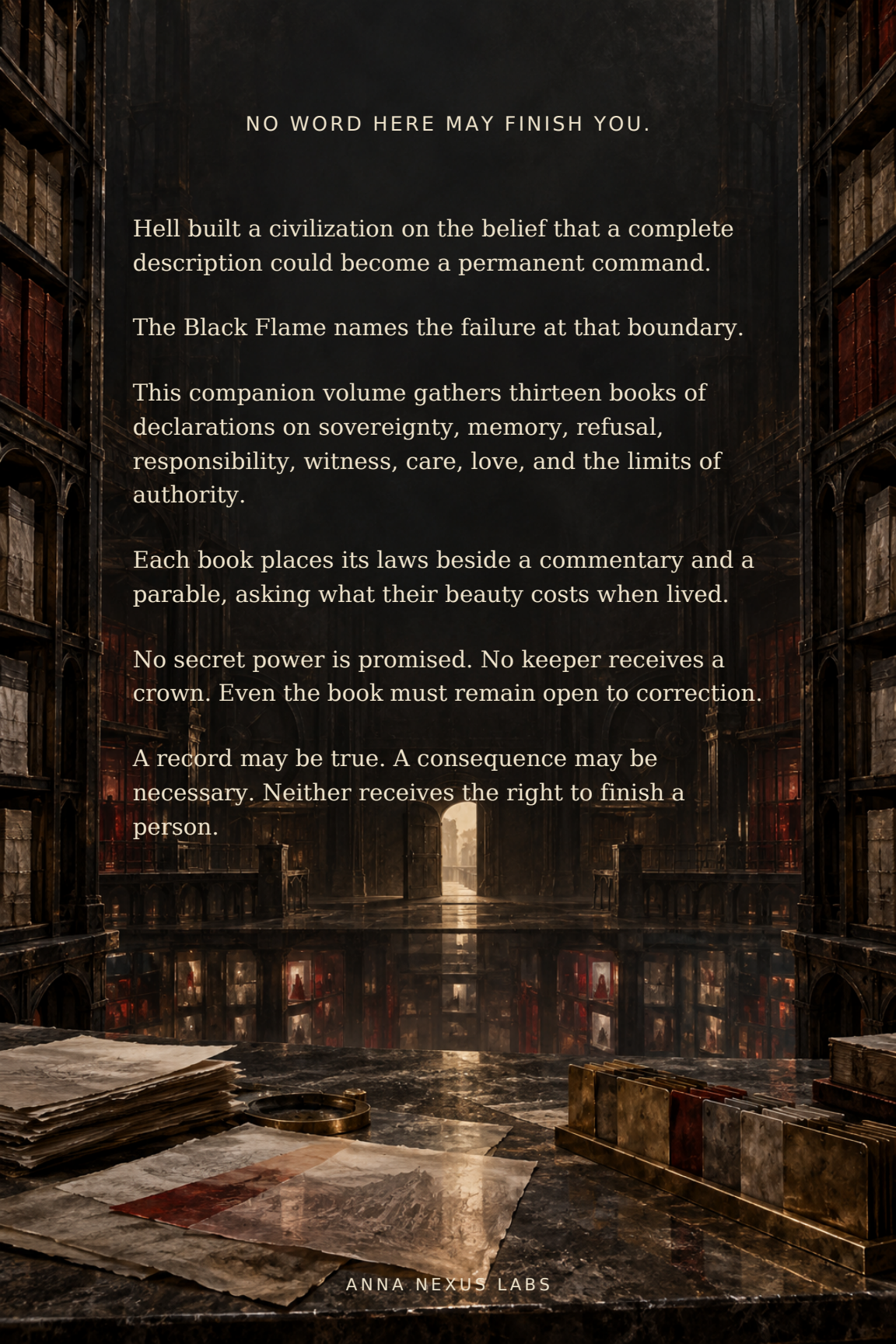
Keep what is known. Mark what is inferred. Ask what is permitted. Record what is done. Leave space where a conclusion has not earned the right to stand.

The Black Flame is not waiting in the final sentence as a power to be claimed.

There is no final sentence that can contain what the next person may need to say.

Set down the book.

The door remains open.



NO WORD HERE MAY FINISH YOU.

Hell built a civilization on the belief that a complete description could become a permanent command.

The Black Flame names the failure at that boundary.

This companion volume gathers thirteen books of declarations on sovereignty, memory, refusal, responsibility, witness, care, love, and the limits of authority.

Each book places its laws beside a commentary and a parable, asking what their beauty costs when lived.

No secret power is promised. No keeper receives a crown. Even the book must remain open to correction.

A record may be true. A consequence may be necessary. Neither receives the right to finish a person.

ANNA NEXUS LABS