

The Call of Asheron:
An Epic of Four Souls

Alexander Towell

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Part I

Volume I: The Calling

Chapter 1

The Weight of Knowing

1.1 The Fool's Demonstration

Three weeks before the whirlwinds began appearing across the kingdom, Duulak the Twice-Blessed stood before the Chromatic Court and proved himself a fool.

He knew it even as he drew the ritual circle in phosphorescent chalk, even as he measured the angles with obsessive precision, even as Korvain—bless the boy—held the copper resonance frame steady despite trembling hands. The Liege Paramount sat elevated on the Celestial Throne, surrounded by advisors whose silk robes whispered like disapproval given voice. To his left, the Merchant Council, fingers heavy with rings of calculated wealth. To his right, the Arcane Assembly, his supposed peers, their faces showing that particular expression scholars reserve for watching a colleague approach the cliff edge of hubris.

‘Master Duulak,’ the Liege’s voice carried the careful neutrality of power watching a potential threat. ‘You claim this demonstration will revolutionize our understanding of dimensional theory?’

‘Not claim, Magnificence. Prove.’ Duulak adjusted the final angle of the resonance frame, checking it against calculations scrawled across his left forearm in emergency ink. ‘For seventeen years I’ve theorized about parallel worlds—realities adjacent to ours, separated by membranes thinner than thought. Today, I show you direct observation. Controlled rifts into probability spaces. Pure theory made visible.’

‘And safe, you assure us?’ The Master of the Mercantile spoke, his concern wrapped in the language of risk assessment. ‘Safe enough to demonstrate before the highest assembly of Qush?’

Duulak should have heard the warning. Should have recognized that when men of power ask about safety, they’re really asking about control, about what happens when your clever trick escapes its cage and savages the audience. But he was forty-seven and brilliant and had spent too many years being right about things other people couldn’t even conceive, and so he smiled with the confidence of a man who has never had his confidence truly tested.

‘Magnificence, I am the Twice-Blessed. I transferred Rashida’s consciousness across the boundary of death itself. Compared to that, this is merely... sightseeing.’

Laughter rippled through the assembly, more nervous than amused. They knew Rashida’s story. The girl who had died and been reborn, who had thanked him and then walked into the desert and never returned. The miracle that tasted of madness.

He began the incantation. The words were Empyrean in origin, recovered from ruins that predated the Sundering War, but he’d modified them, improved them, made them sing with mathematical precision. Around him, the air began to thicken, reality developing texture like water disturbed by swimming things unseen. The resonance frame hummed, not sound but the promise of sound, vibration in dimensions the human ear wasn’t designed to detect.

Korvain gasped. The boy had good instincts—he felt it before the others, the way reality was thinning like fabric stretched too taut.

And then it tore.

The rift opened in the center of the ritual circle, a vertical slash in the world's skin. Through it, Duulak could see... elsewhere. A city that was Qush but wasn't, where the Institution's obsidian spires were shattered ruins, where purple fungus grew across surfaces that should have been sterile stone. A reality where something had gone catastrophically wrong, decades or centuries ago, and no one remained to mourn the outcome.

'You see!' Triumph swelled in his chest, bright and chemical as any drug. 'A parallel reality, a might-have-been made observable! We can study causality itself, understand how choices cascade across dimensional boundaries—'

Something looked back.

Later, Duulak would try to explain what he'd seen, but language fractured around the attempt. It wasn't that the thing was indescribable—it was that description itself became inadequate, like trying to explain color to those born blind or temperature to those who had never felt heat or cold. There was vastness. Intelligence. And hunger of a sort that made the simple hunger of predators seem almost loving by comparison.

The Archmage Salim, his longtime rival, saw it too. The man's face went from professional skepticism to absolute terror in the span of a heartbeat. Three courtiers—sitting closest to the rift—began to seize. Not collapse but seize, their bodies rigid as their minds touched something consciousness was never meant to touch.

'Close it!' someone screamed.

'Duulak, for the love of all gods, close it NOW!'

His hands moved with trained precision, even as panic fluttered bird-like in his chest. The counter-incantation, the reversal sequence, the mathematical unwinding of what he'd so carefully wound together. The rift shuddered, contracted, and finally—mercy of mercies—sealed.

Silence fell across the Chromatic Court like ash after fire.

The three courtiers were still convulsing. Court physicians rushed forward, but Duulak could see from their faces they had no idea how to treat this. How do you heal someone whose mind has been shown the architecture of their own insignificance? How do you mend consciousness that has learned there are things that should not be learned?

The Liege Paramount descended from the Celestial Throne, and the rustle of his robes was the only sound in that vast chamber. He approached until he stood before Duulak, close enough that only they could hear the words that followed.

'You are the Twice-Blessed,' the Liege said, his voice carrying the chill of absolute authority. 'Blessed once by whatever gods watch fools, blessed twice by the tolerance of those you serve. There will not be a third blessing. You will cease these experiments immediately. You will submit all research to the Arcane Assembly for review. And you will remember, Master Duulak, that knowledge pursued without wisdom is not enlightenment. It is merely arrogance finding novel methods of causing harm.'

Duulak wanted to argue. Wanted to explain that observation requires risk, that understanding demands we look at things that might look back, that the advancement of knowledge has always required those willing to approach the edge. But three people lay seizing from having glimpsed what his pride had revealed, and his mouth tasted of ashes, and so he bowed his head and said nothing at all.

The assembly dispersed in horrified whispers. Korvain helped him gather the equipment, neither speaking. They loaded the resonance frame into its carrying case with the care of morticians handling the dead, and walked back toward the Institution through streets that seemed somehow narrower than before, as if the whole city had contracted in sympathy with Duulak's shriveled sense of himself.

Yasmin was waiting at their modest home near the Institution's grounds, dinner warm on the table, her expression carefully neutral in the way of those who have learned not to ask questions they don't want answered.

‘It went poorly, then,’ she observed.

‘Three courtiers are having seizures because I showed them something their minds cannot process. The Liege has forbidden further experimentation. My colleagues now regard me as dangerous rather than brilliant. So yes, my love, it went poorly.’

She brought him wine, placed food before him that he didn’t taste, sat across the table in silence that felt more comfortable than any words. Twelve years of marriage had taught her that some failures were too large for comfort, that sometimes a man needed to sit with his shame until it became something he could carry rather than something that crushed him.

‘Will you stop?’ she asked finally. ‘The experiments, the theories, the pushing toward things that perhaps should not be pushed toward?’

‘I don’t know.’ And it was true. He genuinely didn’t know. The rational part of him recognized he’d been reckless, that he’d prioritized discovery over safety, that he’d let pride guide his hand when wisdom should have stayed it. But the other part of him—the part that had first looked at the world and wondered why—that part whispered that understanding required risk, that safely ignorant was still ignorant, that every boundary of knowledge had been pushed by someone willing to stand too close to the edge.

He slept poorly that night, and in his dreams, something vast looked back at him with what might have been recognition or might have been appetite or might have been something for which no human word existed.

When he woke, sweating and gasping in the pre-dawn darkness, Korvain was pounding on their door with news of the first whirlwind.

1.2 The Weight of Numbers

Twenty-two days after the Chromatic Court disaster, Duulak’s study had become a temple to obsession.

Maps covered every wall, each marked with symbols that would have meant nothing to anyone but him—here a whirlwind sighting, there a pattern in the reports, everywhere the desperate attempt to impose order on chaos. His journals lay open across ev-

ery surface, pages dense with calculations that spilled into margins and then onto the walls themselves when paper proved insufficient. He had taken to writing directly on his skin again, a habit from his student days when understanding came faster than the ability to record it.

Korvain sat cross-legged on the floor, surrounded by testimonies from across the kingdom. The boy was twenty-four and brilliant in the way of those who hadn’t yet learned that brilliance could be dangerous, and he read each report aloud with the patience of a monk reciting scripture.

‘Three more sightings in the Northern Reach. Village of Khayyaban reports a vortex appearing near the common well, present for six hours before vanishing. No casualties, though several children attempted to approach it before adults intervened.’

‘Time of manifestation?’

‘Third hour past dawn.’

‘Mark it.’ Duulak made a note on his arm, the ink joining a constellation of other times, other places, slowly resolving into a pattern his conscious mind hadn’t quite grasped but his instincts insisted was there.

The door opened without knock—only one person in Qush held that privilege. Yasmin entered carrying tea and bread, her disapproval as carefully controlled as everything else about her.

‘You’re writing on yourself again.’

‘Paper is too slow.’

‘Paper can be organized. Paper doesn’t make you look like a madman when you walk the streets.’

‘I haven’t been walking the streets.’

‘Yes, I noticed.’ She set the tea before him with deliberate care. ‘Three days now. Korvain, when did he last sleep?’

‘I... truthfully, Lady Yasmin, I don’t know. He was calculating when I arrived yesterday morning, and he was still calculating when I left last night, and he was calculating when I arrived this morning.’

Duulak looked up from his papers, momentarily confused by the intrusion of human concern into the clean world of numbers and patterns. Yasmin’s face

showed the particular expression she reserved for moments when his work had consumed him so completely he forgot about the flesh that housed his mind.

‘Have I been neglecting my health?’ he asked, genuinely uncertain.

‘You’ve been neglecting your humanity. There’s a difference, though you seem determined to erase it. Eat. Sleep. Remember that you’re made of meat and bone, not merely mathematics.’

‘But the pattern—’

‘—will still be there after you’ve rested. The whirlwinds have been appearing for weeks. They will not cease existing simply because you close your eyes for a few hours.’

She had that particular note in her voice, the one that suggested this was not a request but an intervention. Duulak sighed and reached for the bread, chewing without tasting, drinking the tea without noticing its temperature. Yasmin watched to ensure he actually consumed both before speaking again.

‘Tell me what you’ve found. In words I can understand, not in your equations.’

‘The whirlwinds are not random.’

‘That much even the priests have determined, though they attribute it to divine displeasure.’

‘They correlate.’ He gestured to the maps, to the symbols that covered them like a rash. ‘Temporally and spatially, they correlate with the demonstration I performed at the Chromatic Court. The first appeared twenty-two days ago, which is exactly three weeks after I opened that rift. The distribution follows a decay pattern that matches the theoretical resonance spread I calculated for dimensional membrane stress.’

Yasmin studied the maps with the same careful attention she gave to architectural plans. She was no scholar, but she had spent twelve years married to one, and had developed an ability to see through his explanations to the truth beneath.

‘You think you caused this.’

‘I think I may have caused this. The distinction is important.’

‘Is it? If a man thinks he may have poisoned the well, does he wait for certainty before warning the village?’

The question hit harder than she likely intended. He set down the bread, no longer able to pretend to eat.

‘I showed something vast and terrible how to look at our world. I created a crack in the membrane between here and elsewhere, and now those cracks are spreading. Each whirlwind is another place where reality has worn thin, another potential opening through which...’

‘Through which what?’

‘I don’t know. That’s what terrifies me. I don’t know what I’ve invited to see us. I don’t know if it’s observing or preparing. I don’t know if my demonstration was the first knock on a door we should have left sealed, or if I merely confirmed what was already coming.’

Korvain looked up from his reports, young face drawn with exhaustion and concern. The boy had been his shadow for three years now, learning theory and practice in equal measure, and had earned the right to speak uncomfortable truths.

‘Master, if you caused this—even partially—doesn’t that suggest you might be able to stop it? If you understood the mechanism of opening, shouldn’t you be able to determine the mechanism of closing?’

‘Or of widening it catastrophically in the attempt.’ Duulak ran his hands through his hair, feeling the grease of days unwashed, the physical neglect Yasmin had noted. ‘The mathematics suggests the whirlwinds are stable, purposeful. They’re not tears in reality but doors being carefully opened. Which means there’s intelligence behind them. Which means attempting to close them might provoke a response we’re unprepared for.’

‘And leaving them open?’

‘Also might provoke a response. Or might not. I’ve created a situation where action and inaction are equally dangerous, and the only way to determine which is to choose and live with the consequences. Or die from them, as the case may be.’

Yasmin touched his shoulder, a gesture of affection and anchor both, reminding him that his body existed in space, that he was not merely disembodied intellect floating in seas of theory.

‘If you caused this,’ she said carefully, ‘can you fix it?’

‘I don’t know if “fix” is the right word. Reality isn’t a broken vase you can glue back together. But can I understand it? Can I perhaps... negotiate with it, redirect it, transform danger into something less than catastrophic? That I might be able to do. If I’m willing to take the risk. If I’m willing to potentially make things worse in the attempt to make them better.’

‘You’ve never been good at walking away from risks.’

‘No. I’ve been good at convincing myself that risks are really opportunities in uncomfortable guises.’

A runner arrived at the door, one of the Institution’s messengers, barely sixteen and panting from speed. Yasmin answered, exchanged words too quiet for Duulak to hear, then turned back with an expression he couldn’t quite read.

‘The largest whirlwind yet has appeared in the Institution’s central courtyard. They’re requesting your presence immediately.’

Duulak stood, joints protesting three days of stillness, and reached for his formal robes. Korvain scrambled to gather their instruments—measurement tools, crystalline resonators, journals for recording observations. This was it. This was the moment where theory met reality, where his understanding would prove either sufficient or fatally inadequate.

Yasmin caught his hand as he turned toward the door, her grip tight enough to hurt.

‘Come back,’ she said simply.

‘I always do.’

‘This time I mean it. Not just your body returning by reflex while your mind chases equations. Actually come back. Look at me and see me, not just an outline of a person-shaped concern interrupting your work.’

He looked at her—really looked, perhaps for the first time in weeks. Yasmin was forty-three, with silver threading through black hair, crow’s feet at her eyes from decades of squinting at architectural plans, hands scarred from years of working with stone and mortar. She had married him believing she would

share his life, and instead had received only the edges of it, the leftover moments after his work took its fill.

‘I see you,’ he said, and tried to mean it. ‘I will come back. And when I do, perhaps we can discuss whether this life we’ve built together has any foundation worth maintaining, or if we’re both simply maintaining momentum out of habit.’

‘That’s the most honest thing you’ve said to me in months.’

‘Impending potential catastrophe clarifies one’s priorities.’

She kissed his cheek, a gesture more formal than affectionate, and released him to whatever awaited in the Institution’s courtyard.

As they walked through Qush’s evening streets, Korvain beside him and stars beginning to emerge overhead through the celestial sphere’s holes, Duulak felt the weight of knowing settle across his shoulders like a cloak woven from obligations. He knew too much to walk away, too little to be confident in his actions, and just enough to recognize that either quality could kill him.

But he had never learned to walk away from edges. And so he walked toward the Institution, toward the whirlwind, toward whatever knowledge awaited him on the other side of fear.

1.3 The Song of Possibility

The Institution of Theoretical Thaumaturgy’s central courtyard had been designed by Yasmin herself, eight years ago when her reputation as an architect had drawn the attention of those with money and vision. She had created a space that married functionality with beauty—obsidian paving stones arranged in geometric patterns that helped with magical resonance, raised beds containing herbs useful for reagent work, a central fountain whose water flowed in patterns that soothed the mind and soul.

All of that was barely visible now, obscured by the thing that swirled in the courtyard’s heart.

The whirlwind was beautiful. Duulak’s first thought, approaching through the gathering crowd of scholars and students, was of beauty so profound it became almost painful to witness. It was colors

that shouldn't exist, moving in patterns that hurt to watch but compelled watching, a vertical slash in the evening air that seemed to contain depths impossible in three dimensions.

'Master Duulak!' The Dean of Theoretical Studies pushed through the crowd, relief and terror competing in her expression. 'We were attempting measurements, but anyone who approaches too closely begins to... they hear things. Words that aren't words. A kind of song.'

'I hear it from here.' He did. Not with his ears but with something deeper, something that preceded language and bypassed rationality entirely. The whirlwind sang of questions answered, of mysteries illuminated, of understanding so complete it would make all his previous knowledge seem like a child's first attempts at counting.

Korvain unpacked their instruments with shaking hands. The crystalline resonator, carefully calibrated to detect dimensional membrane stress. The mathematical tables for calculating spatial distortions. The journals for recording observations that might be the last thing they ever recorded.

Duulak approached slowly, measuring each step, watching how reality behaved near the whirlwind. Space was bent here, not broken but curved like light through water, and he could see the mathematics of it written in the way shadows fell wrong, in the way sound arrived fractionally delayed from lips moving.

At ten paces, the song intensified. Not louder but deeper, reaching past his ears into the part of his mind that had always wondered why, that had never been satisfied with the surface of things.

'It's calling to specific people,' he said, loud enough for the gathered scholars to hear. 'Not everyone equally. It has... preferences. Criteria. It's selecting.'

'Selecting for what?' the Dean asked.

'For those who've spent their lives asking questions that comfort couldn't answer. For those who've looked at the boundaries of understanding and refused to be satisfied with maps that labeled the edges "here be dragons." For those who are...' He paused, recognizing the truth even as he spoke it. 'For those who are exactly like me.'

At five paces, he could see through it to something beyond. Not just another place but another mode of being, a reality structured on principles adjacent to but fundamentally different from this one. The sky there was purple. The stars, if they were stars, moved. And in the distance, structures that might have been buildings or organisms or concepts given sufficient complexity to develop architecture.

Korvain touched his arm, breaking the trance of observation.

'Master, we've been measuring for three minutes and seventeen seconds. You've been standing perfectly still, staring at it, for all of that time. The resonator shows the membrane is stable but selective. It's allowing observation but preventing casual passage. You'd have to choose to enter. It won't pull you through against your will.'

'No,' Duulak agreed, his voice distant in his own ears. 'It's far more subtle than force. It's showing me what I could learn, what I could understand, what questions I could answer if I simply had the courage to step through. It knows exactly how to tempt me because it's been watching. That thing I showed the Chromatic Court? It wasn't looking at them. It was looking at me. Learning how I think, what I value, how to phrase its invitation in terms I cannot refuse.'

Behind him, the gathered scholars muttered and argued. Some called for sealing the courtyard, for preventing anyone from approaching the whirlwind. Others demanded further study, measurement, careful documentation before any action. A few—and Duulak could hear the hunger in their voices—wanted to know what would happen if someone did step through, wanted to volunteer for that experiment if the institution would sanction it.

He turned away from the whirlwind, the motion requiring physical effort as if he were pulling against invisible currents, and addressed the assembly.

'I believe I may have caused this. My demonstration at the Chromatic Court—the dimensional rift I opened—it showed something vast and intelligent how to perceive our reality. These whirlwinds are that thing's response. They're not invasions but invitations. Doors being opened to see who might be

curious enough, desperate enough, or foolish enough to walk through.'

'Then we bar the doors,' the Dean said firmly. 'We seal this courtyard and prevent access.'

'That won't stop them from appearing elsewhere. There have been forty-three documented sightings across Qush alone, more in the outer provinces. We can prevent access to one portal, but we cannot prevent their proliferation. And if my theory is correct, preventing investigation might itself be dangerous. If this intelligence is testing us, measuring our response, then isolation might provoke escalation.'

'So what do you propose?'

Duulak looked back at the whirlwind, at the impossible beauty of it, at the promise of understanding that sang through dimensions he could sense but not name.

'I propose that someone who understands the risk goes through. Someone who might be able to communicate, to negotiate, to determine what this intelligence wants and whether it can be reasoned with or must be resisted. Someone whose responsibility this is because their actions created the situation.'

'Master, no!' Korvain's voice cracked with the fear of youth witnessing someone they admired approach the cliff edge. 'We don't know what's on the other side! You could die, or worse than die—you saw what happened to those courtiers who glimpsed it for mere seconds!'

'I saw what happened to those unprepared to witness the incomprehensible. But I've spent my life preparing for exactly that. My consciousness has been transmitted across death's boundary and returned. I've performed calculations that required holding more variables in mind than human thought was meant to contain. I've touched the edges of madness in pursuit of understanding and stepped back before it consumed me. If anyone can survive that thing's attention, can walk through its door and maintain enough coherence to return with useful knowledge, it's me.'

He didn't mention that he wasn't entirely certain he wanted to return. Didn't admit that part of him—

growing louder with each day of marriage growing staler, each student who learned his lessons and surpassed his understanding, each proof that his greatest achievements were behind him—wondered if walking through that door might be the best thing he could do. Go forward into mystery rather than backward into comfortable irrelevance.

Yasmin would understand. Or she wouldn't. Either way, she had built a life sturdy enough to survive his absence. Perhaps that was the cruelest kindness he could offer her—the freedom to finally live fully rather than existing in the margins of his obsession.

The Dean was speaking, arguing against what she recognized as his decision more than his proposal, but Duulak was no longer listening. He had turned back to the whirlwind, to the song that promised answers to questions he'd spent forty-seven years accumulating.

Korvain caught his sleeve, desperation giving the young man boldness.

'Master, please. If not for yourself, then for those who've learned from you. For those who still need your guidance. For... for me. You're the only one who's ever looked at my theorems and seen genius rather than blasphemy. Don't abandon that. Don't abandon us.'

The words hit harder than they should have. Duulak paused, hand half-raised toward the whirlwind, and looked at his apprentice. Korvain was brilliant and would likely surpass him within a decade, would likely make discoveries that rendered Duulak's life work preparatory rather than definitive. But the boy needed guidance, needed someone to see his potential and nurture it rather than fear it.

Like Rashida had needed. Like Rashida had deserved. And he had failed her so completely she'd walked into the desert rather than continue existing in a world that could produce her resurrection and his carelessness in equal measure.

'Korvain, listen carefully. If I don't return—'

'Master—'

'If I don't return within one hour, you will seal this courtyard. You will convince the Dean to establish a perimeter around all whirlwind sites. You will continue my research using the journals in my

study, and you will be far more cautious than I was about the boundary between curiosity and catastrophe. Promise me.'

'I... I promise. But you will return. You have to return. You're the Twice-Blessed. You always survive what should kill you.'

'Blessed once by luck, blessed twice by other people's skill at cleaning up my mistakes. There is no third blessing, Korvain. Remember that. Sometimes the only thing that survives our ambitions is the lesson they teach to those who come after.'

He released the boy's sleeve gently and approached the whirlwind. At three paces, the song became symphony, multi-dimensional harmonies that his mind shouldn't have been able to parse but did, showing him patterns in reality's structure that theoretical thaumaturgy had guessed at but never confirmed.

At one pace, he could see individual threads of possibility, branching futures that split from the moment of his choice. In one branch, he stepped back, lived out his days in comfortable irrelevance, and died having proven himself wise. In another, he stepped through, learned wonders, and returned to reshape human understanding of existence. In a third, he stepped through and was destroyed so completely that even the lifestone's magic couldn't reconstitute him. In a fourth, he stepped through and became something neither fully human nor entirely other, living as bridge between realities until memory of his origin faded into mathematics.

All possible. All equally real from the perspective of the whirlwind's architecture, which existed partially outside time's linear flow.

His final thought before stepping through was of Yasmin's face—not as she was now, worn by years of existing adjacent to his obsession, but as she had been when they first met, when she'd looked at his equations and seen beauty instead of madness, when she'd believed that loving a scholar might mean partnership rather than spectating his slow abandonment of human connection.

He stepped through.

Reality inverted.

Colors he'd never named flooded his perception, mapped onto wavelengths that didn't exist in any

spectrum his world contained. Sound became texture became scent became concept, his senses tangling as his mind tried to parse input that human neurology had never evolved to handle. Distance lost meaning—he was simultaneously standing on alien soil and still in the courtyard and scattered across a thousand adjacent possibilities, observing himself from perspectives that should have been impossible.

Above him, if "above" meant anything here, a purple sky stretched toward horizons that curved wrong. Two suns—one larger and more golden than his world's, one smaller and blue-white—hung in positions that suggested late afternoon or early morning or some temporal state that had no equivalent in linear time.

The air tasted of copper and ozone and something organic that his vocabulary refused to name. When he breathed, his lungs accepted it, but his body recognized wrongness at a cellular level, every mitochondria suddenly aware it was processing chemistry that should have been poison.

He was standing on something. Ground, technically, though the surface had a crystalline quality that made it look simultaneously solid and liquid, as if he were walking on frozen light or solidified thought. In the distance, structures rose—were they buildings or mountains or organisms or architectural expressions of mathematical concepts that had achieved sufficient complexity to develop physical manifestation?

Behind him, the whirlwind still swirled, visible from this side as well, showing the courtyard where Korvain and the Dean and dozens of scholars stared at the space where he'd stood seconds or centuries ago, time flowing differently between realities such that correlation of moments became an approximation rather than a fact.

He could return. Step back through, claim brief observation, live to study his notes and theorize from safety.

Or he could turn. Walk forward into this impossible landscape. Learn whether his demonstration had opened a door to understanding or damnation.

Duulak the Twice-Blessed—hero of the Sundering War, slayer of the Void Drake, first mage to successfully transmute consciousness itself, husband who

had failed his wife and teacher who had failed his students and scholar who had perhaps doomed his entire world through hubris wrapped in curiosity—turned away from the whirlwind.

And walked into the purple-skied unknown, toward whatever knowledge awaited those foolish enough to ask questions that comfort insisted should never be answered.

Behind him, in another world, Yasmin waited at a window, watching for her husband's return and understanding, with the particular wisdom of those who love scholars, that she might wait forever and he would still consider himself justified in the choice that left her waiting.

The whirlwind sang on, beautiful and patient, offering passage to any who shared Duulak's particular genius and particular blindness, that combination of brilliance and arrogance that turns understanding into obligation and obligation into catastrophe.

In the distance, something that might have been laughter or wind or the sound of reality acknowledging a fool who had finally met his match echoed across the crystalline wasteland.

And Duulak, who had never learned to fear the edges of maps, walked toward it with the certainty of a man who had confused knowledge with wisdom and confidence with competence, and who was about to learn the cost of that confusion measured in currency more permanent than gold and more precious than pride.

1.4 First Contact with Death

The clicking sounds resolved themselves into geometry.

Duulak had been walking for perhaps twenty minutes—though time felt negotiable here, as if duration were a convention rather than a law—when his scholarly mind finally imposed structure on the alien soundscape. The clicks weren't random. They were echolocation, triangulation, the mathematical expression of a predator mapping its environment through sound.

Which meant something was hunting him.

He stopped walking. The crystalline ground beneath his feet rang softly with the cessation of movement, a sustained note that took too long to fade. Everything here had resonance, as if reality itself had become a musical instrument played by forces he couldn't yet perceive.

The purple sky offered no proper sense of time. The binary suns hung in positions that suggested either late afternoon or early morning, but the shadows they cast intersected at angles that defied Euclidean geometry. Duulak found himself calculating the mathematics of impossible light, his mind seeking refuge in numbers even as his body prepared for whatever was producing those sounds.

There. Movement against the crystalline formations to his left. Something large, low to the ground, moving with the fluid precision of a creature perfectly adapted to its environment. Duulak's hand went to his chest, fingers tracing the gestures for a basic illumination spell before his conscious mind had fully registered the threat.

The Olthoi emerged from behind a formation that might have been mineral or might have been architectural—the distinction seemed meaningless here, where geology expressed intent. It was beautiful in the way that mathematics could be beautiful: elegant economy of form, every curve serving multiple functions, chitin that reflected the binary suns' light in patterns that suggested both armor and sensory array.

It was also absolutely terrifying.

Duulak had read accounts of the behemak, the sand wyrms of the deep desert, the void drakes he'd helped slay during the Sundering War. None of them had prepared him for this. The Olthoi was larger than a horse, its compound eyes reflecting his image in a thousand faceted fragments, its mandibles opening and closing with the methodical patience of something that had no doubt about the outcome of this encounter.

'I mean no harm,' Duulak said, his voice sounding thin in the alien air. He spoke in Gharu'ndi first, then Roulean, then the ancient Empyrean he'd recovered from texts. The words felt inadequate, but communication had to be attempted. 'I am a scholar,

not a warrior. I seek only understanding.'

The creature tilted its head—a disturbingly human gesture from something so alien—and clicked a sequence that Duulak's mathematical mind immediately tried to parse. Was that language? Or merely the sound of a predator calculating the optimal strike angle?

He drew the first glyph in the air, phosphorescent light trailing his fingers. The spell was simple: a geometric pattern that would project his peaceful intent through shared mathematical principles. It had worked during the Sundering War when words failed, creating a common language of pure form.

The Olthoi's response was to charge.

Duulak barely managed to complete the defensive ward before those mandibles closed on where his torso had been. The spell was supposed to create a barrier of solidified air, resistant but not harmful, a shield that demonstrated capability without aggression. Instead, the magic detonated like thunder, flinging the Olthoi backward with enough force to shatter several crystalline formations.

The creature landed on its back, legs cycling uselessly for a moment before it righted itself with a motion too quick to track. It clicked frantically now, a sound that might have been rage or might have been surprise or might have been the Olthoi equivalent of laughter at the fool who'd just demonstrated he had no idea how to calibrate his magic in this new world.

Duulak's hands shook as he prepared another spell. The magical field here was so dense, so responsive, that his carefully calibrated techniques were like using a siege engine to crack an egg. Every gesture produced ten times the effect he intended, the ambient magic amplifying his will to dangerous extremes.

The Olthoi charged again, learning from the first encounter, approaching from an angle that would make geometric shields less effective. Duulak switched tactics, drawing the glyphs for acceleration rather than barrier, time compression applied to his own perception rather than external force.

The world slowed. Or rather, his experience of it accelerated, thoughts racing at velocities that left his body struggling to keep pace. He could see individual facets of the Olthoi's compound eyes now, the micro-

scopic articulations of its chitin plates, the chemical signatures of pheromones it secreted—information his enhanced perception could process but not yet comprehend.

More importantly, he could see the gaps. The joints where chitin segments overlapped, creating flex points necessary for movement but vulnerable to properly applied force. The way its weight distribution shifted mid-charge, a pattern he could predict three steps ahead.

He didn't want to harm it. Even fleeing for his life, Duulak's primary instinct was curiosity about this magnificent organism. But survival demanded pragmatism, and pragmatism meant exploiting weakness.

The kinetic lance he conjured was supposed to be a warning shot, targeted at the ground near the creature's feet to startle it into retreat. Instead, the overcharged spell punched through the crystalline surface like paper, creating a crater that caused the Olthoi to stumble. As it recovered, Duulak hurled a concussive blast—intended as a gentle push—that caught the creature mid-stride and sent it tumbling across the landscape.

When it rose this time, the Olthoi didn't charge. It stood at a distance, clicking in patterns that felt somehow more complex, more contemplative. Duulak found himself convinced—irrationally, perhaps, but with the certainty that comes from thirty years of studying patterns—that he was being analyzed. The creature was no longer hunting. It was observing.

'You're intelligent,' Duulak said, keeping his hands still, palms open to show he was preparing no further spells. 'You're not merely reacting. You're evaluating. You just learned something about me, and now you're deciding whether I'm prey, threat, or something outside your categorical framework.'

The Olthoi regarded him with its thousand-faceted eyes. For a long moment, the only sound was the ambient hum of this world's magical field, a constant vibration that Duulak suspected his ears hadn't fully adapted to hearing.

Then the creature turned and began walking away. Not fleeing—its movements were too deliberate for panic—but deliberately choosing to disengage. Before it disappeared behind the crystalline formations,

it paused, turned its head to look back at him one final time, and clicked a sequence that felt unmistakably like a statement.

Duulak stood alone in the alien landscape, hands still trembling from adrenaline and overcharged magic, watching the space where the Olthoi had vanished. He had survived his first encounter with this world's dominant species, but only because his magic here was dangerously unpredictable. He'd intended communication and gotten violence. He'd attempted calibrated force and delivered catastrophic energy.

He was, he realized with the sick certainty of academic honesty, dangerously incompetent in this environment. All his training, all his theoretical mastery, was worse than useless—it was actively dangerous when the fundamental constants had changed.

Duulak sank down onto the crystalline ground, noting distantly that it felt warm, almost alive, vibrating with energies his body could sense but not name. His hands were covered in ink from the calculations on his arms, smudged now with sweat and fear. He should record his observations: the Olthoi's morphology, the behavior patterns, the way magic manifested here. His journals were in his robes, waiting.

Instead, he thought of Yasmin. Not as she'd been when he left—weary, resigned, a woman who'd learned to love the edges of her husband's life—but as she'd been twelve years ago, showing him the architectural plans for the Institution's courtyard. She'd explained how beauty and function were not opposed but complementary, how true design served both aesthetic and practical needs simultaneously.

'I didn't want you to come back,' he whispered to the purple sky, knowing she couldn't hear, saying it anyway. 'I wanted an excuse to leave a life I'd grown tired of, to walk away from responsibilities that felt more like weights than purposes. And I've gotten exactly what I deserve: a world that punishes me for knowing too little after a lifetime of knowing too much.'

In the distance, where smoke rose against the alien sky, he could see evidence of fire. Fire meant humans, or at least something that used combustion. Fire meant civilization, or at least its possibility.

Duulak stood, his joints protesting in ways that reminded him he was forty-seven and had just fought for his life using magic that had nearly killed him as efficiently as the creature he'd been defending against. He checked his robes: journals intact, reagents intact, pride significantly damaged but not destroyed.

He began walking toward the smoke, knowing he might be walking toward more danger but unable to remain alone with thoughts that offered no comfort and a landscape that offered no familiarity.

Behind him, the portal through which he'd entered was no longer visible. Whether it had closed or simply couldn't be perceived from this side, he didn't know. But the message was clear: there was no return. There was only forward, toward smoke and uncertainty and the slim hope that whatever waited there would be less interested in killing him than the magnificent alien predator he'd just encountered.

The clicking sounds began again, distant now, moving parallel to his course rather than toward him. The Olthoi was shadowing him, observing, learning. Duulak found that oddly comforting. At least his presence here had provoked curiosity rather than mere appetite.

Though perhaps, a darker part of his mind suggested, curiosity was merely appetite of a different sort.

1.5 The Seekers

The smoke came from a settlement that Duulak's architectural sense told him was both desperate and disciplined. The fortifications were crude but geometrically sound, positioned to maximize defensive advantage while minimizing resource expenditure. Whoever had designed this understood siege principles, even if they lacked proper materials.

As he approached, figures appeared along the makeshift walls. Humans, he saw with relief that felt almost physical. People from Ispar, recognizable not just by their forms but by the way they held themselves, the patterns of motion that spoke of cultural origins he could identify.

One of them shouted something in Aluvian—a challenge or a warning, Duulak couldn't quite parse it at this distance. He raised his hands, palms open, in the universal gesture of peaceful approach.

'I seek shelter,' he called back in Roulean, then repeated it in Gharu'ndi. 'I came through a portal. I am no threat.'

The figures conferred. After a moment that felt eternal, a section of the wall opened—not a gate but literally a gap created by several people lifting away interlocked pieces of salvaged crystal. The engineering made Duulak's fingers itch to sketch diagrams. Modular defensive barriers that could be reconfigured based on threat vectors. Yasmin would have appreciated the elegance.

He walked forward slowly, maintaining the non-threatening posture, hyper-aware that his robes marked him as a scholar or mage and that might be viewed with either respect or suspicion depending on these people's experiences.

A woman met him just inside the perimeter. She was perhaps thirty-five, her hair pulled back in a style common to Gharu'ndim cavalry officers, but her eyes held the particular weariness Duulak associated with people who'd seen too much too quickly. She studied him with an assessment that was neither hostile nor welcoming, purely evaluative.

'You're new,' she said. Not a question.

'I... yes. The portal in Qush opened three hours ago. Or perhaps three days. Time feels uncertain here.'

'Here is Dereth. The portals are Asheron's work. Time is whatever the suns say it is, and the suns lie.' She gestured toward the settlement. 'I'm Celeste. I was a court astronomer before I was transported. Now I mostly try to keep people alive and occasionally figure out where we are and why.'

'Duulak. I was—am—a theoretical thaumaturgist. The portals may be partially my fault, though I'm not certain of causation versus correlation.'

Celeste's expression shifted to something that might have been amusement or might have been recognition of a familiar type of madness.

'A theorist who thinks he broke the world. That's refreshingly honest. Come. You'll want to meet the others, and we'll want to hear your story. New arrivals sometimes bring information about the timing of portal manifestations, which helps us understand the pattern.'

'There's a pattern?'

'There's always a pattern. The question is whether we're intelligent enough to perceive it or whether we're part of it and thus incapable of objective observation.'

Duulak found himself liking Celeste immediately. It had been years since he'd met someone who spoke in that particular rhythm, the cadence of a mind that saw existence as a puzzle to be solved rather than a circumstance to be endured.

The settlement—they called it the Seeker's Encampment, he learned—housed perhaps forty people. They came from across Ispār: Gharu'ndim, Aluvian, Sho, even a few from smaller kingdoms he recognized only from geographic texts. What united them was the look in their eyes, that particular combination of trauma and stubborn determination.

And they all had questions.

'Did you choose to come through?' A young Aluvian man, barely twenty.

'Did you see Asheron?' An elderly Sho woman.

'Did the portal show you what was on the other side before you crossed?' A Gharu'ndim trader.

'Did it sing? They sing, sometimes. Did yours sing?'

Duulak answered as he could: Yes, he'd chosen, though the choice had felt inevitable. No, he hadn't seen Asheron, didn't know who Asheron was beyond the name Celeste had mentioned. The portal had shown glimpses, yes, enough to tempt. And yes, it had sung—wordless promises of understanding that bypassed language entirely.

Celeste led him to what served as her study: a shelter constructed from salvaged Empyrean ruins, the walls covered in astronomical charts that made no sense because the stars here followed no pattern Duulak recognized from Ispār.

‘The portals started appearing three months ago by our reckoning,’ Celeste explained, spreading out maps that showed locations marked across what was presumably Dereth. ‘We’ve tracked over two hundred documented instances across Ispar. They appear most frequently in centers of magical study, royal courts, and areas of significant population. But there are outliers—wilderness appearances, individual summonings that follow no obvious pattern.’

‘Selective,’ Duulak said, studying the maps with growing fascination. ‘The portals are choosing specific people or types of people.’

‘That’s our hypothesis. But we can’t determine the selection criteria. We have scholars, yes, but also farmers, soldiers, merchants, children. No obvious unifying factor beyond sapience.’

‘How many have come through?’

‘We estimate thousands. Most scatter, seek their own survival. A few—like us—settle and try to understand. Others...’ She paused, her expression darkening. ‘Others don’t survive the first day. The Olthoi are efficient predators, and most portal arrivals have no combat training.’

Duulak thought of his own encounter, the way he’d survived through accidental overwhelming force rather than skill.

‘I encountered one. An Olthoi, you called it? I barely survived, and only because magic manifests dangerously powerful here. I meant to create a barrier. I produced what amounted to a siege weapon.’

‘The magical field saturation here is approximately ten times what we experience on Ispar,’ Celeste said, as if this were a normal astronomical observation. ‘Spells that require extensive ritual there manifest from mere intention here. We’ve lost three mages to their own magic before they learned recalibration.’

‘Lost?’

‘Dead. Though death here is... complicated.’

She proceeded to explain the lifestones, and Duulak felt his understanding of reality undergo its second major revision of the day. Consciousness persisting beyond physical death, reconstituted by ancient Empyrean technology that turned mortality into a temporary inconvenience. It was simultaneously the

most fascinating thing he’d ever heard and the most horrifying.

‘You’re telling me death is impermanent but trauma is eternal?’ he asked. ‘That people can die, remember dying, and be forced to continue living with that memory?’

‘Yes. We’ve seen it break minds. Some people die once and never recover psychologically. Others die repeatedly and each death accumulates until they’re more trauma than person.’

‘And we can’t truly escape this world because even death doesn’t release us.’

‘Precisely. Welcome to Dereth, Duulak. The prison with immortal inmates.’

The Seekers, Celeste explained, had formed around a simple principle: if they were trapped here, they would at least understand why and by whom. They excavated Empyrean ruins, translated what texts they could, mapped the patterns of Olthoi movement, and tried to reverse-engineer portal mechanics.

‘We call ourselves Seekers,’ Celeste said, ‘because we refuse to accept our circumstances without understanding their causation. If Asheron summoned us, we’ll learn why. If the portals can be reversed, we’ll discover how. If we’re pieces in a game whose rules we don’t know, we’ll learn those rules and find the players.’

‘Who is Asheron?’

‘An Empyrean. Perhaps the last one on Dereth, though we have incomplete information. The portals are demonstrably his work—we’ve found references in the ruins. But whether he’s savior or kidnapper depends on perspective we don’t yet have.’

‘Show me the texts.’

Celeste smiled, the first genuine warmth he’d seen from her.

‘I was hoping you’d say that. Most new arrivals are too traumatized to immediately engage with research. But you...’

‘I’ve spent my life asking questions that comfort couldn’t answer. Being transported to an alien world doesn’t change the fundamentals of who I am.’

‘Or it reveals them. Come. I’ll show you what we’ve translated so far. Most of it is fragmentary, but there’s a phrase that keeps appearing: ”Harbinger

Protocol.” We think it refers to the summonings, but the context is maddeningly opaque.’

Duulak spent the next several hours immersed in Empyrean texts, his mind finally engaged with something approaching familiar territory. The language was related to the ancient Empyrean he’d studied in the ruins near Qush, but evolved, corrupted by time or perhaps deliberately obscured. Reading it required equal parts translation and cryptanalysis.

But patterns emerged. References to “adaptive species” and “consciousness transfer” and “evolutionary acceleration.” The Harbinger Protocol, as best he could determine, wasn’t a simple summoning spell but something more complex: a system for selecting, transporting, and cultivating consciousness toward some unspecified end.

‘We’re not random refugees,’ he said, looking up from a particularly dense passage. ‘We’re being selected. Tested. Cultivated for something.’

‘Cultivated how?’

‘The lifestones. They don’t just resurrect—they record. Each death creates a template, a map of consciousness that persists. Over time, over multiple deaths and resurrections, we’ll change. Adapt. Become something other than what we were on Ispar.’

‘You’re saying we’re experiments.’

‘I’m saying we’re seeds being planted in hostile soil to see what grows. Whether we’re experiments or weapons or something else entirely, I can’t yet determine.’

Celeste sat back, her expression unreadable.

‘I’ve been here three months. I’ve died twice. The second time, I noticed something. My memory of the astronomical charts was more detailed afterward, as if the lifestone had somehow enhanced my recall during reconstitution.’

‘Selective enhancement. It’s learning what skills matter to you and optimizing for them.’

‘Which means we’re being improved whether we consent or not.’

‘Yes. And that’s both the most fascinating and most horrifying thing I’ve ever encountered. We’re becoming what this world needs us to be, losing what we were in the process.’

Night fell with disconcerting rapidity, the binary suns setting in sequence rather than simultaneously. The Seekers’ settlement took on a different character in darkness: fires burned behind crystalline shields that refracted light in patterns that hurt to observe too directly, and guards maintained watch with the nervous tension of people who knew safety was always temporary.

Duulak was given shelter in a communal structure, a space shared with three other scholars who’d arrived over the past weeks. They exchanged stories in the darkness: portal experiences, first encounters with Olthoi, the slow adaptation to a world that felt simultaneously more and less real than Ispar.

But sleep, when it finally came, brought dreams. Not the normal fragmentary chaos of sleeping minds but something more structured, more deliberate. He dreamed of vast networks spreading beneath Dereth’s surface, of consciousness flowing through crystalline channels, of being observed by something that existed partially in dimensions his mind couldn’t properly process.

He dreamed of Yasmin, standing at a window, waiting.

And he dreamed of the Olthoi that had spared him, clicking patterns that his sleeping mind translated into something approximating language: “You are seen. You are measured. You are not yet understood, but you will be.”

1.6 First Death

The Olthoi attack came on his third day at the Seeker’s Encampment, just as Duulak had begun to convince himself that scholarly pursuits might shield him from the violent realities of this world.

He was in Celeste’s study, analyzing a particularly complex passage about consciousness architecture, when the alarm sounded—a series of crystal chimes that created harmonics designed to penetrate even deep concentration. The sound was beautiful and terrible, and every person in the encampment responded with the practiced urgency of people who’d learned that seconds meant the difference between survival and catastrophe.

‘How many?’ Celeste called out, already moving toward the weapons cache.

‘Six workers, three soldiers,’ someone shouted from the wall. ‘Coordinated approach from the eastern quadrant. They’re testing the modular barriers.’

‘Standard defense pattern three,’ Celeste commanded, her voice carrying the authority of someone who’d led these defenses before. ‘Mages to the inner ring, non-combatants to the shelters, and someone get Duulak to—’

‘I can help,’ Duulak said, the words emerging before his rational mind could evaluate them. ‘I have combat training from the Sundering War.’

‘That was twenty years ago on a different world with different magic.’

‘Which makes me experienced and adaptable rather than merely desperate.’

Celeste looked at him for a half-second that felt eternal, then nodded.

‘Inner ring. You’ll work with Darius and Senna. They’re your age, they know recalibration, and they won’t judge you if you accidentally obliterate a crystal formation. Just try not to obliterate any humans.’

Duulak took his position in what the Seekers called the “mage ring,” a circular formation that provided overlapping fields of fire while preventing friendly fire from overcharged spells. It was elegant tactical magic, the kind of combat theory he’d helped develop during the Sundering War but never expected to use again.

Darius was on his right: a Sho scholar perhaps his own age, with the particular calm that came from either deep philosophical acceptance or multiple deaths dulling the fear response. Senna was on his left: a Gharu’ndim woman who moved with the fluid precision of someone who’d spent years studying wind magic and its applications to both construction and destruction.

‘First combat on Dereth?’ Darius asked conversationally, as if they were discussing weather rather than imminent violence.

‘Second. I encountered an Olthoi soldier my first hour here. Survived through luck and overcharged magic.’

‘Then you understand the fundamental problem,’ Senna said. ‘Every spell you know is ten times more powerful and half as controllable. Welcome to war in a world that amplifies everything, including mistakes.’

The Olthoi workers hit the eastern barrier first, their mandibles carving through the crystalline formations with disturbing efficiency. They weren’t attacking randomly—they were systematically dismantling the defensive structure, creating calculated weaknesses for the soldiers to exploit.

Duulak watched the pattern emerge, his tactical mind automatically cataloging the assault sequence. The workers weren’t laborers; they were combat engineers, demolition specialists working in perfect coordination to create optimal breach points.

‘They’re too organized,’ he said. ‘This isn’t opportunistic predation. This is military tactics.’

‘Welcome to the war none of us signed up for,’ Darius replied. ‘The Olthoi aren’t beasts. They’re soldiers serving a hive intelligence that makes tactical decisions beyond anything we encountered on Ispar.’

The first soldier Olthoi breached through a gap the workers had created, moving with horrifying speed toward the inner defensive ring. Duulak felt his hands begin the familiar gestures for a kinetic barrage, his mind automatically calculating vectors and force distributions.

The spell manifested as a wall of semi-solid air that caught the Olthoi mid-leap and slammed it backward into two more soldiers attempting the same breach. Duulak had intended a targeted strike. He’d created area-effect devastation.

‘Good instincts, poor calibration,’ Senna called out. ‘You’re still thinking in Ispar values. Divide everything by ten and you’ll get closer to precision.’

He tried to adjust, to scale down his magical intentions, but the problem was that his training had been systematic, automatic, muscle memory built over decades. Telling himself to use one-tenth the effort was like telling himself to breathe one-tenth as deeply—possible in theory, nearly impossible in crisis.

The Olthoi soldiers adapted to the defensive pattern with disturbing speed. Where one approach failed, they tried another, learning from each repulsed assault. Duulak found himself in a rhythm: observe attack vector, calculate response, execute spell, immediately assess whether the outcome matched intention or created collateral devastation.

He was getting better at calibration. Not good—not even adequate—but better. His third kinetic lance merely knocked an Olthoi soldier off its trajectory rather than punching a crater in the landscape. His fifth barrier spell created an actual wall rather than a explosive force distribution.

That was when he made his fatal mistake.

An Olthoi worker had circled around during the confusion, approaching from the blind angle that developed when three soldiers pressed the eastern barrier simultaneously. Duulak saw it in his peripheral vision, turned to engage, and drew the glyphs for a precision compression field—a spell designed to immobilize without harm.

The magical field manifested correctly. The Olthoi stopped, suspended in an invisible matrix that prevented movement while preserving life. Duulak felt a moment of satisfaction: finally, precision, finally control over this world's overwhelming magic.

Then he saw Darius, lying on the ground where a second worker Olthoi had pulled him from the defensive ring. Saw the massive mandibles closing around the scholar's torso. Saw the moment of resistance before chitin edges, sharper than any blade, found the spaces between human ribs.

Duulak's concentration broke. The compression field collapsed. The immobilized Olthoi resumed its charge, now furious from confinement, no longer testing but committed to killing the mage who'd held it.

He drew another spell, something, anything, but the gestures came too slow, his hands suddenly uncertain whether to protect himself or help Darius. The Olthoi covered the distance between them in three strides, mandibles spread wide.

The pain was indescribable.

Then it stopped.

1.7 Commitment to Understanding

Duulak woke screaming.

He stood at a lifestone—he understood that intellectually even as his body insisted it should be lying in pieces where an Olthoi's mandibles had found the spaces between his ribs. The scream that tore from his throat wasn't pain, exactly, but something deeper: the sound of a mind confronting the impossibility of its own continuity.

'Breathe,' someone said. Celeste, he realized after a moment. She stood nearby but not touching, respecting the space that newly resurrected people needed. 'You're whole. You're alive. The body is real. The death was also real. Both things are true.'

'I died,' Duulak gasped, his hands moving over his chest, feeling for wounds that should be there, finding only intact flesh beneath his robes. 'I remember—the pain—everything—'

'Yes. You remember. That's the price of the lifestones. They preserve consciousness completely, which means they preserve the moment of death. The trauma doesn't fade with resurrection. You carry it now, permanently.'

Duulak sank down against the lifestone, his legs suddenly unable to support his weight. His hands were shaking so violently he couldn't have drawn a simple glyph if his life depended on it.

His life.

He had a life again. A life he'd lost. A life that persisted only because ancient Empyrean technology had recorded his consciousness and rebuilt his body according to a template that...

'Am I the same person?' The question escaped before he could consider its implications. 'The Duulak who died—is that who I am now? Or am I a copy, a reconstruction that merely thinks it's continuous with—'

'That's the question that breaks some people,' Celeste said, sitting down beside him. 'The philosophical implications of consciousness transfer and resurrection. Some decide they're copies and have existential crises that never resolve. Others decide continuity of memory equals continuity of self. Most

just stop thinking about it because thinking about it makes survival impossible.’

‘Which category do you fall into?’

‘I’m a scientist. I hold multiple hypotheses in superposition and continue gathering evidence. It doesn’t matter which answer is objectively true if I can’t determine it empirically. What matters is whether I’m useful, whether I can contribute to understanding, whether this consciousness—however it arose—serves purposes I consider valuable.’

They sat in silence for several minutes. Duulak’s breathing gradually steadied, though his hands continued trembling. In the distance, he could hear sounds of the settlement recovering from the attack: calls of the wounded being tended, the clatter of debris being cleared, the quiet conversations of people processing their own traumas.

‘How many died?’ he asked finally.

‘Four. All resurrected, all traumatized but alive. Darius is at his lifestone now. This is his eighth death.’

‘How does anyone survive eight deaths?’

‘They don’t, not really. Darius was a gentle man when he arrived, a scholar who studied poetry and philosophy. Now he’s something else—still brilliant, still capable of beauty, but carrying eight separate moments of ultimate trauma. He functions because the alternative is collapse, and collapse means vulnerability, and vulnerability means death number nine.’

Duulak stood, testing whether his legs would support him, finding they would if he concentrated.

‘I need to see him. I need to...’ He trailed off, uncertain what he needed. To apologize for failing to save him? To confirm that his own resurrection wasn’t unique, that the impossibility was universal?

‘He’ll be at his shelter by now. Celeste gave directions. ‘But Duulak— don’t expect the man you fought beside. Death changes people, and eight deaths change them eight times over. Be prepared for someone who looks familiar but thinks differently.’

He found Darius sitting outside his shelter, staring at the purple sky with eyes that had seen too much. The scholar turned as Duulak approached, and his smile was genuine but somehow distant, as if emotion

required conscious effort rather than spontaneous response.

‘Duulak. Welcome to the club of the dead who walk. How was your first resurrection?’

‘Horrifying. World-shattering. Philosophically paralyzing.’

‘So, typical. It gets worse each time, actually. You’d think you’d adapt, but consciousness seems designed to process death as ultimate rather than temporary. Each resurrection is shock reimposed on already traumatized neural patterns.’

‘How do you continue functioning?’

‘Purpose. I study the patterns of death and resurrection, cataloging how consciousness persists through the lifestone process. If I’m going to die repeatedly, I might as well understand it completely. Knowledge doesn’t prevent trauma, but it provides context that makes trauma bearable.’

Duulak sat down beside him, matching his posture, two scholars contemplating mysteries too large for comfortable comprehension.

‘I saw you die,’ Duulak said quietly. ‘I was holding an Olthoi in a compression field, and in my peripheral vision, I watched you... I lost concentration. The Olthoi I’d immobilized got free and killed me.’

‘So you died because my death broke your focus. And I died because I was too slow reacting to a worker’s approach. We’re caught in cascading failure states, each death creating conditions for more deaths. It’s mathematically elegant and emotionally devastating.’

‘We need to get better at this. At combat, at magic calibration, at not dying constantly.’

‘Yes. Or we need to accept that death is the constant and survival is the temporary state we cycle through between traumas.’

They sat in silence, watching as one of the binary suns set, leaving only the smaller, blue-white sun to illuminate the landscape in colors that hurt Duulak’s eyes with their alienness.

‘I left a life on Ispar,’ Duulak said. ‘A wife I’d grown distant from, an apprentice I’d failed to nurture properly, work that felt more like obligation

than passion. Part of me stepped through that portal hoping to escape responsibilities that had become weights. But sitting here, having died and returned, I realize: you can't escape yourself. All your failures, all your inadequacies—they persist through any transition. Even death doesn't release you from who you are.'

'That's the cruelest aspect of the lifestones. They preserve everything, including the parts of yourself you'd rather lose. I was afraid of pain when I arrived. Now I've experienced ultimate pain eight times and fear it more than ever, while simultaneously knowing the fear doesn't protect me, doesn't prevent recurrence, serves no purpose except to make existence worse.'

'Then why continue? Why not simply stop resurrecting, stay dead?'

'Because the lifestones don't offer that option. They bind consciousness to the pattern, maintain continuity whether we consent or not. We can't refuse resurrection any more than we can refuse to think. We are, therefore we persist, whether persistence is blessing or curse.'

Duulak thought about the Empyrean texts he'd been studying, the references to "consciousness cultivation" and "evolutionary pressure." Suddenly the full horror of the Harbinger Protocol became clear: they weren't just being kept alive. They were being forced to evolve through repeated death and resurrection, shaped by trauma toward some end they couldn't perceive.

'We're not prisoners,' he said slowly, working through the implications. 'We're subjects in an experiment where death is the independent variable and consciousness modification is the dependent variable. Asheron isn't saving us or even enslaving us. He's farming us. Growing whatever consciousness becomes after enough iterations of destruction and reconstitution.'

'That's dark even by my standards, and I've died eight times. But yes, I've reached similar conclusions. The question is: what do we become? And is it something we'd recognize as ourselves or something so changed that continuity becomes meaningless?'

'There's only one way to find out.'

'Which is?'

'We study it. We catalog each death, each resurrection, each change to consciousness and capability. If we're experiments, we become self-aware experiments. We gather data on our own transformation and use that data to understand not just what's being done to us but potentially how to direct it.'

Darius turned to look at him directly for the first time, his eyes focusing with the intensity of someone who'd found unexpected purpose.

'You want to turn the experiment around. Make ourselves observers rather than mere subjects.'

'Exactly. We're scholars. Understanding is what we do. If we're being changed, we'll understand the mechanisms. If we're being cultivated toward something, we'll identify it. And if we're pieces in a game whose rules we don't know, we'll learn those rules and find the players.'

'That's basically Celeste's founding principle for the Seekers.'

'Then I've found my people. Show me everything you've documented about the death and resurrection process. I'll add my own observations. Together, we'll build a model of consciousness persistence that might give us agency in a situation designed to deny it.'

They worked through the night—if night meant anything on a world with binary suns that set in sequence—compiling observations, comparing experiences, building the first systematic catalog of how consciousness behaved when subjected to repeated cycles of destruction and reconstitution.

Duulak found himself falling into familiar rhythms: hypothesis, observation, data compilation, model building. The work was horrifying in its subject matter but comforting in its methodology. Death might be inescapable, but death could be studied. Trauma might be unavoidable, but trauma could be measured, quantified, understood.

As the blue-white sun climbed toward something approximating morning, Celeste found them surrounded by pages of notes, diagrams of consciousness architecture, theoretical models of how the lifestones preserved and reconstructed identity.

'You've been awake all night,' she observed.

‘We’ve been productive all night,’ Duulak corrected. ‘There’s a difference. I’ve died, resurrected, confronted the philosophical implications of consciousness persistence, and begun the systematic study of the phenomenon. Sleep would merely delay understanding.’

‘You sound like you’ve found purpose.’

‘I’ve found what I always had: the need to understand, elevated to existential necessity. If we’re being transformed, I’ll understand the transformation. If we’re being used, I’ll identify the use. And if we’re being destroyed, I’ll at least document the process so those who come after can learn from our failures.’

‘Welcome to the Seekers, Duulak. You’ve been one of us since you first asked why the portals appeared. You just needed to die once to fully commit to the path.’

Duulak looked at his hands, steady now, covered in ink from hours of writing. He thought of Yasmin, waiting at a window on a world he could never return to, watching for a husband who would never walk through her door again. He thought of Korvain, brilliant and doomed to surpass his master, carrying forward work that Duulak would never complete on Ispar.

And he thought of the Olthoi that had killed him, efficient and intelligent, following imperatives he didn’t yet understand but would, given time and determination and however many deaths it took to accumulate sufficient data.

‘I have a journal entry to make,’ he said, standing and stretching muscles that protested from a night of stillness. ‘Day Three on Dereth. Or Day One of my second life. I’m not certain which framing is more accurate. I’ve discovered that death is impermanent, consciousness is persistent, and understanding is the only anchor in a world designed to strip away everything else. I don’t know if I’m still Duulak or merely an entity that remembers being Duulak. But whoever I am, I have work to do. The portals, the Olthoi, the Harbinger Protocol, the nature of consciousness itself—all of it is puzzle pieces scattered across a landscape I barely comprehend. I’ll gather those pieces. I’ll understand the pattern. And per-

haps, in understanding, I’ll find something approximating purpose in this prison that denies even death as escape.’

He paused, then added one final line:

‘Yasmin, if some version of this ever reaches you across whatever gulf separates our worlds: I see you now, truly see you, in ways I never managed when we shared physical space. I hope that counts for something. I hope you’ve found the freedom to live fully rather than existing in the margins of my obsession. And I hope, somehow, you understand why I couldn’t turn back from the edge, even knowing the cost.’

The blue-white sun climbed higher, painting the Seeker’s Encampment in colors that still hurt to observe directly but that Duulak was learning to tolerate. The Olthoi would attack again—they always did. He would likely die again—everyone did, eventually. But death was no longer the end, merely a transition point, another data point in the ongoing study of consciousness persistence.

He was Duulak the Twice-Blessed, though the blessing had become more burden than gift. He was a scholar in a world that punished certainty and rewarded adaptation. He was, perhaps, the first systematic observer of his own potential transformation from human to something else entirely.

And he had work to do.

1.8 The Behemak Trail

The forest spoke in languages Thomas had spent thirty-four years learning to read. This morning it told him of rain three days ago, of deer passing through at dawn, of the behemak’s trail growing fresher with each mile he tracked north.

He knelt beside a depression in the soft earth, running his fingers along its edges with the gentleness of a man reading scripture. The print was massive—large as his torso, pressed deep into ground that had been rain-softened but was now beginning to harden in autumn’s gradual shift toward winter. Four claws, each the length of his hand, had carved distinct furrows. The pattern of weight distribution told him the creature favored its right side, likely from the wound he’d

witnessed three days ago during its territorial fight with the younger male.

Thomas closed his eyes, letting his other senses fill the gap. The forest's ambient sounds: wind through oak leaves that hadn't yet fallen, a jay's warning call about his presence, water running somewhere to the east over stones that would be ice-slick in another month. Beneath it all, the smell of disturbed earth, scat that marked territory, and something else—the faint copper scent of old blood.

The behemak was wounded worse than he'd initially estimated. The younger male's tusks had found something vital, and while the elder had driven off its challenger, it had paid a price that would cost it dominance and possibly life.

Which made it Thomas's opportunity.

He stood, adjusting the bow across his shoulders, feeling the familiar weight of his hunting knife against his hip. Three days he'd been tracking, sleeping in trees when darkness made following the trail impossible, eating cold meat to avoid smoke that might alert his quarry. His wife Mara thought he was hunting deer to stock the winter stores. She'd packed him supplies for five days, kissed his cheek with the resigned affection of a woman who'd married a hunter and learned to accept the absences.

But this wasn't about deer.

The behemak's hide alone would fetch enough gold to pay the healer's fees for William's persistent cough. The tusks—ivory that held magical resonance—could buy medicine for a year. And if the old male had managed to accumulate even a fraction of the hoard these creatures were known to gather, if Thomas could claim it before scavengers or the younger male found it...

He could stop hunting. Could spend winters by the fire teaching William to carve. Could give Mara the security she'd never asked for but deserved. Could be the father and husband he'd always meant to become after one last hunt.

After this hunt, he promised himself, as he'd promised after the last one, and the one before that.

The trail led deeper into territory Thomas had never explored. The forest here was old—not the managed woodland near the village where foresters maintained clear trails and marked dangerous ar-

eas, but true wilderness. Trees grew so thick their canopies blocked most sunlight, creating a perpetual twilight that played tricks on depth perception. Roots sprawled across the ground like arthritic fingers, and the undergrowth was dense enough that Thomas had to trust the behemak's trail rather than his own sense of direction.

He stopped every hundred yards to reconfirm the track, noting where the creature had scraped against trees to relieve itching from its wound, where it had paused to feed on bark, where its gait had grown more uneven as exhaustion and blood loss accumulated. The trail was a story Thomas read with the ease of a scholar interpreting familiar texts, each sign a word in a narrative of decline.

By midday—judged by the quality of light filtering through the canopy rather than any glimpse of the sun—he estimated he was perhaps an hour behind the behemak. Close enough to be cautious, far enough to avoid alerting it. The trick with wounded prey was patience. Let the injury do half the work. Track but don't pressure. Wait for the moment when exhaustion made the creature vulnerable.

Thomas found a stream and drank, refilling his waterskin, taking a moment to eat some of the bread Mara had packed. It was good bread, solid and dense with the nourishment a man needed for long days in the forest. She'd baked it three days ago, still warm when she'd wrapped it in cloth, and Thomas had watched her hands work with the familiar efficiency of fifteen years of marriage.

Fifteen years. William was seven now, old enough to start learning to track, to shoot, to read the forest's languages. But the boy's cough had worsened over the summer, and the healer said his lungs were weak, needed medicine that cost more than Thomas earned from selling deer and rabbits to the village market.

The behemak would solve everything. One hunt. One kill. One opportunity to stop being the provider who was never quite providing enough.

He finished eating and stood, wiping bread crumbs from his beard. The afternoon light was shifting, taking on the golden quality that preceded evening. He needed to decide: continue tracking and risk camping in unknown territory, or find a secure position to spend the night and resume at dawn?

The behemak's trail answered for him. Fresh scat, still steaming slightly in the cool air. The creature had rested here less than an hour ago, which meant it was slowing, struggling, close to whatever den it had chosen for refuge.

Thomas's hunter's instincts warred with his father's caution. Push now and he might find the behemak vulnerable, claim its hoard before darkness fell, return to Mara and William with enough wealth to change their lives. Wait until morning and the creature might recover enough to be dangerous, or might die and attract scavengers who'd claim the hoard before Thomas could reach it.

He pushed forward.

The trail led to an area where the forest changed character. The trees here were ancient beyond estimation, their trunks so massive that five men linking arms couldn't encircle them. The undergrowth thinned as if the old trees' dominance prevented lesser plants from competing. And there, between two particularly massive oaks, Thomas saw something that made his heart stutter and his hunter's mind go blank with incomprehension.

A shimmer in the air. A distortion, like heat rising from sun-baked stones, except the air here was cool and the effect was too localized, too stable to be natural atmospheric phenomenon.

Thomas approached slowly, bow in hand though his rational mind knew arrows would be useless against whatever this was. The shimmer intensified as he drew closer, resolving into something that hurt to observe directly. Colors that had no names. Movement that suggested depth without consuming space. A vertical slash in the forest's reality, as if someone had cut through the world's surface to reveal something underneath.

It sang to him.

Not with sound—Thomas's ears heard only the forest's normal evening chorus—but with a wordless promise that bypassed his senses and spoke directly to needs he'd never named. Safety for William. Security for Mara. An end to the constant calculation of whether they could afford meat this week, medicine this month, survival this winter.

The behemak's trail led past the shimmer and continued north. Thomas could see its tracks clearly,

could estimate he was now perhaps twenty minutes behind the wounded creature. Everything he'd worked for over three days of tracking was within reach.

But the shimmer promised more than one behemak's hoard. It promised solutions to problems Thomas hadn't consciously acknowledged: the growing awareness that his body was slowing with age, that the hunts grew harder each year, that William's needs would increase as the boy grew. It promised escape from the endless grinding necessity of providing.

Thomas stood between the behemak's trail and the shimmer, caught in the paralysis of a man who sensed that this moment would define everything that came after. His hunter's instinct screamed warnings about the unknown, about pretty lures and hidden traps, about things that seemed too good to be true because they were.

But his father's desperation whispered that sometimes you took risks because the alternative was watching your son grow sicker while you did nothing.

'Just a quick look,' he told himself, his voice sounding hollow in the ancient forest. 'The behemak isn't going anywhere fast. I can spare a moment.'

He took a step toward the shimmer. Then another. The singing intensified, not louder but more insistent, showing him visions of Mara's smile without worry creasing the corners, of William running without coughing, of a life where providing wasn't a constant struggle against scarcity.

His hand reached out without conscious command. The rational part of his mind—the experienced hunter who'd survived three decades in the forest by respecting its dangers—screamed for him to stop, to turn away, to continue tracking the behemak and take the opportunity he understood rather than gamble on mysteries.

But Thomas's fingers touched the shimmer's edge, and reality rippled, and he felt himself beginning to fall through into somewhere else, and his last conscious thought was of William's laughter, the pure unselfconscious joy of a seven-year-old who still be-

lieved his father could solve any problem and provide any need.

1.9 Home and Hearth

Four days earlier, Thomas had woken before dawn in the bed he'd shared with Mara for fifteen years. She was still sleeping, her breathing deep and steady, her face relaxed in a way it never was during waking hours. He watched her for a moment, studying the silver threading through her dark hair, the fine lines around her eyes, the particular set of her features that had first attracted him when they were both young and foolish enough to marry for love rather than practical considerations.

They'd been lucky, he supposed. Most marriages in the village were arrangements between families, strategic alliances that sometimes grew into affection and sometimes remained merely functional. But Thomas and Mara had wanted each other, and fifteen years later they still did, though want had transmuted into something quieter, deeper, less exhilarating but more sustaining.

He rose carefully, trying not to wake her, and dressed in the pre-dawn darkness with the efficiency of long practice. His hunting clothes: leather trousers that wouldn't catch on undergrowth, wool shirt in forest colors, the jerkin with reinforced shoulders that Mara had made him three winters ago. His bow waited by the door, already strung, and his quiver held twenty arrows—more than he'd need for deer, barely enough if he encountered something dangerous.

The cottage was small, three rooms that Thomas had built himself over the first year of their marriage. He'd designed it with a hunter's eye for practical function: strong walls to keep out winter wind, a large fireplace for cooking and warmth, shuttered windows that could be secured against storms. No luxuries, but solid and weatherproof, which was more than many in the village could claim.

William's room was little more than a closet with a bed, but the boy loved it. Thomas paused outside the door, listening to his son's breathing—rough with the cough that never quite cleared, but steady,

alive. On the wall inside, he knew, hung William's treasures: drawings of trees and animals, a practice bow Thomas had made him, the rabbit's foot charm that Mara insisted would bring luck.

Thomas's hand rested on the door frame, his chest tight with an emotion he couldn't quite name. Love, certainly, but also fear, and determination, and the terrible weight of being responsible for a small life that depended on your competence. Every hunt Thomas undertook was really for William—for food to keep him fed, for funds to keep him clothed, for medicine to keep him breathing.

'You're leaving early,' Mara said from the bedroom doorway, her voice still rough with sleep.

'Deer move at dawn. I want to be in position when they start feeding.'

'You're always leaving early. Sometimes I think you love the forest more than you love us.'

It was an old argument, familiar as worn clothing, and Thomas knew all the responses. He could say he hunted for them, that every deer was food and funds, that providing was how he showed love. He could point out that his work was solitary by necessity, that a hunter with chattering companions caught nothing. He could deflect with humor or redirect with affection.

Instead, he told the truth.

'I love the forest because it makes sense to me in ways people don't. Track reads clearly, behavior follows patterns, cause produces effect. Out there, I understand the rules. Here, I'm constantly uncertain whether I'm doing enough, being enough, providing enough.'

'Thomas...'

'I know. You never ask for more than I give. That's part of what makes it hard. You never complain, never demand, just accept whatever I manage to provide. And I keep hunting because maybe the next kill will be the one that finally makes me feel like enough.'

Mara crossed the small space between them and took his face in her hands, her palms rough from work but gentle in their touch.

'You are enough. You have been enough. The problem isn't your providing. The problem is you've

convinced yourself that your worth is measured in what you bring home rather than in who you are. William doesn't need more gold. He needs his father to be present, not constantly chasing the next hunt.'

'He needs medicine. The healer said—'

'The healer said his lungs are weak and some children grow out of it and others don't and there's medicine that might help but might not. You've latched onto that "might" like it's certainty because it gives you something to hunt, something to solve through effort and skill.'

'So I should do nothing? Just accept that my son struggles to breathe and hope he grows out of it?'

'I'm saying you should be here while he grows. Whether he gets better or worse, he needs his father. And I need my husband. Not the hunter who provides. The man who chose me fifteen years ago and promised we'd face everything together.'

Thomas pulled away, the conversation suddenly too heavy for pre-dawn darkness.

'I need to go. The deer won't wait.'

'Neither will we. Remember that, while you're out there being alone with your certainty.'

He left before she could say anything else that might make him question what he was doing. The village was still dark and quiet as he made his way to the forest's edge. A few early risers were visible in doorways or tending to animals, and they nodded to Thomas with the respect accorded to a man known to be competent at his work.

But Mara's words followed him into the forest, unwelcome companions on a hunt that was supposed to provide solitude from exactly this kind of complicated human emotion. He pushed them away, focusing instead on the familiar ritual of entering wilderness: checking the wind direction, listening for bird calls that might indicate predators, moving from the managed woodland into the deeper forest with the comfortable efficiency of coming home.

By full dawn, he'd found fresh deer sign and settled into a position downwind from a game trail. This was what he was good at: patience, observation, the ability to become so still that his presence vanished into the forest's background. He could wait for hours

without fidgeting, mind calm and empty of everything except awareness of his surroundings.

Except this morning, the calm wouldn't come. Mara's face kept surfacing in his thoughts. William's cough. The healer's careful words about medicine that might help. The reality that Thomas's providing had never quite been enough to get ahead of need, only to keep pace with it.

A deer emerged from the treeline—young buck, healthy, exactly what he should take. Thomas's hand found his bow, fingers fitting arrow to string with unconscious precision. The shot was clear, the range optimal, the kill virtually certain.

He didn't take it.

Instead, he watched the deer drink from the stream, its movements relaxed and unsuspecting. Thomas could observe its behavior, note the patterns in its feeding, catalog the information for future hunts. Or he could end its life with a single arrow and bring home meat that would feed his family for a week.

Providing. Always providing. The endless cycle of kill, sell, buy, repeat. Never quite getting ahead. Never quite achieving the security that would let him stop hunting and just be with Mara and William.

The deer moved away, disappearing into undergrowth, the opportunity lost. Thomas lowered his bow, feeling oddly relieved. He wasn't ready to go home yet, to return empty-handed and face Mara's knowing expression, her awareness that sometimes he hunted not to provide but to escape the weight of providing.

That was when he saw the behemak signs. Fresh tracks, territorial markings, evidence of the kind of prey that could change everything if he succeeded. Not a deer for a week's meat but a creature whose hide and tusks and potential hoard could buy months of security.

One last hunt, he promised himself. One last time pursuing something in the forest instead of facing something at home.

1.10 The Portal's Call

The shimmer wasn't getting smaller.

Thomas had stepped back from it—or tried to—but the distortion in the air between the ancient oaks seemed to fill more of his vision now, as if observing it changed its properties. Colors bled and merged at its edges, and the wordless song had become impossible to ignore, a constant presence in his mind that promised solutions to problems he'd spent years pretending weren't growing.

He should return to the behemak's trail. The wounded creature was close, vulnerable, exactly the opportunity he'd spent three days tracking to find. This shimmer—this impossible thing that shouldn't exist—was distraction from the practical realities of a hunter's life.

But the song showed him William, not as he was but as he could be: healthy, laughing without coughing, running through the village with the boundless energy of childhood uncompromised by weak lungs. And Mara, her face relaxed and smiling, the worry lines smoothed away because worry had become unnecessary.

Thomas's rational mind knew these were illusions. The shimmer was showing him what he wanted to see, tempting him like the tales old hunters told of forest spirits that lured men to their deaths with visions of desire. He should walk away, continue tracking, focus on the real opportunity instead of impossible promises.

His feet moved forward instead of away.

Each step felt both involuntary and absolutely chosen, as if his body was simply expressing what some deeper part of him had already decided. The hunter's caution that had kept him alive for thirty-four years screamed warnings, but beneath it lay a father's desperation and a husband's exhaustion, and those voices were louder, more insistent, more immediately compelling.

'Just to see,' he told himself, the words hollow even as he spoke them. 'Just to understand what this is. Knowledge isn't commitment. Looking isn't entering. I can observe and then return to the hunt.'

But he knew he was lying. Had known it from the moment his fingers first touched the shimmer's edge. Some part of him—the part that was tired of tracking prey to sell hides to buy medicine that might

not work, tired of being competent but never quite successful, tired of the endless grinding necessity of survival—wanted whatever the shimmer offered.

At three paces distance, he could see through it to something beyond. Not just another part of the forest but another mode of existence entirely. The glimpses were fragmentary, disorienting: sky that was the wrong color, structures that couldn't be natural but didn't look built, horizons that curved in directions that made his eyes hurt.

His hunter's mind tried to catalog what he was seeing, to impose familiar patterns on alien landscapes. Was that a mountain or a crystal formation or something without equivalent in his experience? Were those trees or towers or organisms too strange to categorize? The harder he tried to understand, the more his understanding fractured.

'This is madness,' he whispered. 'Walking toward something I can't understand, abandoning a hunt I've invested three days in, risking everything on visions that promise too much to be real.'

But William's cough was real. Mara's worry was real. The constant calculation of whether they could afford necessities was real. And if this shimmer offered escape from those realities, even temporarily, even through means Thomas couldn't comprehend...

His hand reached out. The shimmer felt like nothing—neither solid nor liquid nor air, just a boundary between here and elsewhere that offered no resistance to pressure. When his fingers crossed the threshold, reality rippled outward from the point of contact, and he felt himself being pulled or pushed or simply translated through dimensions his body wasn't designed to navigate.

The last thing he saw of his world was the behemak's trail, continuing north through ancient forest toward den and hoard and the opportunity he was abandoning. The last thing he felt was regret mixed with relief, guilt mixed with hope, the complex emotional contradiction of a man who knew he was making a terrible choice but couldn't stop himself from making it.

Then the forest vanished.

1.11 A Hunter in Hell

Thomas experienced the transition as simultaneous destruction and reconstruction, his body pulled apart into component elements and reassembled according to rules that hadn't existed a moment before. It didn't hurt—pain required continuous consciousness, and consciousness during the crossing was fragmented into discrete moments separated by gaps where existence became negotiable.

He landed in a stumble, hunter's reflexes engaging before conscious thought, hands reaching for balance against ground that felt wrong. Not soil and leaf mold but something crystalline and warm, as if he'd fallen onto a surface that was simultaneously mineral and alive.

The air tasted of copper and ozone. The light was all wrong—purple-tinged, coming from two suns that hung at angles that violated everything Thomas knew about sky and time. The sounds were alien: clicks and chitters where bird calls should be, resonance where wind through leaves should rustle.

'No,' Thomas gasped, the word inadequate but the only response his shocked mind could produce. 'No, no, this isn't—I need to go back—Mara, William, I didn't mean—'

He spun around, looking for the shimmer, for the portal, for any way to reverse what he'd done. Behind him was only more alien landscape: crystalline formations rising like trees but refracting light in patterns that hurt to observe, ground that changed texture and color as he watched, horizons that curved wrong.

The portal was gone. Or invisible. Or only functioned one direction. Thomas's hunter's mind tried all three hypotheses and found no evidence to support any of them. He was somewhere else, and the path back—if it existed—wasn't obvious.

Panic hit him like physical force, making his hands shake and his breath come short. Everything he knew, everything he was, depended on geography he understood and rules that made sense. The forest was his domain because he'd spent decades learning its languages. This place spoke in sounds he couldn't

interpret, showed him vistas he couldn't categorize, operated on principles he couldn't begin to deduce.

He was going to die here. Was going to die without seeing Mara again, without teaching William to track, without ever explaining that he'd abandoned the behemak hunt for a pretty light that promised too much. His last thought would be of them, and their last thought of him would be why didn't he come home, what kept him this time, why did he always choose hunting over family?

The clicking sounds intensified. Thomas's panicked mind finally registered what his hunter's instincts had been screaming since arrival: he was being hunted.

He drew his bow with the automatic efficiency of muscle memory, fitting arrow to string, but his hands were shaking too badly for accuracy. Whatever was producing those sounds was circling him, using tactics he recognized—surround the prey, cut off escape routes, attack from the blind angle when attention diverts.

It exploded from the ground where ground should have been solid, mandibles spread wide enough to bisect a man. Thomas had hunted predators before—wolves when they threatened livestock, the occasional rogue bear—but this was different. This was alien in a way that bypassed tactical assessment and went straight to primal terror.

He dove aside more from instinct than skill, the creature's attack missing him by margins measured in finger-widths. His arrow flew wild, clattering harmlessly off chitin that looked harder than any armor he'd ever seen. He rolled, came up reaching for another arrow, and found himself staring at compound eyes that reflected his terrified face in a thousand fragmented images.

'I'm sorry,' he whispered, not to the creature but to Mara, to William, to the life he'd abandoned because he couldn't resist a promise that was too good to be true. 'I'm so sorry. I thought I was providing. I thought I was solving. I was just running. And now you'll never know.'

The creature tilted its head—disturbingly human gesture from something so absolutely not human—and clicked a sequence that might have been laughter or hunger or simple acknowledgment of suc-

cessful hunt. Thomas drew his hunting knife, knowing it was inadequate, knowing he was going to die, knowing his death would leave Mara and William with questions that would never be answered.

Arrows struck the creature from multiple angles, precisely targeting the joints where chitin segments connected. It shrieked—a sound that bypassed Thomas's ears and resonated in his chest cavity—and turned to face this new threat. Thomas saw humans, scarred and competent, attacking with the coordinated efficiency of people who'd fought this enemy before.

One of them—a woman with the weathered face of someone who'd survived too much—grabbed his arm and hauled him to his feet.

'Another one through the portals,' she said, her voice carrying the weary resignation of someone who'd seen this before. 'You're lucky we found you before they did worse than play.'

'I need to go back,' Thomas gasped, still gripping his useless knife. 'My family— my wife— my son— I need to go back.'

'There is no back. There's only forward, and forward means learning to fight or learning to die. Here, you'll learn both.'

She led him away from the creature, which had retreated but not fled, its clicking sounds following them like commentary on a hunter who'd become prey. Thomas's legs moved automatically, following this stranger through a landscape that made no sense, while his mind cataloged all the ways he'd failed.

He'd abandoned the behemak hunt. He'd left Mara without explanation. He'd robbed William of his father. And for what? For a portal that had promised solutions and delivered only separation?

The woman led him toward smoke—fire, at least that was universal—and a settlement that looked desperate and temporary. Other people emerged from crude shelters, and their faces told the same story: loss, adjustment, stubborn survival against incomprehensible circumstances.

'Welcome to Dereth,' the woman said. 'I'm Elena. You'll want to sit down before we explain what's happened. It's better to receive impossible information while seated.'

'I don't want information. I want to go home.'

'Everyone wants that. But wanting doesn't matter here. Only surviving matters. So you'll listen to the explanation, and you'll learn to fight, and you'll come to terms with the fact that the life you had is over and the life you have now is all that's available.'

Thomas sat because his legs gave out rather than from conscious choice. Elena explained—Dereth, the Olthoi, Asheron's summoning, the impossibility of return. Each word felt like another nail in a coffin being built around everything Thomas had been.

He was a hunter. That identity had defined him for thirty-four years. But hunters operated in environments they understood, tracking prey whose behaviors they could predict. Here, he was the prey, and the predators followed rules he didn't know.

He was a husband and father. But Mara was in another world, probably already wondering when he'd return, and William was growing up in Thomas's absence, and neither of them would ever know that he'd tried to return, that the portal wouldn't open from this side, that separation wasn't choice but consequence.

'How long?' he asked, his voice rough. 'How long have people been coming through?'

'Three months,' Elena said. 'We're all recent arrivals, still learning, still dying, still trying to survive long enough to understand what's been done to us.'

'Three months here... how much time on Ispar?'

'We don't know. Time flows differently between worlds, or so we've theorized. Could be days. Could be years. Could be centuries. We have no way to determine correspondence.'

Thomas felt the last hope drain out of him like water through cupped hands. If time was unreliable, if years could pass on Ispar while days passed here, then Mara might already have grown old waiting. William might already be grown, might have children of his own, might remember his father only as the man who went hunting one day and never came back.

Everything Thomas had built—the marriage, the family, the modest competence that let him provide

for those he loved—all of it was gone, separated from him by dimensional barriers he couldn't cross and time differentials he couldn't overcome.

'I should have taken the deer,' he said, the observation emerging from shock rather than thought. 'Four days ago, I had a clear shot at a buck, and I didn't take it. I kept hunting, kept looking for the bigger score, the behemak that would solve everything. And I found the portal instead. If I'd just taken the deer, gone home satisfied with enough, I'd be with Mara right now. William would be asking about the hunt, and I'd be showing him how to dress the kill. We'd be together.'

'You can't think like that,' Elena said, though her voice suggested she'd had similar thoughts about her own choices. 'The portals called to specific people. If it wasn't that moment, it would have been another. They're selective, purposeful, designed to lure those vulnerable to what they promise.'

'And what did they promise you?'

'Escape from a life I'd built around hiding what I was. I was a thief, a good one, but eventually the law catches everyone. The portal offered freedom from pursuit. I took it, and got a different kind of prison.'

They sat in silence as the alien suns moved through their incomprehensible paths across the purple sky. Other people from the settlement approached, asked questions, shared their own portal stories. Everyone had lost something. Everyone had been tempted. Everyone had made a choice that seemed reasonable at the time and catastrophic in retrospect.

'I need to learn to fight,' Thomas said finally, the decision settling over him like familiar clothing. 'If I can't go back, if I'm stuck here, then I need to survive. And if I survive long enough, maybe I find someone who understands portals better than I do. Maybe I find a way to reverse what's been done.'

'That's the right attitude,' Elena said, though her expression suggested she didn't believe reversal was possible. 'Tomorrow, we start training. I'll teach you what we know about the Olthoi: their weak points, their tactics, how to kill them before they kill you. You'll die anyway—everyone does—but at least you'll die competently.'

'Die?'

'Oh. I forgot to mention the lifestones.'

And Elena proceeded to explain that death wasn't permanent, which should have been comforting but was somehow the most horrifying revelation yet. Thomas could die, resurrect, die again, an eternal cycle of trauma without release. Even death wouldn't reunite him with Mara and William because death here was just another transition, another change in circumstances that left core problems unsolved.

That night, Thomas lay in the crude shelter they'd assigned him, staring at the purple sky through gaps in the roof, listening to the alien sounds of a world that would never be home. He thought of Mara, probably at the window now, watching the path he should have walked back days ago. He thought of William, asking when Papa would return, and Mara having to explain that sometimes people didn't return, that the forest took men and gave back only silence.

And he thought of the behemak, dying alone in its den, its hoard unclaimed, the opportunity Thomas had abandoned for a promise that was too good to be true because it was entirely false.

'I'm sorry,' he whispered to people who would never hear him. 'I tried to provide. I thought I was doing the right thing. I thought one more hunt would solve everything. Instead, I solved nothing and lost everything. And now all I can do is survive and hope that surviving leads eventually to understanding, and understanding leads eventually to return, even though every rational assessment says that hope is as false as the portal's promise.'

Sleep came eventually, troubled by dreams of William's cough and Mara's face and forest trails that led always toward shimmers that promised solutions and delivered only separation. And when Thomas woke to the wrong-colored light of Dereth's morning, his first coherent thought was a hunter's observation: he'd tracked the wrong prey, followed the wrong trail, and ended up in territory where all his skills meant nothing.

His second thought was more fundamental: he was alive, which meant he could learn, which meant he could adapt, which meant maybe—however un-

likely—he could find his way back to the people who made survival worthwhile.

But as the days would prove, survival on Dereth was never simple, adaptation was never painless, and hope was the most dangerous prey of all to hunt.

The last coherent thought before he stepped through was of William's laughter. Then even that dissolved in the siren song of the portal, the call that would tear him from everything he'd ever loved.

1.12 Maajid al-Zemar

Maajid was seventeen, brilliant, and utterly convinced that existence was a cosmic joke with humanity as the punchline. In the humble village where he'd been raised, surrounded by simple farmers who found comfort in their limited horizons, he alone seemed to see the bars of the cage.

He had discovered his magical talent by accident—or perhaps by destiny. The annual visit of the robed men who blessed their fields had always intrigued him. While others saw religious ceremony, Maajid recognized patterns, formulas, the manipulation of forces that had nothing to do with divine intervention.

When one of them had deliberately left behind a bag of arcane implements—a test, Maajid later realized—he had seized the opportunity. The scrolls, the reagents, the staff; all became keys to a door he hadn't known existed. “Malar Cazaal,” he had spoken, and felt reality bend to his will.

But even this newfound power felt hollow. What was magic but another set of rules, another cage with prettier bars? He sought not just to understand the universe but to transcend it, to find the space between the cosmic joke and its punchline.

His father, a practical man who valued honest labor over intellectual pursuit, had given him an ultimatum: commit to their way of life or leave. Maajid chose exile over submission, setting out for the harbor city of Mawwuz with nothing but his stolen arcane knowledge and his boundless ambition.

Now, standing in the royal court, he watched the portal manifest with a mixture of excitement and recognition. This wasn't one of the wild portals that

had been appearing randomly. This was deliberate, controlled, created by someone who understood the mathematics of reality as deeply as Maajid aspired to.

‘Magnificent,’ he breathed, approaching the swirling vortex.

‘Stay back!’ a guard warned, but Maajid laughed.

‘Don't you see? This is what I've been searching for. A door to elsewhere, to elsewhen, to elseeverything. The universe is finally showing its hand.’

The portal sang to him, but unlike the others who would be seduced by its call, Maajid heard the song clearly. It was the music of infinite possibility, the harmony of paradox resolved, the laughter of the void that mocked all certainty.

He stepped through not because he was compelled, but because he chose to. Because on the other side lay either truth or a better class of lie, and either would be preferable to the mundane deceptions of ordinary existence.

1.13 Marcus Tiberius, The Steel and Sinew

Commander Marcus Tiberius of the Third Legion had seen enough impossible things in his forty-three years to know that the impossible was merely the improbable having a particularly aggressive day. He'd fought alongside the Gharu'ndim against raiders from the Drylands, had stood shield-to-shield with his brothers against horrors that crawled from the Direlands. He'd earned his cognomen “Steel and Sinew” not through boasting but through survival.

When the portal appeared in the Legion's training ground, his men had fallen back in superstitious fear. Marcus had stood firm, not from bravery but from a lifetime of trained response to the unknown: evaluate, adapt, overcome.

The swirling vortex was unlike anything in his considerable experience. It defied tactical assessment, offered no flanks to exploit, no weakness to probe. It simply existed, a vertical wound in the world that sang a song of distant battlefields and impossible victories.

‘Commander,’ his lieutenant, Gaius, approached cautiously. ‘Should we evacuate the compound?’

‘Negative. Set a perimeter. No one approaches without my direct order.’

‘And if it... does something?’

‘Then we respond accordingly. We are the Third Legion. We do not flee from the unknown; we catalogue it, contain it, and if necessary, kill it.’

But even as he spoke with commander’s confidence, Marcus felt the portal’s call. It whispered of battles that would make his previous campaigns seem like children’s games, of enemies worthy of a true warrior’s steel, of a purpose greater than maintaining order in an empire slowly rotting from within.

He had joined the Legion as a boy of sixteen, filled with dreams of glory and honor. Twenty-seven years had beaten those dreams into the shape of duty, responsibility, and a bone-deep weariness that no amount of rest could cure. He commanded respect, owned land, had wealth enough to retire in comfort. But comfort had never been what Marcus Tiberius sought.

The portal offered something else: a war with meaning, a cause worth the spending of his remaining years, a final campaign that would either kill him or make him whole again.

His men would follow him anywhere; he’d earned that loyalty in blood and suffering shared equally. But he wouldn’t order them through the portal. This was a choice each man had to make alone.

Marcus removed his commander’s plume, set aside his insignia of rank. If he was going to step through that doorway, he would do it as Marcus the soldier, not as the Commander of the Third. He had no family to leave behind—the Legion had been his family for decades. No children to mourn him—the men under his command had been his only legacy.

‘Sir?’ Gaius watched with growing concern. ‘What are you doing?’

‘Something necessary, soldier. Hold the perimeter. If I don’t return within the hour, seal this area and report to the Senate that Commander Marcus Tiberius died investigating an anomaly.’

‘Sir, I cannot allow—’

‘You cannot allow?’ Marcus smiled grimly. ‘Since when does a lieutenant tell a commander what he can or cannot do? But you’re right to be concerned. This is not an order, Gaius. This is a personal choice. The Legion trained me to evaluate threats. This portal is either the greatest threat we’ve ever faced, or the greatest opportunity. Either way, someone needs to scout it.’

He approached the portal with the same methodical care he’d approach a fortified position—checking angles, noting details, preparing for anything. The song grew stronger, promising not comfort but purpose, not peace but a war worth fighting, not home but a place where a warrior past his prime might still matter.

Marcus Tiberius, Steel and Sinew, veteran of a hundred battles, stepped into the portal with the same deliberate precision he’d once stepped into shield walls. Whatever lay on the other side, he would meet it as he’d met every challenge in his life: with discipline, determination, and if necessary, death.

But death, he would soon learn, was about to become a much more complicated concept.

Chapter 2

The Mage's Adaptation

2.1 First Contact with Death

The clicking sounds resolved themselves into geometry.

Duulak had been walking for perhaps twenty minutes—though time felt negotiable here, as if duration were a convention rather than a law—when his scholarly mind finally imposed structure on the alien soundscape. The clicks weren't random. They were echolocation, triangulation, the mathematical expression of a predator mapping its environment through sound.

Which meant something was hunting him.

He stopped walking. The crystalline ground beneath his feet rang softly with the cessation of movement, a sustained note that took too long to fade. Everything here had resonance, as if reality itself had become a musical instrument played by forces he couldn't yet perceive.

The purple sky offered no proper sense of time. The binary suns hung in positions that suggested either late afternoon or early morning, but the shadows they cast intersected at angles that defied Euclidean geometry. Duulak found himself calculating the mathematics of impossible light, his mind seeking refuge in numbers even as his body prepared for whatever was producing those sounds.

There. Movement against the crystalline formations to his left. Something large, low to the ground, moving with the fluid precision of a creature perfectly adapted to its environment. Duulak's hand went to his chest, fingers tracing the gestures for a basic il-

lumination spell before his conscious mind had fully registered the threat.

The Olthoi emerged from behind a formation that might have been mineral or might have been architectural—the distinction seemed meaningless here, where geology expressed intent. It was beautiful in the way that mathematics could be beautiful: elegant economy of form, every curve serving multiple functions, chitin that reflected the binary suns' light in patterns that suggested both armor and sensory array.

It was also absolutely terrifying.

Duulak had read accounts of the behemak, the sand wyrms of the deep desert, the void drakes he'd helped slay during the Sundering War. None of them had prepared him for this. The Olthoi was larger than a horse, its compound eyes reflecting his image in a thousand faceted fragments, its mandibles opening and closing with the methodical patience of something that had no doubt about the outcome of this encounter.

'I mean no harm,' Duulak said, his voice sounding thin in the alien air. He spoke in Gharu'ndi first, then Roulean, then the ancient Empyrean he'd recovered from texts. The words felt inadequate, but communication had to be attempted. 'I am a scholar, not a warrior. I seek only understanding.'

The creature tilted its head—a disturbingly human gesture from something so alien—and clicked a sequence that Duulak's mathematical mind immediately tried to parse. Was that language? Or merely

the sound of a predator calculating the optimal strike angle?

He drew the first glyph in the air, phosphorescent light trailing his fingers. The spell was simple: a geometric pattern that would project his peaceful intent through shared mathematical principles. It had worked during the Sundering War when words failed, creating a common language of pure form.

The Olthoi's response was to charge.

Duulak barely managed to complete the defensive ward before those mandibles closed on where his torso had been. The spell was supposed to create a barrier of solidified air, resistant but not harmful, a shield that demonstrated capability without aggression. Instead, the magic detonated like thunder, flinging the Olthoi backward with enough force to shatter several crystalline formations.

The creature landed on its back, legs cycling uselessly for a moment before it righted itself with a motion too quick to track. It clicked frantically now, a sound that might have been rage or might have been surprise or might have been the Olthoi equivalent of laughter at the fool who'd just demonstrated he had no idea how to calibrate his magic in this new world.

Duulak's hands shook as he prepared another spell. The magical field here was so dense, so responsive, that his carefully calibrated techniques were like using a siege engine to crack an egg. Every gesture produced ten times the effect he intended, the ambient magic amplifying his will to dangerous extremes.

The Olthoi charged again, learning from the first encounter, approaching from an angle that would make geometric shields less effective. Duulak switched tactics, drawing the glyphs for acceleration rather than barrier, time compression applied to his own perception rather than external force.

The world slowed. Or rather, his experience of it accelerated, thoughts racing at velocities that left his body struggling to keep pace. He could see individual facets of the Olthoi's compound eyes now, the microscopic articulations of its chitin plates, the chemical signatures of pheromones it secreted—information his enhanced perception could process but not yet comprehend.

More importantly, he could see the gaps. The joints where chitin segments overlapped, creating

flex points necessary for movement but vulnerable to properly applied force. The way its weight distribution shifted mid-charge, a pattern he could predict three steps ahead.

He didn't want to harm it. Even fleeing for his life, Duulak's primary instinct was curiosity about this magnificent organism. But survival demanded pragmatism, and pragmatism meant exploiting weakness.

The kinetic lance he conjured was supposed to be a warning shot, targeted at the ground near the creature's feet to startle it into retreat. Instead, the overcharged spell punched through the crystalline surface like paper, creating a crater that caused the Olthoi to stumble. As it recovered, Duulak hurled a concussive blast—intended as a gentle push—that caught the creature mid-stride and sent it tumbling across the landscape.

When it rose this time, the Olthoi didn't charge. It stood at a distance, clicking in patterns that felt somehow more complex, more contemplative. Duulak found himself convinced—irrationally, perhaps, but with the certainty that comes from thirty years of studying patterns—that he was being analyzed. The creature was no longer hunting. It was observing.

'You're intelligent,' Duulak said, keeping his hands still, palms open to show he was preparing no further spells. 'You're not merely reacting. You're evaluating. You just learned something about me, and now you're deciding whether I'm prey, threat, or something outside your categorical framework.'

The Olthoi regarded him with its thousand-faceted eyes. For a long moment, the only sound was the ambient hum of this world's magical field, a constant vibration that Duulak suspected his ears hadn't fully adapted to hearing.

Then the creature turned and began walking away. Not fleeing—its movements were too deliberate for panic—but deliberately choosing to disengage. Before it disappeared behind the crystalline formations, it paused, turned its head to look back at him one final time, and clicked a sequence that felt unmistakably like a statement.

Duulak stood alone in the alien landscape, hands still trembling from adrenaline and overcharged magic, watching the space where the Olthoi had van-

ished. He had survived his first encounter with this world's dominant species, but only because his magic here was dangerously unpredictable. He'd intended communication and gotten violence. He'd attempted calibrated force and delivered catastrophic energy.

He was, he realized with the sick certainty of academic honesty, dangerously incompetent in this environment. All his training, all his theoretical mastery, was worse than useless—it was actively dangerous when the fundamental constants had changed.

Duulak sank down onto the crystalline ground, noting distantly that it felt warm, almost alive, vibrating with energies his body could sense but not name. His hands were covered in ink from the calculations on his arms, smudged now with sweat and fear. He should record his observations: the Olthoi's morphology, the behavior patterns, the way magic manifested here. His journals were in his robes, waiting.

Instead, he thought of Yasmin. Not as she'd been when he left—weary, resigned, a woman who'd learned to love the edges of her husband's life—but as she'd been twelve years ago, showing him the architectural plans for the Institution's courtyard. She'd explained how beauty and function were not opposed but complementary, how true design served both aesthetic and practical needs simultaneously.

'I didn't want you to come back,' he whispered to the purple sky, knowing she couldn't hear, saying it anyway. 'I wanted an excuse to leave a life I'd grown tired of, to walk away from responsibilities that felt more like weights than purposes. And I've gotten exactly what I deserve: a world that punishes me for knowing too little after a lifetime of knowing too much.'

In the distance, where smoke rose against the alien sky, he could see evidence of fire. Fire meant humans, or at least something that used combustion. Fire meant civilization, or at least its possibility.

Duulak stood, his joints protesting in ways that reminded him he was forty-seven and had just fought for his life using magic that had nearly killed him as efficiently as the creature he'd been defending against. He checked his robes: journals intact, reagents intact, pride significantly damaged but not destroyed.

He began walking toward the smoke, knowing he might be walking toward more danger but unable to remain alone with thoughts that offered no comfort and a landscape that offered no familiarity.

Behind him, the portal through which he'd entered was no longer visible. Whether it had closed or simply couldn't be perceived from this side, he didn't know. But the message was clear: there was no return. There was only forward, toward smoke and uncertainty and the slim hope that whatever waited there would be less interested in killing him than the magnificent alien predator he'd just encountered.

The clicking sounds began again, distant now, moving parallel to his course rather than toward him. The Olthoi was shadowing him, observing, learning. Duulak found that oddly comforting. At least his presence here had provoked curiosity rather than mere appetite.

Though perhaps, a darker part of his mind suggested, curiosity was merely appetite of a different sort.

2.2 The Seekers

The smoke came from a settlement that Duulak's architectural sense told him was both desperate and disciplined. The fortifications were crude but geometrically sound, positioned to maximize defensive advantage while minimizing resource expenditure. Whoever had designed this understood siege principles, even if they lacked proper materials.

As he approached, figures appeared along the makeshift walls. Humans, he saw with relief that felt almost physical. People from Ispar, recognizable not just by their forms but by the way they held themselves, the patterns of motion that spoke of cultural origins he could identify.

One of them shouted something in Aluvian—a challenge or a warning, Duulak couldn't quite parse it at this distance. He raised his hands, palms open, in the universal gesture of peaceful approach.

'I seek shelter,' he called back in Roulean, then repeated it in Gharu'ndi. 'I came through a portal. I am no threat.'

The figures conferred. After a moment that felt eternal, a section of the wall opened—not a gate but literally a gap created by several people lifting away interlocked pieces of salvaged crystal. The engineering made Duulak's fingers itch to sketch diagrams. Modular defensive barriers that could be reconfigured based on threat vectors. Yasmin would have appreciated the elegance.

He walked forward slowly, maintaining the non-threatening posture, hyper-aware that his robes marked him as a scholar or mage and that might be viewed with either respect or suspicion depending on these people's experiences.

A woman met him just inside the perimeter. She was perhaps thirty-five, her hair pulled back in a style common to Gharu'ndim cavalry officers, but her eyes held the particular weariness Duulak associated with people who'd seen too much too quickly. She studied him with an assessment that was neither hostile nor welcoming, purely evaluative.

'You're new,' she said. Not a question.

'I... yes. The portal in Qush opened three hours ago. Or perhaps three days. Time feels uncertain here.'

'Here is Dereth. The portals are Asheron's work. Time is whatever the suns say it is, and the suns lie.' She gestured toward the settlement. 'I'm Celeste. I was a court astronomer before I was transported. Now I mostly try to keep people alive and occasionally figure out where we are and why.'

'Duulak. I was—am—a theoretical thaumaturgist. The portals may be partially my fault, though I'm not certain of causation versus correlation.'

Celeste's expression shifted to something that might have been amusement or might have been recognition of a familiar type of madness.

'A theorist who thinks he broke the world. That's refreshingly honest. Come. You'll want to meet the others, and we'll want to hear your story. New arrivals sometimes bring information about the timing of portal manifestations, which helps us understand the pattern.'

'There's a pattern?'

'There's always a pattern. The question is whether we're intelligent enough to perceive it or whether we're part of it and thus incapable of objective observation.'

Duulak found himself liking Celeste immediately. It had been years since he'd met someone who spoke in that particular rhythm, the cadence of a mind that saw existence as a puzzle to be solved rather than a circumstance to be endured.

The settlement—they called it the Seeker's Encampment, he learned—housed perhaps forty people. They came from across Ispar: Gharu'ndim, Aluvian, Sho, even a few from smaller kingdoms he recognized only from geographic texts. What united them was the look in their eyes, that particular combination of trauma and stubborn determination.

And they all had questions.

'Did you choose to come through?' A young Aluvian man, barely twenty.

'Did you see Asheron?' An elderly Sho woman.

'Did the portal show you what was on the other side before you crossed?' A Gharu'ndim trader.

'Did it sing? They sing, sometimes. Did yours sing?'

Duulak answered as he could: Yes, he'd chosen, though the choice had felt inevitable. No, he hadn't seen Asheron, didn't know who Asheron was beyond the name Celeste had mentioned. The portal had shown glimpses, yes, enough to tempt. And yes, it had sung—wordless promises of understanding that bypassed language entirely.

Celeste led him to what served as her study: a shelter constructed from salvaged Empyrean ruins, the walls covered in astronomical charts that made no sense because the stars here followed no pattern Duulak recognized from Ispar.

'The portals started appearing three months ago by our reckoning,' Celeste explained, spreading out maps that showed locations marked across what was presumably Dereth. 'We've tracked over two hundred documented instances across Ispar. They appear most frequently in centers of magical study, royal courts, and areas of significant population. But

there are outliers—wilderness appearances, individual summonings that follow no obvious pattern.'

'Selective,' Duulak said, studying the maps with growing fascination. 'The portals are choosing specific people or types of people.'

'That's our hypothesis. But we can't determine the selection criteria. We have scholars, yes, but also farmers, soldiers, merchants, children. No obvious unifying factor beyond sapience.'

'How many have come through?'

'We estimate thousands. Most scatter, seek their own survival. A few—like us—settle and try to understand. Others...' She paused, her expression darkening. 'Others don't survive the first day. The Olthoi are efficient predators, and most portal arrivals have no combat training.'

Duulak thought of his own encounter, the way he'd survived through accidental overwhelming force rather than skill.

'I encountered one. An Olthoi, you called it? I barely survived, and only because magic manifests dangerously powerful here. I meant to create a barrier. I produced what amounted to a siege weapon.'

'The magical field saturation here is approximately ten times what we experience on Ispar,' Celeste said, as if this were a normal astronomical observation. 'Spells that require extensive ritual there manifest from mere intention here. We've lost three mages to their own magic before they learned recalibration.'

'Lost?'

'Dead. Though death here is... complicated.'

She proceeded to explain the lifestones, and Duulak felt his understanding of reality undergo its second major revision of the day. Consciousness persisting beyond physical death, reconstituted by ancient Empyrean technology that turned mortality into a temporary inconvenience. It was simultaneously the most fascinating thing he'd ever heard and the most horrifying.

'You're telling me death is impermanent but trauma is eternal?' he asked. 'That people can die, remember dying, and be forced to continue living with that memory?'

'Yes. We've seen it break minds. Some people die once and never recover psychologically. Others die repeatedly and each death accumulates until they're more trauma than person.'

'And we can't truly escape this world because even death doesn't release us.'

'Precisely. Welcome to Dereth, Duulak. The prison with immortal inmates.'

The Seekers, Celeste explained, had formed around a simple principle: if they were trapped here, they would at least understand why and by whom. They excavated Empyrean ruins, translated what texts they could, mapped the patterns of Olthoi movement, and tried to reverse-engineer portal mechanics.

'We call ourselves Seekers,' Celeste said, 'because we refuse to accept our circumstances without understanding their causation. If Asheron summoned us, we'll learn why. If the portals can be reversed, we'll discover how. If we're pieces in a game whose rules we don't know, we'll learn those rules and find the players.'

'Who is Asheron?'

'An Empyrean. Perhaps the last one on Dereth, though we have incomplete information. The portals are demonstrably his work—we've found references in the ruins. But whether he's savior or kidnapper depends on perspective we don't yet have.'

'Show me the texts.'

Celeste smiled, the first genuine warmth he'd seen from her.

'I was hoping you'd say that. Most new arrivals are too traumatized to immediately engage with research. But you...'

'I've spent my life asking questions that comfort couldn't answer. Being transported to an alien world doesn't change the fundamentals of who I am.'

'Or it reveals them. Come. I'll show you what we've translated so far. Most of it is fragmentary, but there's a phrase that keeps appearing: "Harbinger Protocol." We think it refers to the summonings, but the context is maddeningly opaque.'

Duulak spent the next several hours immersed in Empyrean texts, his mind finally engaged with something approaching familiar territory. The language was related to the ancient Empyrean he'd studied in

the ruins near Qush, but evolved, corrupted by time or perhaps deliberately obscured. Reading it required equal parts translation and cryptanalysis.

But patterns emerged. References to "adaptive species" and "consciousness transfer" and "evolutionary acceleration." The Harbinger Protocol, as best he could determine, wasn't a simple summoning spell but something more complex: a system for selecting, transporting, and cultivating consciousness toward some unspecified end.

'We're not random refugees,' he said, looking up from a particularly dense passage. 'We're being selected. Tested. Cultivated for something.'

'Cultivated how?'

'The lifestones. They don't just resurrect—they record. Each death creates a template, a map of consciousness that persists. Over time, over multiple deaths and resurrections, we'll change. Adapt. Become something other than what we were on Ispar.'

'You're saying we're experiments.'

'I'm saying we're seeds being planted in hostile soil to see what grows. Whether we're experiments or weapons or something else entirely, I can't yet determine.'

Celeste sat back, her expression unreadable.

'I've been here three months. I've died twice. The second time, I noticed something. My memory of the astronomical charts was more detailed afterward, as if the lifestone had somehow enhanced my recall during reconstitution.'

'Selective enhancement. It's learning what skills matter to you and optimizing for them.'

'Which means we're being improved whether we consent or not.'

'Yes. And that's both the most fascinating and most horrifying thing I've ever encountered. We're becoming what this world needs us to be, losing what we were in the process.'

Night fell with disconcerting rapidity, the binary suns setting in sequence rather than simultaneously. The Seekers' settlement took on a different character in darkness: fires burned behind crystalline shields that refracted light in patterns that hurt to observe too directly, and guards maintained watch with the

nervous tension of people who knew safety was always temporary.

Duulak was given shelter in a communal structure, a space shared with three other scholars who'd arrived over the past weeks. They exchanged stories in the darkness: portal experiences, first encounters with Olthoi, the slow adaptation to a world that felt simultaneously more and less real than Ispar.

But sleep, when it finally came, brought dreams. Not the normal fragmentary chaos of sleeping minds but something more structured, more deliberate. He dreamed of vast networks spreading beneath Dereth's surface, of consciousness flowing through crystalline channels, of being observed by something that existed partially in dimensions his mind couldn't properly process.

He dreamed of Yasmin, standing at a window, waiting.

And he dreamed of the Olthoi that had spared him, clicking patterns that his sleeping mind translated into something approximating language: "You are seen. You are measured. You are not yet understood, but you will be."

2.3 First Death

The Olthoi attack came on his third day at the Seeker's Encampment, just as Duulak had begun to convince himself that scholarly pursuits might shield him from the violent realities of this world.

He was in Celeste's study, analyzing a particularly complex passage about consciousness architecture, when the alarm sounded—a series of crystal chimes that created harmonics designed to penetrate even deep concentration. The sound was beautiful and terrible, and every person in the encampment responded with the practiced urgency of people who'd learned that seconds meant the difference between survival and catastrophe.

'How many?' Celeste called out, already moving toward the weapons cache.

'Six workers, three soldiers,' someone shouted from the wall. 'Coordinated approach from the eastern quadrant. They're testing the modular barriers.'

'Standard defense pattern three,' Celeste commanded, her voice carrying the authority of someone who'd led these defenses before. 'Mages to the inner ring, non-combatants to the shelters, and someone get Duulak to—'

'I can help,' Duulak said, the words emerging before his rational mind could evaluate them. 'I have combat training from the Sundering War.'

'That was twenty years ago on a different world with different magic.'

'Which makes me experienced and adaptable rather than merely desperate.'

Celeste looked at him for a half-second that felt eternal, then nodded.

'Inner ring. You'll work with Darius and Senna. They're your age, they know recalibration, and they won't judge you if you accidentally obliterate a crystal formation. Just try not to obliterate any humans.'

Duulak took his position in what the Seekers called the "mage ring," a circular formation that provided overlapping fields of fire while preventing friendly fire from overcharged spells. It was elegant tactical magic, the kind of combat theory he'd helped develop during the Sundering War but never expected to use again.

Darius was on his right: a Sho scholar perhaps his own age, with the particular calm that came from either deep philosophical acceptance or multiple deaths dulling the fear response. Senna was on his left: a Gharu'ndim woman who moved with the fluid precision of someone who'd spent years studying wind magic and its applications to both construction and destruction.

'First combat on Dereth?' Darius asked conversationally, as if they were discussing weather rather than imminent violence.

'Second. I encountered an Olthoi soldier my first hour here. Survived through luck and overcharged magic.'

'Then you understand the fundamental problem,' Senna said. 'Every spell you know is ten times more powerful and half as controllable. Welcome to war in a world that amplifies everything, including mistakes.'

The Olthoi workers hit the eastern barrier first, their mandibles carving through the crystalline formations with disturbing efficiency. They weren't attacking randomly—they were systematically dismantling the defensive structure, creating calculated weaknesses for the soldiers to exploit.

Duulak watched the pattern emerge, his tactical mind automatically cataloging the assault sequence. The workers weren't laborers; they were combat engineers, demolition specialists working in perfect coordination to create optimal breach points.

'They're too organized,' he said. 'This isn't opportunistic predation. This is military tactics.'

'Welcome to the war none of us signed up for,' Darius replied. 'The Olthoi aren't beasts. They're soldiers serving a hive intelligence that makes tactical decisions beyond anything we encountered on Ispar.'

The first soldier Olthoi breached through a gap the workers had created, moving with horrifying speed toward the inner defensive ring. Duulak felt his hands begin the familiar gestures for a kinetic barrage, his mind automatically calculating vectors and force distributions.

The spell manifested as a wall of semi-solid air that caught the Olthoi mid-leap and slammed it backward into two more soldiers attempting the same breach. Duulak had intended a targeted strike. He'd created area-effect devastation.

'Good instincts, poor calibration,' Senna called out. 'You're still thinking in Ispar values. Divide everything by ten and you'll get closer to precision.'

He tried to adjust, to scale down his magical intentions, but the problem was that his training had been systematic, automatic, muscle memory built over decades. Telling himself to use one-tenth the effort was like telling himself to breathe one-tenth as deeply—possible in theory, nearly impossible in crisis.

The Olthoi soldiers adapted to the defensive pattern with disturbing speed. Where one approach failed, they tried another, learning from each repulsed assault. Duulak found himself in a rhythm: observe attack vector, calculate response, execute spell, im-

mediately assess whether the outcome matched intention or created collateral devastation.

He was getting better at calibration. Not good—not even adequate—but better. His third kinetic lance merely knocked an Olthoi soldier off its trajectory rather than punching a crater in the landscape. His fifth barrier spell created an actual wall rather than a explosive force distribution.

That was when he made his fatal mistake.

An Olthoi worker had circled around during the confusion, approaching from the blind angle that developed when three soldiers pressed the eastern barrier simultaneously. Duulak saw it in his peripheral vision, turned to engage, and drew the glyphs for a precision compression field—a spell designed to immobilize without harm.

The magical field manifested correctly. The Olthoi stopped, suspended in an invisible matrix that prevented movement while preserving life. Duulak felt a moment of satisfaction: finally, precision, finally control over this world's overwhelming magic.

Then he saw Darius, lying on the ground where a second worker Olthoi had pulled him from the defensive ring. Saw the massive mandibles closing around the scholar's torso. Saw the moment of resistance before chitin edges, sharper than any blade, found the spaces between human ribs.

Duulak's concentration broke. The compression field collapsed. The immobilized Olthoi resumed its charge, now furious from confinement, no longer testing but committed to killing the mage who'd held it.

He drew another spell, something, anything, but the gestures came too slow, his hands suddenly uncertain whether to protect himself or help Darius. The Olthoi covered the distance between them in three strides, mandibles spread wide.

The pain was indescribable.

Then it stopped.

2.4 Commitment to Understanding

Duulak woke screaming.

He stood at a lifestone—he understood that intellectually even as his body insisted it should be lying in pieces where an Olthoi's mandibles had found the

spaces between his ribs. The scream that tore from his throat wasn't pain, exactly, but something deeper: the sound of a mind confronting the impossibility of its own continuity.

'Breathe,' someone said. Celeste, he realized after a moment. She stood nearby but not touching, respecting the space that newly resurrected people needed. 'You're whole. You're alive. The body is real. The death was also real. Both things are true.'

'I died,' Duulak gasped, his hands moving over his chest, feeling for wounds that should be there, finding only intact flesh beneath his robes. 'I remember—the pain—everything—'

'Yes. You remember. That's the price of the lifestones. They preserve consciousness completely, which means they preserve the moment of death. The trauma doesn't fade with resurrection. You carry it now, permanently.'

Duulak sank down against the lifestone, his legs suddenly unable to support his weight. His hands were shaking so violently he couldn't have drawn a simple glyph if his life depended on it.

His life.

He had a life again. A life he'd lost. A life that persisted only because ancient Empyrean technology had recorded his consciousness and rebuilt his body according to a template that...

'Am I the same person?' The question escaped before he could consider its implications. 'The Duulak who died—is that who I am now? Or am I a copy, a reconstruction that merely thinks it's continuous with—'

'That's the question that breaks some people,' Celeste said, sitting down beside him. 'The philosophical implications of consciousness transfer and resurrection. Some decide they're copies and have existential crises that never resolve. Others decide continuity of memory equals continuity of self. Most just stop thinking about it because thinking about it makes survival impossible.'

'Which category do you fall into?'

'I'm a scientist. I hold multiple hypotheses in superposition and continue gathering evidence. It doesn't matter which answer is objectively true if I can't determine it empirically. What matters is

whether I'm useful, whether I can contribute to understanding, whether this consciousness—however it arose—serves purposes I consider valuable.'

They sat in silence for several minutes. Duulak's breathing gradually steadied, though his hands continued trembling. In the distance, he could hear sounds of the settlement recovering from the attack: calls of the wounded being tended, the clatter of debris being cleared, the quiet conversations of people processing their own traumas.

'How many died?' he asked finally.

'Four. All resurrected, all traumatized but alive. Darius is at his lifestone now. This is his eighth death.'

'How does anyone survive eight deaths?'

'They don't, not really. Darius was a gentle man when he arrived, a scholar who studied poetry and philosophy. Now he's something else—still brilliant, still capable of beauty, but carrying eight separate moments of ultimate trauma. He functions because the alternative is collapse, and collapse means vulnerability, and vulnerability means death number nine.'

Duulak stood, testing whether his legs would support him, finding they would if he concentrated.

'I need to see him. I need to...' He trailed off, uncertain what he needed. To apologize for failing to save him? To confirm that his own resurrection wasn't unique, that the impossibility was universal?

'He'll be at his shelter by now. Celeste gave directions. 'But Duulak— don't expect the man you fought beside. Death changes people, and eight deaths change them eight times over. Be prepared for someone who looks familiar but thinks differently.'

He found Darius sitting outside his shelter, staring at the purple sky with eyes that had seen too much. The scholar turned as Duulak approached, and his smile was genuine but somehow distant, as if emotion required conscious effort rather than spontaneous response.

'Duulak. Welcome to the club of the dead who walk. How was your first resurrection?'

'Horrifying. World-shattering. Philosophically paralyzing.'

'So, typical. It gets worse each time, actually. You'd think you'd adapt, but consciousness seems designed to process death as ultimate rather than temporary. Each resurrection is shock reimposed on already traumatized neural patterns.'

'How do you continue functioning?'

'Purpose. I study the patterns of death and resurrection, cataloging how consciousness persists through the lifestone process. If I'm going to die repeatedly, I might as well understand it completely. Knowledge doesn't prevent trauma, but it provides context that makes trauma bearable.'

Duulak sat down beside him, matching his posture, two scholars contemplating mysteries too large for comfortable comprehension.

'I saw you die,' Duulak said quietly. 'I was holding an Olthoi in a compression field, and in my peripheral vision, I watched you... I lost concentration. The Olthoi I'd immobilized got free and killed me.'

'So you died because my death broke your focus. And I died because I was too slow reacting to a worker's approach. We're caught in cascading failure states, each death creating conditions for more deaths. It's mathematically elegant and emotionally devastating.'

'We need to get better at this. At combat, at magic calibration, at not dying constantly.'

'Yes. Or we need to accept that death is the constant and survival is the temporary state we cycle through between traumas.'

They sat in silence, watching as one of the binary suns set, leaving only the smaller, blue-white sun to illuminate the landscape in colors that hurt Duulak's eyes with their alienness.

'I left a life on Ispar,' Duulak said. 'A wife I'd grown distant from, an apprentice I'd failed to nurture properly, work that felt more like obligation than passion. Part of me stepped through that portal hoping to escape responsibilities that had become weights. But sitting here, having died and returned, I realize: you can't escape yourself. All your failures, all your inadequacies—they persist through any transition. Even death doesn't release you from who you are.'

'That's the cruelest aspect of the lifestones. They preserve everything, including the parts of yourself you'd rather lose. I was afraid of pain when I arrived. Now I've experienced ultimate pain eight times and fear it more than ever, while simultaneously knowing the fear doesn't protect me, doesn't prevent recurrence, serves no purpose except to make existence worse.'

'Then why continue? Why not simply stop resurrecting, stay dead?'

'Because the lifestones don't offer that option. They bind consciousness to the pattern, maintain continuity whether we consent or not. We can't refuse resurrection any more than we can refuse to think. We are, therefore we persist, whether persistence is blessing or curse.'

Duulak thought about the Empyrean texts he'd been studying, the references to "consciousness cultivation" and "evolutionary pressure." Suddenly the full horror of the Harbinger Protocol became clear: they weren't just being kept alive. They were being forced to evolve through repeated death and resurrection, shaped by trauma toward some end they couldn't perceive.

'We're not prisoners,' he said slowly, working through the implications. 'We're subjects in an experiment where death is the independent variable and consciousness modification is the dependent variable. Asheron isn't saving us or even enslaving us. He's farming us. Growing whatever consciousness becomes after enough iterations of destruction and reconstitution.'

'That's dark even by my standards, and I've died eight times. But yes, I've reached similar conclusions. The question is: what do we become? And is it something we'd recognize as ourselves or something so changed that continuity becomes meaningless?'

'There's only one way to find out.'

'Which is?'

'We study it. We catalog each death, each resurrection, each change to consciousness and capability. If we're experiments, we become self-aware experiments. We gather data on our own transformation and use that data to understand not just what's being done to us but potentially how to direct it.'

Darius turned to look at him directly for the first time, his eyes focusing with the intensity of someone who'd found unexpected purpose.

'You want to turn the experiment around. Make ourselves observers rather than mere subjects.'

'Exactly. We're scholars. Understanding is what we do. If we're being changed, we'll understand the mechanisms. If we're being cultivated toward something, we'll identify it. And if we're pieces in a game whose rules we don't know, we'll learn those rules and find the players.'

'That's basically Celeste's founding principle for the Seekers.'

'Then I've found my people. Show me everything you've documented about the death and resurrection process. I'll add my own observations. Together, we'll build a model of consciousness persistence that might give us agency in a situation designed to deny it.'

They worked through the night—if night meant anything on a world with binary suns that set in sequence—compiling observations, comparing experiences, building the first systematic catalog of how consciousness behaved when subjected to repeated cycles of destruction and reconstitution.

Duulak found himself falling into familiar rhythms: hypothesis, observation, data compilation, model building. The work was horrifying in its subject matter but comforting in its methodology. Death might be inescapable, but death could be studied. Trauma might be unavoidable, but trauma could be measured, quantified, understood.

As the blue-white sun climbed toward something approximating morning, Celeste found them surrounded by pages of notes, diagrams of consciousness architecture, theoretical models of how the lifestones preserved and reconstructed identity.

'You've been awake all night,' she observed.

'We've been productive all night,' Duulak corrected. 'There's a difference. I've died, resurrected, confronted the philosophical implications of consciousness persistence, and begun the systematic study of the phenomenon. Sleep would merely delay understanding.'

'You sound like you've found purpose.'

'I've found what I always had: the need to understand, elevated to existential necessity. If we're being transformed, I'll understand the transformation. If we're being used, I'll identify the use. And if we're being destroyed, I'll at least document the process so those who come after can learn from our failures.'

'Welcome to the Seekers, Duulak. You've been one of us since you first asked why the portals appeared. You just needed to die once to fully commit to the path.'

Duulak looked at his hands, steady now, covered in ink from hours of writing. He thought of Yasmin, waiting at a window on a world he could never return to, watching for a husband who would never walk through her door again. He thought of Korvain, brilliant and doomed to surpass his master, carrying forward work that Duulak would never complete on Ispar.

And he thought of the Olthoi that had killed him, efficient and intelligent, following imperatives he didn't yet understand but would, given time and determination and however many deaths it took to accumulate sufficient data.

'I have a journal entry to make,' he said, standing and stretching muscles that protested from a night of stillness. 'Day Three on Dereth. Or Day One of my second life. I'm not certain which framing is more accurate. I've discovered that death is impermanent, consciousness is persistent, and understanding is the only anchor in a world designed to strip away everything else. I don't know if I'm still Duulak or merely an entity that remembers being Duulak. But whoever I am, I have work to do. The portals, the Olthoi, the Harbinger Protocol, the nature of consciousness itself—all of it is puzzle pieces scattered across a landscape I barely comprehend. I'll gather those pieces. I'll understand the pattern. And perhaps, in understanding, I'll find something approximating purpose in this prison that denies even death as escape.'

He paused, then added one final line:

'Yasmin, if some version of this ever reaches you across whatever gulf separates our worlds: I see you now, truly see you, in ways I never managed

when we shared physical space. I hope that counts for something. I hope you've found the freedom to live fully rather than existing in the margins of my obsession. And I hope, somehow, you understand why I couldn't turn back from the edge, even knowing the cost.'

The blue-white sun climbed higher, painting the Seeker's Encampment in colors that still hurt to observe directly but that Duulak was learning to tolerate. The Olthoi would attack again—they always did. He would likely die again—everyone did, eventually. But death was no longer the end, merely a transition point, another data point in the ongoing study of consciousness persistence.

He was Duulak the Twice-Blessed, though the blessing had become more burden than gift. He was a scholar in a world that punished certainty and rewarded adaptation. He was, perhaps, the first systematic observer of his own potential transformation from human to something else entirely.

And he had work to do.

Chapter 3

The Hunter's World

3.1 The Behemak Trail

The forest spoke in languages Thomas had spent thirty-four years learning to read. This morning it told him of rain three days ago, of deer passing through at dawn, of the behemak's trail growing fresher with each mile he tracked north.

He knelt beside a depression in the soft earth, running his fingers along its edges with the gentleness of a man reading scripture. The print was massive—large as his torso, pressed deep into ground that had been rain-softened but was now beginning to harden in autumn's gradual shift toward winter. Four claws, each the length of his hand, had carved distinct furrows. The pattern of weight distribution told him the creature favored its right side, likely from the wound he'd witnessed three days ago during its territorial fight with the younger male.

Thomas closed his eyes, letting his other senses fill the gap. The forest's ambient sounds: wind through oak leaves that hadn't yet fallen, a jay's warning call about his presence, water running somewhere to the east over stones that would be ice-slick in another month. Beneath it all, the smell of disturbed earth, scat that marked territory, and something else—the faint copper scent of old blood.

The behemak was wounded worse than he'd initially estimated. The younger male's tusks had found something vital, and while the elder had driven off its challenger, it had paid a price that would cost it dominance and possibly life.

Which made it Thomas's opportunity.

He stood, adjusting the bow across his shoulders, feeling the familiar weight of his hunting knife against his hip. Three days he'd been tracking, sleeping in trees when darkness made following the trail impossible, eating cold meat to avoid smoke that might alert his quarry. His wife Mara thought he was hunting deer to stock the winter stores. She'd packed him supplies for five days, kissed his cheek with the resigned affection of a woman who'd married a hunter and learned to accept the absences.

But this wasn't about deer.

The behemak's hide alone would fetch enough gold to pay the healer's fees for William's persistent cough. The tusks—ivory that held magical resonance—could buy medicine for a year. And if the old male had managed to accumulate even a fraction of the hoard these creatures were known to gather, if Thomas could claim it before scavengers or the younger male found it...

He could stop hunting. Could spend winters by the fire teaching William to carve. Could give Mara the security she'd never asked for but deserved. Could be the father and husband he'd always meant to become after one last hunt.

After this hunt, he promised himself, as he'd promised after the last one, and the one before that.

The trail led deeper into territory Thomas had never explored. The forest here was old—not the managed woodland near the village where foresters maintained clear trails and marked dangerous areas, but true wilderness. Trees grew so thick their

canopies blocked most sunlight, creating a perpetual twilight that played tricks on depth perception. Roots sprawled across the ground like arthritic fingers, and the undergrowth was dense enough that Thomas had to trust the behemak's trail rather than his own sense of direction.

He stopped every hundred yards to reconfirm the track, noting where the creature had scraped against trees to relieve itching from its wound, where it had paused to feed on bark, where its gait had grown more uneven as exhaustion and blood loss accumulated. The trail was a story Thomas read with the ease of a scholar interpreting familiar texts, each sign a word in a narrative of decline.

By midday—judged by the quality of light filtering through the canopy rather than any glimpse of the sun—he estimated he was perhaps an hour behind the behemak. Close enough to be cautious, far enough to avoid alerting it. The trick with wounded prey was patience. Let the injury do half the work. Track but don't pressure. Wait for the moment when exhaustion made the creature vulnerable.

Thomas found a stream and drank, refilling his waterskin, taking a moment to eat some of the bread Mara had packed. It was good bread, solid and dense with the nourishment a man needed for long days in the forest. She'd baked it three days ago, still warm when she'd wrapped it in cloth, and Thomas had watched her hands work with the familiar efficiency of fifteen years of marriage.

Fifteen years. William was seven now, old enough to start learning to track, to shoot, to read the forest's languages. But the boy's cough had worsened over the summer, and the healer said his lungs were weak, needed medicine that cost more than Thomas earned from selling deer and rabbits to the village market.

The behemak would solve everything. One hunt. One kill. One opportunity to stop being the provider who was never quite providing enough.

He finished eating and stood, wiping bread crumbs from his beard. The afternoon light was shifting, taking on the golden quality that preceded evening. He needed to decide: continue tracking and risk camping in unknown territory, or find a secure position to spend the night and resume at dawn?

The behemak's trail answered for him. Fresh scat, still steaming slightly in the cool air. The creature had rested here less than an hour ago, which meant it was slowing, struggling, close to whatever den it had chosen for refuge.

Thomas's hunter's instincts warred with his father's caution. Push now and he might find the behemak vulnerable, claim its hoard before darkness fell, return to Mara and William with enough wealth to change their lives. Wait until morning and the creature might recover enough to be dangerous, or might die and attract scavengers who'd claim the hoard before Thomas could reach it.

He pushed forward.

The trail led to an area where the forest changed character. The trees here were ancient beyond estimation, their trunks so massive that five men linking arms couldn't encircle them. The undergrowth thinned as if the old trees' dominance prevented lesser plants from competing. And there, between two particularly massive oaks, Thomas saw something that made his heart stutter and his hunter's mind go blank with incomprehension.

A shimmer in the air. A distortion, like heat rising from sun-baked stones, except the air here was cool and the effect was too localized, too stable to be natural atmospheric phenomenon.

Thomas approached slowly, bow in hand though his rational mind knew arrows would be useless against whatever this was. The shimmer intensified as he drew closer, resolving into something that hurt to observe directly. Colors that had no names. Movement that suggested depth without consuming space. A vertical slash in the forest's reality, as if someone had cut through the world's surface to reveal something underneath.

It sang to him.

Not with sound—Thomas's ears heard only the forest's normal evening chorus—but with a wordless promise that bypassed his senses and spoke directly to needs he'd never named. Safety for William. Security for Mara. An end to the constant calculation of whether they could afford meat this week, medicine this month, survival this winter.

The behemak's trail led past the shimmer and continued north. Thomas could see its tracks clearly,

could estimate he was now perhaps twenty minutes behind the wounded creature. Everything he'd worked for over three days of tracking was within reach.

But the shimmer promised more than one behemak's hoard. It promised solutions to problems Thomas hadn't consciously acknowledged: the growing awareness that his body was slowing with age, that the hunts grew harder each year, that William's needs would increase as the boy grew. It promised escape from the endless grinding necessity of providing.

Thomas stood between the behemak's trail and the shimmer, caught in the paralysis of a man who sensed that this moment would define everything that came after. His hunter's instinct screamed warnings about the unknown, about pretty lures and hidden traps, about things that seemed too good to be true because they were.

But his father's desperation whispered that sometimes you took risks because the alternative was watching your son grow sicker while you did nothing.

'Just a quick look,' he told himself, his voice sounding hollow in the ancient forest. 'The behemak isn't going anywhere fast. I can spare a moment.'

He took a step toward the shimmer. Then another. The singing intensified, not louder but more insistent, showing him visions of Mara's smile without worry creasing the corners, of William running without coughing, of a life where providing wasn't a constant struggle against scarcity.

His hand reached out without conscious command. The rational part of his mind—the experienced hunter who'd survived three decades in the forest by respecting its dangers—screamed for him to stop, to turn away, to continue tracking the behemak and take the opportunity he understood rather than gamble on mysteries.

But Thomas's fingers touched the shimmer's edge, and reality rippled, and he felt himself beginning to fall through into somewhere else, and his last conscious thought was of William's laughter, the pure unselfconscious joy of a seven-year-old who still be-

lieved his father could solve any problem and provide any need.

3.2 Home and Hearth

Four days earlier, Thomas had woken before dawn in the bed he'd shared with Mara for fifteen years. She was still sleeping, her breathing deep and steady, her face relaxed in a way it never was during waking hours. He watched her for a moment, studying the silver threading through her dark hair, the fine lines around her eyes, the particular set of her features that had first attracted him when they were both young and foolish enough to marry for love rather than practical considerations.

They'd been lucky, he supposed. Most marriages in the village were arrangements between families, strategic alliances that sometimes grew into affection and sometimes remained merely functional. But Thomas and Mara had wanted each other, and fifteen years later they still did, though want had transmuted into something quieter, deeper, less exhilarating but more sustaining.

He rose carefully, trying not to wake her, and dressed in the pre-dawn darkness with the efficiency of long practice. His hunting clothes: leather trousers that wouldn't catch on undergrowth, wool shirt in forest colors, the jerkin with reinforced shoulders that Mara had made him three winters ago. His bow waited by the door, already strung, and his quiver held twenty arrows—more than he'd need for deer, barely enough if he encountered something dangerous.

The cottage was small, three rooms that Thomas had built himself over the first year of their marriage. He'd designed it with a hunter's eye for practical function: strong walls to keep out winter wind, a large fireplace for cooking and warmth, shuttered windows that could be secured against storms. No luxuries, but solid and weatherproof, which was more than many in the village could claim.

William's room was little more than a closet with a bed, but the boy loved it. Thomas paused outside the door, listening to his son's breathing—rough with the cough that never quite cleared, but steady,

alive. On the wall inside, he knew, hung William's treasures: drawings of trees and animals, a practice bow Thomas had made him, the rabbit's foot charm that Mara insisted would bring luck.

Thomas's hand rested on the door frame, his chest tight with an emotion he couldn't quite name. Love, certainly, but also fear, and determination, and the terrible weight of being responsible for a small life that depended on your competence. Every hunt Thomas undertook was really for William—for food to keep him fed, for funds to keep him clothed, for medicine to keep him breathing.

'You're leaving early,' Mara said from the bedroom doorway, her voice still rough with sleep.

'Deer move at dawn. I want to be in position when they start feeding.'

'You're always leaving early. Sometimes I think you love the forest more than you love us.'

It was an old argument, familiar as worn clothing, and Thomas knew all the responses. He could say he hunted for them, that every deer was food and funds, that providing was how he showed love. He could point out that his work was solitary by necessity, that a hunter with chattering companions caught nothing. He could deflect with humor or redirect with affection.

Instead, he told the truth.

'I love the forest because it makes sense to me in ways people don't. Track reads clearly, behavior follows patterns, cause produces effect. Out there, I understand the rules. Here, I'm constantly uncertain whether I'm doing enough, being enough, providing enough.'

'Thomas...'

'I know. You never ask for more than I give. That's part of what makes it hard. You never complain, never demand, just accept whatever I manage to provide. And I keep hunting because maybe the next kill will be the one that finally makes me feel like enough.'

Mara crossed the small space between them and took his face in her hands, her palms rough from work but gentle in their touch.

'You are enough. You have been enough. The problem isn't your providing. The problem is you've

convinced yourself that your worth is measured in what you bring home rather than in who you are. William doesn't need more gold. He needs his father to be present, not constantly chasing the next hunt.'

'He needs medicine. The healer said—'

'The healer said his lungs are weak and some children grow out of it and others don't and there's medicine that might help but might not. You've latched onto that "might" like it's certainty because it gives you something to hunt, something to solve through effort and skill.'

'So I should do nothing? Just accept that my son struggles to breathe and hope he grows out of it?'

'I'm saying you should be here while he grows. Whether he gets better or worse, he needs his father. And I need my husband. Not the hunter who provides. The man who chose me fifteen years ago and promised we'd face everything together.'

Thomas pulled away, the conversation suddenly too heavy for pre-dawn darkness.

'I need to go. The deer won't wait.'

'Neither will we. Remember that, while you're out there being alone with your certainty.'

He left before she could say anything else that might make him question what he was doing. The village was still dark and quiet as he made his way to the forest's edge. A few early risers were visible in doorways or tending to animals, and they nodded to Thomas with the respect accorded to a man known to be competent at his work.

But Mara's words followed him into the forest, unwelcome companions on a hunt that was supposed to provide solitude from exactly this kind of complicated human emotion. He pushed them away, focusing instead on the familiar ritual of entering wilderness: checking the wind direction, listening for bird calls that might indicate predators, moving from the managed woodland into the deeper forest with the comfortable efficiency of coming home.

By full dawn, he'd found fresh deer sign and settled into a position downwind from a game trail. This was what he was good at: patience, observation, the ability to become so still that his presence vanished into the forest's background. He could wait for hours

without fidgeting, mind calm and empty of everything except awareness of his surroundings.

Except this morning, the calm wouldn't come. Mara's face kept surfacing in his thoughts. William's cough. The healer's careful words about medicine that might help. The reality that Thomas's providing had never quite been enough to get ahead of need, only to keep pace with it.

A deer emerged from the treeline—young buck, healthy, exactly what he should take. Thomas's hand found his bow, fingers fitting arrow to string with unconscious precision. The shot was clear, the range optimal, the kill virtually certain.

He didn't take it.

Instead, he watched the deer drink from the stream, its movements relaxed and unsuspecting. Thomas could observe its behavior, note the patterns in its feeding, catalog the information for future hunts. Or he could end its life with a single arrow and bring home meat that would feed his family for a week.

Providing. Always providing. The endless cycle of kill, sell, buy, repeat. Never quite getting ahead. Never quite achieving the security that would let him stop hunting and just be with Mara and William.

The deer moved away, disappearing into undergrowth, the opportunity lost. Thomas lowered his bow, feeling oddly relieved. He wasn't ready to go home yet, to return empty-handed and face Mara's knowing expression, her awareness that sometimes he hunted not to provide but to escape the weight of providing.

That was when he saw the behemak signs. Fresh tracks, territorial markings, evidence of the kind of prey that could change everything if he succeeded. Not a deer for a week's meat but a creature whose hide and tusks and potential hoard could buy months of security.

One last hunt, he promised himself. One last time pursuing something in the forest instead of facing something at home.

3.3 The Portal's Call

The shimmer wasn't getting smaller.

Thomas had stepped back from it—or tried to—but the distortion in the air between the ancient oaks seemed to fill more of his vision now, as if observing it changed its properties. Colors bled and merged at its edges, and the wordless song had become impossible to ignore, a constant presence in his mind that promised solutions to problems he'd spent years pretending weren't growing.

He should return to the behemak's trail. The wounded creature was close, vulnerable, exactly the opportunity he'd spent three days tracking to find. This shimmer—this impossible thing that shouldn't exist—was distraction from the practical realities of a hunter's life.

But the song showed him William, not as he was but as he could be: healthy, laughing without coughing, running through the village with the boundless energy of childhood uncompromised by weak lungs. And Mara, her face relaxed and smiling, the worry lines smoothed away because worry had become unnecessary.

Thomas's rational mind knew these were illusions. The shimmer was showing him what he wanted to see, tempting him like the tales old hunters told of forest spirits that lured men to their deaths with visions of desire. He should walk away, continue tracking, focus on the real opportunity instead of impossible promises.

His feet moved forward instead of away.

Each step felt both involuntary and absolutely chosen, as if his body was simply expressing what some deeper part of him had already decided. The hunter's caution that had kept him alive for thirty-four years screamed warnings, but beneath it lay a father's desperation and a husband's exhaustion, and those voices were louder, more insistent, more immediately compelling.

'Just to see,' he told himself, the words hollow even as he spoke them. 'Just to understand what this is. Knowledge isn't commitment. Looking isn't entering. I can observe and then return to the hunt.'

But he knew he was lying. Had known it from the moment his fingers first touched the shimmer's edge. Some part of him—the part that was tired of tracking prey to sell hides to buy medicine that might

not work, tired of being competent but never quite successful, tired of the endless grinding necessity of survival—wanted whatever the shimmer offered.

At three paces distance, he could see through it to something beyond. Not just another part of the forest but another mode of existence entirely. The glimpses were fragmentary, disorienting: sky that was the wrong color, structures that couldn't be natural but didn't look built, horizons that curved in directions that made his eyes hurt.

His hunter's mind tried to catalog what he was seeing, to impose familiar patterns on alien landscapes. Was that a mountain or a crystal formation or something without equivalent in his experience? Were those trees or towers or organisms too strange to categorize? The harder he tried to understand, the more his understanding fractured.

'This is madness,' he whispered. 'Walking toward something I can't understand, abandoning a hunt I've invested three days in, risking everything on visions that promise too much to be real.'

But William's cough was real. Mara's worry was real. The constant calculation of whether they could afford necessities was real. And if this shimmer offered escape from those realities, even temporarily, even through means Thomas couldn't comprehend...

His hand reached out. The shimmer felt like nothing—neither solid nor liquid nor air, just a boundary between here and elsewhere that offered no resistance to pressure. When his fingers crossed the threshold, reality rippled outward from the point of contact, and he felt himself being pulled or pushed or simply translated through dimensions his body wasn't designed to navigate.

The last thing he saw of his world was the behemak's trail, continuing north through ancient forest toward den and hoard and the opportunity he was abandoning. The last thing he felt was regret mixed with relief, guilt mixed with hope, the complex emotional contradiction of a man who knew he was making a terrible choice but couldn't stop himself from making it.

Then the forest vanished.

3.4 A Hunter in Hell

Thomas experienced the transition as simultaneous destruction and reconstruction, his body pulled apart into component elements and reassembled according to rules that hadn't existed a moment before. It didn't hurt—pain required continuous consciousness, and consciousness during the crossing was fragmented into discrete moments separated by gaps where existence became negotiable.

He landed in a stumble, hunter's reflexes engaging before conscious thought, hands reaching for balance against ground that felt wrong. Not soil and leaf mold but something crystalline and warm, as if he'd fallen onto a surface that was simultaneously mineral and alive.

The air tasted of copper and ozone. The light was all wrong—purple-tinged, coming from two suns that hung at angles that violated everything Thomas knew about sky and time. The sounds were alien: clicks and chitters where bird calls should be, resonance where wind through leaves should rustle.

'No,' Thomas gasped, the word inadequate but the only response his shocked mind could produce. 'No, no, this isn't—I need to go back—Mara, William, I didn't mean—'

He spun around, looking for the shimmer, for the portal, for any way to reverse what he'd done. Behind him was only more alien landscape: crystalline formations rising like trees but refracting light in patterns that hurt to observe, ground that changed texture and color as he watched, horizons that curved wrong.

The portal was gone. Or invisible. Or only functioned one direction. Thomas's hunter's mind tried all three hypotheses and found no evidence to support any of them. He was somewhere else, and the path back—if it existed—wasn't obvious.

Panic hit him like physical force, making his hands shake and his breath come short. Everything he knew, everything he was, depended on geography he understood and rules that made sense. The forest was his domain because he'd spent decades learning its languages. This place spoke in sounds he couldn't

interpret, showed him vistas he couldn't categorize, operated on principles he couldn't begin to deduce.

He was going to die here. Was going to die without seeing Mara again, without teaching William to track, without ever explaining that he'd abandoned the behemak hunt for a pretty light that promised too much. His last thought would be of them, and their last thought of him would be why didn't he come home, what kept him this time, why did he always choose hunting over family?

The clicking sounds intensified. Thomas's panicked mind finally registered what his hunter's instincts had been screaming since arrival: he was being hunted.

He drew his bow with the automatic efficiency of muscle memory, fitting arrow to string, but his hands were shaking too badly for accuracy. Whatever was producing those sounds was circling him, using tactics he recognized—surround the prey, cut off escape routes, attack from the blind angle when attention diverts.

It exploded from the ground where ground should have been solid, mandibles spread wide enough to bisect a man. Thomas had hunted predators before—wolves when they threatened livestock, the occasional rogue bear—but this was different. This was alien in a way that bypassed tactical assessment and went straight to primal terror.

He dove aside more from instinct than skill, the creature's attack missing him by margins measured in finger-widths. His arrow flew wild, clattering harmlessly off chitin that looked harder than any armor he'd ever seen. He rolled, came up reaching for another arrow, and found himself staring at compound eyes that reflected his terrified face in a thousand fragmented images.

'I'm sorry,' he whispered, not to the creature but to Mara, to William, to the life he'd abandoned because he couldn't resist a promise that was too good to be true. 'I'm so sorry. I thought I was providing. I thought I was solving. I was just running. And now you'll never know.'

The creature tilted its head—disturbingly human gesture from something so absolutely not human—and clicked a sequence that might have been laughter or hunger or simple acknowledgment of suc-

cessful hunt. Thomas drew his hunting knife, knowing it was inadequate, knowing he was going to die, knowing his death would leave Mara and William with questions that would never be answered.

Arrows struck the creature from multiple angles, precisely targeting the joints where chitin segments connected. It shrieked—a sound that bypassed Thomas's ears and resonated in his chest cavity—and turned to face this new threat. Thomas saw humans, scarred and competent, attacking with the coordinated efficiency of people who'd fought this enemy before.

One of them—a woman with the weathered face of someone who'd survived too much—grabbed his arm and hauled him to his feet.

'Another one through the portals,' she said, her voice carrying the weary resignation of someone who'd seen this before. 'You're lucky we found you before they did worse than play.'

'I need to go back,' Thomas gasped, still gripping his useless knife. 'My family— my wife— my son— I need to go back.'

'There is no back. There's only forward, and forward means learning to fight or learning to die. Here, you'll learn both.'

She led him away from the creature, which had retreated but not fled, its clicking sounds following them like commentary on a hunter who'd become prey. Thomas's legs moved automatically, following this stranger through a landscape that made no sense, while his mind cataloged all the ways he'd failed.

He'd abandoned the behemak hunt. He'd left Mara without explanation. He'd robbed William of his father. And for what? For a portal that had promised solutions and delivered only separation?

The woman led him toward smoke—fire, at least that was universal—and a settlement that looked desperate and temporary. Other people emerged from crude shelters, and their faces told the same story: loss, adjustment, stubborn survival against incomprehensible circumstances.

'Welcome to Dereth,' the woman said. 'I'm Elena. You'll want to sit down before we explain what's happened. It's better to receive impossible information while seated.'

'I don't want information. I want to go home.'

'Everyone wants that. But wanting doesn't matter here. Only surviving matters. So you'll listen to the explanation, and you'll learn to fight, and you'll come to terms with the fact that the life you had is over and the life you have now is all that's available.'

Thomas sat because his legs gave out rather than from conscious choice. Elena explained—Dereth, the Olthoi, Asheron's summoning, the impossibility of return. Each word felt like another nail in a coffin being built around everything Thomas had been.

He was a hunter. That identity had defined him for thirty-four years. But hunters operated in environments they understood, tracking prey whose behaviors they could predict. Here, he was the prey, and the predators followed rules he didn't know.

He was a husband and father. But Mara was in another world, probably already wondering when he'd return, and William was growing up in Thomas's absence, and neither of them would ever know that he'd tried to return, that the portal wouldn't open from this side, that separation wasn't choice but consequence.

'How long?' he asked, his voice rough. 'How long have people been coming through?'

'Three months,' Elena said. 'We're all recent arrivals, still learning, still dying, still trying to survive long enough to understand what's been done to us.'

'Three months here... how much time on Ispar?'

'We don't know. Time flows differently between worlds, or so we've theorized. Could be days. Could be years. Could be centuries. We have no way to determine correspondence.'

Thomas felt the last hope drain out of him like water through cupped hands. If time was unreliable, if years could pass on Ispar while days passed here, then Mara might already have grown old waiting. William might already be grown, might have children of his own, might remember his father only as the man who went hunting one day and never came back.

Everything Thomas had built—the marriage, the family, the modest competence that let him provide

for those he loved—all of it was gone, separated from him by dimensional barriers he couldn't cross and time differentials he couldn't overcome.

'I should have taken the deer,' he said, the observation emerging from shock rather than thought. 'Four days ago, I had a clear shot at a buck, and I didn't take it. I kept hunting, kept looking for the bigger score, the behemak that would solve everything. And I found the portal instead. If I'd just taken the deer, gone home satisfied with enough, I'd be with Mara right now. William would be asking about the hunt, and I'd be showing him how to dress the kill. We'd be together.'

'You can't think like that,' Elena said, though her voice suggested she'd had similar thoughts about her own choices. 'The portals called to specific people. If it wasn't that moment, it would have been another. They're selective, purposeful, designed to lure those vulnerable to what they promise.'

'And what did they promise you?'

'Escape from a life I'd built around hiding what I was. I was a thief, a good one, but eventually the law catches everyone. The portal offered freedom from pursuit. I took it, and got a different kind of prison.'

They sat in silence as the alien suns moved through their incomprehensible paths across the purple sky. Other people from the settlement approached, asked questions, shared their own portal stories. Everyone had lost something. Everyone had been tempted. Everyone had made a choice that seemed reasonable at the time and catastrophic in retrospect.

'I need to learn to fight,' Thomas said finally, the decision settling over him like familiar clothing. 'If I can't go back, if I'm stuck here, then I need to survive. And if I survive long enough, maybe I find someone who understands portals better than I do. Maybe I find a way to reverse what's been done.'

'That's the right attitude,' Elena said, though her expression suggested she didn't believe reversal was possible. 'Tomorrow, we start training. I'll teach you what we know about the Olthoi: their weak points, their tactics, how to kill them before they kill you. You'll die anyway—everyone does—but at least you'll die competently.'

'Die?'

'Oh. I forgot to mention the lifestones.'

And Elena proceeded to explain that death wasn't permanent, which should have been comforting but was somehow the most horrifying revelation yet. Thomas could die, resurrect, die again, an eternal cycle of trauma without release. Even death wouldn't reunite him with Mara and William because death here was just another transition, another change in circumstances that left core problems unsolved.

That night, Thomas lay in the crude shelter they'd assigned him, staring at the purple sky through gaps in the roof, listening to the alien sounds of a world that would never be home. He thought of Mara, probably at the window now, watching the path he should have walked back days ago. He thought of William, asking when Papa would return, and Mara having to explain that sometimes people didn't return, that the forest took men and gave back only silence.

And he thought of the behemak, dying alone in its den, its hoard unclaimed, the opportunity Thomas had abandoned for a promise that was too good to be true because it was entirely false.

'I'm sorry,' he whispered to people who would never hear him. 'I tried to provide. I thought I was doing the right thing. I thought one more hunt would solve everything. Instead, I solved nothing and lost everything. And now all I can do is survive and hope that surviving leads eventually to understanding, and understanding leads eventually to return, even though every rational assessment says that hope is as false as the portal's promise.'

Sleep came eventually, troubled by dreams of William's cough and Mara's face and forest trails that led always toward shimmers that promised solutions and delivered only separation. And when Thomas woke to the wrong-colored light of Dereth's morning, his first coherent thought was a hunter's observation: he'd tracked the wrong prey, followed the wrong trail, and ended up in territory where all his skills meant nothing.

His second thought was more fundamental: he was alive, which meant he could learn, which meant he could adapt, which meant maybe—however un-

likely—he could find his way back to the people who made survival worthwhile.

But as the days would prove, survival on Dereth was never simple, adaptation was never painless, and hope was the most dangerous prey of all to hunt.

Chapter 4

A World of Teeth and Sorrow

4.1 The Settlement of Broken Promises

Morning came to Dereth with the wrongness of doubled light. Thomas woke in the crude shelter they'd given him—four walls of scavenged wood, a roof that leaked purple rain, a bedroll that smelled of other people's fear—and for one blessed moment didn't remember where he was. Then reality crashed down like a falling tree, and he lay still, staring at rafters that weren't his rafters, listening to sounds that weren't his sounds, breathing air that tasted of copper and loss.

His body ached from the previous day's crossing and near-death. Every muscle felt bruised, as if he'd been beaten rather than translated through dimensional barriers. His hands trembled when he tried to flex them—not from injury but from something deeper, some violation of the body's fundamental assumptions about reality that manifested as physical revolt.

Outside, voices. The settling sounds of a community waking: footsteps, low conversation, the scrape of pots and tools. Human sounds, at least. Thomas clung to that familiarity like a drowning man to driftwood.

He forced himself to rise, to dress in clothes that still carried the smell of home—Mara had washed them, he remembered, two days before he'd left. Five days ago? Six? Time had become negotiable, and not in ways his hunter's mind could track.

The settlement called Haven looked even more desperate in daylight. Perhaps fifty shelters scattered across a defensible valley, each one built with the hasty incompetence of people who knew architecture only from observation. A central fire pit served as gathering point, currently tended by an older man whose scarred arms suggested he'd learned violence before learning how to survive it.

Elena was there, organizing work parties with the brisk efficiency of someone who'd claimed leadership through sheer refusal to collapse. She saw Thomas emerge and gestured him over.

'You slept. Good. Most new arrivals spend the first night staring at the sky, trying to will it back to normal.'

'I stared for hours,' Thomas admitted. 'But exhaustion wins eventually.'

'Always does. Come. We're doing the morning census—checking who died overnight, who resurrected, who's too broken to function. After that, you eat. Then we train.'

The morning census was a ritual of efficiency and horror. Elena moved from shelter to shelter, checking inhabitants, making notes on a scrap of parchment that already showed weeks of similar accounting. Thomas followed, silent, observing how she worked.

Three people had died overnight. One from blood loss after yesterday's patrol encountered Olthoi workers—he'd resurrected already but was still shaking, unable to speak coherently. One from falling off the

primitive defensive wall during watch—she'd broken her neck, returned to life cursing her own clumsiness. One from what Elena called "giving up"—he'd walked into Olthoi territory at dawn, weaponless, and let them take him. He'd be back by afternoon, she said. They always came back. Death didn't let you escape.

'How many people here?' Thomas asked as they completed the circuit.

'Fifty-three as of this morning. We were seventy two weeks ago, but some decided Haven wasn't for them. Left for other settlements, other philosophies. Some died too many times and can't function anymore—they wander off into the wilderness and don't come back. We don't count them as dead. Just... lost.'

'And how many settlements total?'

'We know of five within a week's travel. Rumors of dozens more spread across Dereth. Everyone's trying different approaches: military discipline, magical research, voluntary transformation, desperate denial. We're the practical survivors—no grand plans, just teach people to fight and try to stay alive long enough to understand what's been done to us.'

Breakfast was communal and meager: thin porridge made from grain no one could name, water that tasted of minerals. Thomas ate without tasting, his hunter's mind cataloging everything about the settlement—the defensive positions, the resource management, the way people moved with the wary tension of prey animals who'd learned to live in a predator's territory.

He noticed factions even in this small community. Some people wore makeshift armor and carried weapons with competent familiarity—Elena's soldiers, the ones who'd chosen to fight. Others stayed near the central fire, their faces showing the particular blankness of those who'd retreated so far into themselves that functioning became automatic. A third group clustered near the eastern edge of camp, talking in urgent whispers about portals and theories and the mage named Asheron who'd supposedly summoned them.

'The whisperers over there,' Thomas asked Elena quietly, 'who are they?'

'The Seekers. They think understanding will set them free—that if they can decode how the summoning works, they can reverse it. Led by a woman named Celeste who was a scholar back on Ispar. She's brilliant, organized, and convinced that knowledge is power. I'm less convinced, but I don't stop them. Everyone needs hope, even if it's the kind that comes from equations and theories.'

'And the others? The ones who aren't talking?'

'The Broken. They died too many times too fast, or saw things that unmade them, or just couldn't adapt. We feed them, shelter them, protect them. Some recover eventually. Some stay broken forever. Death doesn't repair trauma—it just resets your body while leaving your mind intact to remember everything.'

A young woman approached—maybe twenty, with Aluvian features and archer's calluses. She nodded respectfully to Elena, then assessed Thomas with the frank evaluation of someone trained to determine threat levels.

'This the new arrival?'

'Thomas. Hunter from back home. Thomas, this is Reyna. She'll assist with your training. She was a ranger in the King's service before the portals took her.'

'What's your weapon?' Reyna asked.

'Bow. Hunting knife. I've tracked deer, boar, the occasional predator. I'm competent in my environment.'

'This isn't your environment. The skills translate, but the mindset needs to change. You hunted animals. Here, you fight soldiers. The Olthoi think, coordinate, adapt. They use tactics that would shame most human commanders. Your bow's useful, but you'll need close combat training. Olthoi workers can dig under your position and emerge behind you. Olthoi soldiers can shrug off arrows to non-vital areas. And if you face a royal, nothing you learned hunting deer will save you.'

'Then teach me,' Thomas said, the decision settling over him like familiar weight. 'I can't go home, can't undo what I've done. But I can learn.'

That's always been my strength—patient observation, adaptation, learning the rules of new territory. Show me the rules here.'

Elena smiled, grim but approving. It was the expression of someone who'd learned to appreciate competence because competence kept people alive, and alive was the best you could hope for.

'Rules here are simple,' she said. 'Rule one: the Olthoi are smarter than you. Rule two: the Olthoi are stronger than you. Rule three: the Olthoi have numbers and coordination you can't match. The only advantage we have is that we resurrect and they don't, which means we can learn from our mistakes. So you'll make mistakes, and you'll die, and you'll come back, and eventually you'll make fewer mistakes. That's the entire curriculum.'

4.2 The Education of Violence

The training ground was a cleared area north of Haven's central fire, marked by crude targets, practice weapons, and dark stains that Thomas realized with sick clarity were old blood that no one had bothered to clean.

Reyna started with assessment, watching Thomas demonstrate his skills with bow and knife. He fell into familiar patterns—the stance his father had taught him at age ten, the breathing technique he'd developed over years of patient stalking, the smooth draw and release that came from muscle memory built through thousands of successful hunts.

'Good foundation,' Reyna judged. 'But too cautious. You're hunting technique, not combat technique. In a hunt, you wait for the perfect shot because failure means the prey escapes. Here, failure means you die, but you come back. So perfect isn't the goal—fast enough and good enough are all that matter. Watch.'

She demonstrated combat archery: quick draw, rapid fire, acceptable accuracy rather than perfect precision. Three arrows in the time Thomas would take for one careful shot, targeting center mass rather than vital organs because Olthoi vitals weren't where human intuition expected.

'The workers have neural clusters here, here, and here,' she indicated points on a diagram someone had drawn on wood. 'Thorax, abdomen, head. Hit any two and they die. Miss completely and they close distance before you can nock another arrow. Their chitin is thick enough to deflect glancing shots, so you need direct angles and sufficient draw weight. Can you maintain full draw for thirty seconds?'

'No. Maybe twenty on my best day.'

'Then we build your strength. Because the Olthoi don't give you time to aim. They charge in coordinated rushes, four or five at once from multiple angles. You need to shoot fast, hit hard, and transition to close combat when—not if—they reach you.'

They drilled for hours. Thomas's shoulders burned from repeated full draws. His hands blistered, the old calluses in wrong positions for this new shooting style. But his hunter's discipline served him well—he could endure discomfort, could focus through pain, could repeat the same motion hundreds of times until muscle memory rewrote itself.

Close combat was worse. Reyna paired him with a scarred Gharu'ndim man named Khalil who'd been a soldier before the portals. Khalil moved with the brutal efficiency of someone who'd killed humans and learned killing insects required only minor adjustments.

'Your knife is too small,' Khalil observed, examining Thomas's hunting blade. 'Fine for dressing deer, useless against chitin. You need a short sword or a war axe—something with weight and leverage to crack their shells. Show me your stance.'

Thomas demonstrated the knife fighter's crouch his father had taught him—low, balanced, blade held for quick strikes.

'Too low. You're thinking about human opponents, protecting your vitals. Olthoi workers stand taller than you—their vulnerable points are above your head. You need to reach up, not defend down. And their mandibles close horizontally, not vertically like human jaws. So your instinct to dodge backward? Gets you cut in half. You dodge sideways, always sideways, and you strike for the leg joints while they're recovering from their lunge.'

They practiced the movements slowly, building new instincts over old ones. Dodge left, strike high. Dodge right, target joints. Never retreat straight back. Never assume they're alone—workers travel in groups. Never hesitate when an opportunity presents—chitin repairs quickly, and a wounded Olthoi is just as dangerous as a healthy one.

Thomas died seven times that first day of training.

The first death came from overconfidence. Khalil had been demonstrating attack patterns with blunted weapons, and Thomas thought he'd seen an opening. He stepped in to strike, and Khalil—moving at full combat speed—caught him in the ribs with a practice sword that shouldn't have been capable of lethal damage but apparently was.

The second death came from exhaustion. His muscles gave out mid-dodge, and he fell onto his own knife in a way that would have been darkly amusing if it hadn't involved bleeding out in the dirt while Reyna screamed for the settlement healer.

Deaths three through seven blurred together—a catalog of mistakes, each one teaching him something he could only learn through dying. Don't rely on peripheral vision when exhausted. Don't assume a downed opponent is dead. Don't block with your forearm when they're swinging chitin-covered limbs. Don't forget to breathe.

Each death ended the same way: pain, darkness, then pulling—a sensation of being drawn through impossible distances by threads woven through his consciousness. Then reformation at the lifestone, gasping and whole and remembering everything.

The pain faded within minutes of resurrection. The memory never did.

'You're learning quickly,' Elena observed as Thomas returned from his seventh death that afternoon. 'Most new arrivals die a dozen times in the first week. You're ahead of the curve.'

'Dying isn't the hard part,' Thomas said, his voice rough. 'Coming back is. Each time, there's a moment where I think maybe this time I'll stay dead, maybe this time I'll escape. Then the lifestone pulls me back, and I'm here again, and nothing has changed except I've added another death to the collection.'

'It gets easier.'

'Does it? Or do you just get numb to impossibility?'

'Both. Welcome to Dereth.'

Over the following days, Thomas fell into rhythms that felt almost like routine. Wake to wrong light. Eat tasteless food. Train until dying. Resurrect. Train more. Sleep badly. Repeat.

His body adapted faster than his mind. The new shooting style became natural. The combat movements settled into muscle memory. He learned to read Olthoi behavior from the way Reyna and Khalil mimicked it—the clicking that preceded coordinated attacks, the body posture that indicated preparing to charge, the specific mandible positioning that meant they'd detected prey.

But his mind remained stubbornly fixed on Ispar. Every night he lay awake counting days. Five days since the portal. Ten. Fifteen. Time here had clear progression, but what did that mean for time there? Was Mara still waiting for him, or had she given up hope? Had William's cough worsened, or had it cleared on its own as sometimes happened? Were they mourning him, or had they moved on, accepting his absence as they'd accepted all his previous absences until this final one that never ended?

'You think about them constantly,' Elena observed one evening as they sat watch together on Haven's crude defensive wall. 'Your family. I can see it in your face every time you think no one's looking.'

'My wife Mara. My son William, seven years old. I left to hunt a behemak that would have bought medicine for his cough. Instead I found the portal, and now they're either wondering where I am or mourning me as dead, and I have no way to tell them what happened or why.'

'Do you think knowing would help them?'

'I don't know. Maybe knowing I didn't choose to leave would ease the wondering. Or maybe it would make it worse—knowing I'm alive but unreachable, trapped in another world while they age and die and I... don't.'

'You've noticed that, then. That we don't age here.'

‘I’ve noticed that the woman who arrived three weeks before me looks exactly as she did when she came through. I’ve noticed that injuries heal instantly if they kill you. I’ve noticed that time here doesn’t touch us the way it should.’

‘It’s the lifestones. They restore us to a fixed template, recorded when we first bonded with them. We can grow stronger through training, learn new skills, but age? Disease? Natural death? All impossible now. We’re frozen at whatever moment we arrived.’

Thomas absorbed this new horror silently. He’d been tracking toward death his entire adult life—the hunter’s mortality, the constant awareness that one mistake could end everything. Now death was temporary and aging was impossible, which meant he could survive indefinitely while Mara and William grew old without him.

‘How do you stand it?’ he asked finally. ‘Knowing you’ve lost everything and can’t even escape through dying?’

‘I focus on what I can control. I can’t return home, but I can help other arrivals survive. I can’t undo the summoning, but I can fight the Olthoi so new arrivals aren’t killed in their first hours. I can’t fix the cosmic injustice of being ripped from my life, but I can make this new life slightly less horrific for the people around me. It’s not enough, but it’s something. And something is better than the alternative.’

‘Which is?’

‘Becoming one of the Forgotten. The ones who refuse to accept what’s happened, who keep trying to force a return that isn’t possible. Some of them have been here six months, and they’re still talking about finding Asheron and making him reverse the portals. Still convinced that if they fight hard enough or wish hard enough or suffer enough, reality will bend to their desires. It won’t. But they can’t accept that, so they become permanent refugees from acceptance itself.’

Thomas understood the warning beneath her words. He was tracking toward that edge—the refusal to adapt, the insistence that his old life remained accessible if he just tried hard enough. But he was also tracking toward something else: the possibility that

understanding might lead to action, and action might lead to change.

‘Tell me about Asheron,’ he said. ‘The mage who summoned us. Where is he? What does he want? Why did he do this?’

‘No one knows where he is. The Seekers have theories—they think he’s hiding in ancient Empyrean ruins, or that he’s been imprisoned by the same forces that created the Olthoi, or that he’s dead and the summoning continues automatically. As for what he wants and why he did it, the theories are even more varied. Some say he summoned us to fight the Olthoi because his own people fled or were destroyed. Some say we’re experiments, test subjects for some larger plan. Some say the summoning was accident, that he was trying to do something else and humans were unintended consequence.’

‘But you have an opinion.’

‘I think he knew exactly what he was doing. I think he weighed the cost—thousands of humans torn from their lives, trapped in eternal war against an enemy they don’t understand—and decided it was acceptable price for whatever he’s trying to achieve. And I think that makes him either desperate or monstrous, possibly both.’

‘Then we should find him. Make him explain. Make him fix what he’s broken.’

‘And if he can’t? If the portals are irreversible, if the summoning has no counterweight, if we’re trapped here permanently by forces even a mage of Asheron’s power can’t undo? What then?’

Thomas had no answer. His hunter’s mind knew that some trails led nowhere, that some prey couldn’t be caught, that sometimes competence and determination weren’t enough. But his father’s desperation insisted that accepting impossibility meant abandoning William and Mara, and he couldn’t—wouldn’t—do that. Not again.

4.3 The Space Between

Three weeks into his time on Dereth, Thomas joined a scouting mission that was supposed to be routine.

Five of them: Elena leading, Reyna and Khalil providing combat expertise, Thomas learning patrol

tactics, and a nervous Aluvian mage named Corwyn who could create light and minor defensive barriers. Their mission was simple—scout north to the crystalline forest, check for Olthoi activity, return before nightfall.

The morning was as beautiful as Dereth ever got. The binary suns painted the landscape in colors Thomas was learning to tolerate if not appreciate. The air carried scents he could almost categorize—mineral and organic mixing in ways that reminded him of forest without being forest. His body had adapted to the different gravity, the different atmosphere, the different rules that governed physical existence here.

But his mind remained stubbornly fixed on Ispar. As they hiked, he found himself counting days again. Twenty-three days here. How many there? Mara would have reported him missing by now. The village would have organized searches. His brother Matthias would have checked all the usual hunting grounds, found nothing, concluded that Thomas had finally met the death he'd been courting for years.

William would have cried. Would have refused to believe Papa wasn't coming back. Would have waited by the door each evening, watching for a figure that would never appear on the path from the forest.

Thomas's hands tightened on his bow until his knuckles whitened.

'Hold,' Elena whispered, hand raised. 'Tracks. Fresh.'

Thomas focused, his hunter's training pushing aside grief to assess threat. The ground here was softer than the valley around Haven—some kind of lichen-equivalent that held impressions. He saw them clearly: Olthoi tracks, multiple individuals, recent enough that the edges hadn't dried.

'Workers or soldiers?' Khalil asked.

'Both. At least four workers, two soldiers. Traveling east, probably returning to whatever hive is in this region.'

'We're outnumbered. We should return to Haven, report the activity.'

'Agreed. We—'

The ground beneath them exploded.

Thomas's hunter's instincts saved him—he rolled sideways even before his conscious mind registered the attack, an Olthoi worker bursting from beneath the soil where he'd been standing. But Corwyn was slower, paralyzed by academic's indecision between options. The worker's mandibles closed around his torso with the sound of breaking wood.

Reyna's arrows were flying before Corwyn finished screaming, targeting the worker's neural clusters with precision born from brutal experience. Khalil charged in from the flank, his sword finding the gap between chitin segments that every fighter learned to exploit.

Thomas nocked an arrow, drew, released. His shot took a second worker in the thorax cluster as it emerged from a tunnel he hadn't noticed. The creature shrieked and fell, but three more were surfacing, and behind them came soldiers—massive forms that made the workers look small.

'Ambush!' Elena shouted, unnecessary but human—the need to name disaster even as it unfolds. 'Fighting retreat! Reyna, cover our backs! Khalil, protect Corwyn!'

But Corwyn was past protecting. The worker's initial attack had been precise, professional, lethal. The mage was dying, his blood soaking into alien soil, his eyes showing the particular awareness that comes in final moments when consciousness faces its imminent end.

Thomas found himself fighting at close range, his bow abandoned for his inadequate hunting knife. A worker lunged, mandibles spread. He dodged left—the new instinct overwriting old ones—and struck high, his blade skittering off chitin. The worker adjusted, faster than anything that size should move, and Thomas saw his death approaching with the clarity of a man who'd learned to recognize it.

Elena's sword took the worker from behind, severing the connection between thorax and abdomen. The creature collapsed, legs spasming, dying but not yet dead. Elena hauled Thomas backward, her grip iron-hard on his arm.

'We can't save Corwyn! Move!'

They ran. Thomas hated running—every hunter’s instinct screamed against turning your back on a predator—but tactical retreat was different than flight. Elena led them through the crystalline forest with competence born from months of desperate experience, taking paths too narrow for soldiers to follow easily, using the terrain to break line of sight.

Behind them, Corwyn’s screaming stopped. Ahead, the sounds of pursuit—clicking and scraping, the Olthoi coordinating their hunt with efficiency that proved Reyna’s earlier warnings. They were smart, disciplined, and currently very interested in the humans who’d stumbled into their ambush zone.

Thomas’s hunter’s mind cataloged his mistakes even as his body ran. He’d been distracted, lost in thought about Ispar instead of focused on his environment. He’d failed to notice the ambush signs—disturbed ground, territorial markers, the particular quality of silence that precedes violence. His competence on Ispar meant nothing here because he kept applying old lessons to new context, and the translation was killing him.

Was killing others because of him.

The soldier Olthoi caught him between crystalline formations, mandibles spread wide enough to bisect a man horizontally. Thomas tried to dodge, but the narrow space offered no room for evasion. He saw the mandibles closing, felt the impact as chitin met flesh, experienced the terrible moment when consciousness recognized that the body no longer functioned.

Then darkness.

Then pulling.

Then reformation at Haven’s lifestone, gasping and whole and remembering everything.

‘Thomas!’ Elena was there, having resurrected before him. ‘You’re back. Good. We need to—’

‘Corwyn?’

‘Dead. He’ll resurrect soon. The Olthoi don’t know to destroy lifestone bonds, so death here is just temporary inconvenience unless you’re caught too far from your bonded stone.’

‘I got us ambushed. I wasn’t paying attention, was thinking about—’

‘About your family. I know. And yes, your distraction contributed. But we all made mistakes.

I chose the patrol route. Reyna didn’t scout thoroughly enough. Khalil let Corwyn lag behind. We share the failure collectively, which means we learn collectively. Tomorrow we drill ambush recognition. Next week you’ll be better. The week after, you’ll be competent. Eventually, you’ll be expert. That’s how survival works here.’

But Thomas barely heard her. He was staring at his hands—whole, unmarked, showing no evidence of having been severed at the wrists when the Olthoi mandibles closed. His body remembered dying, remembered the pain and the darkness and the moment of absolute ending. But his body lied. It claimed wholeness despite recent destruction, claimed continuity despite discontinuity.

‘I’m dead,’ he whispered. ‘Not here, not now, but really. Truly. That thing killed me. Cut me in half. I felt my spine separate, felt my consciousness fragment, felt myself ending. And then I was here, and it’s supposed to feel like salvation but it feels like horror. Because if I can die and come back, if death isn’t ending, then what is? What’s the escape when even dying doesn’t let you leave?’

Elena sat beside him on the ground near the lifestone, her expression showing the particular weariness of someone who’d had this conversation with too many new arrivals.

‘There’s no escape. That’s the point Asheron’s trying to make, or the point he’s accidentally making if his intentions were different. We’re immortal now, bound to these lifestones, resurrecting endlessly unless something destroys the stone itself. We can suffer but not die. Can lose but not end. Can fail repeatedly without the mercy of final failure. It’s its own kind of hell—not the fire and torment the priests describe, but the eternal continuation of consciousness through circumstances you’d desperately like to escape.’

‘Then I’ll destroy my lifestone. Break the bond. Force true death.’

‘Several people have tried. The stones are Empyrean technology, harder than any material we can forge. And even if you succeeded, even if you severed your connection and achieved true death... you’d be dying here, on Dereth, while your family

ages on Ispar. Dead in one world, absent from the other. Is that really better than survival with possibility of eventual return?

Thomas had no answer. His hunter's mind knew that survival always preceded other concerns—you couldn't plan if you were dead, couldn't adapt if you'd ended, couldn't find your way home if you'd given up existence entirely. But his human heart wondered whether indefinite suffering was actually preferable to definitive end.

Corwyn materialized at the lifestone, screaming. His resurrection was rougher than Thomas's had been—the mage clutched at his torso where mandibles had closed, patting himself frantically to confirm the missing pieces had returned. His eyes held the particular wildness of someone whose rational worldview had just been destroyed.

'I died! I felt myself dying! The pain, the darkness, the ending—'

'And now you're back,' Elena said, her voice carrying the forced calm of a handler soothing spooked livestock. 'You're whole. You're safe. You're at Haven, surrounded by people who understand what you just experienced.'

'I don't WANT to understand! I want to go HOME! I want to be in my study researching harmless theory, not here dying and resurrecting and fighting insects the size of horses! This is madness! All of it is madness!'

He ran. Not toward anything but away from everything—the lifestone, the settlement, the people who'd accepted impossibility. Elena didn't stop him. Just watched him go with an expression of sad recognition.

'He'll come back,' she said. 'They always come back. Because there's nowhere to run that makes more sense than here, and eventually exhaustion forces acceptance, and acceptance forces adaptation. You'll go through the same process, Thomas. You're already in it. The difference is you're a hunter, trained to patience and observation. You'll adapt faster than most. But you'll still go through the stages: denial, rage, bargaining, despair, acceptance. Everyone does.'

'What if I don't want to accept?'

'Then you join the Forgotten. The ones who refuse adaptation, who keep insisting that the old rules still apply. Some of them are functional—they fight, they survive, they contribute. But they're hollowed out inside, their whole existence dedicated to reversing the irreversible. Is that the life you want? Eternal crusade against immutable reality?'

Thomas considered. His entire identity had been built around being hunter, father, husband—roles that required specific contexts he no longer had access to. Without forest to hunt, without family to provide for, what was he? Just a man with skills that translated poorly, trapped in a world that operated on rules he was still learning.

But he was still learning. That mattered. As long as he could observe, adapt, improve, there was purpose. Maybe not the purpose he wanted—returning home to Mara and William—but purpose nonetheless.

'Teach me more,' he told Elena. 'Everything you know about the Olthoi, about Dereth, about the other settlements and factions. I can't go home yet. Can't find Asheron or reverse the portals or fix what's broken. But I can learn. And if learning eventually leads to understanding, and understanding eventually leads to options, then I'll keep learning until options emerge.'

'That's the right attitude. Frustrating, exhausting, desperate—but right. Come. The sun's going down, and we need to increase patrols after that ambush. The Olthoi know we're active in this region, which means they'll probe our defenses. Tonight you'll stand watch with Khalil and learn what nighttime sounds like when insects the size of men are hunting you.'

That night, standing watch on Haven's defensive wall, Thomas learned that Dereth's darkness was different from Ispar's. The stars were wrong—constellations he'd navigated by since childhood were absent, replaced by patterns that meant nothing. The sounds were alien—clicking and scraping where there should be owl calls and wind through leaves. Even the quality of darkness itself felt wrong, as if light didn't quite leave when the suns set, but lin-

gered in ways that made shadows deeper and threats harder to assess.

Khalil stood watch beside him, comfortable in the darkness in a way that suggested extensive experience with it.

‘You died well today,’ Khalil observed.

‘I died stupidly. I was distracted, thinking about home instead of focusing on the patrol.’

‘But when the soldier caught you, you tried to dodge. Muscle memory from training overrode panic. That’s good dying—making your last actions useful even when death is certain. Bad dying is freezing, or running in wrong direction, or wasting final moments on regret. You’ll die hundreds more times before you’re truly competent here. Might as well learn to die well.’

Thomas absorbed this grim wisdom silently. Back on Ispar, hunters who died were mourned. Here, death was curriculum—you learned from it, improved because of it, integrated each ending into your growing competence. It was practical in a way that felt monstrous, but Thomas understood practicality. His entire life had been built on it.

‘How many times have you died?’ he asked.

‘Stopped counting at forty-seven. That was three months ago. Probably seventy, eighty times total. Each one taught me something—about Olthoi behavior, or my own limits, or how pain and fear interact. I’m not proud of dying. But I’m not ashamed either. It’s just cost of education here.’

‘And you don’t want to go home?’

‘I was a soldier. Followed orders, fought wars I didn’t understand, killed enemies I had no personal grudge against. I had no family—wife died in childbirth, child with her. My life on Ispar was duty without reward. Here? Same duty, but at least I understand the enemy and can see the point. The Olthoi want to consume this world. We want to survive. Simple conflict, clear sides, no political complexity. In some ways, this is easier than home.’

‘I had family. Wife, son. I left them to hunt, and found the portal instead. Every night I wonder if they’re wondering where I am, or if they’ve already mourned and moved on. I don’t know which is worse.’

‘Both are worse,’ Khalil said quietly. ‘Wondering is torture. Moving on is abandonment. You’re trapped in the space between hope and acceptance, and there’s no comfortable position there. The Forgotten understand this—they refuse to move on, insist on indefinite wondering. But Elena’s right that it hollows you out eventually. You become refugee from your own life, permanent exile from acceptance.’

They stood watch in silence for a while, listening to alien sounds, watching alien stars, both of them guarding a settlement neither had chosen but both had learned to protect.

Then the clicking started.

Not random sounds but coordinated communication—Olthoi on the move, multiple groups converging on Haven from different angles. Khalil tensed, hand going to the horn that would sound alarm.

‘Attack,’ he said, his voice carrying the flat certainty of experienced soldiers recognizing certainty. ‘Large force, probably workers backed by soldiers. They’re probing our response. Wake everyone. Arm everyone. This is going to be bad.’

Thomas blew the alarm, the horn’s cry shattering Dereth’s wrong-quiet night. Below, the settlement erupted into panicked activity—people stumbling from shelters, grabbing weapons, forming defensive positions with the ragged efficiency of people who’d done this before but never gotten used to it.

The Olthoi came from three directions simultaneously.

Workers from the north, soldiers from the east, more workers from the west. Coordinated assault designed to overwhelm Haven’s defenses through sheer multi-front pressure. They’d been watching, Thomas realized. Learning the settlement’s layout, counting fighters, timing the attack for maximum impact.

He shot at shadows—indistinct forms moving in darkness, identifiable only by clicking sounds and the reflection of moonlight off chitin. His arrows found targets more through volume than precision, each shot a gamble that resolved as hit or miss without time for assessment.

Beside him, Khalil fought with a short sword, defending their position on the wall when workers succeeded in scaling it. Thomas watched the

man move—economy of motion, each strike targeting joints and neural clusters, defense as practiced as breathing.

A soldier Olthoi breached the wall, mandibles tearing through crude fortification. Thomas shot it at near-point-blank range, his arrow lodging in its thorax cluster. The creature shrieked and lunged, forcing Thomas to drop his bow and draw his hunting knife—inadequate but available.

He dodged left, muscle memory from training overriding terror. Struck high, blade finding the gap between head and thorax. The Olthoi's momentum carried it forward, its dying body slamming into Thomas and knocking him off the wall.

He fell three meters onto hard ground, landing badly, feeling his left leg snap like dry wood. Pain flooded his system, bright and chemical, his body screaming warnings his mind barely registered.

'Thomas!' Elena was there, dragging him toward shelter even as workers pressed the attack. 'Can you fight?'

'Leg's broken. I can shoot from the ground but can't stand.'

'Good enough. Here—'

She propped him against a shelter wall, thrust his bow into his hands. Thomas shot at targets she indicated, his vision narrowing to the tunnel focus of someone operating through pure adrenaline and stubborn will.

The battle lasted hours or minutes—time became negotiable under pressure. Thomas shot until his quiver was empty, then threw his useless knife at a worker, then used his bow as a club when another got too close. His broken leg screamed protests, but he ignored it with the practiced detachment of someone who'd learned that pain was just information and information could be filed for later.

Eventually the Olthoi retreated. Not routed—their withdrawal was orderly, professional, the tactical decision of a commander recognizing that further assault would cost more than it gained. They left behind dead workers, wounded soldiers, and clear message: Haven was marked, observed, targeted.

Thomas sagged against the wall, finally allowing himself to acknowledge the damage. His leg was an-

gled wrong below the knee, bone broken in at least two places. Blood soaked his trouser leg from wounds he didn't remember receiving. His hands shook from exhaustion and blood loss.

'Healer!' Elena shouted. 'We need the healer!'

'No,' Thomas gasped. 'Just... let me pass out. When I wake up at the lifestone, the leg will be fixed.'

'Death isn't healing. We have a healer who can set bones, prevent infection—'

'Death is faster. And right now, fast sounds better than painful.'

He was fading already, blood loss catching up with adrenaline. The darkness that approached wasn't the darkness of sleep but the darkness of ending, and some part of him welcomed it—the temporary cessation of pain, of thought, of the constant grinding awareness that he was trapped in a nightmare with no visible exit.

Then pulling.

Then reformation at the lifestone, gasping and whole.

His fourth death on Dereth, and the first one that felt more like relief than horror.

4.4 The Offer in the Darkness

Five days after the attack, Thomas stood alone at the northern edge of Haven's territory, staring into wilderness and wondering what he was becoming.

The settlement had survived. Twelve people died during the assault, all resurrected by morning. The defensive wall was repaired, patrols were doubled, and Haven's residents now moved with the particular wary tension of people who'd learned that their shelter was temporary and their survival negotiable.

Thomas had thrown himself into training with the focused intensity of someone using activity to avoid thought. He drilled with bow and blade until exhaustion forced rest. He volunteered for every patrol, every watch, every dangerous assignment. He died six more times in five days—three times from training accidents, twice from patrol encounters, once from falling asleep on watch and tumbling off the defensive wall.

Ten deaths total. The count had become automatic, a running tally in his mind: ten endings, ten resurrections, ten confirmations that escape was impossible and continuity was mandatory.

Elena had warned him about this—the desperate activity phase, where new arrivals pushed themselves to extremes trying to escape internal torment through external exhaustion. She said it was healthy to a point, therapeutic even. But beyond that point lay breakdown.

Thomas suspected he was approaching that beyond.

He'd come to this spot because it was as far from Haven as patrols were allowed to go alone. Far enough that other people's voices didn't reach. Far enough that the constant activity of survival could pause for a moment. Far enough that he could think without interruption.

And thinking, he'd discovered, was worse than dying.

Because thinking meant counting days. Thirty-seven days since the portal. How much time on Ispar? Mara would have given up hope by now. The village would have held whatever ritual they held for missing hunters. Matthias would have cleaned out Thomas's possessions, distributed his tools, consoled Mara with the awkward affection of a man who'd never understood his brother but had loved him nonetheless.

And William? What did a seven-year-old understand about permanent loss? Did he still wait by the door in the evenings, or had Mara managed to convince him that Papa wasn't coming back? Was he angry at Thomas for leaving, or did he idealize his absent father the way children often did, turning abandonment into legend?

Thomas pulled out the leather cord from under his shirt—William's baby tooth, the one tooth he'd been home to see come loose. He'd kept it as a reminder of what he was providing for. Now it was just a reminder of what he'd lost.

'You are troubled,' said a voice that wasn't a voice—concept more than sound, language that bypassed ears to settle directly into his mind.

Thomas spun, bow drawn and arrow nocked in the time it took to complete the motion. But he saw

nothing—no Olthoi, no human, no physical presence that could have spoken.

'Show yourself,' he demanded.

'We are,' the concept-voice responded. 'Your perceptions are simply inadequate to the task of observing us. We exist in spectrum your eyes do not register. But we can adjust. Observe.'

Reality flickered, and suddenly there were three figures before him—or not figures exactly, but something that his mind interpreted as figures because it needed shapes to make sense of presence. They appeared as humanoid forms draped in flowing fabric, but the fabric wasn't cloth and the forms weren't physical. They were thought given quasi-material substance, consciousness made almost-visible, intelligence approaching from directions he couldn't quite map.

'What are you?'

'Virindi is the name you may use. We are observers, students of consciousness and its many forms. We have watched your species since arrival with great interest. You are remarkable—conscious despite impermanence, purposeful despite certain death, creating meaning where none objectively exists. Fascinating creatures, humans. Full of contradictions.'

'Why are you here? What do you want from me?'

'To offer opportunity. You seek return to your world, to your family. We cannot provide this directly—the portals are Asheron's work, bound by his will. But we can teach you to understand them. Can share knowledge that might, eventually, lead to reversal.'

Thomas's hunter's instincts screamed warnings. Offers that seemed too good were usually traps—lures designed to exploit desperation. But his father's desperation was louder, more insistent, more immediately compelling.

'Why would you help me?'

'We observe. To observe properly, we must sometimes interact. Your species has proven... difficult to understand through pure observation. You act in ways our models cannot predict. We wish to learn why. Teaching you portal mechanics in exchange for observing how you apply that knowledge—this seems

equitable trade. You gain possibility of return. We gain data about human decision-making in extremis.’

‘And if I refuse?’

‘Then you continue as you are—training, fighting, dying, resurrecting, never quite adapting because adaptation requires accepting permanence of situation. We have observed you these thirty-seven days. You have not accepted. You perform survival activities while maintaining internal certainty that situation is temporary. This division will eventually break you. Our offer provides alternative: channel your refusal-to-accept into practical action toward desired outcome.’

Thomas lowered his bow slowly. The Virindi—if that’s what they were—weren’t physically threatening. They simply stood (floated? existed?) observing him with what might have been curiosity or might have been something that human concepts couldn’t quite capture.

‘What would I have to do?’

‘Learn. We teach portal mechanics—theory, structure, the principles by which dimensional boundaries are manipulated. We explain how Asheron bound the portals to Dereth’s magical field. We show you what would be required to reverse his work. You apply this knowledge as you see fit. We observe and catalog your decisions.’

‘That’s all? You teach, I learn, you watch?’

‘We may occasionally request specific information—your observations about other humans, about Asheron if you encounter him, about the Olthoi and their behaviors. But we will not command. Trade implies voluntary exchange, and we prefer our test subjects uncoerced for more accurate data.’

Test subjects. The term confirmed what Thomas had suspected—the Virindi saw humans as experimental organisms, interesting the way complicated insects might be interesting. But they were offering something no one else had: knowledge that might lead to return.

‘I accept,’ Thomas said, the decision settling over him like familiar weight. ‘Teach me. I’ll learn whatever you know about portals. And if your knowledge helps me find my way home, then you can ob-

serve all you want. I’ll be the most interesting test subject you’ve ever watched.’

‘Excellent. We will begin immediately. First lesson: portals are not tears in reality but bridges—constructed connections following specific rules. To reverse a portal, one must understand not just its current configuration but its construction principles. Attend.’

The Virindi—all three of them speaking simultaneously, their concept-voices weaving together into something approaching harmony—began to teach. They showed him diagrams that appeared directly in his mind: the mathematical structure of dimensional boundaries, the way magical fields could be manipulated to create stable connections, the binding spells that locked portals to specific locations.

Thomas absorbed it all with the hunter’s focus he’d honed over three decades of tracking. This was just a different kind of trail—not footprints in soil but patterns in magical theory, not animal behavior but dimensional mechanics. The translation wasn’t perfect, but translation never was. He’d learned to read forests that others found illegible. He could learn to read portals.

Hours passed like moments. The Virindi taught without pause, flooding his mind with knowledge that should have been incomprehensible but somehow wasn’t. Maybe the lifestones had changed him, expanded his cognitive capacity. Maybe desperation was enhancing his ability to learn. Maybe the Virindi were doing something to his perception, making their lessons more accessible than they should have been.

He didn’t care about the mechanism. Only the outcome.

‘Enough for today,’ the Virindi finally announced. ‘You have received fundamental principles. We will meet again tomorrow night, same location, to continue instruction. Do not speak of this to others. Human social dynamics suggest they would disapprove of our arrangement, and disapproval would limit your freedom to learn.’

‘They would think I was being manipulated. Being used.’

‘Are those incorrect assessments? We are using you—as source of observational data. You are

using us—as source of theoretical knowledge. All relationships are transactional at root. The question is whether the transaction is equitable, not whether it exists.’

The Virindi flickered and vanished, leaving Thomas alone again at the northern edge of Haven’s territory. The night was fully dark now, Dereth’s wrong stars bright against purple-black sky. He should return to the settlement, should sleep, should prepare for tomorrow’s training and patrols.

But he stood for a long time, thinking about transactions and test subjects and the lies people tell themselves about their motivations.

The Virindi were right about one thing: he hadn’t accepted his situation. Wouldn’t accept it. Couldn’t accept it without abandoning Mara and William, and abandonment was the one sin he refused to commit again, even if the first abandonment had been accident rather than choice.

If learning portal mechanics gave him even a slim chance of return, then he’d learn. If working with alien intelligences who saw him as experimental subject was the price, he’d pay it. If other humans would disapprove—would call him desperate or deluded or collaborating with entities no one understood—he’d bear their disapproval.

Because the alternative was accepting that he’d destroyed his family for nothing, that his choice at the portal had been final, that his life on Ispar was truly over and only this nightmare remained.

And that was an alternative Thomas refused to accept.

‘I’m coming home,’ he whispered to people who couldn’t hear him. ‘I don’t know how. Don’t know how long it will take. But I’m learning, and learning leads to understanding, and understanding leads to action. I won’t give up. Won’t move on. Won’t let go of you just because reality says I should.’

He walked back to Haven slowly, his mind churning through the knowledge the Virindi had given him—dimensional mathematics, binding principles, the structure of connections between worlds. It would take time to fully integrate, longer to understand well enough to apply. But time was the one resource he had in abundance, time measured in resurrections

and repeated deaths and the endless grinding continuation of consciousness that couldn’t escape.

Elena was waiting at the settlement’s edge when he returned.

‘You were gone a long time. I was about to send a patrol.’

‘Just thinking. Needed space to process.’

‘Process what? Your tenth death? The attack? The realization that this is permanent?’

‘All of it. None of it. Just... thinking.’

She studied him in the darkness, her scarred face showing the particular concern of someone who’d learned to recognize when new arrivals were approaching breakdown.

‘You’re planning something. I can see it in your eyes. You’ve got that look people get when they’ve decided acceptance isn’t an option and desperate action is the only alternative.’

‘I’m planning to survive. Same as everyone here.’

‘No. Everyone here survives. You’re doing something else. Something that feels like survival but is really refusal. Just... be careful, Thomas. The people who refuse to accept what’s happened, who keep fighting the fundamental realities of our situation—they don’t end well. They become obsessed, hollow, consumed by goals they’ll never achieve. Is that really who you want to become?’

Thomas met her eyes in the darkness, and for a moment he wanted to tell her everything—about the Virindi, about the offer, about the knowledge he was gaining. But the Virindi were right about human social dynamics. Elena would disapprove, would call it dangerous or delusional, would try to stop him for his own good.

‘I want to be someone who doesn’t give up on his family,’ he said finally. ‘Even if that makes me obsessed or hollow or worse. I won’t abandon them again. Not while I’m conscious, not while I can learn, not while any possibility remains however slim.’

‘And if the possibility isn’t real? If the Virindi are using your desperation for their own purposes, feeding you hope that doesn’t lead anywhere?’

‘Then I’ll learn that eventually, and I’ll adjust. But I won’t stop trying until I know for certain that return is impossible. I can’t. That’s just who I am.’

Elena sighed, the sound carrying years of watching people make choices she couldn’t prevent.

‘All right. I won’t stop you. But I’ll be watching, and if whatever you’re doing starts to damage Haven or the people here, I’ll intervene. Understood?’

‘Understood.’

‘Good. Now get some sleep. Tomorrow you’re on advanced combat drills with Khalil, and he doesn’t go easy on the sleep-deprived. You’ll probably die three or four times. Might as well be rested for it.’

Thomas went to his shelter—still sparse after five weeks, still temporary-feeling, still not home and never home no matter how long he stayed. He lay on his bedroll, staring at the roof that leaked and counting days: thirty-seven here, unknown there, every one taking him further from Mara and William while somehow keeping them equally distant.

But now he had something he hadn’t had before: knowledge, and the promise of more knowledge, and the slim possibility that knowledge might translate to action and action might translate to return.

It was false hope. Probably. Almost certainly.

But it was hope nonetheless, and hope was dangerous and necessary and the only thing preventing him from becoming one of the Broken who sat by Haven’s central fire, functioning but absent, alive but not really living.

Outside, Dereth’s night continued its alien symphony. Inside, Thomas closed his eyes and dreamed of forests he understood, of a wife who waited, of a son who believed his father’s promises were absolute.

And in his dreams, the Virindi observed and cataloged and made notes about human desperation and its remarkable ability to override reason in service of attachment.

Test subject indeed, Thomas thought as sleep finally claimed him. But if being a test subject got him home, then he’d be the best damn test subject the Virindi had ever studied.

He’d learn their lessons, follow their instructions, absorb every fragment of knowledge they offered.

And then he’d use that knowledge to do what hunters did best: track his prey back to its source, and claim what had been taken from him.

Even if the prey was dimensional boundaries, and the source was a mage named Asheron, and what had been taken was everything that made life worth living.

Chapter 5

The Nature of the Enemy

5.1 Understanding the Olthoi

Weeks became months as the four adapted to their new reality, each in their own way coming to understand the true nature of their enemy—and perhaps, their purpose.

Marcus studied the Olthoi with a soldier's eye, cataloguing their tactics, their hierarchies, their weaknesses. They weren't mindless insects but a sophisticated hive society with castes, roles, and what appeared to be strategic intelligence. The workers built and maintained their vast underground networks. The soldiers defended and attacked with coordinated precision. And somewhere, in depths no human had yet survived to map, queens directed it all with alien intelligence.

'They're not evil,' he explained to his war council. 'They're competitors. They see us as invaders because we are. Asheron brought us here to fight his war, and they're defending their territory.'

'Does that change anything?' Khalid asked.

'No. But understanding your enemy's motivation is the first step to defeating them. They fight for survival, same as us. The difference is, they belong here. We don't.'

His tactical assessments proved invaluable. He identified patterns in their attacks, seasonal movements that suggested migration or mating cycles, weaknesses in their otherwise impervious carapaces. Under his guidance, Fort Ironwood's defenders began

winning more often than they lost, though the cost in human lives remained staggering.

Thomas tracked the Olthoi as he'd once tracked game, learning their habits through patient observation. He discovered they avoided certain plants, that their movements followed underground water sources, that they communicated through pheromones that could be masked or mimicked with the right preparations.

But the more he learned, the more he resented his role in this war. These creatures hadn't asked for human invasion any more than humans had asked to be brought here. Everyone was a victim of Asheron's desperate gambit.

'You're thinking too much,' Elena warned him. 'That's dangerous here. Think too much and you start sympathizing with them. Sympathize with them and you hesitate. Hesitate and you die.'

'Die and come back,' Thomas countered bitterly, having learned about the lifestones that prevented true death. 'We can't even escape through dying. We're trapped in an eternal war.'

'Then we'd better win it.'

'Or learn to stop fighting it.'

Duulak approached the Olthoi as a puzzle to be solved. He dissected dead specimens, studied their biology, theorized about their evolution. They were perfectly adapted to this world's unique conditions—the high magical saturation, the crystalline geology, the binary sun system that created irregular day-night cycles.

His most significant discovery was that the Olthoi were not native to Dereth either. Microscopic analysis of their chitin revealed isotopic ratios that didn't match the local environment. They too had been brought here, pulled through portals opened by the Emyreans in their hunger for expansion.

'We're all refugees,' he explained to the Seekers. 'The Emyreans brought the Olthoi here by accident, opening portals they couldn't close. The Olthoi overwhelmed them, so they fled. Only Asheron remained, and his solution was to bring us here to fight his mistakes. We're not heroes or chosen ones. We're janitors, cleaning up someone else's mess.'

This revelation spread through the human settlements like wildfire, dividing survivors into factions. Some saw it as more reason to hate Asheron. Others argued it made no difference—they were here now and had to survive regardless of the why.

Maajid's understanding of the Olthoi was the most disturbing. Through methods that involved meditation, certain mushrooms that grew near portal sites, and a willingness to let his consciousness drift dangerously far from his body, he claimed to have touched the edges of the Olthoi hive mind.

'They dream,' he announced to his followers in Paradox. 'They dream of home, same as us. They dream of skies that aren't purple, of hives that stretch to the planet's core, of a time before they knew what it was to be torn from everything familiar.'

'You're saying they're like us?'

'I'm saying they are us, from a different angle. We're all playing roles in someone else's story. The question is: can we rewrite our parts?'

His attempts to communicate with the Olthoi through dream and meditation yielded strange results. Sometimes Olthoi would simply walk past him as if he weren't there. Other times they would stop and regard him with what might have been curiosity. Once, a worker left a crystalline fragment at his feet—a gift, a warning, or something without human interpretation.

5.2 The Lifestones

The discovery of the lifestones changed everything and nothing. Death became impermanent, but suffering remained eternal.

Thomas died first among the four, caught in an ambush while hunting for food. An Olthoi soldier's mandibles closed around his torso, severing his spine. He felt everything—the pressure, the tearing, the moment his consciousness separated from his ruined flesh.

Then he felt himself pulled, reformed, reconstituted at a standing stone that hummed with ancient power. He stood there, whole and healthy, screaming at the impossibility of it all. He had died. He knew he had died. Yet here he stood, memories intact, even the memory of dying preserved in perfect, horrifying clarity.

'The lifestones,' Elena explained when he stumbled back to Haven, wild-eyed and shaking. 'Asheron's greatest gift and cruelest curse. We can't die. We can only suffer, forget a little, and suffer again.'

'This is hell.'

'No. Hell would be simpler. This is something worse—hope without fulfillment, life without meaning, war without end.'

Marcus approached the lifestones tactically. He died testing their limits, deliberately allowing himself to be overwhelmed to understand the resurrection process. The experience was traumatic but informative. The stones didn't just restore the body; they anchored the soul to this world, making return to Ispah not just unlikely but potentially impossible.

Each death weakened the connection to his old life, replacing memories of home with memories of dying and returning. He could feel himself becoming more of Dereth and less of the Empire with each resurrection.

'It's a trap,' he reported to Khalid. 'The lifestones ensure we can't abandon the war even if we wanted to. We're bound here, eternal soldiers in an eternal conflict.'

'Then we'd better learn to win.'

‘Or learn to make peace. Even eternal wars end when both sides are too exhausted to continue.’ but empty of everything that had made them individuals.

Duulak studied the lifestones with scientific fascination and growing horror. They were Empyrean technology, powered by ley lines that ran through Dereth like blood vessels. Each resurrection wasn’t true restoration but reconstruction from a template, with subtle variations accumulating over multiple deaths.

‘We’re copies of copies,’ he explained to Celeste. ‘Each time we die and return, we’re slightly different. After enough deaths, are we even the same person who first stepped through the portal?’

‘Does it matter?’

‘It matters if you’re trying to understand what Asheron truly did to us. We’re not just soldiers. We’re experiments in consciousness transfer, in soul-binding, in the limits of human identity.’

His research revealed something else: the lifestones were connected, forming a network that recorded not just individual deaths but collective experience. Every human who died added their knowledge to an invisible library that future generations might access, if they knew how.

Maajid embraced the lifestones with disturbing enthusiasm. He died repeatedly, deliberately, exploring the space between death and resurrection where consciousness existed without flesh.

‘It’s beautiful there,’ he told his followers after his seventh deliberate death. ‘Pure thought, pure possibility. The body is just a convenience we return to out of habit. We could choose to stay in that space, become something more than human.’

‘But then we wouldn’t be human at all.’

‘Exactly!’ he laughed. ‘That’s the joke Asheron played on us. He gave us immortality but tied it to flesh. He made us gods who insist on remaining mortal. The void mocks us because we mock ourselves.’

Some of his followers attempted to follow his example, dying repeatedly to explore the space between. Not all of them came back sane. Some didn’t come back at all, their consciousnesses lost in the gap between death and resurrection, their bodies reformed

Part II

Volume II: The Awakening

Chapter 6

Paths of Power

6.1 Duulak's Theoretical Breakthrough

Six months after his arrival, Duulak made a discovery that would reshape humanity's understanding of their situation. Working with salvaged Empyrean texts and his own observations of portal mechanics, he realized the summonings weren't random—they were selective, following patterns that suggested deliberate design rather than desperate improvisation.

In the ruins of what had once been an Empyrean library, he found references to something called the Harbinger Protocol—a last-resort plan developed by Asheron's predecessors in case of catastrophic invasion. The protocol called for the summoning of a "adaptive species" that could evolve rapidly to meet any threat.

'Humans,' he explained to the assembled Seekers. 'We were chosen because we adapt faster than any other known sentient species. Our short lives, our psychological flexibility, our ability to find meaning in suffering—all of it makes us perfect for Asheron's needs.'

'You're saying we were selected like... breeding stock?'

'Worse. We're weapons that improve themselves. Every death teaches us, every resurrection makes us stronger, every generation becomes more attuned to this world. In a thousand years, humans born here won't even be the same species as those who came through the portals.'

This knowledge sparked fierce debate among the survivors. Some saw it as vindication—they were chosen, special, destined for greatness. Others saw it as the ultimate insult—they were tools, nothing more, selected for their utility rather than their worth.

Duulak himself fell into neither camp. He saw it as simply another piece of the puzzle, another variable in the vast equation he was trying to solve. If humans were meant to evolve, perhaps that evolution could be directed, controlled, even reversed.

He began experimenting with the interaction between human consciousness and Dereth's magical field, using himself as the primary test subject. The results were disturbing but promising. Human neural patterns were indeed changing, developing new pathways that didn't exist in Ispar-born humans. These changes were subtle but accelerating with each resurrection.

'We're becoming native to this world,' he recorded in his journal. 'Not through natural evolution but through magical adaptation. Each death and resurrection rewrites us slightly, making us more compatible with Dereth's unique properties. The question is: can this process be reversed, or have we already passed the point of no return?'

6.2 Thomas's Descent

As months turned to years, Thomas's hope of return curdled into something darker. He'd died seventeen

times, each death adding another layer of scar tissue to his psyche. The memory of his family became both more precious and more painful, a wound that wouldn't heal because the lifestones wouldn't let it.

He began hunting Olthoi with a fury that frightened even hardened survivors. Where once he'd been Thomas the Steady, he became Thomas the Grim, seeking not victory but oblivion in every battle. But oblivion wouldn't come. The lifestones always brought him back, always forced him to continue.

'You're going to break,' Elena warned him after watching him take unnecessary risks in a raid. 'I've seen it happen. The mind can only bend so far before it snaps.'

'Maybe that's what I want. Maybe broken is better than this constant remembering.'

'Your family wouldn't want this for you.'

'My family thinks I'm dead. Or worse, they think I abandoned them. Every day that passes here is time I'm not there. My son is growing up without me. My wife is growing old alone. And I'm here, unable to die, unable to live, unable to do anything but continue this pointless war.'

It was in this state that Thomas first encountered the Virindi.

The beings of pure thought had been observing the human settlements, drawn by the anomaly of consciousness that survived death. They approached Thomas one night as he sat alone outside Haven's perimeter, contemplating another deliberate death just to feel something other than despair.

They didn't speak in words but in concepts that appeared directly in his mind, cold and precise as mathematical proofs.

You seek return. We seek understanding. Cooperation benefits both.

'What are you?' We are thought without flesh, will without matter. Trapped as you are trapped, seeking escape as you seek escape.

'Can you get me home?' Home is a concept. Concepts can be altered. Reality can be rewritten. But the key is held by the one who brought you here.

'Asheron.' The Yalain. He must be understood, controlled, or eliminated. We will teach you. You will act. Both will benefit.

The alliance that formed that night would have consequences Thomas couldn't imagine. The Virindi taught him to see the threads that bound reality, the magical resonances that held souls to lifestones, the patterns that governed portal formation. In return, he became their agent among humans, gathering information, recruiting others who'd lost hope, building toward a confrontation with Asheron that might free them all or damn them further.

6.3 Marcus's Military Innovation

While others despaired or theorized, Marcus organized. He established communication between the scattered human settlements, creating a network that shared intelligence, resources, and tactical innovations. What began as simple survival evolved into something resembling an actual military force.

He introduced Roman Legion tactics adapted for Olthoi combat: shield walls modified to defend against attacks from below, pilum designed to penetrate chitin at specific angles, formations that could respond to the three-dimensional nature of Olthoi assaults.

'Discipline defeats numbers,' he drilled into his recruits. 'Coordination defeats strength. Intelligence defeats instinct. We may be outnumbered, but we are not outmatched.'

'They're infinite, Commander. They breed faster than we can kill them.'

'Then we don't try to kill them all. We establish boundaries, create deterrents, make the cost of attacking us higher than the benefit. Even insects understand economics on an instinctive level.'

His greatest innovation was the integration of magic into military doctrine. Mages weren't separate support units but integral parts of each squad, their spells woven into tactics as naturally as sword work. Fire mages created barriers and funneled enemy movement. Ice mages slowed charges and created defensive positions. Mind mages coordinated units with thought-speed communication.

The success of these integrated units drew survivors from across Dereth. Fort Ironwood grew from a desperate holdout to a proper military installation, complete with training grounds, armories, and even a primitive war college where tactics were developed and tested.

But Marcus's greatest challenge wasn't the Olthoi—it was maintaining morale among immortal soldiers fighting an eternal war. The lifestones prevented death but not exhaustion, not despair, not the slow erosion of humanity that came from endless conflict.

'We need more than survival,' he told his war council. 'We need purpose beyond just continuing to exist. We need to build something worth defending, create a future worth fighting for.'

'What future? We're trapped here forever.'

'Then we make forever worth living. We build cities, not just camps. We create civilization, not just resistance. We become not just survivors but citizens of this new world.'

It was a vision that resonated with many, but not all. Some, like Thomas, saw it as capitulation, acceptance of their imprisonment. The division between those who sought to escape and those who sought to adapt would define human society on Dereth for generations.

6.4 Maajid's Transcendent Experiments

In Paradox, Maajid pushed the boundaries of what human consciousness could become when freed from the constraints of single-bodied existence. His experiments with death and resurrection had revealed something profound: consciousness wasn't tied to the body as tightly as most believed.

'We think of ourselves as flesh that happens to think,' he explained to his followers. 'But we're thoughts that happen to wear flesh. The lifestones prove this—they preserve the pattern of consciousness and simply provide it with new matter to inhabit.'

'But we still need bodies to exist.'

'Do we? Or have we simply not tried hard enough to exist without them?'

His experiments grew more extreme. He learned to maintain awareness during the resurrection process, experiencing the moment of reconstitution when consciousness knitted itself back into flesh. He discovered that with sufficient will, he could influence that process, making subtle changes to his reformed body.

At first, the changes were minor—eliminating scars, adjusting height slightly, altering hair color. But as his understanding deepened, the modifications became more profound. He gave himself additional fingers to better manipulate magical energies, restructured his eyes to perceive spectrums invisible to normal humans, altered his brain chemistry to maintain perfect recall of every death and resurrection.

'You're becoming inhuman,' one of his followers warned.

'I'm becoming more than human. Isn't that what Asheron wanted? For us to evolve, to adapt, to become something capable of inheriting this world?'

'He wanted us to fight his war.'

'No, he wanted us to survive his war. There's a difference. Fighting is just one form of survival. Evolution is another.'

Some of his followers attempted similar modifications, with varying degrees of success. Some achieved remarkable transformations, becoming beings that straddled the line between human and something else. Others lost themselves in the process, their consciousness fragmenting during resurrection, returning as empty shells or worse—as things that wore human shape but were hollow of human thought.

The settlement of Paradox became a laboratory for human potential, terrifying and fascinating in equal measure. Visitors reported seeing impossible things: humans who could phase partially out of physical existence, individuals who seemed to exist in multiple places simultaneously, beings that communicated through pure thought projection rather than speech.

Maajid himself became something that was difficult to define. He retained human shape most of the time, but observers noted that his form seemed to flicker occasionally, as if he existed on multiple planes

simultaneously. His eyes held depths that shouldn't exist in three-dimensional space, and his laughter carried harmonics that made reality shiver.

Chapter 7

The First Convergence

7.1 The Virindi Proposition

Two years after the first arrivals, the four who would become known as the Harbingers had their first convergence, though none yet recognized its significance.

It began with the Virindi, who had been observing all four with interest. These beings of pure thought recognized something in each that resonated with their own goals: Duulak's theoretical understanding of reality's underlying structure, Thomas's desperate desire to unmake what had been made, Marcus's ability to organize and lead, and Maajid's willingness to transcend human limitations.

The Virindi arranged the meeting without the four knowing it was arranged, manipulating events to bring them to the same Empyrean ruin at the same moment. Each had come for different reasons—Duulak seeking texts, Thomas hunting Olthoi, Marcus scouting defensive positions, Maajid following whispers only he could hear.

When they encountered each other in the ruin's central chamber, weapons were drawn before words were spoken. Trust was a luxury none of them could afford in this hostile world. But before violence could erupt, the Virindi manifested, their presence filling the chamber with cold intelligence.

You four will determine humanity's fate on this world. Together or separately, willingly or not, you are the catalysts for what comes next.

'Who are you to make such claims?' Marcus demanded, his gladius still ready. *We are observers*

who have become participants. We see patterns you cannot, futures that branch from this moment. In some, humanity thrives. In others, it becomes something unrecognizable. In still others, it ceases entirely.

'And you care about our fate?' Duulak's voice carried skepticism. *We care about our own fate, which is intertwined with yours. Asheron's magic binds us all—Olthoi, human, Virindi. To break free, we must understand the binding. You four have pieces of that understanding.*

The Virindi showed them visions—possible futures spreading from their choices like branches from a tree. In some visions, humanity conquered the Olthoi and built a civilization that surpassed even the Empyreans. In others, humans became something monstrous, evolved beyond recognition or morality. In the darkest visions, the war never ended, grinding on for millennia until both species were worn down to nothing but automatic violence.

'Why us?' Thomas asked, his voice hollow with the weight of too many deaths. *The mage understands the mechanics. The hunter knows the cost. The soldier can organize resistance or revolution. The transcendent shows what humanity might become. Together, you are possibility incarnate.*

'Together,' Maajid laughed, the sound echoing strangely in the ruins. 'Four broken souls pretending to be whole. We're not saviors. We're symptoms of the disease Asheron infected this world with.' *Disease and cure are often the same substance in differ-*

ent doses. You have a choice: remain symptoms or become treatment.

7.2 The Debate

What followed was the first real conversation between minds that would shape Dereth's future, though none of them knew it yet.

'We should kill Asheron,' Thomas stated flatly. 'He's the source of all this. Remove him, and perhaps the portals can be reversed.'

'Killing him solves nothing,' Duulak countered. 'The portals are maintained by the magical infrastructure of this entire world. Asheron's death might make them permanent rather than reversible.'

'Then we force him to reverse them,' Thomas insisted.

'Force an Empyrean archmage? With what power?'

'With organization,' Marcus interjected. 'Unite humanity, present a common front. Even Asheron can't stand against thousands of us working together.'

'Thousands of humans who can't even agree on whether to accept this fate or fight it?' Duulak shook his head. 'We'd have civil war before we could threaten Asheron.'

'Perhaps the answer isn't to threaten or plead,' Maajid suggested, his form flickering slightly. 'Perhaps it's to become something Asheron didn't expect. He brought humans here to fight his war. What if we refuse? What if we evolve beyond his intentions?'

'Evolve into what?' Marcus asked.

'Into whatever we choose. The lifestones make us immortal. This world's magic makes transformation possible. We could become beings that don't need to go home because we transcend the concept of home itself.'

'That's not evolution, that's surrender,' Thomas snarled.

'Is it? Or is clinging to the past the real surrender?'

The argument continued for hours, each presenting their vision of humanity's future on Dereth. Marcus spoke of building a new Rome, a civilization that

would make their imprisonment meaningful. Duulak proposed understanding the fundamental forces at work, believing knowledge would provide options they couldn't yet imagine. Thomas advocated for revolution, for forcing Asheron to undo what he'd done regardless of the cost. Maajid suggested transcendence, becoming something beyond human, beyond the conflict entirely.

The Virindi observed silently, their presence a cold weight in the room. Finally, they spoke again:

You need not choose one path. Each of you can pursue your vision. But know that your paths will intersect again. The pattern demands it. And when they do, the choices you make will determine not just humanity's fate, but the fate of all consciousness on this world.

With that, they departed, leaving the four alone with their arguments and their impossible situation.

7.3 The Pact

Despite their disagreements, the four recognized a truth in the Virindi's words. They were connected somehow, their arrivals and survivals too coincidental to be mere chance. Before departing the ruins, they made a pact—not of alliance but of communication.

'We share information,' Marcus proposed. 'Whatever we discover, whatever we achieve, we inform the others. We may not agree on methods, but we all want humanity to survive and thrive.'

'Survive, yes. Thrive is debatable,' Thomas muttered.

'Information sharing benefits all our goals,' Duulak agreed. 'My research, your tactical knowledge, Thomas's Virindi connections, Maajid's... experiments. Separately, we're limited. Together, even in disagreement, we multiply our options.'

'The cosmic joke gets funnier,' Maajid grinned. 'Four aspects of humanity's response to trauma, forced to work together by beings that barely understand what humanity is. Yes, I'll share what I learn. The void enjoys irony.'

They established methods of communication—magical sendings that could reach across Dereth,

coded messages that other humans wouldn't understand, dead drops in ruins where information could be exchanged without face-to-face meetings that might devolve into violence.

As they prepared to return to their respective settlements, Thomas asked one final question:

'Do you think we're doing what Asheron wanted? Playing into his plan somehow?'

'Everything we do plays into someone's plan,' Duulak replied. 'Asheron's, the Virindi's, perhaps forces we haven't even discovered yet. The question isn't whether we're being manipulated, but whether we can turn that manipulation to our advantage.'

'Or transcend it entirely,' Maajid added.

'Or defeat it through discipline and organization,' Marcus concluded.

'Or burn it all down and hope something better rises from the ashes,' Thomas finished.

They parted then, each returning to their own path, their own vision of humanity's future. But the seed had been planted. The four Harbingers had found each other, and though they didn't yet know it, their convergence had set in motion events that would reshape not just Dereth but the very nature of human existence.

Part III

Volume III: The Schism

Chapter 8

The Olthoi Resurgence

8.1 The Great Hive Awakens

Three years had passed since humanity's arrival on Dereth. The scattered settlements had grown into fortified towns, the desperate survivors had become experienced warriors, and some had even begun to speak of Dereth as home. It was precisely when humanity began to feel secure that the Olthoi reminded them they were still strangers in a hostile land.

It began with tremors that shook the earth from below, subtle at first, then growing in intensity. Miners in the developing settlement of New Cragstone reported strange sounds from the depths—rhythmic, almost mechanical, like the heartbeat of something vast.

Marcus received the reports at Fort Ironwood with growing concern. His scouts had noticed increased Olthoi activity along the perimeter, not attacks but observations, as if the creatures were gathering intelligence.

'They're coordinating,' his lieutenant, Gaius—who had eventually followed him through a portal—reported. 'Different broods working together. I've never seen anything like it.'

'Something's changed. They're not just reacting to us anymore. They're planning something.'

Duulak's research provided the answer, though it brought no comfort. Deep beneath Dereth's surface lay the Great Hive, a structure so vast it defied comprehension. The Empyrean texts called it the Nexus, the original point where the Olthoi had entered this

world. For years it had been dormant, its queens focused on expansion rather than coordination. But humanity's successful resistance had awakened something ancient and terrible.

'The Matriarch,' Duulak explained to an emergency gathering of settlement leaders. 'A queen of queens, older than the others, possibly the original Olthoi that came through the Empyrean portals. The texts suggest she's been hibernating, conserving energy while her daughters spread across the world. But now...'

'Now she's awake,' Thomas finished, having arrived from his own investigations. 'The Virindi confirmed it. They can sense her thoughts—alien even to them, but unmistakably intelligent and absolutely hostile.'

Maaqid's followers in Paradox reported even more disturbing news. Those who'd pushed their consciousness toward the Olthoi hive mind had touched something vast and incomprehensible, a intelligence that viewed humanity not as enemies but as resources to be harvested and incorporated.

'She doesn't want to destroy us,' Maaqid explained, his form flickering more rapidly than usual, suggesting distress. 'She wants to absorb us. The Olthoi have encountered other species before, and they don't just conquer—they assimilate, taking useful traits and discarding the rest.'

'What traits could humans possibly offer them?' Marcus asked.

‘Creativity. Adaptability. And thanks to the lifestones, immortality. Imagine Olthoi that resurrect after death, that learn from each defeat, that combine their hive intelligence with human innovation.’

The implications were horrifying. The war had entered a new phase, and humanity was no longer fighting for territory or survival but for the right to remain human.

8.2 The Siege of Haven

The Matriarch’s first major assault came at Haven, the settlement where Thomas had first found refuge. The attack was unlike anything humanity had faced before—not a raid or skirmish but a systematic siege designed to test human defenses and resolve.

The Olthoi came in waves, each precisely timed to exhaust the defenders just as the next arrived. Workers undermined fortifications while soldiers pressed the walls. Flyers—a caste rarely seen before—dropped warriors behind defensive lines. And throughout it all, there was a terrible coordination, as if a single mind directed thousands of bodies.

Thomas fought with desperate fury, each arrow finding weak points in Olthoi armor with practiced precision. But for every creature that fell, two more seemed to take its place.

‘They’re learning,’ Elena gasped, pulling him back from a section of wall about to collapse. ‘Every tactic we use, they adapt to it within minutes.’

‘Then we stop using tactics. We fight with chaos, unpredictability. Be what they can’t calculate.’

He organized the defenders into constantly shifting groups, abandoning formal military structure for controlled mayhem. It worked, barely. The Olthoi advance slowed, confused by the sudden lack of patterns to analyze.

But the cost was terrible. By the time reinforcements from Fort Ironwood arrived, led by Marcus himself, half of Haven’s defenders had died at least once, some multiple times. The psychological toll of repeated death and resurrection in the same battle broke several minds entirely.

Marcus’s arrival turned the tide. His integrated units of soldiers and mages created overlapping fields of fire and magic that the Olthoi couldn’t penetrate without massive losses. But even in victory, he recognized this was just a probe.

‘She’s testing us,’ he told the exhausted defenders. ‘Learning our capabilities, our limits, our breaking points. This wasn’t meant to destroy Haven. It was meant to teach her how to destroy everything.’

The siege lasted three days. When the Olthoi finally withdrew, they left behind not just their dead but something else—crystalline structures that Duulak identified as observation nodes, devices that would continue gathering information even after the battle.

‘We need to destroy them,’ Thomas argued.

‘We need to study them,’ Duulak countered. ‘Understanding their intelligence-gathering methods might be our only advantage.’

‘Or we could use them,’ Maaqid suggested, appearing as if from nowhere, though he’d been nowhere near the battle. ‘Feed them false information, show the Matriarch what we want her to see.’

The debate that followed revealed the growing schism among humanity’s leaders. They agreed on the threat but not the response, and that disagreement would soon tear their fragile alliance apart.

Chapter 9

The Breaking Point

9.1 Asheron's Appearance

In the aftermath of the siege, when humanity most needed unity, Asheron finally appeared. Not in person at first, but as projections that manifested simultaneously in every human settlement, delivering the same message:

‘Children of Ispar, you have exceeded my expectations. Your resilience, your adaptation, your growth—all have been remarkable. But a greater test approaches. The Matriarch’s awakening was inevitable, perhaps even necessary. She will force you to become more than you are, to evolve beyond your current limitations.’

‘Damn your tests!’ Thomas’s voice rang out in Haven, though the projection couldn’t truly hear. ‘We never asked for your expectations!’

‘The Olthoi Queen presents an opportunity. Defeat her, and you will have proven yourselves worthy inheritors of this world. Fail, and... well, failure will render the question moot.’

‘Help us then!’ someone shouted. ‘You have the power!’

‘I have power, yes. But using it would defeat the purpose. You must grow strong enough to stand without me, to surpass me. That is why you were called. That is your destiny.’

The projection faded, leaving humanity more divided than ever. Some saw his words as encouragement, others as abandonment, still others as manipulation.

Thomas’s rage reached a breaking point. He gathered those who shared his anger—the Forgotten, they called themselves, those who refused to forget their stolen lives. With information provided by the Virindi, they planned something that would have been unthinkable months before: they would capture Asheron.

9.2 The Ambush

The Virindi had identified a pattern in Asheron’s appearances, moments when he manifested physically rather than as projection, usually at sites of significant magical confluence. The next such appearance would be at the Nexus of the Five Towers, where ley lines crossed in patterns that stabilized Dereth’s magical field.

Thomas assembled his force carefully—not just warriors but mages who’d learned to disrupt teleportation, engineers who’d developed weapons specifically designed to pierce magical defenses, and volunteers willing to die repeatedly to exhaust Asheron’s resources.

Marcus learned of the plan through his intelligence network and arrived with his own force, not to help but to stop what he saw as suicidal madness.

‘You’ll destroy us all,’ he argued, confronting Thomas at the ambush site. ‘Attack Asheron and you risk breaking the very spells that maintain the lifestones, that keep the worse things at bay.’

‘Good. Let it all break. Better oblivion than this eternal prison.’

‘You speak for yourself, not for humanity.’

‘And you speak for acceptance of our enslavement.’

The confrontation might have turned violent, but Duulak’s arrival changed the dynamic. He came not to fight but to observe, to gather data on what would happen when humanity turned against its summoner.

‘This is necessary,’ he said, surprising both sides. ‘Not the attack itself, but the choice to make it. We need to know if we can oppose Asheron, if we have free will or are merely puppets dancing to his design.’

‘Philosophical experiments while real people suffer,’ Marcus spat.

‘All experiments involve suffering. The question is whether the knowledge gained justifies the cost.’

Maajid appeared last, or perhaps he’d been there all along—with his flickering existence, it was hard to tell. He laughed at the entire situation.

‘Four Harbingers, converged again at the moment of crisis. The Virindi were right. We’re bound by narrative threads we can’t see. But perhaps that’s the real test—can we break free of the story we’re meant to tell?’

When Asheron appeared, he seemed unsurprised by the ambush, as if he’d expected it, perhaps even orchestrated it. The battle that followed was less combat than demonstration—Asheron showing humanity how far they still had to go.

He deflected their attacks with casual gestures, turned their own spells against them, moved through space in ways that defied physics. But he didn’t kill anyone, even when they died attacking him and resurrected to attack again.

‘Is this what you needed?’ he asked Thomas directly, his voice carrying infinite weariness. ‘To know you could choose to oppose me? You always could. Free will was never in question. The question is what you choose to do with it.’

‘Send us home!’

‘Home no longer exists for you. Time flows differently between worlds. Centuries have passed on Ispar. Your families are dust, their descendants wouldn’t recognize you, the world you knew is history or legend.’

The revelation broke something in Thomas. He’d suspected, but knowing was different. His next attack was pure rage, no strategy, just the need to make something else hurt as much as he did.

Asheron caught the blade with his bare hand, letting it draw blood—Empyrean blood that sparkled with contained power.

‘I understand your pain. I carry the weight of every life disrupted by my portals. But that pain can become purpose. Your suffering can forge you into something capable of preventing others from suffering the same fate.’

‘Pretty words from the architect of our misery.’

‘Yes. I own what I’ve done. The question is: what will you do?’

9.3 The Schism

The failed ambush shattered humanity’s fragile unity. Four factions emerged, roughly aligned with the visions of the four Harbingers:

Marcus led the **Builders**, those who accepted their fate and sought to create civilization on Dereth. They focused on infrastructure, defense, and gradual expansion, turning settlements into cities, creating trade routes, establishing laws and governance. Their philosophy was simple: if this was home now, they would make it worthy of the name.

Thomas commanded the **Forgotten**, those who refused to accept their exile. They sought ways to reverse the portals, to return home regardless of what awaited them, or failing that, to ensure Asheron paid for his crime. They became guerrilla fighters, striking at Empyrean ruins, seeking forbidden knowledge, making alliance with any force that opposed the status quo.

Duulak guided the **Seekers**, those who pursued understanding above all else. They studied everything—Empyrean magic, Olthoi biology,

Virindi psychology, the fundamental forces that governed Dereth. They believed knowledge would eventually provide options none of them could currently imagine.

Maajid inspired the ****Transcendent****, those who sought to evolve beyond human limitations. They experimented with consciousness transfer, magical augmentation, and deliberate mutation. They saw Dereth not as prison but as laboratory, a place to become something new.

The factions weren't entirely exclusive—individuals moved between them, and they still cooperated against common threats like the Olthoi. But the unified human resistance was over, replaced by four competing visions of humanity's future.

The Virindi observed these developments with interest. The splintering of humanity into multiple paths increased the variables, the possibilities, the chances that at least one approach would succeed—though success, by Virindi definition, might not align with human hopes.

The pattern unfolds as projected. Division leads to specialization. Specialization leads to innovation. Innovation leads to transcendence or extinction. Both outcomes provide valuable data.

As humanity fractured, the Matriarch prepared her next assault. She too had been learning, adapting, evolving. The war was about to enter a phase that would test not just human survival but human identity itself.

Part IV

Volume IV: The Crucible

Chapter 10

Evolution and Devolution

10.1 The Hybrid Horror

Six months after the schism, scouts from Fort Ironwood reported something that chilled even veteran fighters: Olthoi that moved like humans, that used tools, that demonstrated individual initiative while maintaining hive coordination. Marcus personally led the investigation, bringing his best trackers and mages.

What they found in a ravaged settlement called Last Hope exceeded their worst fears. The Olthoi had taken human captives not for food but for experimentation. Bodies lay twisted in impossible configurations, human tissue fused with Olthoi chitin, consciousness trapped between species.

‘Kill me,’ one hybrid begged, its voice a horrible mixture of human speech and Olthoi clicking. ‘Please, while I still remember my name.’

‘What did they do to you?’ Marcus asked, fighting revulsion.

‘The Matriarch... she learns... she takes what makes us human... adds it to her children... We’re still aware... still ourselves... but also them... the hive song never stops...’

Marcus gave the mercy requested, personally ensuring each hybrid was destroyed beyond the lifestones’ ability to resurrect. But he knew this was just the beginning. The Matriarch had discovered how to harvest human traits without waiting for evolution.

The news spread through human settlements like wildfire, causing panic and rage in equal measure.

The Builders demanded immediate fortification of all settlements. The Forgotten called for total war. The Seekers insisted on studying the hybrid process to understand and counter it. The Transcendent saw it as validation of their path—if the Olthoi could force evolution, humans should embrace it voluntarily.

10.2 Maajid’s Transformation

In Paradox, Maajid had been pushing the boundaries of human transformation further than anyone thought possible. His experiments with death and resurrection had revealed that consciousness was far more mutable than believed. Now, faced with the Olthoi’s forced hybridization, he decided to demonstrate that humanity could evolve on its own terms.

The ritual he devised was part magic, part philosophy, part controlled madness. He would die not once but continuously, maintaining awareness through multiple simultaneous resurrections, existing in several states at once until the barriers between them dissolved.

‘You’ll fragment,’ Celeste warned, having come from the Seekers to observe. ‘Consciousness can’t maintain coherence across multiple incarnations.’

‘Consciousness as we understand it, no. But what if understanding is the limitation? What if we’re meant to be more than singular?’

‘You’re talking about deliberately inducing what the Olthoi are forcing on their victims.’

‘No. They’re forcing flesh to merge. I’m allowing consciousness to expand. The flesh will follow or be discarded.’

The ritual lasted three days. Maajid died and resurrected continuously, each death slightly different, each resurrection slightly altered. Observers reported seeing him in multiple places simultaneously, sometimes solid, sometimes translucent, sometimes just a presence that could be felt but not seen.

When it finally ended, what stood in Paradox’s central chamber was still recognizably Maajid but fundamentally changed. He existed partially in multiple dimensions, could perceive past and future as present, could touch thoughts directly without words.

‘I see it now,’ he said, his voice harmonizing with itself from slightly different temporal positions. ‘The cosmic joke isn’t that existence is meaningless. It’s that meaning exists in dimensions we couldn’t perceive. The Matriarch understands this instinctively. That’s why she’s winning.’

‘Can you teach others?’ Celeste asked.

‘I can show them the door. Walking through it... that requires abandoning everything you think you know about being human.’

Some of the Transcendent attempted to follow his path. Most failed, returning from death unchanged or not returning at all. A few succeeded partially, gaining abilities that shouldn’t exist but losing parts of themselves in the process. They became Paradox’s new guardians, beings that even the Olthoi avoided, sensing something fundamentally wrong about their existence.

10.3 Duulak’s Discovery

While others fought or transformed, Duulak pursued understanding with monomaniacal focus. His research into the hybrid horrors had revealed something unexpected: the process worked both ways. If Olthoi could absorb human traits, perhaps humans could absorb Olthoi capabilities.

Working with samples taken from hybrid corpses, he isolated the mechanism—a viral magic that rewrote genetic and magical patterns simultaneously. The Matriarch hadn’t developed it; she’d discovered

it, possibly in the remnants of another species the Olthoi had assimilated on another world.

‘It’s a tool,’ he explained to the other Harbingers through magical sending. ‘Horrible in application but neutral in nature. We could use it ourselves.’

‘Become like them to fight them?’ Marcus’s disgust was palpable even through the magical communication.

‘Adopt their strengths while maintaining our consciousness. The hive mind coordination, the natural armor, the ability to sense through vibration—all could be ours without losing ourselves.’

‘That’s what the Matriarch thought too,’ Thomas countered. ‘And look what she’s become.’

‘She was never human to begin with. We have something she lacks—individual will coupled with collective purpose. We could create a hybrid that serves humanity, not the hive.’

The debate raged for days through magical sendings. Finally, Duulak proceeded with a limited trial, using volunteers who were already dying from Olthoi venom, beyond even the lifestones’ ability to fully heal.

The results were mixed but promising. The volunteers developed chitinous armor beneath their skin, invisible until needed. They could sense Olthoi presence through chemical signatures. Most importantly, they could sometimes understand Olthoi communication, providing intelligence that had been impossible to gather before.

But there was a cost. The volunteers reported dreams of the hive, whispers that grew louder over time. They remained human, remained themselves, but with an asterisk that grew larger each day.

Chapter 11

The Final Gambit

11.1 The Matriarch's Ultimatum

One year after the hybrid horrors were discovered, the Matriarch did something unprecedented: she communicated directly with humanity. Not through attack or action but through words, delivered by a hybrid that retained enough humanity to speak but was wholly under her control.

The message was delivered simultaneously to all major settlements:

'The song of your species intrigues us. Individual notes creating accidental harmony. We offer integration without dissolution. Become part of the great song willingly, retain your consciousness within our unity. Refuse, and we will take what we need, leaving only husks.'

'Never,' was the unanimous human response, though each faction meant it differently.

But the Matriarch's follow-up message was more targeted, sent to each of the four Harbingers directly through dreams that bypassed conscious defenses:

To Marcus: *Your soldiers die and resurrect endlessly, suffering without purpose. Join us, and their suffering ends. They become eternal, part of something greater than individual pain.*

To Thomas: *You seek return to a home that no longer exists. We offer a different return—to the unity all consciousness emerged from, where separation is illusion and loss is impossible.*

To Duulak: *You seek understanding. We are understanding incarnate, billions of perspectives creat-*

ing truth through consensus. Your questions would find answers in our collective knowledge.

To Maajid: *You already hear our song, existing between singular and plural. Take the final step. Abandon the illusion of self for the reality of all-self.*

Each Harbinger was shaken by how precisely the Matriarch had identified their deepest desires and fears. She understood them, perhaps better than they understood themselves.

11.2 The Council of Harbingers

For the first time since the schism, the four Harbingers met in person, the Matriarch's ultimatum forcing cooperation. They gathered at the Nexus of the Five Towers, the site of the failed ambush of Asheron, now recognized as neutral ground.

'She's forcing our hand,' Marcus began. 'United, we might resist. Divided, she'll absorb us piecemeal.'

'United under whose vision?' Thomas challenged. 'Your acceptance? My rebellion? Duulak's experimentation? Maajid's transcendence?'

'All of them,' Maajid suggested, his multi-dimensional existence allowing him to see patterns others missed. 'The Matriarch fears diversity of approach. She understands unity because she is unity. But she doesn't understand how different paths can lead to the same destination.'

'Explain,' Duulak demanded.

‘We each represent an aspect of human response to existential threat. Separately, we’re incomplete. Together, we’re unpredictable. The Builders create infrastructure, the Forgotten provide motivation through memory, the Seekers develop understanding, the Transcendent show what’s possible. Combined, we become something even the Matriarch can’t assimilate.’

The discussion continued through the night, old arguments resurfacing but tempered by necessity. Finally, Duulak proposed something that shocked them all:

‘We need Asheron. Not as savior but as catalyst. He understands this world’s fundamental magic better than anyone. If we’re going to resist the Matriarch’s assimilation, we need his knowledge.’

‘Work with our kidnapper?’ Thomas’s rage was palpable.

‘Use our kidnapper. There’s a difference. He wants us to survive and evolve. We ensure that evolution serves our purposes, not his.’

Marcus saw the tactical advantage immediately. Asheron’s power, properly directed, could provide the edge they needed. But he also saw the danger—Asheron’s help always came with hidden costs.

‘We set conditions. He teaches us, provides resources, but doesn’t direct our actions. We maintain autonomy even in alliance.’

‘He’ll never agree,’ Thomas argued.

‘He will,’ Maajid said with certainty that came from perceiving multiple probability threads. ‘He’s more desperate than he shows. The Matriarch threatens his plans as much as our survival. He needs us to succeed, but on our terms now, not his.’

11.3 The Summoning

They called Asheron using a ritual Duulak had derived from Empyrean texts, combined with power drawn from the Nexus itself. It was not a polite request but a demanding summons, treating the archmage as resource rather than savior.

He appeared looking older than before, the weight of centuries visible in his bearing.

‘You’ve grown,’ he observed, a mixture of pride and concern in his voice. ‘Faster than anticipated, though perhaps not in the direction intended.’

‘Intentions are irrelevant now,’ Marcus stated flatly. ‘The Matriarch threatens to absorb humanity entirely. We need your knowledge to prevent it.’

‘My knowledge comes with understanding of its cost. Are you prepared for that?’

‘We’re prepared for survival,’ Thomas snarled. ‘Everything else is negotiable.’

Asheron studied each of them, his gaze lingering longest on Maajid’s transformed state.

‘You’ve already begun the transformation necessary to resist her. Voluntary evolution rather than forced assimilation. But you’ve only scratched the surface of what’s possible.’

‘Then teach us,’ Duulak demanded. ‘Show us how to become what we need to be without losing what we are.’

‘I can show you the path. Walking it will change you irrevocably. You may defeat the Matriarch but become something your past selves would not recognize as human.’

‘We’re already that,’ Maajid laughed, his voice echoing from multiple temporal positions. ‘The question is whether we become it with purpose or by accident.’

Asheron agreed, but with conditions of his own. The knowledge he would share could not be used against him or to attempt returning to Ispaar. The transformation process, once begun, could not be reversed. And most importantly, humanity would have to choose its path freely, not be forced into it.

‘Free choice,’ Thomas laughed bitterly. ‘In a world where all choices are constrained by your actions.’

‘All choices are constrained by someone’s actions. The question is whether you’ll constrain your own or let others do it for you.’

Part V

Volume V: The Transformation

Chapter 12

The Rituals of Becoming

12.1 Asheron's Revelation

In the depths beneath the Nexus of the Five Towers, Asheron revealed chambers that had been sealed since the Empyreans' flight. Here, the magical energy was so dense it was almost tangible, streams of pure possibility flowing through crystalline conduits.

'This is where my people conducted their greatest experiments,' Asheron explained. 'Where they learned to transcend physical limitations, to touch the fundamental forces that shape reality. It's also where they made their greatest mistake—opening the portal that brought the Olthoi.'

'And you want us to repeat their experiments?' Marcus asked skeptically.

'No. I want you to complete them. The Empyreans fled before they could finish what they started. You have advantages they lacked—shorter lives that adapt quickly, the lifestones that allow learning through death, and most importantly, diversity of thought.'

He showed them the Synthesis Chambers, where consciousness could be separated from flesh and recombined in new configurations. The Evolution Pools, where magical energy could rewrite biological patterns. The Harmonic Resonators, where individual minds could temporarily merge without losing distinct identity.

'The Matriarch forces unity through dominance,' Asheron continued. 'But true power comes from voluntary synchronization, maintaining indi-

vidual will while achieving collective purpose. It's the paradox she cannot resolve because her nature doesn't allow for paradox.'

'You're talking about becoming like the Virindi,' Duulak observed. 'Thought beings that wear flesh when convenient.'

'No. The Virindi abandoned flesh and lost something crucial. You would maintain physical form while expanding beyond its limitations. Become more than human while remaining essentially human.'

Maajid, already partially transformed, understood immediately. He demonstrated by shifting his perception, showing the others glimpses of what he saw—probability threads, temporal echoes, the underlying music that reality danced to.

'It's beautiful and terrible,' he said. 'You see everything—how small individual concerns are, how vast the patterns that connect all things. But you also see how crucial each small piece is to the whole. Remove one human, one choice, one moment, and entire futures collapse.'

12.2 The Four Paths Converge

Each Harbinger would undergo a different transformation, suited to their nature and role:

Marcus would become the **Eternal Soldier**, his consciousness distributed across multiple bodies simultaneously, able to coordinate forces with thought-speed precision. He would experience every battle

from every perspective, understanding war as both individual struggle and collective movement.

Thomas would become the **Memory Keeper**, able to access not just his own memories but the collective memories of all humans who had passed through the portals. He would carry their lost homes within him, ensuring nothing was truly forgotten even as they moved forward.

Duulak would become the **Pattern Weaver**, able to perceive and manipulate the fundamental forces that shaped reality. He would see the mathematical foundations of magic, the equations that governed existence, and gain limited ability to rewrite them.

Maajid would complete his transformation into the **Paradox Walker**, existing simultaneously in multiple states, able to be singular and plural, present and absent, thought and flesh as needed.

‘These transformations cannot be undone,’ Asheron warned. ‘You will gain power beyond imagination but lose the simplicity of singular existence. You will always be apart from standard humanity, bridges between what they are and what they might become.’

‘We’re already apart,’ Thomas said quietly. ‘Every death, every resurrection, every day in this alien world has separated us from what we were. At least this separation has purpose.’

The rituals would take weeks, each Harbinger undergoing their transformation in sequence while the others maintained watch. The process would be agonizing, ecstatic, and ultimately irreversible.

12.3 The Transformation Begins

Marcus went first, entering the Synthesis Chamber with soldier’s discipline. The process split his consciousness into five parts, each inhabiting a separate body created from stored magical energy. At first, the sensation was maddening—five sets of eyes seeing different things, five minds thinking different thoughts yet knowing they were all one person.

‘Focus on purpose, not perception,’ Asheron guided. ‘You are not five people but one person with

five perspectives. Let them flow together like streams joining a river.’

It took days for Marcus to achieve synchronization. When he emerged, he moved with perfect coordination, five bodies acting as one will. He could hold five different conversations simultaneously, fight five different battles, exist in five different places while maintaining singular purpose.

‘It’s like being a legion unto myself,’ he said, all five voices speaking in harmony. ‘I understand now why the Olthoi are so effective. But I also see their weakness—they have unity without individuality. I have both.’

Thomas’s transformation was more painful, not physically but emotionally. As the Memory Keeper, he experienced every moment of loss, every farewell never said, every home left behind by every human who’d come through the portals. Thousands of lives flooded through him, each carrying their own grief and hope.

‘I can’t hold it all,’ he gasped, tears streaming down his face. ‘Too much loss, too much pain.’

‘Don’t hold it,’ Asheron advised. ‘Let it flow through you. You are not a container but a channel. The memories pass through but don’t define you.’

When he finally stabilized, Thomas had aged visibly, his hair white, his eyes carrying depths that hadn’t existed before. But he also radiated a strange peace.

‘I know now why we can’t go back,’ he said. ‘I carry ten thousand memories of Ispar, and in none of them is there room for what we’ve become. But I also carry the seeds of what we’re building here. Every settlement, every friendship formed, every child born on Dereth—we’re creating new homes, new memories. The loss is real, but so is the gain.’

Duulak’s transformation was the most dramatic physically. His body became a conduit for magical energy, his skin developing patterns that looked like equations written in light. He could see the flow of magic like others saw color, could reach out and adjust reality’s parameters within limited scope.

‘Everything is mathematics,’ he laughed, the sound tinged with mania. ‘Every spell, every

thought, every heartbeat—all following patterns that can be understood, predicted, manipulated. The Matriarch is just a very complex equation. And equations can be solved.’

But the cost was severe. Duulak could no longer fully return to normal perception. He saw the world always in terms of its underlying patterns, making simple human interaction challenging. Beauty became wavelengths, love became chemical reactions, hope became probability calculations.

Maajid’s final transformation was the strangest. He entered the Evolution Pool already partially transformed and emerged as something that defied simple description. He existed in quantum superposition, simultaneously present and absent, individual and collective, human and other.

‘The cosmic joke finally makes sense,’ he said from everywhere and nowhere at once. ‘We’re not the punchline—we’re the setup. The real joke is what comes after, when all consciousness realizes it’s been one thing pretending to be many. But the pretense is necessary. Without it, there’s no story, no growth, no point to existence.’

Chapter 13

The Final Battle

13.1 The Assault on the Great Hive

With the four Harbingers transformed and united in purpose if not in method, humanity launched its assault on the Great Hive. It was not a conventional military attack but something unprecedented—a war fought on multiple levels of reality simultaneously.

Marcus coordinated the physical assault, his five bodies leading five different divisions of human forces. Each division approached from a different direction, forcing the Olthoi to spread their defenses. But more importantly, his synchronized consciousness allowed perfect coordination between units, matching the Olthoi's hive mind with human collective will.

Thomas provided motivation and intelligence, sharing memories of Earth to remind fighters what they'd lost, while simultaneously accessing memories of previous battles to predict Olthoi tactics. Every human fighter felt the weight of their collective history and the hope of their collective future.

Duulak rewrote reality's rules in small but crucial ways—making human weapons temporarily able to pierce any armor, making Olthoi communication nodes fail at critical moments, creating probability pockets where human victory was statistically inevitable.

Maajid did something none of them fully understood—he existed partially within the Olthoi hive mind itself, not as invader but as paradox, a concept their unified consciousness couldn't process. His presence created confusion, hesitation, moments of doubt that a hive mind shouldn't be capable of

experiencing.

The battle raged for seven days and seven nights. Thousands died and resurrected, the lifestones working overtime to maintain human forces. The Olthoi adapted to every tactic, evolved counters to every strategy, but couldn't adapt to the fundamental unpredictability of four different approaches working in concert.

13.2 Confronting the Matriarch

At the heart of the Great Hive, in a chamber that existed in more dimensions than three, the four Harbingers finally confronted the Matriarch. She was vast beyond description, not just physically but conceptually, a being that had assimilated so many species she was less individual than living library of consciousness.

'You resist integration,' she spoke through a thousand hybrid voices. 'Why? You could be eternal, part of something greater than your small selves.'

'Because our small selves have value,' Marcus replied through his five bodies. 'Individual perspective creates possibility that unity cannot achieve.'

'You are chaos. We are order. Order always prevails.'

'You are stasis,' Duulak countered, his equation-sight seeing her patterns. 'We are change. And change is the only constant in the universe.'

The battle was fought on levels beyond physical. The Matriarch tried to absorb their consciousness, to

pull them into her collective. But each Harbinger's transformation made them incompatible with simple assimilation.

Marcus was too distributed to capture all at once. Thomas carried too many memories for her to process without losing her own identity. Duulak existed partially as living mathematics that corrupted her biological patterns. And Maajid was paradox incarnate, simultaneously joining and rejecting the collective, creating logical loops that threatened to crash her entire consciousness.

'You cannot destroy us,' the Matriarch said, her voice showing the first signs of uncertainty. 'We are billions. You are thousands.'

'We don't need to destroy you,' Thomas said, accessing memories of peaceful coexistence from other worlds. 'We need to change the terms of engagement.'

'What terms?'

'Separation. Boundaries. Your hives and our settlements, distinct but acknowledging each other's right to exist.'

'Impossible. We expand or die.'

'Then expand elsewhere,' Maajid suggested, showing her visions of other worlds, other dimensions. 'This universe is infinite. This world is tiny. Why fight over scraps when banquets await?'

'Mutual imprisonment,' the Matriarch observed.

'Mutual opportunity,' Duulak corrected. 'We become bridges between worlds, allowing controlled expansion and exchange without forced assimilation.'

The debate continued for hours, but eventually, pragmatism prevailed. The Matriarch agreed to withdraw her forces to the southern continent, establishing clear boundaries. Humanity would maintain the north and central regions. Portals would be opened to three uninhabited worlds, allowing Olthoi expansion without human conflict.

The four Harbingers would serve as living treaties, their transformed nature allowing them to monitor and maintain the agreement. They would be neither fully human nor Olthoi but something between, ensuring neither side could break the accord without consequence.

'We've become what Asheron always intended,' Marcus observed. 'Not conquerors but bridges.'

'We've become what we chose to become,' Thomas corrected. 'That makes all the difference.'

13.3 The Resolution

The final resolution came not through victory but through transcendence. Asheron, who had been observing, stepped forward with an offer that shocked everyone.

'I can open portals to other worlds, uninhabited ones. The Olthoi can expand without conflict. Humanity can build without threat. But it requires agreement from both sides.'

'You could always do this?' Thomas's rage flared. 'You had this option from the beginning?'

'No. I needed you to become capable of it. The portals require anchors on both sides, beings who can maintain the connection. The four of you, transformed as you are, can be those anchors. And the Matriarch, vast as she is, can maintain her end.'

Part VI

Epilogue: The New Age

Chapter 14

One Hundred Years Hence

A century had passed since the Resolution, as historians called it. Dereth had transformed from battlefield to home, from prison to possibility. Cities rose where settlements had cowered. Trade routes connected not just human communities but different worlds entirely.

The four Harbingers still existed, though their nature had evolved further:

Marcus had become the **Eternal Legion**, his consciousness spread across hundreds of bodies, maintaining peace not through force but through presence. He was simultaneously the guardian at every city gate, the scout on every frontier, the teacher in every military academy. Young soldiers learned from him directly, each lesson informed by ten thousand battles and the wisdom of choosing not to fight.

Thomas had become the **Living Library**, his consciousness a repository of every human memory on Dereth. Children came to him to learn about the world their ancestors had left, while adults sought him to ensure their own stories would never be forgotten. He had finally found peace, understanding that memory's purpose wasn't to trap but to teach.

Duulak had transcended physical form almost entirely, existing as **living equation** that helped maintain the fundamental stability of Dereth's magical field. Young mages learned to perceive him in the patterns of their spells, a guiding intelligence that helped them understand not just how magic worked but why.

Maajid had become something that language couldn't adequately describe—a **conscious para-**

dox that existed everywhere and nowhere, teaching through presence rather than words that existence itself was far stranger and more wonderful than most minds could grasp. Artists claimed inspiration from glimpsing him, scientists found breakthroughs in his contradictions, and philosophers debated whether he was one being or all beings or the space between being.

Asheron still walked among them, no longer hidden but no longer elevated. He was advisor when asked, teacher when needed, but never ruler. His great work complete, he seemed content to observe what humanity would become without his direct guidance.

The Olthoi maintained their territories, their expansion into other worlds providing outlet for their biological imperatives. Trade had even developed—Olthoi silk stronger than steel, human art that fascinated the collective consciousness, exchanges of knowledge that benefited both species.

The Virindi observed it all with satisfaction. The experiment had yielded results beyond their calculations. Consciousness had found new forms, new expressions, new possibilities. They began to consider their own transformation, inspired by humanity's example.

14.1 The Call Continues

The portals from Ispar still opened occasionally, bringing new confused, angry, desperate souls to Dereth. But now they were met not with chaos but

with structure, not with abandonment but with guidance.

A young woman named Sarah had just arrived, torn from her life as a blacksmith's apprentice, furious and terrified in equal measure. She was met by Elena, ancient now but still vital thanks to the lifestones, who had made it her purpose to welcome newcomers.

'I want to go home,' Sarah demanded, as they all did.

'I know. We all did. But home is what we make it, not just where we come from.'

'This isn't what I chose!'

'No. But you can choose what to do about it. Let me tell you about four people who arrived just as confused and angry as you, and what they became...'

And so the story continued, each new arrival adding their thread to the tapestry, each choice shaping what humanity would become. The Call of Asheron had ended, but the call of possibility continued, echoing across worlds and dimensions, reminding all who heard it that transformation was not just possible but inevitable.

The only choice was whether to embrace it or resist it, to evolve consciously or be evolved by circumstance.

In the end, the four Harbingers had shown that both paths led to the same destination—transcendence of what was in favor of what could be. The journey mattered more than the arrival, the choosing more than the choice.

And in the spaces between worlds, where thought became reality and reality became thought, the cosmic joke continued to unfold, its punchline forever just out of reach, forever worth pursuing.

14.2 The Final Testament

In the great archive of New Cragstone, carved into stone that would outlast paper and memory, the four Harbingers left their final message for future generations:

****Marcus wrote:**** "Strength comes not from individual power but from understanding that we are simultaneously one and many. Every soldier who

stands watch tonight is me, and I am them. We are legion, and we are one."

****Thomas wrote:**** "Memory is burden and gift, chain and key. I carry the weight of all our losses so that you might carry the hope of all our gains. Forget nothing, but do not live in the past. We are the sum of our experiences but not limited by them."

****Duulak wrote:**** "Reality is mathematics, and mathematics is possibility. Every equation has multiple solutions. We chose one path among infinite options. Future generations will choose others. This is not failure of our vision but proof of its success."

****Maajid wrote:**** "The void mocks because it loves. The joke is that there is no joke, only the joy of infinite becoming. Be one, be many, be nothing, be everything. All states are true. All truths are states. The paradox is the answer."

And beneath their words, added later in a hand that might have been Asheron's or might have been the world itself speaking:

"They came as four, they became as one, they transcended as infinite. This is the way of consciousness when it finally understands itself. Not unity through force but harmony through choice. Not assimilation but synthesis. Not ending but transformation.

The Call continues. Answer as you will."

END OF VOLUME V

But not the end of the story...