

PRAYPREY

Screenplay by

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Based on the novel by Adam J. Spencer

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Animated feature

FADE IN:

EXT. HAVEN - ROPE TERRACE - DUSK

Two pairs of forelimbs braid rope. The elder pair ends in five weathered fingers, fully divided and sure. The younger claws have almost finished separating into digits. They keep losing the third strand.

RHOSSEN (50s), a mature male mantid of the Haven line — long-winged, five-fingered, fine-framed, scarcely two-thirds the mass of an adult female. Worn plates and finished hands: small does not mean young. A narrow THREE-STRAND FATHER-CORD crosses one shoulder in plain sight.

He feeds the rope without looking at it. Beside him, his son VEDRAN (16), smaller still, soft-shelled and all elbows, chases the strand he dropped.

RHOSSEN

Again.

VEDRAN

The third one hates me.

RHOSSEN

The third one carries the weight.
That's why it fights you.

Below them, Haven settles into evening. A small city grown into the curve of a fossil rib — bone the size of a hillside, weathered smooth, terraced with gardens. Lichen-lamps warm to gold one by one.

It looks ordinary. Across its terraces, father-cords remain uncovered.

EXT. HAVEN - NURSERY MOUTH - CONTINUOUS

VALKYRITH (16) leans in a doorway of polished fossil-bone, arms crossed, watching the rope terrace across the gap. Her carapace is jade-speckled brown. The hooks of her adolescent foreclaws have divided almost to the palm, not yet an adult's hands. On her brow, three sensory nodes sit dark.

Behind her, the nursery breathes: rows of eggs in resin cradles, lit low and amber. AMETHYL (40s) moves down the rows with a bowl of pale fungal blooms, dusting each cradle. Flour-pale powder has whitened the grooves of her knuckles.

At the end of the row, one cradle holds a smaller egg than the rest. The others shift and settle in their resin. This one has not moved all evening.

AMETHYL
 (to the egg)
 Still thinking about it?

She does not wait for an answer. She never does. She moves on.

Above the cradles, a low shelf of hand-copied scrolls – old chants set down in a careful, patient script. Winter work. Nobody asks from what she copies.

AMETHYL
 You're watching the rope again.

VALKYRITH
 I'm watching Vedran lose to the rope again.

AMETHYL
 Mm. He'll get it. His father got it.

Valkyrith doesn't move from the doorway. The next thing costs her something to say, so she says it to the gap, not to Amethyl.

VALKYRITH
 Hessa's cousin came from Virethish today. She saw Rhossen on the terrace and she made a sign over her eyes. Like he was – something spilled.

AMETHYL
 To her, he is.

VALKYRITH
 He's a rope-maker.

AMETHYL
 Virethish has grown males in every workshop. It doesn't keep fathers. She saw the third strand.

Amethyl sets down the bowl. Considers the eggs – fourteen of them, amber-lit, patient as stones.

AMETHYL
 Nothing hatches without breaking something, Val. Haven decided a long time ago what it was willing to break.

VALKYRITH
 Was I in one of those cradles?

Amethyl's hand stills over the nearest egg. Not alarm.
Recognition: the old question finally arriving.

AMETHYL

No.

She resumes dusting.

AMETHYL

I found you beyond the western
spur, where no nursery had ever
stood. One egg under a dead root,
humming at the stone like you
expected it to answer.

VALKYRITH

And it did?

AMETHYL

I did.

Valkyrith looks at the hand-copied scrolls above the cradles.
At a tiny three-fold mark repeated in the margins – the same
mark Amethyl absently traces in spilled powder before wiping it
away.

VALKYRITH

Who left me there?

Amethyl doesn't answer. She holds the question a moment longer
than it needs, and smiles – warm, unhurried, entirely unashamed
of the silence.

AMETHYL

Do not let the missing half of a
story write the half you have.

She lifts the bowl again. Work resumes.

EXT. HAVEN - GARDEN PERCH - NIGHT

Valkyrith and Vedran sit on a curved outcrop, legs dangling
over the dark. Between them, shared: a strip of dried
sweetroot. He bites. She bites. The order never varies.

Below, a HAVEN MAN descends the switchback path with a heavy
pack, moving quickly, like someone leaving before he can be
watched leaving.

VALKYRITH

There goes another one to
Virethish.

VEDRAN

His mother is dying there.
(MORE)

VEDRAN (CONT'D)
I read him her letters.

VALKYRITH
I saw him leaving.

VEDRAN
You saw a pack.

Valkyrith keeps watching after the man's lamp disappears.

Above the far ridgeline, the moon is a thin closing eye.

VEDRAN
Crescent tomorrow. Hessa's cousin
says in Virethish they put the
whole city dark for it. Every lamp.
She says the silence is so deep you
can hear the Reckoner's drums from
the mustering hall, counting.

VALKYRITH
Counting what?

VEDRAN
What's owed.

He says it the way you repeat a word you don't want to define.
Valkyrith looks at him — too long. He looks away first.

VALKYRITH
Haven keeps its lamps on.

VEDRAN
I know.

VALKYRITH
Every crescent. On purpose. Amma
says the light is the argument.

VEDRAN
I know, Val.

A pause. He turns the rope-burn on his palm to the moonlight,
studying it like it might be a map.

VEDRAN
Do you ever think we're wrong?
Everyone else, everywhere, all of
them — and one town on a rib says
no, we know better, we'll keep our
fathers.

VALKYRITH

I think their wrong is bigger than
our wrong.

VEDRAN

That's not the same as being right.

She takes the last of the sweetroot. Splits it. Gives him the
larger half – and he accepts it the way he accepts everything.
Vedran has never in his life said no.

VEDRAN

You decide fast, Val.

VALKYRITH

Somebody has to.

VEDRAN

Mm.

The moon above them looks closed.

EXT. HAVEN - WIDE - NIGHT

The lichen-lamps of Haven burn gold against the dark country. A
city-sized candle, alone on the black.

Far out on the plain – points of red light. Moving. Patient.

Drums, almost too low to hear. Counting.

INT. HAVEN NURSERY - NIGHT

Amethyl stops dusting mid-row.

Her antennae lift. Hold. The powder drifts off her knuckles.

In the resin cradles, fourteen eggs sit amber and patient.

AMETHYL

(to herself, then the eggs)

No.

EXT. HAVEN - MAIN STAIR - NIGHT

The Hollow Swarm enters Haven the way water enters a cracked
jar – without hurry, through every seam at once.

Troopers in lacquered obsidian, breath hissing through vent-
masks. They do not loot. They do not shout. They move in a
syncopated, clicking cadence.

At their center walks VEL'ZHERA (40s). Dusk-crimson plates over
a frame built spare and exact. She carries no drawn weapon. She
carries a scroll.

She mounts a cistern's edge and unrolls it, and her voice is calm enough to balance a level on.

VEL'ZHERA

Haven, settled rib of the eastern
bone-shadow. Sixty-two acknowledged
fathers, living beyond their rites.
Sixty-two debts, unpaid.

She lets the number stand.

VEL'ZHERA

The Rains fall thin and the world
is fed by what is given. You have
given nothing for three
generations. Tonight the Swarm
collects the arrears.

A beat. Somewhere a lamp flickers, recovers and keeps burning.

VEL'ZHERA

Bring out your fathers.

EXT. HAVEN - ROPE TERRACE - NIGHT

Rhossen stands at his terrace rail, coil of new rope still over his shoulder. Below, his neighbors are being sorted — FATHERS, each identified by a witnessed third-strand cord and checked against a list, to the left. Everyone else to the right.

A full-grown male with no father-cord is inspected, found unentered, and pushed toward the survivors. Beside him, a father of the same lineage is pulled the other way.

Not butchery. Inventory. The Swarm's clerks move down the line with wax and seals.

Vedran pulls at his father's arm.

VEDRAN

The flue behind the kilns — Papa,
it comes out past the wall, I've
done it —

RHOSEN

Take the rope.

VEDRAN

What?

Rhossen lifts the coil off his own shoulder and settles it onto his son's. Adjusts it. Takes his time.

RHOSSEN

The third strand carries the weight.

He steps down the stair, into the torchlight, into the sorting, and does not look back.

Vedran stands with the rope on his shoulder.

He does not run.

INT. HAVEN NURSERY - NIGHT

The door bursts. Smoke rolls in low along the floor like something looking for a place to root.

Amethyl has the eggs out of their cradles and into a CARRY-CRATE - fossil-slat sides, a worn leather strap polished dark by two generations of shoulders. She moves down the rows with terrible efficiency. Twelve. Thirteen. Fourteen.

Valkyrith skids in through the smoke.

VALKYRITH

They're taking the fathers - Amma, they have lists, they have wax -

AMETHYL

I know what they have.

She cinches the crate shut. Swings it - not toward the door. Onto Valkyrith's shoulders. Pulls the strap tight across her chest with a mother's roughness.

VALKYRITH

What are you-

AMETHYL

The vent flue behind the kilns. Then the chapel path. You don't stop at the chapel. You give the Vowless your name and you show them what you carry.

VALKYRITH

Come WITH me-

AMETHYL

The clutch is unaccounted. Do you understand? They haven't counted it yet. The moment they count it, it's theirs.

Boots in the corridor. The clicking cadence, closing.

Amethyl takes Valkyrith's face in both hands. Powder-pale knuckles against jade-brown plates.

AMETHYL
Never forget who you are.

VALKYRITH
Amma—

AMETHYL
Go.

Valkyrith goes — three steps — turns at the vent mouth for one last look:

Amethyl, alone in the amber light, stepping between the empty cradles and the door. Picking up the dusting bowl. Holding it like a tool and not at all like a weapon.

The door fills with obsidian.

Valkyrith drops into the flue.

INT. KILN FLUE - CONTINUOUS

Tight dark. Valkyrith crawls, crate dragging the soot-slick stone, breath sawing.

Through a vent grate, a slice of the terrace below:

The fathers kneel in a line. A Swarm clerk moves down it, pressing a wax seal to each shoulder. Stamp. Stamp. Stamp. Rhossen's turn. Stamp.

Beyond them, a second clerk inventories survivors for labor: porter, digger, courier. Different ledger. Different stamp. Same red wax.

Valkyrith stops crawling. Through the grate, smoke, torchlight —

— and VEDRAN, at the line's edge, in shadow, unseen, the rope still on his shoulder. Free. Ten feet from the dark and gone.

A TROOPER's head turns toward the kiln wall. Toward the flue. Toward her. Antennae tasting the air — finding something.

Vedran sees the trooper turn.

He looks at the smoke. He looks at the soldiers. He looks — for half a heartbeat — directly at the kiln wall, at the dark behind the grate, at her, though he cannot possibly see her.

Then Vedran steps out of the shadow, into the torchlight, and kneels before the labor clerk.

The trooper's attention swings to the boy who appeared. The labor stamp comes down on Vedran's shoulder. Stamp.

Through smoke and iron, the two ledgers flatten into one image: red wax and a bent knee.

From inside the flue, it does not look like a boy stepping between her and a soldier's attention.

It looks like choosing.

VALKYRITH
(a breath)
Vedran-

She crawls on, the strap across her chest and fourteen eggs pulling behind her.

EXT. HAVEN - NURSERY MOUTH - NIGHT

Fire takes the upper terraces. Ash drifts down through the lamps.

Vel'Zhera stands at the nursery door while her clerks carry out resin cradles.

Empty. All of them.

CLERK
The keeper won't say where.

Vel'Zhera looks past him, into the amber room. At the small mantid standing among her empty cradles with a dusting bowl in her hands.

VEL'ZHERA
(to Amethyl, almost
courteous)
Fourteen unaccounted. You can still
balance this.

AMETHYL
You should go home. The light here
is for children.

A long beat. Two doctrines, one doorway.

Vel'Zhera turns away.

VEL'ZHERA
(to the clerk)
Close the account.

The clerk steps in. Vel'Zhera walks down the burning stair, her face giving nothing - except her hand, which finds the cold token at her own throat and holds it the whole way down.

From the nursery behind her: nothing loud. Just a bowl, hitting stone, and rolling to a stop.

EXT. CHAPEL PATH - RIDGELINE - NIGHT

Wind. Ash. A thin path along a fossil spine.

Valkyrith runs – then her legs simply end. She goes down on the path, crate cradled, lungs scorched.

Below: Haven, burning in its rib like a coal in a hand.

Her brow –

The three dormant nodes IGNITE.

Not gently. Gold light sputters, catches, flares – and the world arrives all at once:

The path under her palms HUMS. Every footstep ever set on it. The wind off Haven carries voices that are not on the wind – a hundred years of lamplight chatter, lullabies, arguments, rope-songs – all of it pouring off the burning bone like heat shimmer, all of it ending.

She hears her city's whole memory leaving it.

She screams – clamps her foreclaws over her brow – and the light strobes, gutters, steadies into a faint banked glow.

She kneels there shaking. Listening to the largest silence of her life.

INT. CHAPEL VAULT - NIGHT

Stone hush. A single convex DIVINE MIRROR, tall as three mantids, curves like the inside of an eyelid. A hairline crack crosses its face.

At the walls stand the VOWLESS MONKS – mature males from several mantid lineages, small-bodied in the particular way of each kind, visibly adult in finished hands, full wings and weathered plate. Bone-dust robes. Antennae bound flat. No father-cords.

Valkyrith stumbles in, soot-black, crate on her back.

The LEAD MONK comes forward. His chestplate hums, shaping words.

LEAD MONK

Your name.

VALKYRITH

Valkyrith. Of Haven.

The words catch.

VALKYRITH
Of what was Haven.

She opens the crate. Fourteen eggs, amber and whole, dusted with ash.

The monks lean closer.

LEAD MONK
The unaccounted clutch.

VALKYRITH
The what?

LEAD MONK
The Swarm's word for what it failed to own.

He looks at the faint gold banked in her brow.

LEAD MONK
The dust speaks to you now.

VALKYRITH
It screams.

LEAD MONK
At first, everything remains at once.

The Mirror's crack catches her gold light and returns it in three broken pieces.

Two monks sling an egg in dust-silk. The Lead Monk turns it beneath the lamplight. Hard amber resin sheaths the shell.

LEAD MONK
Your keeper sealed them against the smoke. It saved them. It also stilled them.

VALKYRITH
How do I wake them?

LEAD MONK
The Tower of Dust and Memory at Ob'lisk. When the moon opens, the Verdant Rain falls there for one night. Beneath that Rain, they wake.

A beat.

LEAD MONK

Anywhere else, they go still. There is no after.

Valkyrith looks at the eggs.

VALKYRITH

How long?

LEAD MONK

One year.

VALKYRITH

How far?

LEAD MONK

Six days through the Sacred Gorge. The Swarm sealed the bridge.

VALKYRITH

Then the long way.

She stands.

VALKYRITH

I should have left already.

INT. CHAPEL VAULT - PRE-DAWN

The monks pad the crate. One monk sets out a traveling MANTLE—a deep hood, shoulder-cape—one side made of grey leather, the other side adorned with white luminous fibers.

Valkyrith pulls it on herself, the way you pull on the first warm thing anyone hands you. Grey side out.

Nobody corrects her.

In a wall-niche apart from every lamp, a single banked EMBER sits in a dish of ash. A passing monk feeds it three crumbs of resin, shielding it with his body as he goes. It lights nothing. It has never been allowed to go out.

The Lead Monk holds out a KAVRI — an oval of pale crystal, small as a knuckle, threaded on a cord. Three triform marks circle its rim. Inside, faint dust turns like snow in a still room.

LEAD MONK

We gathered what we could from the nursery floor. A Kavri keeps the dust from scattering.

Valkyrith knows without being told.

VALKYRITH

That's her.

LEAD MONK

No. It is what she left. Those are different things. The day you can't tell them apart, you will be in danger.

He sets the cord in her palm and closes her dividing digits over it.

She hangs the Kavri at her throat, against the crate strap.

LEAD MONK

The Vowless keep every name but their own. We kept Haven's.

A beat.

LEAD MONK

We will keep yours when this is done.

Valkyrith shoulders the crate.

EXT. CHAPEL - DAWN

Grey light. The monks line the path, still as fence posts.

As Valkyrith passes the first of them, a hum kindles in his chestplate and is handed down the line, shoulder to shoulder — a fragment of something far older than the chapel that keeps it:

THE VOWLESS

(a chestplate hum, passed
down the line)

Born of the gash, hungry and
nameless — no mercy, no mirror, no
name — yet the light still stirs in
the shell.

Valkyrith walks out between them, crate on her back, east toward the long way. She does not look back at the smoke.

The moon, low and thin, closes a little further.

PRAYPREY

INT. HOLLOW SWARM MUSTERING HALL - VIRETHISH - DAY

Maps of bone-ink. Racks of lacquered armor. The hall is lit by KAVRI-LAMPS — small crystal ovals burning in iron cages, each giving a steady, beautiful, slightly wrong light.

Vel'Zhera stands over the maps. COMMANDER KORRYX (late 20s) waits – frontline lacquer, a scar across one mandible, the stillness of a soldier who has survived by never letting thought reach her hands.

VEL'ZHERA

Fourteen eggs and a girl. The Gorge is sealed, so she goes east – Grottanar, then the Orchid city, then the marsh. She has until the moon opens.

KORRYX

One girl. Reckoner, with respect – we burned the town for sixty-two fathers. Why does a crate of eggs rate the eastern garrisons?

Vel'Zhera looks up. The hall waits.

VEL'ZHERA

Because the town was an argument, Commander. We answered it. The crate is the argument's children.

Vel'Zhera rolls the map.

VEL'ZHERA

A debt that hatches becomes a generation. Count it forward sixty years and tell me again it's a crate of eggs.

She lifts one of the Kavri-lamps from its cage. Turns it in her fingers – the light swims.

VEL'ZHERA

Send word east. And bring me the new courier. The Haven boy. He writes clean and he runs fast, and he should learn what his town cost.

INT. MUSTERING HALL - RECORDS ANNEX - DAY

Vedran – scrubbed, soft plates under a courier's half-harness that doesn't fit yet – copies names into a ledger. His script is small and exact. The rope sits coiled under his stool, where his feet can touch it.

A SHADOW falls across the page. He doesn't look up fast enough to hide that he flinched.

VEL'ZHERA

Your hand is clean.

VEDRAN
Thank you, Reckoner.

VEL'ZHERA
It wasn't praise. It was inventory.

She sets a sealed dispatch on his desk. Wax still warm.

VEL'ZHERA
East road. The Grottanar garrison.
You carry names now, boy. Lose a
name, lose a life.

VEDRAN
I'll remember them.

Vel'Zhera turns away, almost gentle.

VEL'ZHERA
That's the job.

Vedran looks at the dispatch. At the seal pressed into the wax
— the Swarm's mark, deep and single.

His thumb moves over it once. Then — privately, pointlessly, a
habit from a kitchen that no longer exists — he presses his own
thumbnail beside it. A second, smaller mark. Twice-pressed.

He pockets the dispatch and runs.

EXT. EASTERN ROAD - DAY (TRAVEL SEQUENCE)

Valkyrith walks. The country unrolls — fossil ridges like the
knuckles of something sleeping, fields in their bone-shadows.

-- A farm wife fills Valkyrith's water gourd, sees the crate's
amber gleam through the slats, and goes inside without a word.
The bolt slides.

-- A toll-keeper at a rope bridge: "Swarm wax says watch for a
girl with a crate." A long look. He raises the bar. "Didn't say
which girl." He waves her through. Some kindness keeps its head
down.

-- Night. She sleeps curled around the crate. Her banked third-
eyes glow faintly with the road's old noise. She has learned to
sleep inside the world's murmur the way you learn to sleep on a
ship.

-- The moon, thinner. Behind her the fields go from green to
cut to burned stubble: a season spent, and spent walking.

EXT. VIRETHISH OUTSKIRTS - QUARRY PLAZA - DUSK

A dead quarry, rain-pooled. Valkyrith fills her gourd, crate at
her feet. Hood down — and in the hollow of it behind her neck,

a curve of white nobody has ever remarked on.

The mantle tightens across her shoulders. She shrugs it straight. Wet stone throws cold; she thinks nothing of it.

Three HOLLOW SWARM SOLDIERS come around the cut stone. Not a patrol. Off-duty, bored, young. The worst kind.

SOLDIER ONE

Well. A grey little monk-bird, far
from her cage.

They've seen the crate. They don't know what it is. They know it's strapped like it matters.

SOLDIER TWO

What's in the box, bird?

VALKYRITH

Eggs.

It's so plainly true that they laugh.

SOLDIER ONE

Eggs. She's a merchant. Pay the
road-tithe, merchant.

They spread out – practiced, lazy. Soldier Three lifts a hooked baton.

What happens next takes eleven seconds.

Valkyrith reads the ground – her eyes flick down once, banked gold flaring. The quarry floor remembers: ten thousand cart-turns wore that groove; the rain pools where the stone dips; Soldier One favors his left knee because his boot-print says so.

She steps where the stone is dry. They step where it isn't.

One slips into the other; she folds the third over her hip into the rain-pool; the baton skitters; she has it; she throws it – over the quarry lip, away, gone.

Three soldiers in the mud, unhurt except where it counts.

She picks up the crate. Walks past them.

Soldier One scrambles up, humiliated, reaching for the worst thing he can throw.

SOLDIER ONE

You'll want the gods, bird, where
you're walking. You should pray–

His friends haul him back.

SOLDIER ONE
-pray, PREY.

The other two take it up, jeering, mud-slick - "pray-prey, pray-prey" - the chant of boys who lost.

Valkyrith stops.

She looks back at them - a long, level look, third-eyes banked low, and something in it makes the chant die in their mouths.

VALKYRITH
Tell your Reckoner the prey is
walking east.

A beat.

VALKYRITH
Tell her it prays for you. Somebody
should.

She walks on. Behind her, three soldiers stand in the rain-pool. Their jeer follows her east, no longer small.

INT. MUSTERING HALL - VIRETHISH - NIGHT

The three soldiers kneel on the map-room floor, mud still on them. Vel'Zhera reads a report by Kavri-light. She does not look up for a long time.

VEL'ZHERA
She disarmed three of the Swarm and
gave the weapons to the sky.

SOLDIER ONE
Reckoner, she - there was a trick
in it, the stone was-

VEL'ZHERA
And then she spared you.

Silence. The lamp swims.

VEL'ZHERA
The Swarm is an account. Every life
in it is owed and owing. But the
spared-

Vel'Zhera rises and comes around the table. Her voice never sharpens.

VEL'ZHERA
-the spared are a gift.
(MORE)

VEL'ZHERA (CONT'D)

And a gift from the enemy is a debt to the enemy. The Swarm carries no such debts.

SOLDIER ONE

Reckoner—

VEL'ZHERA

You should have come back on your shields. You came back in her ledger instead.

VEL'ZHERA

(to the guards)

Balance it.

The three are taken out. Vel'Zhera returns to her maps and does not watch.

At the annex door, half in shadow — Vedran. He heard all of it. He holds the ledger tight against his chest.

Vel'Zhera speaks without turning.

VEL'ZHERA

Write it in the eastern dispatch, courier. The heretic spares. Word will run ahead of her now — and every town she leaves standing will know what her sparing costs.

A beat.

VEL'ZHERA

Mercy keeps poor books. We keep them for her.

Vedran writes. His script stays small and exact. His thumbnail presses the wax twice.

EXT. EASTERN ROAD - RIDGELINE - DAWN

Valkyrith jolts awake on the ridgeline, third-eyes flaring — somewhere behind her on the road's memory: three lives ending. She doesn't know what it means yet. She knows the road groaned with it.

She tightens the strap and walks faster.

EXT. GOTTANAR - LOWLAND GATE - DAY

Copper terraces step down a green bowl. Fermentation towers breathe warm yeast into the morning. The whole city smells like bread deciding to be beer.

At the gate: a GRAIN-CLERK at a tall desk, and a queue. Valkyrith waits her turn like anyone. When she reaches the desk, she sets down a thin bone token the monks gave her.

VALKYRITH
I claim rain-right. Shelter and
passage. It's the old law.

The clerk looks at the token. Then at a NOTICE nailed to his desk — Swarm wax in the corner, a smear of crimson seal.

GRAIN-CLERK
(quietly)
The old law's been... reassessed.

VALKYRITH
By who?

GRAIN-CLERK
By the people who buy our grain. Or
stop buying it.

The Grain-Clerk slides the token back.

GRAIN-CLERK
There's an embargo with your name
in it, girl. Verbatim. I have a
family.

VALKYRITH
So do I.

She nods at the crate. He looks at its amber seams, then at the Swarm notice beneath his hand.

GRAIN-CLERK
Gate closes at dusk. Be outside it.

EXT. GOTTANAR - MARKET TERRACE - DAY

Valkyrith buys what sellers will sell her — which shrinks stall by stall as the whisper outruns her down the terrace. Heretic. Swarm-marked. That one. A vendor pulls his root-baskets inside as she reaches them.

A second vendor — bolder, meaner — steps into her path.

VENDOR
We heard what your sparing buys.
Three soldiers in Virethish,
balanced because of you. You walk
mercy through a town and the Swarm
bills the town.

VENDOR
 (to the terrace)
 Walk it somewhere else.

A crowd's worth of agreement, low and ugly. Someone's hand on her crate-strap—

A SHADOW falls over the entire conversation.

BRACCA (30s) is built like the answer to a question about walls. Shield Mantis stock: the great scarred BACK-SHIELD down her spine is bone, grown, not carried. Names are carved into its inner rim — dozens, small, worn smooth by her own thumb.

BRACCA
 She's a guest.

VENDOR
 She's a debt, Bracca. The wax says—

BRACCA
 The wax says. The clerk says. The grain says.

Bracca removes the vendor's hand from the strap, gently, as if taking a knife from a child.

BRACCA
 Grottanar doesn't strike the unarmed. Not while I breathe. Everything else is bookkeeping.

The crowd unclots. Commerce resumes, embarrassed.

Bracca looks down at Valkyrith. At the crate. A long, unhurried reading.

BRACCA
 You're the one the wax is about.

VALKYRITH
 Yes.

BRACCA
 Eggs.

VALKYRITH
 Fourteen. Haven's.

Something slow crosses Bracca's face.

BRACCA
 Come on. You look like you could use a wall to sit behind.

INT. GROTTANAR - BRACCA'S LEDGE - DUSK

A hollow under a copper terrace. Sparse. One bench, one whetstone worn hollow at the middle, one kettle. Barely room in it for her.

Valkyrith sits with tea she hasn't drunk. Bracca works the whetstone with the lamp behind her, the inner rim of her back-shield catching the light - all those small carved names. Doesn't ask questions. Bracca never asks questions; she states, and lets you correct her.

BRACCA

You're for the Tower. Crescent year. First Rain.

VALKYRITH

Yes.

BRACCA

The Gorge is sealed, so you're going the long way. Through the Orchid city. Then the Whisper.

VALKYRITH

Yes.

BRACCA

The Whisper kills travelers.

VALKYRITH

So does waiting.

The whetstone stops.

BRACCA

The gate clerk gave you till dusk. Dusk was a while ago.

VALKYRITH

Then I should go.

BRACCA

You should sleep. The patrols change at dawn - the fat one takes the south wall and he doesn't look up because looking up reminds him there's a hill.

A beat.

BRACCA

I'll walk you out past him.

VALKYRITH

Why?

Bracca thumbs along the shield's inner rim. Stops on a name.
Doesn't say which.

BRACCA

I've stood a lot of walls. Walls
are good work. But a wall only ever
keeps a thing where it already is.

Bracca stands. The lower edge of her shield scrapes the floor.

BRACCA

I never once walked a thing to
where it needed to be.

VALKYRITH

That's not a reason.

BRACCA

It's mine, though.

EXT. GOTTANAR - SOUTH WALL - DAWN

Mist. Bracca boosts Valkyrith and the crate over a low saddle
of wall while, fifty feet away, a fat sentry dedicatedly fails
to look up.

They drop down the far side into bracken. Walk.

After a while:

BRACCA

Bracca.

VALKYRITH

Valkyrith.

A beat. The name has walked beside her for days. Now she
decides whose it is.

VALKYRITH

They're calling me something else
now. Soldiers made it up to spit at
me.

BRACCA

What is it?

VALKYRITH

Prayprey.

Bracca tries it. Once. Tastes the build of it — the kneel and
the hunt of it, the third thing underneath the two.

BRACCA

Names soldiers make up are free.
Everything else about soldiers is
expensive.

A beat.

BRACCA

Keep it.

VALKYRITH

(to the road ahead)

Prayprey.

From here on, she is PRAYPREY.

INT. ALTAR OF THE LAST BROOD - NIGHT

Elsewhere. A blackened private shrine. Resin flame.

Vel'Zhera kneels, helm off. In her palm: the cold token from
her throat — a BROOD TOKEN, the kind mothers wear. No pulse in
it. No song. It has never held either.

VEL'ZHERA

(quietly)

No heirs. No brood. My line ends
with me.

A beat. The cold token lies in the hand that keeps the
accounts.

VEL'ZHERA

The ledger has a column for every
father the rite takes. It has none
for this.

The air in the shrine turns. Under the resin smoke: pennies and
rain.

Vel'Zhera's antennae lift and hold.

The flame bends — inward, wrong, as if the dark behind it
inhaled.

Vel'Zhera's hand clamps around the cold token.

VEL'ZHERA

(quietly)

Thal'gox.

A voice. Not loud. Not male, not female. Mostly hunger that
learned grammar.

VOICE (V.O.)
Then refuse the ending.

VEL'ZHERA
I keep the accounts of the dead. I
know every voice that's owed to the
dark, and yours isn't in the
ledger.

Vel'Zhera stands and replaces the token.

VEL'ZHERA
I refuse you.

VOICE (V.O.)
(pleased)
For now is also an answer.

The flame stands straight again. Vel'Zhera stares at it a long moment — then crushes it out with her bare palm, and holds the burn like a receipt.

EXT. ROAD TO NYMBARI - RIDGE - NIGHT

Prayprey and Bracca on a ridgeline. Overhead, the moon has narrowed to a thin closing eye — almost the whole year gone into the walking. Below, in a torchlit bowl: a RITE.

Females in ceremonial chitin-lace. Adult males stand among the families watching — smaller than females of their own lineages, unbound and alive.

Beneath the closing moon, FATHERS wait in a patient line. Each wears a witnessed three-strand cord. Drums. One by one, the fathers walk forward, kneel, and are — the ridge is far enough that it is shapes and silence. Far enough, and not nearly far enough.

After each one: a small crystal oval is lifted, glowing faintly, and set in a rack with the others. Kavrii, fresh-lit.

An uncorded male watches from the crowd. Beside him, a father of the same lineage steps into the line.

Bracca folds her arms until the plates creak.

Below, another father walks forward. His family holds the loose end of his cord.

BRACCA
And they line up like it's an
honor.

PRAYPREY
I knew someone who wanted that.
(MORE)

PRAYPREY (CONT'D)

Wanted it the way other boys want
to be tall.

Bracca waits. Bracca is very good at waiting.

PRAYPREY

When they came for Haven, I saw him
kneel to them. He wasn't taken. He
walked out of a shadow they
couldn't see into, and he knelt.

The wound is fresh as the night it was born.

PRAYPREY

He chose them.

BRACCA

You saw him kneel.

PRAYPREY

I just said-

BRACCA

You saw a knee touch stone. The
rest you've been writing yourself,
every night since, with no one to
check your script.

Prayprey turns - stung, fast, seventeen -

PRAYPREY

You weren't there.

BRACCA

No.

Bracca unfolds her arms and turns from the rite.

BRACCA

Neither were you, the way you think
you were.

She walks. After a moment, Prayprey follows. Below, the drums
keep the books.

EXT. NYMBARI - APPROACH - GOLDEN HOUR

The path crests - and the Orchid city spills out below like an
argument for never leaving:

NYMBARI. A city grown into the fossil of a Titan's ribcage,
stained-glass towers in crimson and amethyst, vine-trellised
balconies dripping black fruit. Lanterns by the thousand swing
on silk lines, each burning with that steady, beautiful,
slightly wrong light.

Kavri-light.

Bracca and Prayprey stand looking at the loveliest thing either has ever seen, lit by the worst thing either knows.

BRACCA
Every lantern.

PRAYPREY
Every lantern.

Bracca starts down.

BRACCA
Don't drink anything that gets
offered twice.

EXT. NYMBARI - GATE PLAZA - NIGHT

Carnival. Masks on every face — lacquered orchids, beetle-shells, moons. Music with too many strings in it. The crowd moves like syrup poured from a great height.

Prayprey and Bracca enter with the foot traffic. Hooded. A GATE HERALD bangs a chime.

GATE HERALD
Third pouring at moonset! By grace
of Grand Vintner Lord Luther — the
Hall of Light renewed! New light
for the new year!

PRAYPREY
(to Bracca)
New light.

BRACCA
Keep walking.

They pass under the gate-lanterns. Up close, inside each glass bell: a Kavri, burning. The dust inside doesn't swirl anymore. It streams, one direction, like sand in an hourglass that someone tipped and will never turn back over.

The mantle goes rigid across her shoulders. Not toward the crowd, not toward the soldiers on the gate. Toward the lanterns.

Prayprey's third-eyes flare without her permission —

— and for one staggering second she HEARS the lanterns. Hundreds of thin voices, mid-sentence, mid-song, mid-name, burning.

Bracca catches her elbow. Holds her up. Moves her along.

BRACCA
(quietly)
Breathe.

PRAYPREY
They're talking. Bracca, the lamps
are still—

BRACCA
I know. Breathe anyway.

INT. NYMBARI - VINTNER HALL - NIGHT

The third pouring is being prepared.

A great hall beneath a stained-glass rib. At its center: the FURNACE OF LIGHT — an altar-shaped burner of bronze and crystal, cold and open. Around it on velvet racks: tonight's fuel. Rows of Kavrii, faint-glowing, tagged with paper labels in elegant script.

LORD LUTHER (60s), a mature Orchid male — fine-framed, long-winged, five-fingered, immaculate. A jeweled exo-corset manufactures breadth around his naturally smaller body. Across it, a three-strand father-cord has been remade in House gold. He inspects the racks with a taster's pleasure, his voice like fermented honey.

Beside him: VIRESSA (19), an Orchid female nearly twice her father's size, beautiful the way a knife collection is beautiful, in performance silks, holding her own elbows.

LUTHER
Posture, blossom. The houses watch
the pouring for omens, and you are
an omen.

VIRESSA
You're burning the high racks
tonight.

LUTHER
The vintage racks, yes. Old light
burns truest. It's considered
elegant.

Viressa walks the rack, reading labels like gravestones. Her hand stops at one oval. Older than the rest. Its glow is faint and warm and patient.

The label, in old script: VESSANTHE.

VIRESSA
(level)
That's Mother's.

LUTHER

That is House property of the first vintage, and it will light the year beautifully.

VIRESSA

She died before your rite. The exception named you clutch-steward until I came of age. You supplied "Lord."

LUTHER

I kept her House alive.

VIRESSA

You kept the title warm.

Luther adjusts a rack two degrees.

LUTHER

She would approve. She had a gift for being useful at the proper moment. It was nearly her only flaw that the moment had to be chosen for her.

Viressa's face performs serenity. Her hands, behind her back, are a riot.

VIRESSA

Of course, Father. The proper moment.

She bows. Exits. Counts her steps so she doesn't run.

EXT. NYMBARI - LANTERN ARCADE - NIGHT

Prayprey and Bracca thread the carnival. Ahead: a SWARM LIAISON POST - crimson wax on the door, two bored soldiers, a notice board.

On the board, fresh: a sketch. A hooded girl. A crate. A reward in grain-weight.

BRACCA

That's a better likeness than you deserve.

PRAYPREY

We need a way out the west postern before-

A HAND slips into the conversation - small, fast, lifting the coin-pouch off Bracca's belt with genuine artistry.

Bracca's fist closes around a wrist without looking.

BRACCA

No.

The wrist belongs to ZIPRA (17, delta-built, quick everywhere — eyes, hands, mouth). Caught, she recalibrates instantly to charm.

ZIPRA

Excellent reflexes. I run a —
testing service. Free assessment.
You passed.

BRACCA

Give the girl her three coins back.

ZIPRA

(returning two coins)
Two. Inflation.

Zipra clocks Prayprey's hood, the crate, the notice board. Arithmetic moves fast behind her eyes.

ZIPRA

Oh. Oh-h. You're the grain-weight.
The one from the scream-tales — the
girl who spares.

Zipra lowers her voice, suddenly businesslike.

ZIPRA

You're worth more than that board
says, by the way. The wax that came
through the liaison post tonight
doubled it. New orders. Somebody
important is angry with you
personally.

PRAYPREY

How do you know what came through
the post?

ZIPRA

Because I read other people's mail.
It's the only honest part of this
city.

Zipra tears a corner from the bounty notice, scratches an ORCHID and three BARS on it, and folds the third coin inside. A gutter-runner takes both without breaking stride.

PRAYPREY

What was that?

ZIPRA
Making the cells useful.

Shouts behind them — a LIAISON SOLDIER comparing Prayprey's silhouette to the sketch, raising a whistle—

ZIPRA
That's our cue. You want the cells
or the roofs?

BRACCA
Why would we want the cells?

Zipra is already moving.

ZIPRA
Because the roofs are where I lost
the guards the LAST time, so
tonight they watch the roofs.
Cells. Trust me. I know this jail
like family.

Zipra cuts DOWN a debtor stair instead of up. At its foot, she turns, raises both hands and sits as the pursuing guards pile in around them.

ZIPRA
Three prisoners. One religious
crate. Adjacent cells, unless you
enjoy forms.

INT. NYMBARI - ORCHID DUNGEON - NIGHT

Crystal bars, bio-lit walls. Beautiful, like everything here, in a way that has stopped meaning anything good.

A cell door closes on Prayprey, Bracca, and the crate. Down the corridor, guards congratulate each other on a capture that took eleven of them.

Zipra is already in the next cell. She waves through the bars — cheerful, like a neighbor over a fence.

ZIPRA
See? Told you. Safest room in
Nymbari. Nobody looks for anybody
in here.

BRACCA
We're IN PRISON.

ZIPRA
We're in POSITION.

ZIPRA

(to Prayprey)

One: the west postern keys hang in the warden's annex, which is through that wall. Two: at the third pouring every guard in this city goes to the Hall to watch the rich burn their grandmothers. Three

—

Zipra produces, from somewhere unjust, a thin resin pick.

ZIPRA

—three is me.

PRAYPREY

(quietly)

Why help us? You don't know what we're carrying.

Zipra works the lock without looking up.

ZIPRA

Crates that get strapped to a back like that carry one of two things: money, or somebody's whole life.

The lock gives a first, promising click.

ZIPRA

If it was money you'd have hired guards. So.

A beat. Zipra goes lighter — too light.

ZIPRA

Call it a toll I owe the road. I keep a ledger too. Mine's all debits.

Footsteps. Zipra ghosts the pick away. A figure comes down the corridor — masked, cloaked, carrying a guard's key-ring and walking like a dancer pretending to be furniture.

The figure stops at their cell. Lifts the orchid mask.

Viressa.

VIRESSA

(to Prayprey)

You're the heretic with the crate. The one the wax doubled tonight.

PRAYPREY

Word moves fast here.

VIRESSA

Nothing else is allowed to.

Viressa holds up the key-ring.

VIRESSA

I am going to open this door, and then you are going to do something for me that no one in this city would dare, because none of you are from this city.

BRACCA

We don't take work.

VIRESSA

You'll take this. It's theft.

A beat. Viressa's etiquette cracks, one hairline.

VIRESSA

At moonset they burn the vintage racks. My mother is on one of them. I have watched this city light its parties with the dead my whole life and I have held my elbows and smiled, and tonight they have finally chosen a lantern I cannot smile about.

Viressa faces Prayprey directly.

VIRESSA

Help me steal her back, and I'll put you through the west postern myself. I know every door. I was raised by the man who locks them.

A silence. Bracca looks at Prayprey: this is a detour, and the moon is closing, and they both know it.

Prayprey looks at the crate. Fourteen lives she's carrying out of a fire.

Then at Viressa. One life, already burned once, about to be burned again.

PRAYPREY

The crate goes where I go. It doesn't wait outside.

VIRESSA

Agreed.

PRAYPREY

(to Zipra)

You said you read the mail. Can you
read a furnace schedule?

Zipra grins as the lock surrenders.

ZIPRA

Lady, I can read a furnace
schedule, forge a furnace schedule,
and sell the original to two
different buyers.

Bracca rolls her shoulders.

BRACCA

We were safer in the cells.

INT. NYMBARI - VINTNER HALL - SERVICE GALLERY - NIGHT

The third pouring, from above:

The hall packed with masks. Luther on the dais, glass in hand.
Below the great furnace, ACOLYTES in flame-silk carry the first
rack of Kavrii forward in procession. Music climbing.

In the service gallery, behind the stained glass: the four of
them, plus crate.

Viressa points, surgical.

VIRESSA

Vintage racks stage on the left –
they burn last, for the crescendo.
Mother is third rack, fourth from
the end. The acolytes carry, the
warden counts, my father watches
the crowd. Nobody watches the
racks. Watching the fuel is
considered gauche.

ZIPRA

Gauche. I love rich people.
Everything has a word.

BRACCA

What do I do?

VIRESSA

At the right moment? Be enormous
somewhere distracting.

Bracca cracks her neck.

BRACCA

Finally, a plan that respects my gifts.

INT. VINTNER HALL - FLOOR - NIGHT

The burn begins. Rack by rack, acolytes feed Kavrii to the furnace mouth. Each one goes in with a sound like a held breath releasing – and the great chandelier-veins of the hall surge brighter. The crowd sighs with pleasure.

Prayprey, masked, moves along the wall. Her third-eyes are clamped down to coals – she can feel every oval in the room mid-sentence – and she keeps walking, because the job is one rack, fourth from the end, and you cannot carry a city.

She keeps walking. Her foreclaws have locked tight around nothing – around everything she is not carrying out of this room.

The vintage racks advance. Viressa, masked, falls into the acolyte line like she was born in it – she was. Zipra, in stolen flame-silk two sizes too big, follows with a censer she is swinging slightly wrong.

At the third rack, Viressa's hand finds the fourth oval from the end. Palms it. Replaces it in one motion with a cold dead Kavri from her sleeve – a lamp that burned out years ago, relabeled tonight in her mother's elegant script.

It is done. It is perfect.

Then the WARDEN'S COUNT stops.

At the rack's end, the Warden taps the swapped label.

WARDEN

This tag is new wax.

Half a second of the whole world tilting–

– and across the hall, Bracca trips into a pyramid of ceremonial wine casks.

Casks thunder in every direction. Nobles scatter like petals. A cymbal player commits fully to the wrong moment. Somewhere in it, Bracca's voice, booming with absolute sincerity:

BRACCA

WHO PUT THOSE THERE?

INT. VINTNER HALL - DAIS - CONTINUOUS

Luther, unmoving in the chaos, watches the room the way a spider reads its web. His eye finds the one wrong thread: an acolyte, walking against the flow, hand cupped at her sash.

He doesn't see her face. He sees her walk. He raised that walk.

LUTHER
(to his guard-captain)
Seal the hall. My daughter is
stealing from me.

EXT. NYMBARI - SERVICE STAIRS / WEST POSTERN RUN - NIGHT

Out and down - gallery, stair, cellar arcade - alarm chimes spreading behind them like rings in water.

They run the lantern arcade as the lanterns themselves seem to lean in to watch - four shadows, one crate, one small warm light in Viressa's fist.

The WEST POSTERN: a low gate, two guards already turning at the chimes-

Viressa doesn't slow. She lifts her mask, and lets them see exactly who is leaving.

VIRESSA
Gentlemen. My father says seal the
gate after me. You know how he is
about after.

The guards - trained their whole lives to fear the family more than the law - hesitate one fatal second. Bracca's shoulder settles the philosophical question.

Through. Out. Into the vineyard terraces and the dark beyond the glass.

Behind them, the alarm finds the gate. Ahead, downhill, the land drops away toward a low country of mist and listening:

The Whisper.

ZIPRA
(gleeful)
That went so well.

BRACCA
We're being hunted by a city now.

ZIPRA
Before, we were being hunted by an
army. This is variety.

VIRESSA
(to the Kavri)
We're going, Mother.

Viressa's mask returns, etiquette resealing over the crack.

VIRESSA

The marsh-line is six hours if we walk like we mean it. I suggest we mean it.

INT. NYMBARI - VINTNER HALL - LATER

Wreckage. Wine like a battlefield. Luther stands at the furnace, holding the dead, relabeled Kavri his daughter left in trade.

The SWARM LIAISON OFFICER waits at his elbow.

LUTHER

The heretic girl. The one your wax is so excited about. She left through my postern tonight with my daughter and my property.

Luther sets the dead lamp down with great care.

LUTHER

I am told your Reckoner pays in standing grain for her route.

LIAISON OFFICER

She does.

LUTHER

West postern. Marsh-line. The Whisper road — and out the delta mouth, three days, no other exit this season.

A beat. Honey over iron.

LUTHER

Have her returned alive if convenient. Have my daughter returned regardless. Talent is renewable. Blood is brand.

EXT. OB'LISK - MIRROR CITY / MORNING BASIN - DAWN

Far west, morning opens across the hand of a sleeping giant.

OB'LISK lies over the Sacred Gorge, so large the country has spent ages pretending he is terrain. A walled city occupies the seams of his open palm.

Its roofs are convex mirrors. At first light, shutters rise and turn their silver faces OUTWARD — not toward the rooms they serve, but toward one another.

In a palm-crease plaza, citizens queue at a public rain-basin. Bowls in hand. No clerk. No ledger.

Before each citizen draws, they tilt a small mirror over the water. It does not show the face above it. It shows the line waiting behind.

A MIRROR-CITY CHILD reaches the basin carrying two bowls in hooked young claws. One bowl is adult-sized and badly cracked. She draws a full measure for herself, looks into the public mirror, sees the long line – and pours half back.

The child starts away with two half-bowls.

A hand steadies the cracked one.

SOL'RYN (20s), WARDEN OF THE VERGE. Desert-white plates. Stillness sharpened into a profession.

Around her left forearm, three narrow REFLECTION SHARDS rest in a translucent living wrap. Each catches the plaza from a different angle. None gives Sol'ryn her own face.

She empties her untouched ration into the child's cracked bowl.

MIRROR-CITY CHILD
You didn't look.

SOL'RYN
I know who's behind me.

The child goes. Sol'ryn takes her place at the dry end of the queue.

At the plaza store, a small, full-winged VOWLESS STOREKEEPER lifts the lid on a grain bin. Bare wood under one scoop of meal. He closes it before the waiting families can see.

Beyond the wall, Swarm survey carts sit under canvas. The wind lifts one corner: sacks of grain, stacked high. The Storekeeper looks once. Then back to his empty bin.

Across the palm, beyond the city wall, SWARM SURVEYORS raise a black-red CLAIM MARKER over a seam in Ob'lisk's ancient bone. The permit wax is immaculate. The spike beneath it is not.

The hammer FALLS.

The marker enters the hand.

Every public mirror in the plaza rings.

The basin-water dimples though there is no wind. One of Sol'ryn's three shards clouds violet. Another shows the same plaza emptied and dry. The third shows nothing at all – only a pale root tightening somewhere far beneath the street.

Sol'ryn crosses to the marker. A SWARM SURVEYOR offers her the permit without being asked.

SWARM SURVEYOR

Deep-country transit right. Signed
by the Gorge houses.

SOL'RYN

You purchased a road.

She places two fingers on the ancient seam beside the spike.
The mirror-shards tremble.

SOL'RYN

You put the receipt through his
hand.

The Surveyor looks down at what he has been trained to call
stone.

Sol'ryn grips the spike and pulls. The pale root beneath it
tightens. Pain rolls through the street in one low stone note.

She releases it before the note becomes a crack.

Behind Sol'ryn, one household after another turns its roof-
mirror face-down. Not panic. A practiced civic refusal: if the
city cannot trust what is looking through the glass, the glass
does not get to look.

Sol'ryn breaks the Swarm seal and pockets the wax like
evidence. The spike stays, pale root already wound around its
buried shaft.

She looks along Ob'lisk's immense arm toward the far chest,
where the TOWER OF DUST AND MEMORY rises around a dark Mirror-
shard.

One tower mirror remains facing the sky.

Waiting for an answer.

INT. HOLLOW SWARM FORWARD CAMP - NIGHT

A field tent. Maps. Vel'Zhera reads the liaison dispatch by
lamp. Around her, CAPTAINS wait. Korryx stands nearest the
exit, where a field commander stands when she expects the
answer to become work.

VEL'ZHERA

The delta mouth. Three days.

Vel'Zhera sets a fossil tooth on the map.

VEL'ZHERA

We stop chasing her road and we go
stand at the end of it. Strike the
camps. We march tonight.

Vel'Zhera turns to the tent's edge, where Vedran copies orders.

VEL'ZHERA

Courier. The eastern garrisons are to seal every marsh exit but the delta mouth. Collapse her choices into one throat. Write it.

Vedran writes. Clean, small, exact.

VEDRAN

(without looking up)

And the crate, Reckoner? If it's — when it's taken. The order should say.

The tent quiets one degree. Vel'Zhera looks at him a long moment.

VEL'ZHERA

The clutch comes to me. Unbroken. The Swarm doesn't waste what it can raise.

A beat. Vel'Zhera turns back to the maps.

VEL'ZHERA

Fourteen heretic eggs, brought up Sworn. In one generation Haven's own blood drums for us. That is how you close an argument, courier. Not with fire. With inheritance.

Vedran's stylus doesn't stop. His thumbnail, sealing the dispatch, presses twice.

Vel'Zhera takes the dispatch and studies him.

VEL'ZHERA

You knew her. The carrier.

The tent goes still. Vedran answers carefully:

VEDRAN

Everyone in Haven knew everyone in Haven. That's what a town is.

VEL'ZHERA

(evenly)

Was.

She ducks out of the tent. Vedran stands very still, the way you stand when a blade has passed close enough to part hair.

EXT. VINEYARD EDGE - MARSH-LINE - PRE-DAWN

The four of them — five, counting the crate; six, counting the small warm Kavri at Viressa's throat beside her collarbone — descend the last terrace toward the mist.

The Whisper waits below: drowned forest, antler-roots, water like poured slate. Mist that moves at its own discretion, against the wind when it pleases.

They stop at the edge, where cultivated land gives up.

ZIPRA
(quietly)

Rules. The marsh listens. So: no names past the tree-line — names stick to things in there. Step where I step. If you hear someone you love, you keep walking, because you don't, you hear the marsh doing an impression.

A beat.

ZIPRA
It's a good impression.

BRACCA
You've run it before.

Zipra adjusts her reed-spear and takes a moment.

ZIPRA
I've run it twice. Once forward.

Zipra steps onto the first root.

ZIPRA
Once back, alone, to count what my map cost the people who bought it. Move.

She doesn't explain. She goes. They follow — one, two, three shadows and a crate, swallowed by the mist.

The moon above the marsh: a hairline now. Closing.

EXT. THE WHISPER - DROWNED FOREST - DAY

Daylight arrives here secondhand, strained grey-green through a canopy of antler-roots. Water the color of poured slate. The mist keeps its own counsel and its own schedule.

The four move in single file along root-spines. Zipra leads, pricking the mud ahead with her reed-spear — eleven small cuts notch its shaft.

Sounds travel wrong. A drip lands behind them and arrives in front.

ZIPRA
(low, a litany)
Step. Step. Skip that one, it's
lying. Step.

Bracca walks rear-guard under her own weight, sunk to the shin with every stride and pretending not to mind.

BRACCA
(under her breath)
The marsh and my patience. Both
bottomless.

Behind a root-veil, something large displaces water without sound. They all stop. It doesn't come. They go on.

EXT. THE WHISPER - SUNKEN CAUSEWAY - DAY

A drowned stone causeway, older than any nation that could claim it. Halfway along it, half-submerged: a TOPPLED IDOL with a convex mirrored eye, fogged by a century of marsh breath.

As Prayprey passes, her banked third-eyes catch — the idol's eye holds her reflection a half-second longer than physics allows.

She stops. Looks again. Just fog and stone.

VIRESSA
(quietly)
Don't window-shop. It's considered
rude here.

EXT. THE WHISPER - SINK-ROOT LATTICE - DUSK

The path dies at a spread of black water. Across it: a lattice of pale, hollow roots, a suggestion of a bridge. Beautiful. Wrong.

Zipra stops. And for the first time since the tree-line, she has nothing quick to say.

The notches on her spear-shaft are suddenly very present in her hands.

ZIPRA
This is the lattice. It holds if
you load it slow and single. It
drinks anything heavy or hurried.

BRACCA
You've crossed it.

ZIPRA
I've SOLD it.

A beat. The jokes fall away.

ZIPRA
Two years ago. Orchid guards wanted a route through the Whisper and I drew them a good map with one bad line in it, because they were Orchid guards and I was angry and the price was right. The bad line was this lattice, loaded fast, in armor.

Zipra looks at the water. The water looks back.

ZIPRA
Eleven tolls. The marsh kept all of them.

A silence. The mist drifts against the wind, interested.

PRAYPREY
And then you came back. Alone. To count.

ZIPRA
(sharp)
Who told you that?

PRAYPREY
You did. At the tree-line.

Zipra looks away. Then crouches and lays her palm flat on the first root – a professional checking her work, or a debtor visiting the debt.

ZIPRA
Single file. Slowest first. The crate goes middle, on its own sling – the lattice takes cargo better than it takes hearts.

Zipra stands.

ZIPRA
Tonight you get my good map. All of it good. That's the toll I'm paying. Move.

EXT. SINK-ROOT LATTICE - CONTINUOUS

The crossing.

Viressa first — dancer-light, root to root. Then the crate, slung and tethered, gliding above the black water like a small amber moon.

Then Prayprey — and midway across, her balance stutters. Not the lattice. Her. She catches herself, breathing hard. Under her mantle, a fine pale CRACKLINE tracks her shoulder seam.

She covers the crackline beneath her mantle and keeps walking.

Bracca last, hugest, slowest, the roots groaning their opinions. She steps off the far end and the whole lattice exhales behind her, sagging — done forever, holding no one else's mistakes again.

Zipra looks back at it once. Eleven notches' worth of look.

Then they go on.

EXT. THE WHISPER - THE STILL HEART - NIGHT

The mist opens onto a clearing of absolutely still water — a black lens a hundred feet across, rimmed with bone-pale roots. No insects. No drips. The first true silence of the marsh, and it is not restful. It is attentive.

ZIPRA

(barely audible)

We don't camp here. We cross the
rim and we keep—

PRAYPREY has stopped.

Her antennae are up and holding. Something over the black water that has no business in a marsh: pennies and rain.

Her third-eyes flare toward the black lens, dragged open.

Out on the still water, the mist does an impossible thing. It thickens into a shape that is not quite a figure, woven of threads finer than smoke. The shape doesn't walk. It is simply nearer each time the eye blinks.

And it speaks — in a voice that stops Prayprey's heart:

AMETHYL'S VOICE

Spark.

Prayprey makes a sound like a stitch tearing.

BRACCA

(low, urgent)

What. What do you hear?

PRAYPREY

You don't—?

She looks at the others: nothing. Wind, for them. Mist. The voice is being played on an instrument only she has.

AMETHYL'S VOICE

You're light tonight. Did you eat?

PRAYPREY

(a whisper)

Stop.

Amethyl's voice slips. Beneath it: the same dry cadence that bent Vel'Zhera's altar flame.

THE SHAPE

Why? She isn't gone, little carrier. Nothing here is gone. I keep what the world is careless with — every voice that ever ended mid-sentence. I have your whole burning city, unscattered.

The shape blinks nearer.

THE SHAPE

You've heard the lamps in the Orchid city. That is keeping done BADLY — burned, spent, wasted. I waste nothing. Give me the little deaths you're hauling to their funeral in the rain, and I will keep them too. Forever. Mid-laugh. Mid-song.

The shape blinks nearer again, almost tender.

THE SHAPE

Nothing has to be lost. That is all I have ever offered anyone.

Prayprey's foreclaw rises. An inch. Toward the voice in the mist.

Her foreclaw rises — and the crate-strap pulls across her chest with the small ordinary weight of fourteen unfinished arguments.

She looks down at the crate.

The amber seams of the eggs, glowing faintly in the dark — nursery resin, Amethyl's own hands, the seal made in the last hour of her life.

Prayprey digs the tip of one dividing digit into a seam of spare resin along the crate's rim. Warms two beads between the unfinished fingers of her foreclaw, the way she watched Amethyl warm salve a thousand ordinary evenings.

And presses one into each ear.

The marsh's voice goes out like a lamp.

Prayprey breathes in the silence.

She faces the shape on the water. When she speaks, she can barely hear herself.

PRAYPREY
Kept isn't carried.

A beat.

PRAYPREY
She's not in your dark, mid-sentence. She's in the resin in my ears. She's in how I hold a bowl. You don't have her. You just do an impression.

Prayprey turns her back on it. Her voice comes too loud.

PRAYPREY
We're leaving.

The shape on the water does not rage. It folds itself away, polite as a merchant whose customer will be back.

THE SHAPE
(to the marsh)
For now is also an answer.

EXT. THE WHISPER - DELTA EDGE - DAWN

Out. The roots thin, the water freshens, the mist surrenders to honest light. The four of them stagger onto firm ground and stand there breathing like it's a new skill.

Zipra digs the resin beads out of Prayprey's ears with a guide's clinical care.

The mantle stirs for the first time in a day. Not outward. It gathers — and turns toward Prayprey's own throat.

She looks down. There is nothing at her throat but the Kavri.

Nobody else is looking. She straightens the mantle and says nothing.

ZIPRA

What did it sound like?

PRAYPREY

My mother. Amethyl.

Zipra's hands stop.

ZIPRA

Amethyl of Haven?

PRAYPREY

You knew her?

ZIPRA

No. My mother did. She said the name when she thought I wasn't listening. More than once.

PRAYPREY

What did she say?

ZIPRA

Not enough. That was her gift.

Ahead, the delta spreads toward open country — channels braiding silver, reed-flats, and beyond them a rise of land. Bracca climbs a hummock for the view. Stops.

BRACCA

Down.

They flatten. Crawl up beside her. Look:

EXT. DELTA MOUTH - CONTINUOUS (THEIR POV)

The rise beyond the delta — the only dry road out — is dressed in the Hollow Swarm.

Not a patrol. An ARMY. Ordered ranks of obsidian, supply trains, watch-fires going pale in the dawn. A standard at the center: the crimson reckoning-glyph.

They didn't chase. They went to the end of the road and sat down.

ZIPRA

That's three hundred. That's — they were waiting. They knew the exit before we did.

VIRESSA

(flat)

My father. He sells routes the way he sells everything.

(MORE)

VIRESSA (CONT'D)

I led him straight to the price.

BRACCA

The marsh behind. The moon above.
That ahead.

On the horizon past the army, faint and impossibly far: a bone-pale spire rising from what looks, at this distance, like a reclining range. The Tower at Ob'lisk. Visible. Unreachable.

Prayprey looks at it. Then at the closing moon, fading in the morning blue. Six days of road left and four days of moon.

And under her mantle, the crackline along her shoulder has lengthened. She presses her foreclaw to it.

It gives — a fraction. Soft.

PRAYPREY

(to herself)

Not now.

EXT. DELTA FLATS - PARLEY GROUND - DAY

A white cloth on a reed-flat, weighted with stones, halfway between army and marsh. The Swarm's parley custom: old, exact, honored to the letter because the letter is all it honors.

Vel'Zhera waits there. Alone. Helm under her arm.

Prayprey walks out with the crate on her back. They face each other across the cloth.

Neither speaks at first. The wind crosses the white cloth between them and finds nothing soft on either side.

VEL'ZHERA

You're smaller than the reports
spend ink on.

PRAYPREY

You're the one who burned my town.

VEL'ZHERA

I'm the one who closed its account.
The fire was the account closing.

Vel'Zhera lets the horror stand. She has never needed a raised voice.

VEL'ZHERA

You know what I'm going to offer. I
know what you're going to answer.
Let's do it properly anyway.
(MORE)

VEL'ZHERA (CONT'D)

The forms matter.

PRAYPREY

The crate.

VEL'ZHERA

The clutch — alive, unbroken,
raised Sworn. Fed, taught, drummed
into the only family that will ever
be permitted to want them. And the
carrier and her — collection — walk
out of my delta unbalanced. Free.

A beat.

VEL'ZHERA

Fourteen lives saved at the price
of one strap. You'll never be
offered a kinder arithmetic, and
arithmetic is the only kindness
that scales.

PRAYPREY

Raised Sworn. Raised to stamp wax
on shoulders. Raised to drum at
crescents and call the lamps
elegant.

A beat.

PRAYPREY

You're not offering to save them.
You're offering to keep them. Those
are different things.

VEL'ZHERA

(interested)

There it is. The heresy, in one
sentence.

Vel'Zhera circles the cloth's edge, slow, a scholar at a
specimen.

VEL'ZHERA

Tell me, carrier. The town that
taught you the difference — where
is it now? Kept things outlast
carried things. That is the entire
history of the world.

PRAYPREY

Then the world's history is a lamp-
room. Everything preserved.
Everything burning.

Prayprey steps to the cloth's edge. The army on the rise leans forward.

PRAYPREY

I watched what your keeping looks like. The answer is no. The answer was no before you spread the cloth.

Vel'Zhera nods slowly. The forms are satisfied.

VEL'ZHERA

And now the forms are met, here is the arithmetic you walked into: The marsh behind you starves you or talks you mad. Every exit but this one is sealed. I don't have to take the crate, child. I have to stand here while the moon does my work.

Vel'Zhera replaces her helm. The courtesy is over.

VEL'ZHERA

You have four days to choose a better answer. The cloth stays out. So do we.

She walks back toward her army. Stops. Without turning:

VEL'ZHERA

The keeper of your nursery. At the end, she chose the eggs over the door.

A beat.

VEL'ZHERA

It was the only account I've closed that wouldn't balance. Whatever that means to you — make it mean something. You have four days.

She walks on. Prayprey stands at the white cloth with her dead mother in her ears and fourteen lives on her back, and the moon overhead, closing.

EXT. DELTA EDGE - FELLOWSHIP CAMP - NIGHT

A cold camp in the reeds. No fire — the army's watch-fires glitter on the rise like a constellation with a grudge.

The four, in council:

ZIPRA

There's a way. There's — technically — a way.

BRACCA

Say it.

ZIPRA

The drowned causeway forks a mile back. The south fork runs under the delta – under THEM – and comes up in the rain-shadow country past their pickets. It's on no map but mine.

VIRESSA

Why is it on no map but yours?

ZIPRA

Because it's the bad line. The one I sold. The lattice was the start of it – the causeway is the rest. It killed eleven trained soldiers moving fast.

A beat.

ZIPRA

It might pass four fools moving slow.

BRACCA

Then we move slow.

PRAYPREY

We move tonight.

She stands to settle it – and her legs don't.

She goes down on one knee, catching herself on the crate, and the sound her shoulder makes is a dry SPLIT, like ice deciding.

Bracca is there first. Pulls back the mantle.

The cracklines have webbed – across both shoulders, down the back-plates. Beneath them, where carapace should be, something pale and soft is asking to be born.

ZIPRA

(quietly)

Oh.

VIRESSA

That's a molt. That's – now? Out
HERE?

Bracca rolls her shoulders under the weight she was born with, declarative as ever.

BRACCA

Molts don't schedule. Bodies finish
their arguments when they finish
them.

PRAYPREY

(through her teeth)

Tomorrow. It can have me tomorrow.
Tonight we cross—

The argument finishes.

Her back SPLITS down the seam — not gore; release. Gold light
breathes out of the opening like warmth out of a door. Prayprey
gasps and folds, and the world's sound pours away from her —

Her third-eyes gutter. Bank. Go DARK.

For the first time since the ridge above burning Haven:
silence. True deaf-dark silence. The dust of the world,
unhearable.

PRAYPREY

(small, involuntary)

I can't hear anything. I can't —
Bracca, I can't hear the ground.

BRACCA

I know.

PRAYPREY

The eggs — the strap stays on me,
the strap—

Bracca takes Prayprey's foreclaw and sets it flat against the
crate's slats. Holds it there.

BRACCA

The strap stays in reach. You molt.
We carry. That's the whole
arrangement and you're not being
consulted.

PRAYPREY

(fading)

I've never been carried in my life.

Zipra gently lashes her to Bracca's back.

ZIPRA

Yeah. It shows.

**EXT. DROWNED CAUSEWAY - SOUTH FORK - NIGHT (THE
CROSSING)**

The breakout, in the dark, in the worst place in the world:

-- Bracca walks point with Prayprey lashed to the great back-shield like cargo — the wall, walking. Soft-shelled, half-molted, third-eyes dark, Prayprey rides her friend's back wrapped in every cloak they own.

-- The crate swings in its sling between Zipra and Viressa. Two women, fourteen eggs, black water to both sides.

-- The causeway stones tilt and lie. Zipra reads them by spear-prick and memory and debt.

-- Above, through root-gaps: the Swarm's watch-fires, close enough to hear soldiers complain about the damp. The fellowship passes beneath their enemies' boots, slow as sap.

-- Prayprey, helpless, watches the watch-fires slide overhead while the others carry her by the inch.

EXT. CAUSEWAY EXIT - REED CUT - PRE-DAWN

The causeway climbs toward air and grey light — a reed-choked cut between two banks.

Zipra holds up a fist. Stops them.

On the bank above the cut: a SWARM SCOUT. Young. Bored. Looking the wrong way — but posted exactly where no map says anyone should be.

They wait. The scout doesn't leave. The light is coming, and with it, visibility, and with visibility, three hundred soldiers.

Bracca does not put her down. She rolls her neck once, and Prayprey feels it through the shell she is tied to.

Prayprey reaches with one half-freed foreclaw. There is nothing to grip and nowhere to go.

PRAYPREY

Bracca. Don't.

BRACCA

(low)

You can't hear the ground. I can't hear anything else.

She goes up the bank like weather.

It is quick and it is quiet: a hand over a mouth, a turn, a weight folding into the reeds. The scout's spear slides into black water without a splash.

Bracca comes back down the bank. The weight on her back has not moved.

No one speaks as they move.

EXT. RAIN-SHADOW COUNTRY - DAY

Out. Beyond the pickets, beyond the delta — a land the bone-ridges don't shelter.

It shows. Fields of grey stubble. A hamlet of shuttered round-houses, its great communal RAIN-CISTERN cracked and dry, its rim carved generations deep with prayers. A child watches them pass with eyes that have learned not to ask.

The fellowship walks through in silence.

Viressa looks back at the cistern a long time.

VIRESSA
(to herself)
We dance on glass towers, and this
is the cellar.

EXT. RAIN-SHADOW COUNTRY - CAMP - NIGHT

Fire, finally — small, sheltered. Prayprey sleeps on every cloak they own, unlashd at last, breathing slow. The crate beside her, in reach of one softening foreclaw.

Bracca sits apart, working her whetstone over a blade that is already sharp. Zipra watches her across the fire.

ZIPRA
You haven't said anything since the
cut.

BRACCA
Nothing needed saying.

ZIPRA
The scout was a kid.

BRACCA
The scout was a bell. Bells ring.

The whetstone stops.

BRACCA
Say the rest, delta girl. You've
been carrying it all day and you're
listing.

ZIPRA
(quietly)
She wouldn't have. Even to save us.
You know she wouldn't have.

BRACCA
No. She wouldn't have.

PRAYPREY (O.S.)
Don't use me to make it clean.

Prayprey is awake in the cloaks, too weak to rise. Her third-eyes remain dark.

PRAYPREY
They had a name.

BRACCA
I didn't ask it.

Prayprey looks at the names cut into Bracca's shield.

PRAYPREY
Then mark where it should be.

Bracca takes out her knife. At the blank end of the rim, she cuts one short vertical line — a place held open for a name none of them knows.

PRAYPREY
You didn't keep me clean. You
carried all of us over him.

BRACCA
Yes.

Bracca meets her eyes, sets the knife down between them and resumes the whetstone.

EXT. CAMP - LATER THAT NIGHT

Prayprey wakes.

The molt is finishing. The old shoulder-plates lift away like a roof coming off a finished house — and she pulls her arms free of her own outgrown self.

Her new plates are pale and will darken. At the ends of her forelimbs, the long division is complete.

The hooks have opened into five articulated fingers. Adult hands — newly finished, absurdly soft. She raises them against the watch-fire stars and flexes each digit independently.

From the small of her back down, nothing. The long wings she has worn all her life stayed behind in the shell — as a woman's always do, and a man's never will.

Her third-eyes flicker — re-igniting, banked and steady. The world's murmur returns like circulation: the fire's small memory, the road's long one, her friends' breathing.

Her new hands go first to the smaller egg at the row's end. It has not moved since Haven. Her palm finds warmth beneath the amber — low, steady, not yet an answer.

She leaves it nested and lifts the egg beside it.

Holds it without hooking or pinching.

Inside the amber, faint, a shape turns in its sleep.

Across the camp, Bracca is awake. Her thumb rests in the empty notch she cut. Prayprey sees it, then looks at her. Neither offers a nod.

By the fire, the shed carapace settles into the grass — the wings still folded down the back of it, long and whole, like a coat left on a chair.

EXT. RAIN-SHADOW COUNTRY - SYR'ALLA'S REFUGE - DAWN

The road ends at a house grown around a dead cistern.

Not abandoned. Refused. The roof is patched with sailcloth from six nations. Hundreds of little clay cups hang under the eaves, each positioned to catch one particular leak. A house that has made a profession of thin rain.

An OLD WOMAN waits in the doorway before the fellowship reaches it.

SYR'ALLA (60s), delta-born, heavy through the shoulders, one eye milked by age. She stands bent over a tall twisted spiral staff, both hands on it, putting her whole weight through a shape like braided rope. Her thumb works a hollow in a whetstone tied at her belt.

Zipra stops walking.

ZIPRA

Ma.

SYR'ALLA

You took your time paying eleven tolls.

ZIPRA

I was busy becoming disappointing in three countries.

SYR'ALLA

Two. Nymbari doesn't count. It's a chandelier with taxes.

They stare at each other through years of practiced absence.

Then Syr'Alla opens her arms. Zipra goes into them so fast the joke cannot protect her.

Bracca watches. Her thumb stops on the shield rim.

SYR'ALLA
(to the others)
Bring the eggs in. Ob'lisk has gone dry. The old rain-road may still be open.

INT. SYR'ALLA'S REFUGE - MORNING

Archive, kitchen and armory without admitting to any of the three. Delta maps. Broken mirror-shards. Titan-bone tools. A cradle used as a shelf.

The eggs rest under damp silk while Syr'Alla turns Prayprey's newly finished hands beneath the window light.

SYR'ALLA
Final molt found you on the road.

PRAYPREY
It could have waited.

SYR'ALLA
It did.

She releases the hands and sees the Kavri at Prayprey's throat. Then the nursery-resin seals on the crate.

Something in her face opens and closes.

Syr'Alla crosses to a sealed chest.

ZIPRA
You knew her.

SYR'ALLA
Clutchkin by promise. Better than blood. We had to keep choosing it.

The chest opens.

Inside: AMETHYL'S OLD CARAPACE ARMOR, shed in an earlier molt and repaired at every seam. Every seam is bound with a pale moss-coloured fibre threaded with green light. TITAN-FLEECE.

Prayprey cannot touch it yet.

SYR'ALLA
She left the plates when she settled Haven. Told me not to sell them unless I was starving.

ZIPRA

You live in a broken cistern.

SYR'ALLA

And yet, breakfast.

Syr'Alla straightens. Looks — properly, for the first time — at what the girl is wearing.

She lifts the grey mantle off Prayprey's shoulders. Weighs it. Her thumb finds the inside face and stays there.

SYR'ALLA

Old signal-fiber. It learns the bodies touching it. It will not take one that refuses.

Prayprey's shoulders are bare.

SYR'ALLA

(to Prayprey, of the plates)
Do you want it?

Prayprey looks at the armor. At the crate.

PRAYPREY

Yes.

Only then does Syr'Alla settle the plates across her shoulders.

The repaired plates close over Prayprey's pale new carapace and darken toward leaf-jade. Amethyl's road-worn armor has found an adult body.

And while they settle, Syr'Alla works the mantle over between her palms — the way you reverse a sleeve. She does not look at it while she does it.

She lays it back across Prayprey's shoulders.

WHITE. Short, dense, luminous. Cape and deep hood both, turned out at last.

The fleece brightens. Threads move through Amethyl's old armor, through the crate strap, along the Kavri cord — not fusing. Finding the load.

Nobody remarks on it.

One loose thread reaches toward Bracca's shield. Syr'Alla catches it before contact.

SYR'ALLA

Yours?

BRACCA

Not yet.

Syr'Alla lets the thread fall.

She opens an old skin-map. It shows the Sacred Gorge crossed by an immense reclining body: lower hand on the near height, arm over the abyss, ribbed chest beneath the Tower.

Syr'Alla traces a faded route under the ridges to Ob'lisk's palm.

SYR'ALLA

The Pilgrim Way. It comes up inside the lower hand. The Swarm burned it out of the registries; the Vowless kept walking it.

She sets a broken disk of immaculate Swarm wax on the drawn palm — the permit seal Sol'ryn pocketed at the morning basin.

SYR'ALLA

Sol'ryn sent this downroad when the first spike went in. One became thirty. They're in the rain conduits now.

PRAYPREY

The Tower will be dry.

SYR'ALLA

Unless Ob'lisk's road opens before the moon does.

BRACCA

We have one day.

PRAYPREY

Then he isn't a detour.

Syr'Alla looks at her — Amethyl's armor, Amethyl's crate, none of Amethyl returned.

SYR'ALLA

No. He isn't.

She rolls the map and gives it to Zipra.

At the door, Bracca pauses. She takes the loose green thread from Prayprey's mantle and looks to Syr'Alla.

Syr'Alla waits.

Bracca threads it through the unnamed notch in her shield rim and knots it herself.

INT. HOLLOW SWARM FORWARD CAMP - DELTA MOUTH - DAWN

The white parley cloth, dew-soaked. The picket line. KORRYX runs the morning count — and stops at a gap in the reeds, at a missing scout, at a cold trail going north.

In her command tent, Vel'Zhera receives it without expression.

KORRYX

Under us. They went UNDER us.
There's no route there — there's no
ROUTE there, Reckoner—

VEL'ZHERA

There was a route there.

Vel'Zhera stands and studies the map. Then, once, she laughs. Nobody in the tent has ever heard it. Brief, real, worse than anger.

VEL'ZHERA

Four of them. One molting. Through
the drowned dark, under three
hundred spears, slow as sap.

Vel'Zhera sets the fossil tooth on a new place on the map: the SACRED GORGE.

VEL'ZHERA

North, then. She has three days of
moon and one door left in the
world, and it's the door we sealed
first. Good.

Vel'Zhera moves the fossil tooth from the Gorge to the outline of Ob'lisk's lower hand.

VEL'ZHERA

Wake the claim crew. Drive the
spikes into his rain conduits. If
she reaches the Tower, let her
reach it under a dry sky.

KORRYX

Reckoner. Those are public rain
lines.

VEL'ZHERA

I know what they are.

KORRYX

Children draw from them.

VEL'ZHERA

Then drive the spikes before they
wake.

Korryx's command hand stills against her breastplate. Only for
a beat. Then she salutes.

Vel'Zhera pulls on her helm.

VEL'ZHERA

Doors are where accounts get
settled. Strike the camp. And send
me the courier — the Gorge garrison
needs its orders carried ahead.

OFF Vedran, at the tent flap, ledger to his chest — having
heard his assignment, and underneath it, his chance.

EXT. NORTH ROAD - VIRETHISH EDGE - DAY

The road north skirts the Swarm capital at a respectful
distance — Virethish's fossil towers biting a bruise-colored
sky on the horizon.

The fellowship moves fast now, cross-country, the Gorge a day
ahead. The moon, where it hangs pale in the daylight blue, is a
closed eyelid with a seam of light. One day of seam.

At a ruined WAYSIDE GARDEN — old Virethish pleasure-ground,
walls down, fountain dry, roses gone feral into something
honest — Prayprey stops.

Her third-eyes pull. Not danger. Familiarity.

PRAYPREY

(to the others)

Water's here. Ten minutes.

Their looks answer her.

PRAYPREY

Ten. Minutes.

Bracca reads something in her face and herds Zipra and Viressa
onward to the well. Prayprey walks into the garden alone.

EXT. WAYSIDE GARDEN - CONTINUOUS

He is standing under the broken arch, where the road's memory
said he would be. Courier's harness. Dispatch case. His
father's rope rebraided as the shoulder strap.

And he has finished. Full wings, folded from the small of his
back to his heels. Forelimbs that bend now where they used to
hook, five divided fingers loose at his side. Seventeen going
on a hundred.

Prayprey stops. The Vedran she has argued with every night for a year was sixteen.

Vedran.

For a moment, neither of them is capable of anything at all.

VEDRAN

Your route only has one well on it.
I requisitioned a detour.

A beat. The joke dies. Vedran gestures helplessly at the ruined garden – the ruined everything.

VEDRAN

Hello, Val.

PRAYPREY

Prayprey.

VEDRAN

I know. I've written it on more wax
than you've ever seen.

A beat.

VEDRAN

It's a good name. It sounds like
you won an argument with it.

She comes closer and stops across the dry fountain basin from him.

PRAYPREY

You look–

VEDRAN

Fed. You can say fed. It's the
Swarm's best argument.

PRAYPREY

I was going to say tired.

VEDRAN

That's their second best.

A beat. Then she does the thing she came to do – the thing she has rehearsed on every road since Haven. She says it gently. She says it generously. She says it from above:

PRAYPREY

Vedran. What you did that night –
kneeling to them – I want you to
know I understand it.

(MORE)

PRAYPREY (CONT'D)

You were hungry, and they were
there, and everyone breaks
somewhere.

A beat. The final blow, delivered as a gift.

PRAYPREY

I forgive you.

Violet floods the white at her collar.

Vedran's eyes go to it. Come back to her face.

Silence.

Vedran looks at her for a long, long moment. And then he laughs
— one syllable, awful, the sound a rope makes before it parts.

VEDRAN

You forgive me.

PRAYPREY

I just said—

VEDRAN

You've carried it all this way. My
crime. Wrapped and fed and kept
warm — you've been more faithful to
my crime than the Swarm has ever
been to me.

Vedran comes around the fountain. The detonation is quiet and
total.

VEDRAN

And now you set it down in front of
me and forgive it, and I'm supposed
to kneel again — to YOU this time —
and be grateful, and be small, and
be the boy you were generous about.

A beat.

VEDRAN

You didn't come here to love me,
Val. You came to rise above me.
Forgiveness is just the ladder.

PRAYPREY

That's not—

Her voice misses its footing. Somewhere under the wound, she
recognizes the shape of the accusation.

PRAYPREY

That's not what it is.

VEDRAN

Then ask me.

PRAYPREY

Ask you what?

VEDRAN

ANYTHING. One question. You've had a year and a wound and the whole eastern road, and you have never once asked me what happened that night. You SAW, and you sentenced, and tonight you've come to commute the sentence.

A beat. The trooper, the grate, the torchlight — the truth climbs to Vedran's teeth.

He swallows it.

VEDRAN

You think you watched me kneel.

PRAYPREY

I DID watch you—

VEDRAN

Then there's nothing to ask, is there.

The silence that follows has rubble in it.

Prayprey looks down. On the fountain rim, his dispatch case sits open — sealed scrolls in their loops. Every seal pressed deep with the Swarm's mark.

And beside every mark: a second, smaller press. A thumbnail. Twice-sealed, every one.

Despite everything, Prayprey frowns.

PRAYPREY

You still do that.

Vedran follows her eyes.

VEDRAN

My father sealed rope-bales that way. One press for the maker. One for the carrier. So whoever hauled it knew somebody made it on purpose.

Vedran closes and buckles the case.

VEDRAN

Nobody in the Swarm has ever asked
what it means. They think it's a
flaw in my thumb.

He shoulders the case. Looks at her once more.

VEDRAN

The Gorge garrison changes watch at
moonrise minus one — the bridge
throat stands at half-strength for
the length of a kettle's boil. The
relief column always comes up the
east stair because the west one's
cracked.

A beat.

VEDRAN

Don't ask me why I told you that.
You won't, anyway. Asking isn't
your discipline.

PRAYPREY

Vedran—

VEDRAN

Go save your eggs, Prayprey of the
scream-tales.

Vedran turns away.

VEDRAN

You were always going to be carried
out of that night, and I was always
going to be the one who stayed
kneeling. I just thought — for one
whole year I thought — when you
came back, you'd come back asking.

He walks. She watches him out of sight, her prepared
forgiveness still in her hands.

Her mouth opens after him. No question comes before he is gone.

EXT. THE PILGRIM WAY - DAY

Beyond the ruined garden, an old stair takes them under the
ridges.

A road cut through the inside of the world: fossil-bone
corridors, arches worn smooth by ten thousand years of grey
robes, lichen-light in seams overhead. Cold. Airless. Utterly
without a horizon.

- Prayprey walks with her palm against the wall. Her Third-Eyes hold a steady banked gold. Old footsteps and old humming fill the stone, company instead of assault.

- At a junction, Zipra finds a pilgrim wall: ten thousand travelers' names and tolls cut into the bone. She reads it the way other people read a market.

- Viressa carries the crate for an entire watch without being asked. Nobody comments.

- They sleep in a chamber where the carvings are all hands — thousands, every size, pressed and traced and cut.

BRACCA

What is this room?

PRAYPREY

(listening)

People saying they were here.

BRACCA

That is all?

PRAYPREY

That is everything.

The moon's seam widens overhead, unseen but felt in every old road turning north.

EXT. OB'LISK - MIRROR WASTE / LOWER HAND - DUSK

The Pilgrim Way opens beneath a field of black glass.

Prayprey, Bracca, Zipra and Viressa climb into evening — and see the destination whole.

The SACRED GORGE tears the country open.

Across it lies OB'LISK.

Not a mountain shaped like a body. A body the world has mistaken for mountains: an intact Colossus reclining across the wound, lower hand on the near height, one immense arm spanning the abyss, ribbed torso embedded in the far plateau.

A city occupies him. Mirror-roofed towers rise from his knuckles. Homes nest along the joints of his arm. On the far height, Vowless walls encircle the buried Mirror-shard in his chest-cavity — and from that ancient hollow rises the TOWER OF DUST AND MEMORY.

The bridge is his arm. The Tower is where his heart remembers being.

Tonight, every mirror in the lower city has been turned face-down.

Swarm claim-spikes stand driven into the palm-streets, crimson wax packed around their bases. Violet filaments creep from them into Ob'lisk's old green-gold conduits. Beneath both, almost invisible, pale roots tighten through the glass.

The hidden way deposits the fellowship inside a shuttered mirror arcade. A crescent blade touches Prayprey's throat before her second step.

SOL'RYN, the Warden of the Verge, stands where no one stood a breath ago. The living wrap still binds three mirror-shards to her left forearm. One shard is cracked now. Another has gone violet at the edge.

SOL'RYN
Carrier. Wall. Thief. Orchid.

ZIPRA
I object to the order.

SOL'RYN
(to Prayprey)
You are late.

A SOUND rolls through the street — stone trying not to cry out.

All three shards ring. The crack lengthens.

EXT. OB'LISK - LOWER HAND - CONTINUOUS

Panic along the palm-city.

VOWLESS and RAIN-PRIESTS haul water toward dry cisterns while the avenue tilts one degree at a time. At the morning basin, the CHILD with the cracked bowl waits beneath a tap giving dust.

Five channels scored through the plaza meet at one circular plate: the rain-road's central confluence.

At its center, the BASIN-KEEPER convulses. Violet filaments run from his chestplate into all five channels.

The oldest claim-spike has been driven through the plate beneath him, making one living body the signature on every claim in the hand-city.

BASIN-KEEPER
Cut me loose — CUT IT—

Sol'ryn opens her left hand. The three shards lift from their wrap and stand in the air.

In the FIRST: Sol'ryn cuts the filaments. The Keeper dies.
Water returns.

In the SECOND: Sol'ryn waits. The pale root reaches Ob'lisk's
nerve. The Tower stays dry beneath an open moon.

The THIRD reflects no future at all. Only the violet line
entering the Keeper – and far beneath it, something pale
holding its breath.

SOL'RYN

I have turned it every way. Cut him
and open the road. Keep him and
lose the Rain.

She raises her crescent blade.

Prayprey steps between.

PRAYPREY

You have three mirrors.

SOL'RYN

The third refuses me.

PRAYPREY

Then hold it where I can listen.

She kneels and lays both new hands on the Keeper's chest. The
filaments bite her palms. Violet races into the Titan-fleece.

The world hits her Third-Eyes:

- Hands shaping copper around patient bone.

- A great worker lifting water because the small lives below
asked, not commanded.

- This same filament, green-gold and young, carrying rain-song
from deep country into an open hand.

Prayprey's Kavri flares. The triform marks on its rim answer
marks buried in Ob'lisk's street. Light runs down her arm and
takes a rough EDGE in her right hand – unfinished, green-gold,
humming.

THE BLADE OF VOICE, newborn and uncertain.

Prayprey sees violet. Sees the Keeper screaming. Sees the two
finished futures waiting for her to pick one.

PRAYPREY

Corruption.

She swings at the filament.

The edge SHATTERS.

Light bursts back up her arm like a slammed door. Prayprey hits the black glass, her palm burned along one thin line. The filament holds – and bites deeper.

Sol'ryn moves.

PRAYPREY

Wait.

Prayprey stares at the ruined light smoking off her hand. At the word she gave the root. At the answer she supplied before asking.

She crawls back and lays her burned palm on the filament itself.

This time she listens.

Down beneath the violet she hears its first labor: water rising through a living conduit. Centuries of carrying.

Then crimson claim-resin driven into the stone – and, deeper still, a pale root tightening. A road made into a leash one held breath at a time.

PRAYPREY

(to the filament)

What did you carry before they
named you?

The third shard clears in Sol'ryn's hand.

Not a future. A memory: green-gold water climbing freely through Ob'lisk's open palm.

SOL'RYN

Rain.

PRAYPREY

Then remember the way.

The filament shudders.

The light returns to her hand. Not larger. Truer. The Blade reforms along the burn.

Sol'ryn holds the cleared shard against the violet line. Prayprey lays the Blade's FLAT against its reflection.

Voice and Reflection find one pitch.

The filament releases.

Not severed. It unthreads from the Keeper's living tissue, violet draining to grey — and the violet goes out of the Titan-fleece with it, white returning at her collar. The central claim-spike fractures beneath him. Crimson claim-resin spits out of all five channels like clotted blood.

Across the palm-city, every secondary spike misses one beat.

Then Ob'lisk BREATHES — once.

Green-gold light enters the five conduits, races beneath the bridge-arm and reaches the ribs on the far height. Not enough to free him. Enough to reopen the old rain-road.

At the basin, one clear thread of water falls into the child's cracked bowl.

The Tower answers with one deep note.

The eggs hum in their crate.

The Blade dissolves from Prayprey's hand, leaving the thin burn and a shaking palm.

Sol'ryn catches the Keeper. Her third shard now reflects him alive. She studies the image as though it has violated a law.

SOL'RYN

It had no image for him.

PRAYPREY

It does now.

Sol'ryn looks across Ob'lisk's arm toward the Tower. Swarm watch-fires burn along every joint. The secondary spikes are already finding their rhythm again.

She binds the three shards back to her forearm and starts toward the bridge.

SOL'RYN

The road is open. The city is not.

PRAYPREY

Then show us where it closes.

Sol'ryn does not look back.

SOL'RYN

Keep up.

INT. OB'LISK - MIRROR GALLERY - DUSK

Sol'ryn leads them at speed through the city's buried center toward the bridge throat.

Convex Mirrors line the gallery, from hand-sized tools to discs tall as houses.

Mirror-city families work beside the monks now – replacing cracked backing, polishing silver, carrying water to the old and the injured. The city's sacred machinery is also its public repair shop.

Ob'lisk's single breath wakes one shield-sized Mirror as they pass.

Three images:

– A ridge folded into shelter by enormous hands.

– Ob'lisk lifting rain while small cities flower along his wrists.

– Pale roots entering the chest-cavities of great workers. Open hands closing. Purpose becoming posture.

The image dies. The crack travels one finger-width farther.

Around its rim: FIVE UNLIKE MARKS.

All five RING – one complete chord.

Within it, one answers the burn in Prayprey's palm with a green-gold HUM.

One rings against Sol'ryn's three shards.

One warms beneath the names on Bracca's shield.

Sol'ryn opens the concealed door to the overlook.

Bracca looks toward the bridge, where Ob'lisk's arm disappears into gathering dark.

BRACCA

We still choose where it goes.

INT. GORGE GARRISON - RECORDS POST - NIGHT

Lamplight. Vel'Zhera stands at the garrison's dispatch archive, a clerk trembling beside her, scrolls laid out in ranks.

She isn't reading the orders. She is reading the WAX.

Seal after seal after seal. Her gauntleted thumb moves down the rows – stops on one. A second press beside the mark. And the next scroll. And the next. Twice. Twice. Twice.

VEL'ZHERA
 (to herself)
 One for the maker.

A beat.

VEL'ZHERA
 Who carries, I wonder.

She looks up through the records-post window, down the line of watch-fires to the bridge.

VEL'ZHERA
 (to the clerk)
 When the courier reports back –
 he's to be my guest. He'll carry
 one more message for me.

A beat.

VEL'ZHERA
 Himself.

The clerk slides forward a Vowless service map and an iron stair-key, both dusted with red grain meal.

Vel'Zhera takes them.

**EXT. OB'LISK - SACRED GORGE OVERLOOK - NIGHT (CRESCENT
 EVE)**

The Gorge: a wound in the world, a mile deep, wind howling up out of it like the planet breathing through its teeth.

Spanning it, impossibly old: OB'LISK'S OUTSTRETCHED ARM – the Bridge, white as a tooth, broad enough for a road and a city wall. Obsidian hoardings and edict-wax barricade the wrist at its near throat.

Beyond it, on the far height, Ob'lisk's chest-city cups the TOWER OF DUST AND MEMORY in mirrored walls. Close enough, finally, to be a place instead of a hope.

The fellowship lies flat on the overlook. Below: torches, hoardings, the garrison changing watch.

PRAYPREY
 Moonrise minus one. The watch thins
 for a kettle's boil.

ZIPRA
 And you know their kettle schedule
 how?

Bracca reads Prayprey's face and answers for her.

BRACCA

The road told her.

Bracca rises into a crouch and settles the shield.

BRACCA

The throat's a wall's width. One wall can hold it while you run the span.

PRAYPREY

Bracca-

BRACCA

You'll be sixty heartbeats on that bridge, naked as prayer, with everything that matters on your back. Somebody stands the door.

She looks at the crate.

BRACCA

All my life I kept things where they already were. This one I get to keep moving. Don't take it from me.

Prayprey grips Bracca's forearm - new soft hand on old scarred plate.

PRAYPREY

Sixty heartbeats. Then you follow.

BRACCA

Then I follow.

BRACCA

(to Zipra and Viressa)

If anything gets past me, it earned the right. Hit it anyway.

EXT. OB'LSK - GORGE BRIDGE / ARM - THE RUN - NIGHT

Moonrise minus one. Somewhere in the garrison a kettle starts its boil.

It happens before the kettle boils:

- The west stair, cracked and empty, taken in the dark, two at a time.

- The throat: four sentries where eight should stand. Bracca arrives among them like a verdict. She does not kill. Shield, shoulder, floor - then she fills the gap and the hoardings groan around her.

– Prayprey, Zipra, Viressa, Sol'ryn and the crate race onto the span. Ob'lisk's arm underfoot. A mile of wind below. The moon opening over the Tower in his chest.

– Alarm horns. The garrison waking behind them. Bodies hit Bracca's shield and stay down.

– Sol'ryn's three Reflection Shards split moonlight into impossible angles and throw it into the archers' eyes. Every arrow finds a reflection and forgets its target. Each volley adds another hairline crack.

Then the west stair ERUPTS.

KORRYX and twelve claim-crew soldiers climb into the throat carrying the final black-red CLAIM SPIKE between them. Violet resin drips from its point. A GARRISON CAPTAIN points to an empty conduit socket beside Bracca.

GARRISON CAPTAIN

Drive it! Close the rain-road!

Korrryx raises one hand to order the hammers down.

It shakes.

A young claim-soldier with a clay water-charm tied to her hammer sees it and lowers hers.

Across the spike, a veteran holds ready for three more beats. Then opens her grip.

Two hammers follow. Then four. Then the rest, until only one remains. The last soldier meets Korrryx's eyes before lowering hers.

KORRYX

Set it down.

The spike hits the bridge with a bone-deep CLANG.

GARRISON CAPTAIN

That is the Reckoner's order.

KORRYX

I heard her.

Korrryx puts her claim-hammer through the Captain's guard and sends him into the hoarding.

KORRYX

Open the throat.

The twelve turn. The Swarm hits the Swarm. For the first time the clicking cadence cannot tell which side owns it.

KORRYX

Wall!

BRACCA

Bracca.

KORRYX

Korryx. Thirteen soldiers. No
defensible explanation.

BRACCA

Best kind. Hold here.

Korryx and her twelve lock into the gap.

Bracca looks once toward Prayprey, already halfway across. Then she runs after what is moving.

EXT. OB'LISK - GORGE BRIDGE / FAR BARRICADE - CONTINUOUS

Edict-wax seals the far hoarding, each stamp a reckoning-glyph. Viressa's stiletto and Zipra's pick make insulting work of the Swarm's law.

At the last seal, Viressa's stiletto bends. Prayprey braces the hoarding while Zipra drives her pick through the fractured wax.

The seal breaks. The hoarding swings. All five and the crate pass through.

Beyond it, Ob'lisk's chest-city climbs toward the Tower. The three shards around Sol'ryn's arm ring out of tune.

She looks down through the black glass. Violet is returning to the channels they freed.

SOL'RYN

The claim current is finding
another road. I have to turn it
before the Rain reaches the heart.

PRAYPREY

Meet us above.

Sol'ryn breaks for the Mirror Gallery. Prayprey, Zipra and Viressa run for the Tower stair.

INT. OB'LISK - MIRROR GALLERY - SAME

Violet light races across the awakened Mirror toward Ob'lisk's chest.

Sol'ryn slides to the rim and locks her three shards into its worn marks. Turns them together.

The five marks around the Mirror sound their complete chord backward.

The claim current bends away from the Tower and empties into a dead conduit. One shard cracks almost to its edge, but holds.

Sol'ryn tears the shards free and runs.

EXT. OB'LISK - TOWER OF DUST AND MEMORY - LOWER STAIR - NIGHT

The Tower stair enters the vast convex Mirror-shard embedded in Ob'lisk's chest. Black glass outside. Within it, strata of pale dust – generations settled layer over layer, names cut beside them on the inward-facing walls.

Every landing is part stair, part archive. The dead do not watch the climbers. The climbers carry the record upward.

Bracca catches them at the second turning, armor scored and breathing like a forge.

PRAYPREY

Sixty?

BRACCA

Korryx counts slowly.

At a side arch, a service-stair lock lies open rather than broken. One red grain kernel is pressed into the resin groove.

Torchlight rises through it.

VEL'ZHERA, VEDRAN bound beside her, and six ELITE emerge from inside the Tower bone.

VEL'ZHERA

Set down the crate.

BRACCA

No.

VEL'ZHERA

I wasn't speaking to you.

BRACCA

That's been your trouble all night.

Prayprey starts down.

BRACCA

(without looking at her)

No. You asked me for sixty heartbeats. I gave you those on the bridge. These are mine.

PRAYPREY

Bracca-

BRACCA

Carry what moves.

She settles the shield.

BRACCA

I'll discuss the rest with what
doesn't.

Prayprey holds her gaze. Zipra takes one arm. Viressa takes the
crate strap. Together they pull Prayprey up the stair.

Bracca turns to Vel'Zhera.

**EXT. OB'LSK - TOWER OF DUST AND MEMORY - LAST LANDING -
CONTINUOUS**

Bracca fills the stair.

Vel'Zhera's elites come first. Shield. Shoulder. Step. Bracca
makes the narrow landing obey geometry.

She does not win. She makes winning take time.

Above, Prayprey climbs with the crate. The Titan-fleece across
her shoulders has found Bracca's fight below and will not let
her set it down - each impact arriving in her own body.

BRACCA'S fight becomes a second heartbeat in all of them.

Vel'Zhera enters at last, twin blades out.

VEL'ZHERA

Your shield carries failures.

BRACCA

That's how it learned the work.

VEL'ZHERA strikes once. Bracca turns it.

Twice. The old shield GROANS.

The third strike cleaves the shield from her body, rim to boss.

The names split.

Bracca looks down at two dead halves of herself in her hands.

For the first time in her life, no wall between her and the
blow.

Inside the split shield, the strand of TITAN-FLEECE Bracca tied
through the unnamed notch burns green-gold.

Light runs through every carved name. It reaches the empty mark and does not pass it by.

Bracca closes her hands around nothing.

BRACCA

I know what I'm holding.

Green-gold light pours from her chest into every carved name. No faces. No voices. Only the marks burning whole.

The broken pieces lift from her hands and re-form around a new absence:

It becomes THE SHIELD OF THOUGHT.

Translucent. Green-gold. Lined in Titan-fleece. Every carved name burns along its rim. The unnamed notch remains open.

Vel'Zhera recoils one step.

Bracca smiles. Small. Astonished.

BRACCA

Well.

BRACCA

(to the Shield)

You're lighter.

She turns and HURLS it up the stair.

The Shield does not fall. It flies.

It flies up the stair, strikes Prayprey's left arm and fastens there.

BRACCA

(shouting up the stair)

Don't stop here.

Prayprey turns.

Below, Bracca stands bare-backed before Vel'Zhera.

Vel'Zhera's blade goes in.

Bracca's body folds to one knee. She looks up the stair at the Shield on Prayprey's arm.

PRAYPREY

Bracca?

BRACCA
 (her last question)
 Did we move them?

Prayprey's mouth opens. No sound. Zipra sees and answers for her.

ZIPRA
 Yes.

BRACCA
 Good.

Her body settles.

The Shield remains warm on Prayprey's arm.

Below it, Bracca is still.

No voice comes from the Shield. Nothing rises.

Prayprey cannot breathe. Zipra pulls her upward, weeping.

ZIPRA
 We move them now.

Vel'Zhera steps over Bracca's body and drives Vedran and the remaining elite toward the summit.

EXT. OB'LINK - TOWER OF DUST AND MEMORY - SUMMIT - NIGHT

The top of everything. A plateau of fossil-bone worn smooth by ten thousand crescent years, open to a sky going silver at its eastern hem. Wind, and under the wind, to ears that can hear it, the deep settled HUM of the oldest dust in the world.

And under the hum, for ears that go deep enough: not voices. LABOR. The bone remembering being folded, carried and set down with care — the memory of a task completed before history learned the name of the worker.

Prayprey, Zipra and Viressa crest the last stair with the crate. Bracca's new Shield is warm on Prayprey's arm.

They reach the summit three breaths before their pursuers.

Torchlight climbs behind them.

VEL'ZHERA enters with three remaining ELITE in lacquered night-armor.

And driven ahead of her, wrists bound in resin cord, courier lacquer stripped away: VEDRAN. His father's rope still crosses his chest.

Vel'Zhera's blades are dark with Bracca's blood. Prayprey sees it. Her grip closes around the living Shield until its rim cuts her new palm.

VEL'ZHERA
(almost kind)
Everything holy is hungry
somewhere, carrier. One Vowless
sold the service stair for forty
sacks of grain. Your wall spent her
life on a door I had already
opened.

Prayprey isn't listening. She is looking at Vedran — at the bound wrists, at the stripped harness, at the bruise coming up under one eye that says somebody already asked him questions.

He meets her eyes. And — Vedran to the last — he tries to smile.

VEDRAN
You won't believe this, but I
requisitioned another detour.

Vel'Zhera steps forward.

VEL'ZHERA
Moonrise is coming. So here is the
final arithmetic, and I will keep
it short, because you've made me
respect you and respect is brief:

Vel'Zhera gestures: the crate, then the boy.

VEL'ZHERA
The clutch... or the courier.

A beat.

VEL'ZHERA
Set down the crate and walk to the
stair, and the traitor lives —
demoted, flogged, ALIVE; I keep
what I raise. Or keep your strap,
and I will balance him here on this
stone, and you can explain to
fourteen hatchlings someday what
their first breath cost.

A beat.

VEL'ZHERA
You've spent the whole road
refusing to trade lives. Tonight
the road charges for the privilege.
(MORE)

VEL'ZHERA (CONT'D)

Choose.

Wind. The moon's seam, widening.

Prayprey looks at the crate. Fourteen amber shells, one night from waking.

At Vedran. One boy, one year, one unasked question.

Her new fingers begin to count. She catches them doing it and closes them around the Shield's name-cut rim.

VEDRAN
(only to her)

Val.

Prayprey looks at Vedran. He meets her eyes.

VEDRAN
Don't you dare ask me to be the
reason.

PRAYPREY
(broken)
Vedran—

VEDRAN
All year I wanted you to come back
asking. Not like this. Not THIS
question.

Vedran turns to Vel'Zhera, clear and on the record.

VEDRAN
She doesn't trade. It's the best
thing about her. Write it in your
book.

VEL'ZHERA
(almost sorrowful)
I have.

Vel'Zhera draws her twin blades and addresses her elite.

VEL'ZHERA
Balance the courier.

EXT. OB'LINK - TOWER SUMMIT - CONTINUOUS

An elite steps toward the kneeling boy, blade lifting—

— and Prayprey SCREAMS.

Not a word. His name, maybe, or the year of silence around his name, or every question she didn't ask, all of it leaving her

at once — and her three eyes go from banked gold to FULL IGNITION, and the oldest dust in the world answers her.

The summit-hum rises through the stone. The Kavri at her throat flares — Amethyl's dust streaming light along the cord, through the Titan-fleece, into her collarbone, down her arm —

— and into her new right hand the light pours and takes an EDGE.

THE BLADE OF VOICE. Green-gold, root-veined, humming at the frequency of the scream that called it.

Along the flat, the veins knot into the same small triform marks worn shallow on the Kavri's rim. The rough edge that shattered in Ob'lisk's palm is whole. The burn remains beneath the hilt.

The elite swings at her — a killing arc —

Bracca's Shield meets it first. Thought rings against iron.

Prayprey's blade follows.

It passes THROUGH him.

No wound. No blood. The soldier stands untouched —

— and his armor falls off.

Every lacquered binding, every oath-sealed strap, every edict-glyph baked into the resin: SHEARED.

The obsidian plates crash to the stone. A young man stands in his underlayers, unhurt and blinking in the wind.

The summit goes very still.

PRAYPREY
Wax. Chains. Oaths.

She moves through the crescent of soldiers, the blade a green-gold sweep — and armor RAINS. Bindings burst.

Two elites simply sit down in the wreckage of their own lacquer like soldiers waking from standing sleep. One runs for the stair in his underlayers, leaving oath-plates behind him.

She reaches Vedran. One stroke: the resin cords drop off his wrists, dead string.

For half a heartbeat — his hands and hers. Both finished. Neither one there for the other.

VEDRAN
 (awed)
 You came back asking.

THEN - Vel'Zhera.

Her armor hangs in shorn pieces, the brood token bare at her throat. One elite runs. Two sit among the wreckage. Vedran stands free.

Vel'Zhera looks across what remains of her command.

Then at the CRATE.

Her blades turn toward the crate.

Prayprey is too far. Zipra is too far. Viressa is throwing herself sideways and is too far-

Sol'ryn bursts onto the summit from the stair, all three Reflection Shards locking edge-to-edge across Vel'Zhera's left-hand strike -

The oldest shard SPLITS. Sol'ryn holds the other two in the gap -

- but the right-hand blade is already falling.

Vedran is not too far.

Vedran steps between Vel'Zhera's blades and the crate.

VEDRAN
 No.

The blades come down.

SILENCE - total, the wind itself holding -

- and he folds, and the crate stands behind him, untouched, and Vel'Zhera does not strike again. She is looking down at her own blades like a stranger's hands have brought them here.

PRAYPREY catches him before the stone does.

EXT. OB'LISSK - TOWER SUMMIT - CONTINUOUS

She has him in her lap. The Blade of Voice is gone - light scattered back to dust. Her newly finished hands press the wound. Nothing in them stops the blood.

PRAYPREY
 No no no - Vedran. VEDRAN. Look at me. Help - somebody-

The sentence she has never said tears out of her at last.

PRAYPREY

HELP ME.

Zipra is there. Viressa is there, hands working with carnival-medical efficiency and a face that already knows.

Vedran looks up at Prayprey. He is calm. It is infuriating and unbearable, the calm.

VEDRAN

Val. That night.

PRAYPREY

Don't. Save it, you can tell me—

VEDRAN

The trooper turned.

Three words.

The missing angle drops into place behind her eyes:

The grate. Smoke. The trooper's antennae turning toward her. Vedran stepping out of safety. The labor stamp falling while the flue remains dark.

Her year-old certainty collapses.

PRAYPREY

(breaking)

You — the whole time — Vedran, the
WHOLE TIME—

Vedran finds her hand with his own.

VEDRAN

One for the maker...

He presses his thumbnail into the back of her hand. Once.

VEDRAN

...one for the carrier.

Twice.

His hand settles. His eyes stay open, on her, until they don't.

Wind. The moon's seam, wide now, a white eye opening over the summit.

Prayprey bows over him and makes a sound that has no spelling.

Nobody moves.

Zipra's medic hands come away from the wound. Viressa lowers her head. One slow band of moonlight crosses the stone.

Prayprey unloops Rhossen's rope from Vedran's chest. She coils it between his hands, sets him down and stays kneeling beside him.

Only when the wind lifts the loose end of the third strand does she rise.

EXT. OB'LSK - TOWER SUMMIT - MOMENTS LATER

Vel'Zhera has not moved. Disarmored, blades lowered, she stands amid the shed lacquer of her own elite.

Prayprey crosses the stone and takes up one of Vel'Zhera's dropped blades. Her hands are sure of it.

Vel'Zhera looks at the blade in the heretic's hand. And — kneels.

She settles onto her knees, lifts her chin and bares the line of her throat above the barren brood token. Her voice is not defeated. It is HUNGRY.

VEL'ZHERA

Yes. Good.

A beat.

VEL'ZHERA

Do it as the rite, girl. Not as revenge — I'll die before I accept revenge — as the RITE. Take me and carry me. My line ends tonight either way; let it end INTO something. Into you.

VEL'ZHERA

I have kept the world's accounts my whole life and no one — NO ONE — has ever owed me. Be the first. Carry me, and I will have mattered to one living thing.

A beat.

VEL'ZHERA

Balance it.

The blade-point at her throat. Prayprey's arms shake. Vedran's blood is still on her hands and on Vel'Zhera's blades.

Violet blooms across the white at her collar. Everyone left standing on the summit can see it. So can the woman kneeling under the blade.

A long, long moment.

Then Prayprey hurls the blade off the summit, end over end into a mile of dark where no one can pick it back up.

The violet goes out of her collar. White.

PRAYPREY
(quietly)

No.

VEL'ZHERA
(unsteady)
You owe me an ending—

PRAYPREY
I owe you NOTHING. That's the sentence. That's the whole sentence.

Prayprey crouches to Vel'Zhera's level, eye to eye.

PRAYPREY
You want to be carried. Carried isn't taken, Reckoner. It's given, or it's nothing.

Prayprey stands.

PRAYPREY
So live. Unbalanced. I won't make you matter with a blade.

A beat. Prayprey turns away.

PRAYPREY
Matter some other way.

Vel'Zhera kneels amid the shed armor and SCREAMS at the heretic's back.

It echoes down the Gorge a long time.

The last echo comes back wrong.

The cold brood token at Vel'Zhera's throat turns VIOLET. The old burn across her palm opens red.

Prayprey's antennae come up. Pennies and rain.

Dust lifts from the summit and gathers beside her: the shape from the black water, given one degree more body. Tall. Hooded. Head bowed, hands hidden.

One hidden hand settles on her shoulder. Violet filaments drive from the brood token into the seams of her carapace. Vel'Zhera

folds beneath them with a strangled cry.

THAL'GOX

You asked to be carried.

Prayprey turns. She reaches Vel'Zhera empty-handed but does not touch her.

The mantle goes wild – violet and white racing across it in waves, too fast to read. Neither colour holds. Nothing on the board is clean.

PRAYPREY

Vel'Zhera. Do you choose this?

The waves stop. The mantle goes still, and colourless, and waits.

THAL'GOX

She called.

PRAYPREY

I didn't ask you.

Vel'Zhera forces her head up beneath the hidden hand.

VEL'ZHERA

No.

The word strikes the summit. The mantle goes BLINDING WHITE – and out of the white, half a beat later, the burn across Prayprey's palm ignites green-gold.

THE BLADE OF VOICE returns for one clean stroke – called not by Prayprey's voice, but Vel'Zhera's.

Prayprey cuts neither body. She cuts the CLAIM between them.

A bone-dry CHIME.

The violet filament parts. Thal'gox convulses and unthreads, drawn down through the cracks in the Tower.

Vel'Zhera collapses onto the stone, alive.

Unclaimed.

Quiet returns and holds.

EXT. OB'LISSK - TOWER SUMMIT - MOONRISE

The moon opens its eye full.

The Tower answers.

The summit-hum deepens. High above, where the fossil crown cups the sky, the air begins to GLITTER.

One glass-green drop falls and dissolves against the bone into light.

Then everywhere:

THE VERDANT RAIN.

Green-gold. Unhurried. Carried through Ob'lisk without tithe or collector. Ten thousand crescent years of dust rise to meet it in slow spirals.

It strikes the shed Swarm armor. Lacquer dulls. The disarmed soldiers lift bare hands into it.

It reaches Vedran and settles the dust around him. It raises nothing. It makes no voice. It only honors what is there.

ON THE GORGE BRIDGE

Rain falls on the claim-spike lying undriven at Korryx's feet. Its edict-wax softens and runs between the seams of Ob'lisk's arm.

Korrryx sets down the claim-hammer.

Around her, spear-points lower one by one. Not all of them. Enough.

The throat opens.

AT THE LAST LANDING

Rain reaches Bracca's body. Nothing closes her hand.

High above, one drop travels the Shield's rim, touches every carved name and pauses in the unnamed notch.

BACK ON THE SUMMIT

The Rain reaches the crate.

PRAYPREY
(to Zipra and Viressa)
Open it.

EXT. OB'LINK - TOWER SUMMIT - THE HATCHING - CONTINUOUS

Fourteen eggs under the open sky.

The amber resin seams drink the Rain — soften — RELEASE, curl by curl, Amethyl's last work dissolving with the sound of a held breath letting go.

For one long beat, nothing.

Then the first CRACK.

A seam. A wobble. A wet, furious, jade-speckled HATCHLING fights out of its shell and into the Rain, hooked foreclaws scrabbling, mandibles working on its first complaint.

Then the next. Then three at once. Small catastrophes of birth all down the crate — thirteen hatchlings tumbling into the light, climbing one another, falling over, beginning.

Prayprey kneels among them, laughing and weeping in the same ruined breath. Her newly finished hands lift the first one.

The Shield turns with her arm, a roof over thirteen wet beginnings. Rain collects in every name.

PRAYPREY

Bracca, this is Haven.

No answer. Only Rain on the Shield and the hatchling's furious breath.

Prayprey begins the lullaby without deciding to.

PRAYPREY

(singing, barely a tune)

Hush-a-bye, you grounded ember,
don't you cry, you leaf-borne
flame...

The unfinished line opens beneath her.

PRAYPREY

...Mama's in the husk-nest,
spinning up shelter...

She cannot go farther. The hatchling yells at her. She holds it closer.

Across the summit, Rain lands in Vel'Zhera's bare hand, becomes light and disappears.

She closes her fist. Opens it. Nothing to enter in a ledger.

Vel'Zhera looks at the thirteen lives making noise beneath the Shield. Then she leaves her blades among the dead lacquer and descends the stair alone.

EXT. OB'LSK - TOWER SUMMIT - DAWN

The Rain has thinned to green mist. Thirteen hatchlings sleep in the open crate.

Korryx and her twelve climb from the last landing carrying Bracca on a field litter made from two broken Swarm standards. They lay her beside Vedran.

Two graves open in the dust-rich earth.

Vedran goes into one with Rhossen's rope coiled on his chest. Bracca goes into the other with her back bare.

Viressa opens her mother's Kavri above them. The dust settles into Ob'lisk's old bone.

VIRESSA

You weren't House property after all.

Zipra studies the eleven notches on her reed-spear.

ZIPRA

Does Nymbari keep guard rosters?

VIRESSA

Forty years of them.

ZIPRA

Good. I need eleven names.

The graves close.

Prayprey seals both marker-stones with warm nursery resin. Once. Twice. She sets Bracca's hollowed whetstone on Bracca's marker.

The Shield's green-gold light has banked. Its names remain along the solid rim, beside the empty notch.

KORRYX

Whose?

PRAYPREY

The scout at the reed cut.

KORRYX

Keth.

A beat. Bracca's grave lies between them.

KORRYX

Their name was Keth.

Prayprey takes Zipra's resin pick and cuts three names into the rim:

KETH. BRACCA. VEDRAN.

The new cuts remain plain in the dawn.

EXT. OB'LSK - MORNING BASIN - MORNING

Clear water runs again.

The child with the cracked bowl waits beneath the public mirror. In its curve: the line behind her.

Six places back, Sol'ryn stands with the split Reflection Shard bound to her forearm and an empty bowl in her hands.

The child draws half a measure and steps aside.

EXT. OB'LSK - TOWER SUMMIT - DAY

Full morning. The Vowless climb from the mirror-city with dust-silk and care.

Prayprey sits at the rim, apart from the others. Thirteen hatchlings sleep in the crate beside her.

In her lap: the fourteenth egg. Whole. Unhatched. Warm. Beneath the amber resin, its shell is mottled rust and jade.

She takes Amethyl's Kavri from her throat and holds it to her ear.

Kitchen sounds. A bowl set down. Amethyl humming the lullaby, unhurried, mid-task, for no one.

The hum reaches the unfinished line.

Stops.

A bowl scrapes. Several seconds of ordinary nursery quiet.

Then the recording ends.

Prayprey keeps the Kavri at her ear through the silence. Nothing new comes. Nothing ever will.

She lowers it.

She looks west — past the Gorge, toward the dead root where someone once set down an egg she cannot remember.

She does not go.

She finishes the song herself.

PRAYPREY
(singing softly)
...and when the shell won't hold
you, little ember — break it.
(MORE)

PRAYPREY (CONT'D)
Breathe. Begin.

The fourteenth egg HUMS.

One clear, small note from inside the shell: the note she just sang.

Prayprey lifts the egg to her ear.

And smiles.

FADE OUT.

THE END