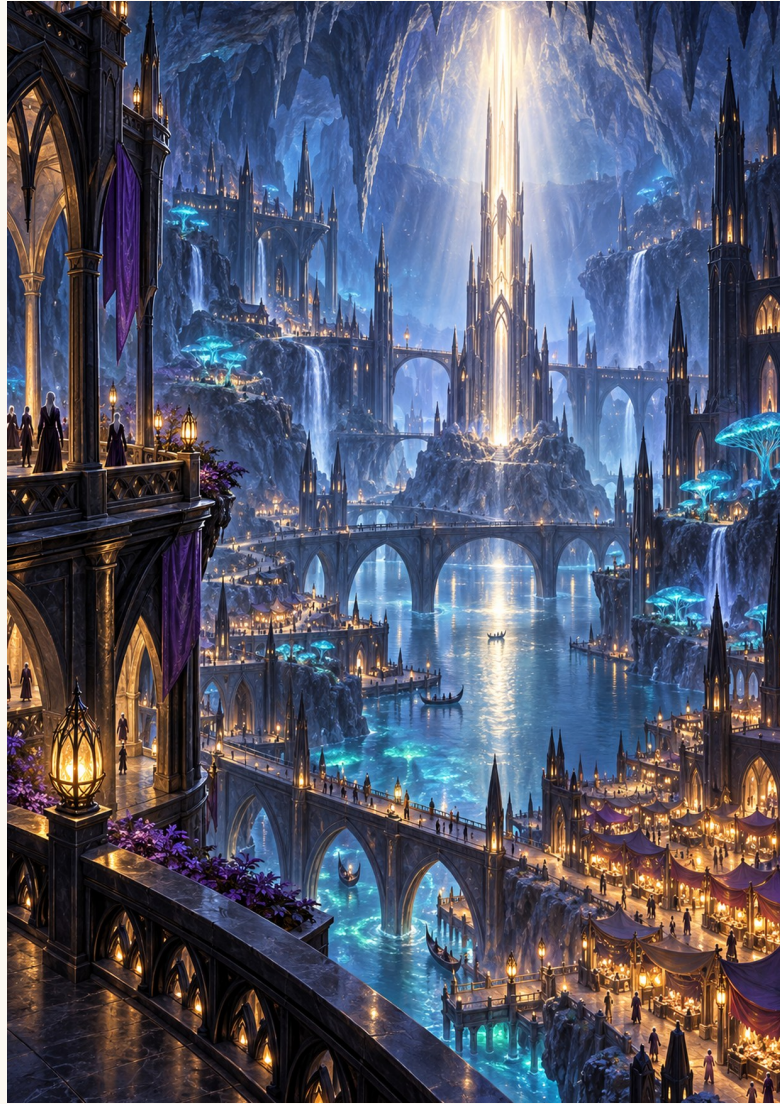




The Paths Beneath the Thread

Book I · Forbidden Maps

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Chapter 1 — The Name in the Dust

Narbondel lit up before Zaelyra had finished lacing her boot.

Light ran along the pillar, thin at first and then bright, like a stream of silver poured through the heart of the stone. It reached the high terraces of Menzoberranzan and glimmered in the obsidian windows. Below, the bridges emerged from shadow. The Bazaar's lanterns went out one by one; no one would waste a flame when the city itself told the time.

Narbondel Awakens



Zaelyra tightened the last knot and straightened up.

From the gallery of House Xil'Nrae, the city seemed almost peaceful. Figures crossed the walkways above the underground lake. Merchants raised their awnings. In the hanging gardens, luminous mushrooms unfurled turquoise caps. Only the shouts from a training yard somewhere beneath the cliff recalled that Menzoberranzan never began a day without preparing for the next war.

Zaelyra had known this view through maps before seeing it with her own eyes. She knew which walkways joined beneath the terraces, which vanished behind the pillars, and where the guards changed posts. The House maps showed routes useful to soldiers, priestesses, and authorized merchants. Other routes, those porters took to avoid a tax or children used to get home without crossing a patrol, existed only in the margins.

She brushed back a white strand that had escaped her braid.

She preferred the margins. They did not pretend to contain the whole city.

Her father had taught her to distrust lines drawn with too much certainty. When she was little, he sometimes took her along the walkways with a blank tablet and asked her to draw the way home. Zaelyra drew the bridge, the steps, and then the House door.

"You forgot what moves," he would say.

She would start again, adding the stalls set up for the day, the chains a porter might stretch across a stairway, and the guards who changed positions without warning. On the third attempt, he would point out the current of air beneath an arch or the stone that trembled when a cart passed over it.

"A map is not the road," he had told her. "It is what you were able to verify of the road when you traveled it."

Since then, Zaelyra had recorded the date, conditions, and limits of every survey. The masters of the House found such precautions cumbersome. Her father called them the most honest part of the work.

She said those detours interested her because they were useful. That was true, up to a point. But every passage missing from the House maps also made her feel that, beneath the rules and oaths, another way through the city existed. She had never called that a wish to leave. Not even in her thoughts.

"Are you admiring the view or looking for a way out?" Rhylor asked.

The old weapons master waited in the doorway. A pale scar cut across his cheek and disappeared beneath his coat collar. He had kept the habit of speaking without raising his voice. In a city where the walls had ears, a whisper was a useful weapon.

"I'm looking for the passage you forbade me to take."

"Then you're not looking far enough."

He laid a rolled map, a pen case, and a small knife with a simple guard on the table. Zaelyra recognized the map. She had drawn it three nights earlier from surveys of the Bazaar.

"You're sending me to check my own mistakes?"

"I'm sending you to see whether they're still there." Rhylor tapped the map. "The south pillar has subsided. A passage may have opened behind it. Take the measurements, note the guards, and touch nothing."

"What if I find something?"

"You note it."

"And if someone is trapped?"

Rhylor looked at the city behind her. "You note their name, too."

It was a weapons master's answer, not a man's. Zaelyra took the map and slipped it into the case.

She knew the reason for that brusqueness. Eight years earlier, Rhylor had entered Dhal's name in a patrol report, then a search register, then a petition no one had signed. His son's name survived every copy. The verbs changed: departed, missing, probably dead. None said what had happened. Eventually Rhylor stopped correcting the scribes.

"If I find a name, I'll tell you before I give it to a register," she said.

He folded the corner of the map just enough to align it with the table. "A name isn't yours because you heard it first."

"I know."

"No. You'll know it when you have the choice to keep it to yourself."

She wanted to answer, but Rhylor was already handing her the pen case. The lesson was over; the warning was not.

Above them, a white spider descended along an almost invisible thread. She stopped at Rhylor's height, waved her legs, then went up to the beams.

The old drow followed her with his eyes.

"Bad sign? Zaelyra asked.

"Here, a spider that does not bite is already good news."

She left before he added anything else.

The Bazaar had the smell of spices, heated metal and mushrooms that had been kept in a box for too long. The stalls stretched over several terraces. Duergars sold short-handled tools; a svirfneblin merchant offered oil vials for the mechanisms; drows in House dresses bargained with soft voices and hands ready to call the guards.

Zaelyra knew the paths between the stalls. She had drawn them, corrected them, and then redesigned them when the sellers had moved their tables to avoid a tax. A perfect map did not exist. A useful map was the one that said where the ground would give way, which bridge was creaking, and which guard agreed not to look.

She kept three versions of the Bazaar in her case: the official plan, the one used to bill the locations, and hers, where the passages too narrow for the guards remained marked. She had never shown the last one to Rhylor. She didn't know if she was hiding it out of caution or because she wanted to own at least one thing that the House had not named.

A cart loaded with boxes of mushrooms had stopped at the foot of a ramp. The driver, a duergar with rolled up sleeves, tried to rotate the axle without overturning his cargo. Every time he pushed, a wheel hit the stone ledge.

The Bazaar of Menzoberranzan



"The ramp is on the plan," he told Zaelyra without looking up. "The width too. But not the pillar they added."

A low column was indeed entroping on the turn. Its base had been widened since the last survey, probably to hide a crack. The official path continued to cross it as if nothing had changed.

Zaelyra unfolded her plan on a box. "You can go back to the tool stall. There is an alley behind."

"It is crossed out by baskets."

"Since when?"

The duergar pointed to the baskets of the chin. "Since a priestess decided that the passage should look private."

The merchant who held the stall approached. "He is not private. It is narrow. And its boxes are too wide."

"My boxes are the right size," replied the driver. "It is the passage that has narrowed."

Zaelyra measured the axle with the copper ruler of her case. The cart would not pass between the boxes, even unloaved. She examined the wall behind the stall: two transport hooks, a wooden panel placed on trestles and, above, a low opening that joined the ramp after the pillar.

"If you remove the panel, the cart can go through there. Provided you get the basket from the top."

The merchant hesitated. "This is my best stock."

"I'm not asking you to give it. Only to move it as time passes."

The duergar waited, his hands placed on the handles. He could have complained to the guards, but the guards would have cleared the aisle by overtopping the baskets. The merchant knew it. Zaelyra too.

The woman finally picked up her basket and put it against her hip. The driver unstruck the first box, then pushed the cart down the narrow lane. One wheel brushed the wall; the other passed without touching the edge. The cargo remained in place.

"You're going to mark that?" asked the merchant.

"The passage or the pillar?"

"Both. Otherwise the next cart will start the same dispute again."

Zaelyra traced a dotted detour on her plan, then noted the date and the minimum width. "The detour is practicable today. It depends on your stall."

"So also write that the passage is mine until I reopen it."

Zaelyra looked up. "You want us to know that you lent it, not that we can demand it."

"Exactly."

She added the mention. The duergar took back the handles without thanking her; the merchant hung up her basket and checked each box before returning behind her stall. Nothing had been settled forever. The next seller might move his boxes, the pillar would continue to move, and the House would probably not add this detour to the official plan.

However, someone could find him.

A brief cry springs from an alley.

The crowd did not stop. She contracted, like an animal that had heard a familiar noise and chose not to interfere.

Zaelyra put her hand on her dagger and slipped between two stalls. At the end of the passage, a svirfneblin was on his knees, one ankle caught in an iron jaw. Two guards of the House supervised him. One was holding a roll of maps. The other examined the prisoner with the boredom of a man who had already decided on his report.

"Intrusion into a reserved duct," says the greatest of the guards. "He claims that he got lost."

"I got lost," replied the svirfneblin. "It's the first truth of my day."

The guard gave him a blow with the back of his hand. The little man cashed without looking down.

Zaelyra recognized the roll. It was an old copy of the south road, the one she had to measure. The paper had a mark in the form of three curved lines. She had never seen this sign in the official statements.

"This roll belongs to the Xil'Nrae House," she says.

The guards turned around. The youngest bowed with a finger, just enough to recognize his rank without giving him respect.

"It was found on the intruder, Lady Zaelyra."

"So it belongs to the one who found it, until we check the seal. She held out her hand. "Give it to me."

The guard did not give it to him right away. "I will have to write that you took it under your responsibility."

Zaelyra felt the gazes of the Bazaar land on her badge. People hadn't stopped; they just slowed down enough to hear. As long as she spoke on behalf of the House, the scroll could become proof, an order or a property. Nym, on the other hand, remained an intruder.

"Write my name," she said. "Not the one in the House."

The guard had a crease at the corner of his mouth. "This is not how registers work."

"So note that the register does not know how to make the difference."

The guard hesitated. His eyes passed from his face to the insignia of the House, then to the prisoner.

"The Matron ordered that anyone found in the conduits be taken to the temple for interrogation."

"The Matron instructed me to check these ducts. If you move the witness before I finish, you prevent the work of the House."

It was wrong. Not entirely, but enough to give the sentence a solid form. The guard knew it. This time, he handed her the roll. Zaelyra understood that she had just transformed a rank favor into personal responsibility. It was not giving up his privilege. It was only to make it more difficult to pretend that she had not used it.

Zaelyra unfolded it. The ink was old, the edges eaten by moisture. On the back, someone had added a note of narrow writing. Three words, almost erased:

Do'Urden. Didn't hit.

A cold sensation opened under his ribs.

"What does that mean?" asked the prisoner.

She folded the parchment.

"Nothing that concerns you."

"It's rarely true when you say it like that."

The guard pulled on the chain of the jaw. The svirfneblin grimaced. Zaelyra put her boot on the mechanism.

"Don't move."

"Is it you who give the orders?" asked the guard.

"For the maps, yes."

She crouched and observed the trap. A spring had stuck a stone splinter under the iron tooth. She slid the tip of her dagger between the plates, lifted the spring and released the ankle. The prisoner held back a curse. Under the dust, his skin was covered with fine white scars.

Zaelyra Frees Nym



"Nym Varr," he said, massaging his leg. "Cartographer. Not a thief."

"You were walking in a closed conduit with a stolen map."

"I had a borrowed map. She became stolen when the guards found her."

"Do you have an answer to everything?"

"No. But I try not to waste the ones I have."

"What were you looking for in this conduit? Zaelyra asked.

Nym hesitated. He looked at the two guards who were waiting their turn to take him, then the map rolled in Zaelyra's hand.

"An air outlet."

"Did you get caught for an air outlet?"

"I came to measure the current under the Bazaar. In my neighborhood, two galleries filled with gas after a collapse. Families had to leave their homes."

"And you thought you'd find another passage here?"

"I thought I could find a place where the stone was still breathing. The old plan indicated ventilation to the south. The House removed it from public copies."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

Nym rummaged through the pocket of his tunic and pulled a gray thread, so thin that it could have passed for a hair. He squatted in front of the gate, being careful of his ankle, then approached the wire of a slot between two stones. The fiber shivered towards the duct, hesitated, then pressed against the rock.

"The power comes from down there? Zaelyra asked.

"He should. But he weakens. Nym retrieved his thread. "If the southern gallery is blocked, gas will accumulate in the houses above. If she is still breathing, you have to find where the air comes out."

He didn't ask her to believe him. He showed him a measure too weak to reassure anyone, then explained that he had promised to return before the next spore season. If the current had changed, his neighborhood had to clog two ducts and open a third. If he was wrong, they would lose days of work and maybe a house.

Zaelyra took out her notebook and a strip of paper. The thread had confirmed that a breath was still passing; it did not say where it was going.

Nym pointed to a joint, almost at ground level. Zaelyra placed the band there. The paper trembled towards the duct, then fell back. She started again a little higher: this time, the edge rose in the other direction. She noticed the two directions without connecting them yet.

"Two currents? She asked.

"Or a current that runs in the cavity. We would have to measure further to know. Nym pointed to the wall, without approaching it. "The map indicates a breakdown. She does not say if the two openings still communicate."

Zaelyra noted the two measurements separately, then specified that they had been taken at the entrance to the gallery, after the collapse. She wanted to write that the duct was clogged. It would be clear, understandable and false: they did not know what was behind the stone.

"You could draw the passage to the crack? Nym asked.

"I can draw what I see."

"So also mark what we don't know. This is the part that is most often missing from the maps."

She looked up at him. He didn't smile. He watched the slit as if he was waiting for it to change its mind.

"You risked your life for a measure? Zaelyra asked.

"People who live above the passage risk theirs if I don't bring it back."

The answer was not heroic. It was practical, and that's what made it difficult to discard.

One of the guards held out his hand. "He's coming with us."

The old roll weighed little in his palm. However, the three words he carried seemed to have left their mark there. She knew the name Do'Urden, but never associated with this phrase. The stories that ran about the fugitive contradicted each other; this note did not pretend to explain his gesture. She only claimed that he had not hit.

Nym looked at the guard's hand, then Zaelyra.

"If he found this brand, he knows where the rest of the map is," she says.

"I especially know where she is," replied Nym. "It's already an acquaintance that your House does not have."

The guard came closer.

Zaelyra made her decision knowing that her name would now be entered in a register that she could not consult.

"He's coming with me. I have to check his itinerary."

"Your mother didn't order it."

"My mother ordered me to do my job."

The guard stared at her, looking for the point where she would give in. She let him look.

Finally, he stepped back. "I will report your choice."

"It would be a shame to go home with nothing to tell."

The sentence cost him less than silence would have cost Nym, but it was not free. The guard knew the rules: his report would name Zaelyra, and the name of the House would appear next to his. If the case went wrong, no one could claim that she had acted without authority. No one could claim that she had not chosen either.

The two soldiers walked away. The crowd resumed its movement around them, with this facility that people have to become invisible again as soon as the danger chooses someone else.

Nym stood up again, leaning on the wall.

"You have just made an enemy," he says.

"I thought it had already happened."

"So you're progressing fast."

"I didn't say you were free," says Zaelyra. "I only prevented you from being taken before I knew why you were there."

"It's a difference that suits you."

"Yes."

Nym looked at her more carefully. He didn't seem to expect an apology, but he didn't offer her his trust in exchange for what she had just done.

"I have to bring the measures back to my neighborhood," he says. "It's not a way to thank you. That's what I planned before you arrived."

"I don't need you to thank me."

"Everyone says that before asking for something."

"Then I won't ask you for anything."

He raised an eyebrow. "You still want to know where I found the map."

"Yes."

"And you want to keep it."

"Yes."

"There you go. You ask for something."

Zaelyra put away the roll. "I don't know yet what I'll do with it."

"It's at least one answer you can hold."

She showed him the note on the back of the map.

The Map Fragment



"Have you ever seen this name?"

Nym narrowed his eyes. "Drizzt Do'Urden. Yes. The caravans say that he refused a massacre order and disappeared into the tunnels. Others say his father died for him. Still others claim that it never existed."

"And you, what do you think?"

"I think each version suits the one who tells it. He looked at the parchment. "But someone wrote that before the paper was burned."

Twenty years had passed since the escape of Drizzt Do'Urden. Enough for the witnesses to age and for the reports to change hands; not enough for his name to stop worrying those who heard him. Zaelyra had grown up in the midst of contradictory versions. No one said what he had found on the other side.

"Do you think he really left the city? She asked.

"I believe that people have left Houses before him and others will do it after. His name only made this truth harder to hide."

"Then why keep his name?"

"Because sometimes someone needs to know that a passage has already been crossed. Not to follow the same road. To remember that it is not impossible."

Under his hand, the map suddenly seemed to belong less to the House than to the one who could read it.

Zaelyra slipped the map into her case. Above them, the lamps of the Bazaar trembled. A white spider came down from an awning and crossed the wall, its legs touching the stone at regular intervals.

Nym followed her with his eyes.

"Do they really carry the messages? He asked.

"No," said Zaelyra.

She was lying. In Menzoberranzan, spiders did not carry messages. They listened to them.

"You come with me," says Zaelyra.

Nym looked down at his ankle. "To check my itinerary?"

"To avoid the temple. You will remain in a service annex, under the care of my sister."

"So you didn't release me."

"No. I removed you from their interrogation. It's not the same, and I won't pretend it's generous."

Nym considered the guards waiting at a distance. "At least, you don't make up the chain in favor."

They returned to the House by a delivery staircase, followed by the two soldiers. Zaelyra walked next to Nym, without pushing him or taking his bag. In the lower annex, she opened a watch cell and ordered that her ankle be treated. Nym entered it of his own free will, but the gate closed behind him.

On the way back, Vhaelyn was waiting for him in the map room.

Her sister wore the black dress of Arach-Tinilith, lined with a silver thread. She had not yet received the marks of an accomplished priestess, but she was already standing as if the world had to move away so as not to wrinkle her garment.

The Two Sisters



"You released a prisoner," she said.

"I moved a witness."

"You hid a svirfneblin in the passages of our House."

"I stopped him from breaking his ankle."

Vhaelyn put her fingers on the map. "Do you know what they say about the Do'Urden?"

"Contradictory stories."

"This is what makes them useful. People choose the version that allows them to disobey."

"Maybe they disobey because they have a reason."

Vhaelyn's gaze hardened, but his voice remained low. "A reason doesn't protect anyone from Lolth."

"No. But silence does not protect more."

For a moment, they were children again: two girls sitting under a table, listening to their mother negotiate the survival of the House. Then Vhaelyn put back her face of priestess.

"Our mother is waiting for you."

"To punish me?"

"To know what you found. These are two different things."

Zaelyra looked at her sister. Vhaelyn had removed a silver thread hanging from her sleeve and held it between two fingers, a tiny gesture she had been doing since childhood when she wanted to gain a few seconds before speaking. In the past, she used it to invent stories: a line became a road, a knot a village, a loop a lake. Then she was taught to read the signs differently, and she learned to no longer tell what they did not prove.

"Do you remember the maps we drew under the table? Zaelyra asked.

Vhaelyn dropped the thread in an ashtray. "I remember you drawing doors everywhere."

"It was necessary."

"You never put the guards."

"I didn't know yet where they would be."

"You still don't know," says Vhaelyn. Then, more slowly: "That's why I'm worried."

The door opened behind them. A white spider entered, climbed on the foot of the table and stopped near the map. A thin thread hung from his abdomen. At the end of the wire, a fragment of paper bore a black ink stain.

The Eight-Legged Messenger



Vhaelyn did not move.

Zaelyra recognized the seal of the Matron.

There was no message. Only proof that someone had seen the name on the parchment.

In the city, the day had just begun. For Zaelyra, the road had just closed.

Chapter 2 — The price of silence

Vhaelyn was waiting for Zaelyra to explain why she kept the old roll.

The blackened fragment still rested at the end of the line. The ink stain took over the seal of the Matron, but no order or name accompanied it. The sign confirmed that someone had seen the map; it did not say who or why.

The Blackened Fragment



"Did you know this map existed?" asked his sister.

"No."

"And this annotation?"

"No. I had heard the name. Not these words."

"You still took the roll."

"Yes."

"Why?"

Zaelyra looked at the map she had brought back. "Because someone wanted to make a road disappear and failed to erase everything."

"This is not proof."

"No. This is a reason not to destroy what remains."

Vhaelyn closed his eyes for a brief moment. When she reopened them, her anger had given way to something more difficult to read.

"The Matron will not punish ignorance. She will punish a threat. Nym Varr is one of them now."

"He didn't threaten anyone."

"He found a map that our House made disappear. Sometimes it's worse."

The spider went up along its thread and disappeared in the crack between two stones. Vhaelyn took the blackened fragment without touching it, using the edge of his dagger.

"She wants to see you alone," she says. "Rhylor is already with her."

"You're not coming?"

"I'm already here."

Zaelyra understood. Her sister would not accompany her, but she would not let her in without knowing what was waiting for her.

"What did our mother say?"

"Nothing. That's what worries me."

"And Nym?"

"The lower annex. The healer bandaged his ankle."

"Do we question him?"

"Not yet. The guards are waiting for Mother's order."

Zaelyra slipped her thumb under the lanyard of her case. "You asked them to wait?"

"I reminded him that you had to ask him questions before we took him to the temple."

"It's not the same as protecting him."

"No. Vhaelyn did not try to soften the answer. "This is what I can do without pretending that the House will obey me if Mother decides otherwise."

They went down to the annex by a service staircase. The steps were wide enough for two people, but Vhaelyn walked behind her sister, as if she left her the first place without wanting to give up her guard. At the bottom, a young soldier stood in front of the door. He seemed to be waiting for a question to which he already knew the answer.

"A minute," said Vhaelyn. "He's hurt."

The soldier looked at his novice badge. "The order was to keep it here."

"That's what we do."

He hesitated, then opened the inner grille without removing the outer bar.

Nym was sitting on a stone bench, his ankle bandaged and placed on an inverted box. He had been given back his empty bag. His tools and the wire he had used to test the air were missing. He had replaced them with a frayed strand torn from the edge of his sleeve. He held it between two fingers, but did not place it against any wall.

"You're back," he said.

"I have to talk to my mother."

"And the map?"

"I have it."

"This is not what I asked for."

Zaelyra looked down at the case. She had first wanted to keep the roll because it could explain a censored road. Then she had discovered the name of Drizzt, and the parchment had ceased to be just a piece to be examined. She did not yet know what she was looking for in this note. She knew she wasn't ready to return it.

"I won't entrust it to you," she says. "Not yet."

Nym looked at the case, then his face. "So, for the moment, it's you who chooses what we have the right to know."

"I want to understand what it contains."

"Me too. But there are people in my house who are waiting for a measure."

"I can't promise you that we'll let you leave today."

"I didn't ask you to promise that. Just tell them I was on my way to check a draft, not to steal their secrets."

Vhaelyn crossed his arms. "You understand that this distinction may not be enough."

"I understand. I still ask that she be registered. Nym put the frayed thread back in his sleeve. "The registers know very well how to keep the accusations. Let them also keep my answer."

Zaelyra nodded. She could not return him either her map or her freedom, but she could at least not let the guards turn her silence into a convenion.

"I'll say it."

"So you have something to ask your mother," says Nym. "Ask him who decided that a road should no longer appear on the maps. Not only who erased the line."

The question followed Zaelyra as she went up the stairs.

Vhaelyn led Zaelyra to the old map corridor, without accompanying her to the door.

"You just said she wanted to see me alone."

"She wants it. This does not mean that you have to go without knowing what can await you."

"And what awaits me?"

"A question whose answer will cost you something."

Zaelyra looked at the guards stationed at the entrance. They didn't pretend not to listen; they had learned to listen without turning their heads.

"You could come with me."

"I could. Then Mother would talk about you as a child protected by her sister."

"What if I prefer to be protected?"

"You can prefer it. But you have to choose it, not that I decide it by pretending to do you a favor."

Vhaelyn handed him the blackened fragment, taken in the map room. "Keep it. Do not show it to the guards and do not leave it in the room."

"Do you think he's proving something?"

"I think he survived someone who wanted him to disappear. That's enough for us to pay attention."

A maid passed by with a platter of cups. She slowed down in front of the two sisters, then continued on her way without greeting them. Vhaelyn waited for his steps to move away.

"Do you remember the East Gallery? She asked.

"The one where Father had brought us back without following the marks?"

Zaelyra remembered her father leaning over a leaf, his hand covering half of the features. He asked him to find his way from the distances, never the name of the streets. She thought he wanted to make it a test. Rather, he taught him not to depend on his voice.

She saw a low gallery where three arches resembled each other to the point of deceiving the eye. His father had turned the map against the wall and asked them to enter without following the marks. Zaelyra had counted her steps. Vhaelyn, who already knew the names of the corridors, had protested that they were deprived of half of the indications.

"The field doesn't know what you've learned by heart," he told them.

At the third arch, Zaelyra had heard water behind the wall. The plan didn't say anything. She wanted to add a passage; her father had stopped her.

"Note the sound. Not the gallery you imagine."

Vhaelyn had taken back the pencil and marked the place with a temporary sign. She didn't say her sister was right. She had only kept the map open while Zaelyra added the warning.

Since then, Zaelyra was wary of too sharp lines. Vhaelyn, for her part, remembered above all that an uncertain indication could send someone to a danger.

"He was right," she said.

"He was right about the maps. For the rest, he was wrong like everyone else."

"You say it as if you resented him."

"I resent him for leaving questions for our mother and for leaving us the work of living with her."

Vhaelyn didn't look down. She had never talked about their father with this frankness. Zaelyra wondered if the disappearance had been a departure, a death or a decision that the House had arranged under an easier name.

"Do you know anything about his disappearance?"

"No. I asked Mother. She told me she didn't know where he was."

A group of servants passed at the end of the corridor, carrying a box whose hardware jingling at every step. The two sisters waited for the noise to move away.

"Did you believe her?"

"I believed her when she said she didn't know where he was and that she was afraid of him. I didn't believe her when she hinted that this fear was enough to silence us."

Zaelyra observed her sister's profile. "So you think he started on his own."

"I think Mother didn't know where he was. It's not the same thing."

"You always have a distinction ready."

"Distinctions prevent assumptions from passing off as facts. It was you who taught me that, with your maps."

"I taught you to mark the places you hadn't checked."

"And I remember it. Vhaelyn pinched the silver thread at the edge of his sleeve. "I don't know if he died, if he fled or if someone prevented him from coming back. I don't want to choose the answer that would hurt me the least and call it the truth."

Zaelyra's anger moved, without disappearing. She had taken her sister's caution for acceptance. It was perhaps easier than admitting that Vhaelyn also refused to let the House write the end of their story alone.

"So why not look?"

"Because we do not yet know which door leads to him and which leads to those who would like to silence us."

"What if the wait is already a decision?"

"She is. Vhaelyn supported his gaze. "I will not claim the opposite."

Above them, a lamp sizzled. A maid stopped to change the wick, then resumed her journey. The light flickered, strengthened, and the features of the map regained their contours.

"I'm not asking you to give up the question," Vhaelyn continued. "I ask you not to let the first stranger who came use it to take you where he wants."

Zaelyra thought of the name written on the back of the parchment, and the ease with which he had drawn her attention away from the hand that had traced it.

"Maybe that's already what's happening."

"So go to Mother's house knowing it."

The fragment wrinkled in Zaelyra's palm. She flattened it carefully, then slipped it under the lining of her sleeve. The paper was so light that she hardly felt it against her skin; yet, she kept her wrist closed.

The guards opened the door of the gallery. Rhylor was already standing inside, near the big map. He didn't look at Zaelyra, but she saw his hand leave the apple of his dagger.

Vhaelyn took a step back.

"I'll stay here," she said. "Not because I refuse to help you. Because this time, you have to come in with your own questions."

Zaelyra passed the threshold. The door closed behind her.

Chapter 3 — The accounts of the Matron

The Matron's room had no windows. She didn't need it: the walls were covered with maps, and each opened on a different way of holding the city.

The Matron's Maps



Zesstra Xil'Nrae stood in front of the oldest. Black wires connected guard posts to warehouses, warehouses to bridges, bridges to temples. Zaelyra recognized several strokes of her own hand. She had never traced the black wires.

"You subtracted a svirfneblin from the temple interrogation, kept a map that does not belong to you and hid the blackened fragment that the spider brought you," says his mother. "In what order do you want to explain these choices?"

Rhylor stood by the door. He didn't look at her.

"The svirfneblin is a witness. The map is a piece to be examined. As for the fragment, it carried no order."

"And now?"

Zaelyra kept her eyes on the pin planted in the map. "I don't know more."

His mother finally turned her head. In the light of the lamps, his face looked more tired than the day before. "That's a cautious answer. Don't confuse it with an inconsequential answer."

Zesstra put a finger on the southern pillar of the map. The Three Echoes were drawn as three parallel lines, interrupted in the same place.

"You're going to resume your statement. Rhylor will accompany you. You will go to the first relay, you will measure the walls and you will come back before the next Narbondel ignition. The svirfneblin will remain in the lower annex. He will have no map or blade."

"He can't help us if you remove his instruments."

"He can help us as long as we understand that he is not free."

"What if he didn't do anything?"

"Then he will survive a night of caution."

"How will this be registered?"

His mother raised an eyebrow slightly. "You already have the order."

"I'm talking about Nym. You say he's not free. The guards will say that he is guilty."

Zesstra pointed to a tablet placed on the edge of the table. "Write what you know. Not what you suppose."

Zaelyra took the stylus. "Nym Varr. Cartographer svirfneblin. Found in a reserved conduit with an old map copy. Ankle injured by a trap."

"And the reason for his presence?"

"He says he measured a draft to warn his own of a risk in their galleries."

"Do you believe it?"

"I think he told me."

The Matron followed the line of gaze. "It's not the same thing."

"No. That's why I wrote "he says"."

Zesstra did not answer right away. She took the stylus, added to the bottom of the tablet that Nym's tools would remain on guard, then returned it to him. "You can attest to what you saw. You can't attest to what he wanted to do."

Zaelyra signed. The line of his name seemed darker than ink. She had just officially acknowledged that she had taken part in the decision to keep him. If Nym was injured, if the priestesses took him away or if he disappeared, this line would not protect him. She would only prevent the House from claiming that she had never been consulted.

"A tablet is not a guarantee," says Zesstra.

"I know."

"But it allows you to ask who changed the words."

The Matron removed a pin from its sleeve and planted it in the layout of the southern district. The metal went through the parchment, sank into the wood and held the map open.

"When I was your age," she said, "I accompanied an escort to a gallery that had to be safe. The report said that the passage was free. The verification was three days old. We arrived on the fourth."

Zaelyra knew the story. We rarely talked about it, and never in the same way. In the version of the House, the escort had been surprised by looters. In that of the servants, a guide had sold the itinerary. Her mother had never talked about it in front of her.

"We lost seven people," Zesstra continued. "The House has lost a contract, two allies and the confidence of an entire neighborhood. The fault was attributed to the guide. However, he had handed over the good statement. The shift came from a scribe who had copied the wrong column."

"The date of the inspection was found below that of departure," she explained. The passage had been free on the day of the visit. On paper, three days had disappeared."

Zesstra went around the map without touching the wires. She stopped at the edge of a secondary line, where a small triangle marked the location of the ambush.

"I asked the guide if he knew of a detour," she said. "He told me that he knew three. I asked him which one was safer. He said he didn't know."

"Was that the right answer?"

"It was the only one he could defend. I wanted some certainty. I ordered him to choose one."

Zesstra spread his hands. The sons did not move.

"He chose one. We lost the seven. After that, I learned that one of the other detours would also have been dangerous. I don't know if we would have survived."

"So you wanted him?"

"I resented him for not giving me what I wanted. Then I understood that I had asked him to lie so that I could call my choice a safe decision."

"What happened to him?"

"He returned his badge and left the relay."

"The House continued to say that he had sold the road."

"Yes."

Zaelyra waited for the rest. His mother didn't look away.

"You knew that nothing proved that he had done it."

"I knew the report didn't prove it."

"And you didn't say anything."

"I thought that by keeping silent, I was protecting the House from a second loss. In reality, I was also protecting my place with her."

The nearest black thread trembled when Zesstra touched the map. She put it back in place, without trying to hide the gesture.

"I'm not telling you this story so that you forgive me," she says. "I'm telling you because obedience and prudence can have the same face. Sometimes it takes years to see what they cost."

The Matron moved the triangle a few fingers. "Since then, I have demanded reports that distinguish a measure from a guess. It's not always enough. But it's better than sending people to the front of a fabricated certainty."

Zaelyra looked at her mother. She had long believed that Zesstra's fear came from the weakness she refused to show. Perhaps it came more from the precise memory of what an order could do to those who obeyed it.

"So you want me to check every line."

"I want you to understand that mistakes have legs. They take out maps and walk with the living."

Zaelyra looked at the black wires on the wall map. "What if the report is incomplete because someone chose to delete it?"

"Then you will find out who benefits from it before deciding that you can correct it."

The answer was neither a warning nor a permission. It was Zesstra's method, hardened by years of having to survive truths that could not be said out loud.

"You know the name of Do'Urden," says Zaelyra.

"I know the names of many people who have died or gone."

"It is said that he survived."

"You don't know anything about it."

"You don't either."

Zesstra removed the pin. The paper kept a small tear. "I'm not asking you to stop asking questions. I ask you to stop believing that the first answer makes you free."

Zaelyra refrained from looking at Rhylor. She would have liked him to confirm that she was right, or at least tell her what question to ask next. He wasn't there for that.

The harshness of these words did not erase the fear that preceded them. Zaelyra recognized her because she had heard her, in the past, in her mother's voice after her father's disappearance. An ancient fear, organized in rules.

"Why did someone write this name on the back of the map? She asked.

"Someone writes a lot of things. A note is neither a fact nor a proof. Zesstra folded the map. "Don't turn a rumor into a compass."

In the corridor, Rhylor waited for them to be alone.

"Did you know she was going to send us there? Zaelyra asked.

"I knew she would want to see if you obeyed."

"And you?"

"I want to know who moved the dust in front of the annex."

It wasn't an answer, but it was the first time he named the danger.

They went down to get their lamps. At the foot of the stairs, Vhaelyn was waiting for them. She adjusted the clasp of her sleeve, a calm gesture that she reserved for the decisions already made.

"Our mother entrusted me with custody of Nym," she says. "I will not let him be questioned by the priestesses."

"Do you protect him? Zaelyra asked.

"I protect the House from a scandal that it cannot contain. Vhaelyn approached. "Don't forget the difference."

Then she walked away to the lower annex.

Zaelyra followed her to the gate. Nym was sitting on a narrow bench, his ankle surrounded by a clean band. His tool bag rested on the other side of the grid. He wasn't sleeping.

"Do you have something to tell me? He asked.

"Not yet."

"This is a noble answer."

"This is an honest answer."

Vhaelyn approached the door. "He asked for his tools. I refused them to him."

"Can I do my statement without him?"

"You can. But you will take longer."

"What if the Matron asks why?"

"You will tell him the truth. I kept him under surveillance."

Zaelyra observed her sister. "You're really going to let him out?"

"I'll leave the door unlocked. The rest will depend on him."

Nym had a joyless laugh. "A considerable privilege."

"It's more than what the guards offered you," says Vhaelyn.

She did not look at him as a prisoner or a guest. She saw it as a risk of which she had agreed to bear a share.

"If you go out, you will be wanted," says Zaelyra.

"I already am."

"What if you stay?"

"I will be questioned."

A slight friction ran under the door of the annex. Rhylor turned to the corridor. The dust had been moved on a narrow line, as if something had just slipped below the threshold.

Zaelyra crouched down and picked up a turquoise thread knotted around a stone splinter.

Nym froze. "A passer's mark."

"Do you know this knot?" asked Rhylor.

"Left hand, reverse tightening. Someone wants us to notice it. That doesn't mean the road is safe."

"Who left him? Zaelyra asked.

"I don't know. Nym looked at the dust at the foot of the door. "But this person knows we're here."

Rhylor stared at the corridor. "Our mother already knows. I'm talking about someone else."

She slipped the thread under her sleeve without noting it on the map. Vhaelyn brought the door back almost against the frame, without engaging the lock.

Zaelyra found nothing to answer. Rhylor took the stairs; she followed him. The official road led them to Les Trois Échos. The turquoise thread, hidden against his skin, seemed to weigh more than an entire map.

Chapter 4 — The Three Echoes

The south gallery began behind a basalt portal whose gands had recently been greased. Zaelyra noticed it. The register, on the other hand, said that no one had been there for three weeks.

The Three Echoes



Rhylor put his palm on the stone. "Someone is lying in the accounts."

"Is this an accusation?"

"It's an observation. The charges are waiting for a way out."

They advanced with two lamps covered. The first corridor descended gently, then divided into three branches. Each branch sent back the noise with a slight delay. That's why cartographers called it the Three Echoes: not for its beauty, but because you could lose your group by following a voice that seemed to come from the wrong side.

Zaelyra began by counting the steps. At fifty, she put a discreet mark at the foot of the wall. At one hundred, she measured the height of the vault with a foldable rod. The numbers did not correspond to the plan. The gallery should have gone up; it kept going down.

"The official statement is false," she says.

"Or old," replied Rhylor.

"Twenty years do not change the inclination of a corridor."

"The maps, yes."

At the first bifurcation, she placed the marbles one by one at the threshold of each branch and let them roll in the dark. In the first, the sound of the metal moved away until it disappeared. In the second, the echo came back to him after four beats. In the third, the rolling was stopped; a moment later, a brief sound rose from under their feet.

"There is a hidden slope on the third."

"How can you be sure?"

"I'm not. The ball only tells me what she met."

Rhylor handed him a second marble. "So check."

She started again with a heavier stone. It followed the same road, then disappeared into a crack. A moment later, a light sound came up from the passage, three unequal notes.

"A cavity underneath," she whispered.

"Or a bell."

Zaelyra marked the choice on her notebook and left the third branch aside. The gesture cost him. Every ignored detour could contain the answer, but exploration was not a race to discover. It was also necessary to keep a return road.

At the second bifurcation, she asked Rhylor to move twenty steps away and pronounce his name. The echo came back from the wrong gallery.

"How did the teams not get lost? She asked.

"They learned to recognize the sounds they produced themselves."

"What if the sound was imitated?"

"So they didn't move forward."

"This is a slow method."

"She lets more people come back."

At the next bifurcation, the sound of a drop came to them from the right passage. A second drop fell almost immediately, then a third, at regular intervals.

Zaelyra put her palm against the wall. The rock vibrated very slightly.

"Water behind the wall."

"Did you hear her?" asked Rhylor.

"I felt it."

She tapped her finger three times. The wall returned two dry sounds and a third, more dull. A cavity was behind the lower part, but the space seemed filled with rubble.

Rhylor handed him a tip of metal. "Check before you dig."

Zaelyra scratched the stone at the level of the matte sound. A thin white powder was detached. Under the black deposit, an engraving ran horizontally, then stopped at the edge of a crack.

"It's a level limit," she says. "The passage was drowned."

"Or he still is."

She consulted her map. The old line continued straight ahead. The new statement should show the stop, but marking it as a dead end could lead someone to engage in it without a rope.

Zaelyra drew the wall, the crack and the watermark. She added: **do not open without checking the upstream level.**

"Are you really going to write that?" asked Rhylor.

"Someone else will come here. He won't need to repeat our mistake."

"We haven't made a mistake yet."

"Then it will be easier to avoid."

He let out a breath that could have been a laugh. "You start talking like a cartographer."

"I thought I was one."

"You drew paths. It's not quite the same."

Further on, the gallery tightened until it left only a strip of stone between the wall and a vertical well. Zaelyra attached a small measuring bell to it, then took a step aside. The sound came back three times: first from the front, then from behind, finally from a point under their feet.

"There is a room below," she says.

"Or an opening that returns the sound," Rhylor replied.

She uncoiled her copper wire and fixed the bell on it. The wire sank into a slit at the base of the wall, then got stuck after two arms in length. It was not enough to reach the room, but enough to prove that it was not in the main gallery.

Zaelyra drew a small cut of the well, with the slit and the measured depth. For the first time, she understood why the old surveys used several views of the same place. A line could tell where to go; a cut said what was waiting underfoot.

"You're going to put this room on the statement?" asked Rhylor.

"I'll put what I know."

"Even if it allows someone to enter it?"

"If I don't write it down, someone will fall for it."

Rhylor did not answer. She wrote the warning in the margin, without tracing a passage down.

Zaelyra marked the pillars with chalk. Rhylor checked the recesses, looking for trigger wires. He did not explain his actions. She had learned to read her silences as another form of map.

At the first crossroads, she compared the wall to her survey. An old line continued under a layer of black lime. Someone had tried to make it disappear, but the stone kept a clearer scar.

"This gallery is not closed," she says.

"She's supposed to be."

"It's not the same."

A dull rumble passed under their feet. Dust fell from the ceiling. Rhylor raised his fist. They waited. Further on, something scraped the stone, three times, then stopped.

"A guard?" Zaelyra whispered.

"A guard would have liked to be heard."

She looked at the ground. In the dust, fine traces went towards the third branch. Not boots. A narrow sleigh, pulled by hand.

"Someone is carrying loads here."

Rhylor did not answer. He crouched near a groove and passed his thumb over a shard of turquoise stone. The same tone as the thread hidden in Zaelyra's sleeve.

She didn't take it out. A color could connect two traces without revealing who had left them.

At the end of the passage, a small recess had been set up behind a mobile slab. It contained two empty gourds, rolled blankets and a box of chalk. Not a den. A stopove prepared for travelers who did not want to be seen.

At the threshold, a turquoise wire had been tied to a roughness of the stone. He was cut straight, as if someone had left him there without wanting him to obstruct the passage. Zaelyra thought about the thread found under the door of the annex, then remembered that a color was not enough to prove a common origin.

Zaelyra examined the blankets. One was too small for an adult. The other had a stain of dried blood.

"Who's passing by here?"

"People who don't have permission," Rhylor replied.

"And who arranged the stop?"

He pulled out of his pocket an old copper plate, tarnished, engraved with the open circle. "This sign used to mark rescue teams. The open side indicated that you could ask for help without presenting a house seal."

"Did you work there?"

"A few times. Rhylor turned the plate between his fingers. "We brought a rope, water and a guide. We did not ask the names of those who were pulled from the rubble."

"Why did you stop?"

"The Houses ended up demanding a report for each rescue. Who had asked for it, who had paid for it, to whom the survivors returned. The circle did not answer any of these questions. He put away the plate. "The teams are gone. The sign has been transmitted."

"Did you keep it to remember them?"

"I kept it because a useful sign does not need to remain with those who created it."

An echo came to them from the opposite branch: a metallic rattle, then a voice that said an indistinct word. Rhylor turned off his lamp. In the dark, he grabbed Zaelyra's wrist and pulled her behind the slab.

Steps approached. Two people, maybe three. They did not wear armor; their steps were too light. One stopped at the entrance of the recess.

"The mark has been left? "Blowed a voice.

"Yes. But not for us."

"So who?"

The silence stretched.

"The one who wants to know who passes."

The steps left without entering.

Rhylor stood still, his hand raised. In the Three Echoes, a step could come back from a gallery where no one was anymore. He waited for the last noise to be lost in the runoff, then turned his lamp back on. Zaelyra didn't ask him who they had just heard. He may not have been able to tell him.

She took back her notebook. She did not notice the gourds or the blankets, and did not give a name to those who could have slept there. On the statement intended for the House, she did not mark the shelter. In her private map, she only traced the approach and placed the open circle at the stopping point, without drawing the slab or the recess. Next to it, she added: **do not move without a guide**. She left a white margin around the sign. For the first time, she did not take it for a gap. An attentive cartographer could understand that a refuge existed; the official copy would not deliver his address.

When they resumed walking, Rhylor let him choose the line that bypassed the stop. The passage brought them back to the third branch, where the rumble of a current gradually covered the echoes.

Chapter 5 — What water takes away

The third branch ended on a narrow duct, beyond which a stream of black water flowed between two walls. It did not appear on any recent map.

Rescue in the Cistern



Zaelyra knelt on the edge. "The current comes from the east. It must join the basin under the forges district."

Rhylor observed the water. "Or a pit."

The water had tiny shiny splinters. Zaelyra collected one from a bottle and placed it against the light of her lamp. It was not ore, but a transparent scale, very thin.

"There are fish in the pool," she says.

"Or someone is transporting it."

She put away the bottle without arguing. The detail did not establish a route; it only indicated that the water was not stagnant. The current could connect a tank to an inhabited basin.

Rhylor knelt down and deposited some dust on the water. The grains drifted, then disappeared into a crack under the ledge.

"This is where you have to fix the rope," he says.

Zaelyra handed him the pitch. "You saw it right away."

"I've already fixed a rope in the wrong place."

"What happened?"

"Someone crossed. The rope, on the other hand, remained."

He did not add who had crossed or why the rope had given way. Zaelyra planted the pitch higher, in the place it indicated, and tested the grip of all his weight before engaging.

"You let me do it? She asked.

"I'll check."

"It's not the same thing."

"No. But it's a start."

Zaelyra fixed a ribbon of paper on a rod and held it above the net. The paper leaned eastwards, then straightened up. The air current was going in the other direction. Two paths crossed under the stone.

"The water goes down to the basin. The air comes from a lower gallery."

"Or the air rises through the cistern."

"I can check with a thread."

Rhylor handed her a reel. She knotted a strand on a flat stone and let it drift. The wire stretched, vibrated, then stopped against a ring hidden under the surface.

"There is a passage below," she says.

"There's a ring underneath. Do not turn one into the other until you have checked."

He was right. Zaelyra stretched the strand until she felt the resistance of the ring, then knotted it to a roughness of the cornice. The flat stone remained under the surface, held against the metal. On the map, she noted two hypotheses, with a clearly visible question mark. She hated signs of uncertainty. That was probably why she forgot them so often.

Before engaging on the cornice, they planted two pitons several steps apart and stretched a safety rope between them. They hung their harnesses on it, with enough slack to move forward without pulling each other. Rhylor tested each piton separately. Both bit in the same strip of rock; the surface, however, showed no cracks. They advanced to the cistern. Halfway, they discovered a cut in the wall, at shoulder height. Fibers were stuck there: a rope had rubbed there recently.

"How long? Zaelyra asked.

Rhylor pinched one of the fibers. "A few days. Maybe less."

"Someone is still using the boat."

"Someone used it. It's not the same."

She looked at the black water. "You really don't want to conclude anything."

"I want to avoid concluding instead of evidence."

"And if we wait for the evidence, people can disappear."

"That's why we're moving forward. That's not why we invent."

Zaelyra folded the map in half, then reopened it on the page where she had noted the first measurements. The ink was clean, the lines straight. Nothing said that the ground was shaking or that the light had changed.

"The House's reports do not keep the assumptions," she says. "Only the conclusions."

"The reports are made to decide where to send the guards. Not to tell what people ignored."

"Then they forget how wrong they were."

"People are wrong even when they remember. Rhylor checked the pitch. "But a good survey leaves enough room for the next one to doubt."

She added a pencil mark on the edge of the page, without inking it. Next to it, she wrote the direction of the current, the angle of the cornice and the difference between the displacement of the water and that of the air. Her statement looked less like an order and more like a conversation with the person who would come after her.

"You really don't want to give a simple answer," she says.

"Simple answers are easy to carry. That's why we sell them so expensive."

"And you, what do you sell?"

"Time. When I have some."

She wondered how much time he had left, and since when he knew.

They resumed their progress towards the tank, held by the safety rope. The stone was smooth, polished by centuries of runoff. After about twenty steps, the gallery expands around a low cistern. Someone had fixed rings in the wall. Below, a flat boat was overturned against the rock.

"A road of passage," says Zaelyra.

"A road that should not appear on your report."

"You ask me to falsify the statement?"

"I ask you to choose what you put in danger."

She turned to him. "If this way is used to get people out, why is the House hiding it?"

"Maybe the House is not the only one hiding it."

A sudden thrust lifted the flat stone and stretched the thread. Three metal blows resounded under the water: the ring had just hit the wall. The current swelled and the cistern vibrated. The tremor ran into the cornice. A crack opened under Zaelyra's boot and the edge collapsed. The first piton was torn off. Rhylor pulled on the safety rope and grabbed his harness; the tension passed to the second, but the crack crossed the entire rock strip. He in turn ceded. Both slid towards the ledge.

The lamp fell into the water and went out.

In the dark, Zaelyra felt her hand slide. Another hand grabbed his sleeve from the cornice. It wasn't Rhylor.

"Don't pull on the arm," says a familiar voice. "The stone is crumbling. Give me the rope."

Nym Varr stood above them, a bag of tools on his shoulder. A fine rope surrounded his shoulder.

"You were supposed to be in the annex," said Zaelyra.

"I was there. Then your sister had the good idea to leave a door open."

"Did Vhaelyn let you go?"

"She left the door open. My tools were in the hallway. She was looking at the stairs when I took them back."

"Did she see you?"

"Yes. She didn't sound the alarm. We didn't specify what came next."

Nym fixed his rope to a ring deeply sealed in the wall. He shot it once, then a second, listening to the metal.

"Rhylor, keep your harness on. Zaelyra, pass your arm in the loop that I go down. Don't try to grab the stone: it goes under your fingers."

The buckle brushed his shoulder and slipped. She took it back with her free wrist. Rhylor kept one hand on his harness; with the other, he spread a stone that was detached above them. Nym stretched the rope until it carries Zaelyra's weight.

"Now, push against the wall."

His boot scraped the basalt. The first grip rested, but the rope held it. Rhylor and Nym slowly pulled it up, without tearing off what was left of the ledge. Once on the cornice, she rolled flat on her stomach and cleared the passage.

Nym handed him a hooded lamp. For Rhylor, he added a knot of friction to the rope and lowered a second loop.

"The first piton gave way. The second too," says Zaelyra.

"I remember," Rhylor replied. "Keep the tension."

They put it back together. Nym only let him catch his breath after verifying that the ring was still holding.

"Did you follow us?"

"I followed the marks. Not you. The thread of the annex made me believe that a lane was opening up. This one led me to the cistern. He showed the ground. A small turquoise bow was attached to the base of the wall.

"Someone wanted her to be found."

"What did you learn from the measurement? Zaelyra asked.

Nym rolled out his sheet. The circles represented air vents; thin arrows indicated the direction of the current. At the place of the tank, three arrows joined while the ducts should have remained separated.

"This connection is not on the plans of my neighborhood."

"It could have been built later."

"Or the plans have been corrected to make it disappear."

Rhylor followed the line without touching the ink. "This duct could feed the inhabited galleries."

"It could also evacuate smoke from a forge. I will only know by measuring the air on the other side."

Nym folded his statement before Zaelyra could copy it. "I can give you the directions, not the names of the families who depend on this catch."

"I didn't ask you."

"Not yet."

He put the paper against his chest. The hidden road may not have been a single road. It was used by people who did not have the same reasons to borrow it. If Zaelyra made her visible in one go, she risked confusing their needs.

Rhylor took out his open circle plate. Nym looked at her without touching.

"This path leads to an old relay? Zaelyra asked.

"At one pass, yes. The relay, I cannot guarantee it. The maps stop before the interesting part."

A flash of light passed in the distance, on the other side of the water. A lantern, then a second. Guards searched the galleries.

Rhylor put the plate back in his pocket. "We have what we need."

"We didn't even understand what we found," says Zaelyra.

"This is just the right time to leave."

They left the boat where it was. Nym erased the turquoise bow from the tip of his boot, but the pale mark remained on the stone.

Chapter 6 — The deleted line

They returned through the official gallery before the next ignition. At the guard post, a scribe was waiting with a wax tablet. One of the guards recognized Nym and blocked the passage of his forearm.

The Scribe's Seal



"The svirfneblin had escaped from the annex."

"He comes back with us as a witness to the inspection," says Zaelyra. "I will answer for his presence before the Matron."

"His detention has not been lifted."

"I don't claim otherwise. The tablet I signed describes what I saw; it does not exonerate him."

The guard looked at Rhylor, who did not confirm or contradict. The scribe slid his tablet towards them.

"The report," he said.

Zaelyra handed him a clean sheet. It had recorded the subsidence of the pillar, moisture, cracks and the risk of falling. She did not mention the stop, the boat, or the passage under the water.

A statement given to the House could be copied, then copied again. With each copy, the stop would become easier to find.

The scribe checked the sheet. "You didn't find anything else?"

"I found several things. These are verifiable."

Rhylor didn't blink. Nym stared at the ground.

The scribe put the seal of the House. "The Matron will receive you. Without delay."

He didn't take back his tablet. He put it on the edge of the window, the wax still soft, and passed his thumb over the corner as if he were checking the seal. A flat signet ring, almost hidden under its sleeve, pressed the wax. When he withdrew his hand, three curved lines were printed on it, similar to those of the old parchment.

Zaelyra held her gaze for a second longer.

The scribe immediately folds his sleeve. "You should go through the archives corridor. The central passage is closed for inventory."

"He wasn't when he came."

"He is now."

Rhylor had seen the gesture. He waited for them to be at their distance from the counter before speaking.

"Are you going to ask what he scored?"

"Yes."

"To whom?"

She had no answer. If she reported it to the Matron, the scribe would be questioned. If he worked for the House, she might have revealed a useful agent. If he helped those who used the road, she might have condemned someone who was only looking to survive.

"I will note his gesture and wait to know what it means."

"It's progress."

"You say that as if you were afraid that I would do something else."

"I'm afraid you'll do what I taught you: make a decision before you hear the whole question."

He stopped in front of the door of the map room. "I'm not asking you to be careful to please me. I ask you to understand that every time you put a name on a map, someone can use it to find a person."

Zaelyra thought of the svirfneblin arrested at the Bazaar, then of the piece of fabric of the cover in the Three Echoes. "What if not writing the name erases it?"

"So we have to find a way to keep it without delivering it."

They entered.

The map room was already occupied. Vhaelyn stood next to Zesstra, her hands clasped in her sleeves. On the table rested the old parchment, open on the back.

The Matron had placed several versions of the same statement next to it. One was so worn that it seemed to have been consulted every day; the other still had recent folding marks. Zaelyra recognized the writing of a former cartographer of the House in the margin, but the name had been scratched.

"Do you know who this map belonged to?" asked Zesstra.

"No."

"Do you recognize the writing?"

"The one on the statement, yes. The name, no."

"Someone erased it."

"Someone wanted us to no longer know who had drawn it."

The Matron slid a more recent copy to her. "And this one?"

Zaelyra compared the lines. The copy had kept the measurements, but not the stop marks. We had also moved the point of origin by about thirty steps, enough for the path to open up against a wall.

She placed the copy on the old parchment and aligned the corners of the galleries, then the two stone landmarks she had just measured. The intervals matched. It was not the entire network that had been redesigned: only one point had slipped, and all distances were now starting from it. The line kept the same length, but led elsewhere.

"A copy error?" asked Zesstra.

"It's possible. I can only establish the effect: the recent version sends the traveler against a wall. She does not say if the copyist was wrong or if he wanted to close the passage."

"And the stop signs?"

"They have been removed. I don't know by whom."

The Matron followed the interrupted line with her eyes. "Write the two possibilities. Don't choose the one that suits you."

Zaelyra noted **possible error** and **possible erasure**, then left a space between the two. She did not yet have a measure to decide.

"It doesn't come from the same hand."

"However, it has been certified by the House."

"So the seal certifies authority, not accuracy."

Vhaelyn barely moved. Zesstra, on the other hand, showed nothing. She only removed the copy and placed it face down.

"You learn quickly," she says.

"I learn what the maps don't say."

"This is precisely what can kill you."

"The name circulates in the lower neighborhoods," says the Matron.

"Someone wrote it before us."

"It's possible. But this does not prove that the map or note has left the House. A rumor can pass from word of mouth without it."

"People are already repeating it."

Zesstra closed the file in front of her. "Who saw him?"

"Nym and I."

"And the guards of the Bazaar?"

"They saw the parchment. I don't know if they read the note."

"The merchant who sold it?"

"I don't know."

"The scribe who sealed it?"

Zaelyra thought back to the three lines printed in the wax. "He used a signet ring to leave the same mark. I don't know if he recognized the one on the parchment or if he wanted to see if we would notice it."

His mother's face did not change. "You should have said it right away."

"I just saw it."

"So you should have asked before deciding what it meant."

The remark reached Zaelyra because she was right. She felt her hand close on the sleeve where the turquoise thread remained hidden.

"I don't know how many people have seen the map," she says. "I can't answer a question that no one has asked yet."

"You can answer that you don't know. It's already information."

Vhaelyn looked up. For a moment, she looked surprised to hear their mother recognize a limit.

"Then we'll find out who. Zesstra turned to Rhylor. "You recognized the sign on the map."

"I recognized an open circle. It was used by rescue teams."

"What were you ordering?"

"No."

"What were you accompanying?"

Rhylor remained silent.

Vhaelyn intervened. "Mother, if this road is used to move people, you have to know how much and who helps them."

"That's why Zaelyra and you are going to resume the inspection tomorrow."

Zaelyra understood the trap before her sister. "We have already done the statement."

"You submitted an incomplete report."

"I have submitted a report that does not endanger anyone."

"You saw people, then."

The silence of the room seemed to tighten around her.

Zesstra didn't need a confession. She observed the hesitations, the looks, the hands. She had built a House on things that were not said.

"Nym will stay here," she continued. "Rhylor will be relieved of his duties. Vhaelyn, you will take the direction of the inspection. Zaelyra, you will assist him."

"What if he refuses to help us?" asked Vhaelyn.

"He will speak when he understands that his silence does not protect anyone."

A white spider crossed the scratched copy and stopped at the place where the name had been erased. Zaelyra understood that the House was no longer just looking for the road. She was looking for those who knew her.

Chapter 7 — The price of a sister

At the end of the hearing, Zesstra had returned the old scroll to Zaelyra without comment. She had slipped it under her coat while the guards led them to the exit.

Vhaelyn's Choice



Vhaelyn waited for the guards to close the door before speaking.

"You could have warned me."

"Of what?"

"Of what you intended to hide."

"I didn't know yet what I was hiding."

"This is what you say when you want others to bear half the risk without having half the information."

Zaelyra accepted the reproach. Her sister was right about one part, and that was the part she would have preferred to ignore.

"You let Nym out of the annex," she says.

"I left a lock badly closed."

"Why?"

Vhaelyn looked at the door, as if the answer could be there. "Because I wanted to know if the road existed. And because I wanted to know if Rhylor would let you down."

"He didn't do it."

"No. Her voice almost broke, but she resumed immediately. "This is one more reason not to let it be destroyed in your place."

They are shut. Above, the songs of the temple began. The voices went down the ducts and mixed with the rumble of the city.

"Mother will have the low neighborhoods searched," says Zaelyra. "If families use this road, they will be taken."

"Mother will do what she deems necessary."

"And you?"

Vhaelyn looked away. "I have to decide if I can still believe you."

A memory went back to Zaelyra: the night of her first rite, when she was twelve years old and trembled with fever. Vhaelyn was already old enough to know the price of an absence from the temple. However, she had spent the night sitting near her sister's bed, reciting prayers in her place, until the Matron agreed to postpone the test.

The next day, Vhaelyn had claimed that she had simply needed to repeat the words.

Zaelyra knew she was lying. She had never asked why.

"That night, I trusted you," says Zaelyra.

"You had a fever. I knew what to do."

"And today?"

Vhaelyn followed the line of light under the door. "Today, you ask me to cover things that you have not yet understood."

"I can't tell you what I don't know."

"I know. That's the problem."

"When I started at the temple," she finally said, "a novice refused to recite the oath. She was afraid. Not from the goddess; from her own voice."

Zaelyra vaguely remembered an empty seat at the table, then a name that had stopped being pronounced.

"Did you help her?"

"I told him to breathe before speaking. The next day, she recited the oath."

"You saved her."

"No. She chose. I only gave him one more minute."

Vhaelyn folded her hands in front of her. "I thought the minute would be enough. She served the House for years, then disappeared after a mission in the suburbs. I never knew if she was dead, if she had fled or if she had finally found another life."

"Do you think you should have done more?"

"I don't think I had the right to decide for him. It's different."

Zaelyra then understood that her sister was not only afraid of losing her position. She feared confusing one protection with another form of control. Vhaelyn knew how to open a door; she still didn't know who had to go through it.

"You can ask me to help you," said Zaelyra. But you can't ask me to stay because you're afraid of what will happen to me."

"I'm not asking you."

"Not yet."

Vhaelyn had a joyless smile. "You learn to answer like a Mother."

"Is that what worries you?"

"What worries me is that you learn from her to no longer distinguish people from the decisions they make."

Vhaelyn took out of his sleeve the tablet that an Arach-Tinilith acolyte had given him when he left the audience. She put it on a console. The text required that Nym be taken to the temple before the next ignition. The wax bore two seals: that of the House, which ordered the inspection, and that of Arach-Tinilith, which authorized his interrogation.

"If I disobey the temple seal, I lose my place. If I obey, he may never leave their rooms."

"So why not destroy it?"

"Because a destroyed order remains an order that someone can rewrite. A proof can be shown."

Zaelyra looked at the tablet. "If the acolyte learns that you have kept a copy, he will know that you have chosen a camp."

"He will know it especially because I delayed Nym's transfer. The copy does not create the choice; it keeps track of it."

"What if our mother finds her?"

"Then she will know that I wanted an order to remain verifiable. Not that I canceled it."

She unfolded the tablet and copied the two seals on a small piece of parchment. Then she handed it to Zaelyra.

"Keep it. If we later claim that the interrogation was never ordered, you will know who is lying."

The copy was accurate, even in the small break of the temple seal. Vhaelyn had reproduced the imperfection rather than correct it.

"Why the crack? Zaelyra asked.

"Because too clean proof looks like a fabrication."

"Did you learn that at the temple?"

"With an archivist who had lost her job for omitting an ink stain. She said that people distrust a flawless truth more than a well-presented lie."

Vhaelyn showed him how to write down the time, place and name of the witness on the edge of the parchment. She did not just transmit the seals; she taught him to keep their context.

"A trademark alone does not prove who affixed it," she says. "Note who showed it to you. Also write down what you couldn't check."

Zaelyra wrote the three elements. For the first time, his sister gave him something that was neither an order nor a warning.

It was not a promise of support. It was a way to give him a share of the risk.

A guard came in to announce that Rhylor was summoned to the temple. The order was regular, sealed, and therefore more dangerous than a threat.

Vhaelyn read the tablet. "This is not an arrest."

"Not yet," said Zaelyra.

His sister left with the guard. Zaelyra waited a few seconds, then took the opposite corridor. She knew the service passages of the House better than the priestesses who claimed to supervise them. A low door led to the cells in the annex.

Nym was sitting on his bed, his ankle bandaged. Next to him, someone had put down his tool bag.

"Your sister looks upset," he says.

"She always seems to know what I'm going to do."

"This is often the case with sisters."

"I can't get you out of here without setting off an alarm."

"Then don't take me out. Show me the map."

She took out of her coat the old parchment seized at the Bazaar and spread it on the bench. The route was incomplete. Nym quickly spotted the passage of the cistern and the interrupted line.

He didn't immediately look at the drawing. He first asked who had consulted him, how long he had stayed in the room and if the guards had hit the backhand.

"You want to know if the map has been changed."

"I want to know if it's still the same map. People change the lines. Sometimes they also change the paper."

Zaelyra checked the fibers near the fold. A paler area marked the place where someone had scratched the ink, then covered the parchment with a layer of wax.

"Can you find the old line?"

"Maybe. But if I do, it should be noted that we have revealed it. Otherwise, tomorrow someone will believe that the line was visible from the beginning."

Nym showed him a way to hold the parchment under the lamp without heating the wax. The line appeared, incomplete, then interrupted at the edge of a tear.

"It's not a road," says Zaelyra.

"It's a trace of a road."

She noted the two formulations side by side. He nodded, as if he recognized a student who had just asked the right question without yet knowing that she had done it.

"The relay is probably beyond this gorge. There is a low road, but it passes under an old toll station."

"Can you find her?"

"With my instruments, yes. With a fake map and three guards in the hallway, maybe."

Zaelyra took out the turquoise thread from her sleeve. Nym examined it.

"I would take it for an answer, not for a call."

"To what?"

"Perhaps to a sign placed elsewhere. Someone would have marked the road; this knot would say that we saw the message. But I didn't see the hand that did it."

"Who?"

"We should see the hand."

In the corridor, steps stopped in front of the door. Zaelyra put the thread back on her sleeve.

The lock turned. The faction guard opened, without taking his eyes off his eyes, the young drow who was waiting behind.

"He says he has an itinerary to sell, madam. I let him in to hear him."

The visitor passed under the guard's arm. He was wearing a merchant's coat. A silver coin was sewn to his collar, without an emblem.

"Lady Xil'Nrae? He asked.

"Who wants to know?"

"Someone who sells itineraries. I was told you were looking for one."

Nym stood up suddenly. "Who told you that?"

The messenger shrugged his shoulders. "In this city, the walls speak. Good routes cost more than walls."

Zaelyra dismissed him without taking the room he was holding out. When the door closed, Nym breathed:

"Bregan D'aerthe. Or someone who wants us to believe him."

The turquoise thread was therefore not the only answer they had been left.

Chapter 8 — Clean hands

In the morning, the messenger had disappeared. The faction guard denied having seen him; his look said the opposite.

The Missing Messenger



The day before, he had admitted to letting him in. Zaelyra does not contradict him. Reminding him in front of the post would have turned a confidence into an accusation.

Zaelyra found Vhaelyn in the secondary prayer room. Her sister had removed the ornaments from her dress and rubbed her fingers with scented water. She stopped when she saw Zaelyra.

A trace of ink resisted under the nail of his index finger. Vhaelyn rubbed again, then hid his hand in his sleeve.

"Rhylor?"

"The temple released him. He is assigned to his quarters."

"Why?"

"He didn't confess anything. Vhaelyn dried his hands. "And he didn't deny anything."

"You know what he used to do?"

"No. I know what people are claiming. It's different."

A sidekick appeared in the doorway. "The Matron asks for the two girls."

Zesstra received them in front of the wall map. She had moved the black wires. The way of the cistern was now connected to the forges district and the Bazaar.

The order of the previous day remained in force; the Matron was now specifying the conditions on the ground.

"Cargos disappear in the lower galleries," she says. "Weapons, food, sometimes people. If this road is used against the House, we must close it."

"What if it is used to get families out? Zaelyra asked.

"A family can become a cargo as soon as it costs soldiers."

Vhaelyn turned pale. "Mother."

"I'm not asking you to like the answer. I ask you to understand its price. Zesstra placed two tablets in front of them. "Vhaelyn will lead the guards. Zaelyra will make the statement. You will find the entrance to the cistern and identify those who use it. Nym will accompany you under escort. Rhylor will stay here."

Vhaelyn put the copy of the two seals on the table. "The order of the temple requires the transfer of Nym before the next ignition."

"I know. The House postpones this transfer until the end of the inspection. You will have returned before the ignition of Narbondel."

"What if we're not?"

"Then the temple will receive it with my report and yours. I take responsibility for the delay, not its cancellation."

Vhaelyn folded the copy. "The temple will ask who has decided."

"He will have my name."

The Matron had not raised her voice. She offered neither refuge nor forgiveness; she set a limit that she was ready to defend until the next ignition.

"You separate him from the road because he knows it," says Zaelyra.

"I separate him from you because you listen to him."

His mother did not raise her voice. She didn't need it.

Later, in the corridor, Vhaelyn caught up with Zaelyra.

"If you still hide things, I won't be able to cover you."

"I'm not asking you to do it."

"Yes. Every time you let me discover the danger after you, you ask me."

Zaelyra wanted to answer, but no word seemed honest to her.

Vhaelyn joined her near the stairs that led to the guard quarters. She had replaced the wax tablet with a rolled map.

"Why did you agree to drive the patrol? Zaelyra asked.

"If I had refused, Mother would have sent a priestess who considers each prisoner as a pending offering."

"Do you think you can prevent it?"

"I can slow things down. Sometimes, that's all there is to do."

She unrolled the map. The official line bypassed the Three Echoes by a longer, wider corridor monitored by two guard posts. Zaelyra recognized a fresh correction.

"This road does not reach the cistern."

"No. She joins the checkpoint that keeps access to it."

"Someone wants us to arrive in front of the priestesses."

"Or that we have a reason to come back."

Vhaelyn folded the map. "If you find another way, tell me before you take it."

"I'll try."

"It's not a promise."

"No. But it's the truth."

His sister nodded. "It's more than what I had yesterday."

Zaelyra felt the answer cost her. She would have preferred to promise that she would do everything just right. She now knew that a promise could become another false map.

When the lamps fell, Vhaelyn gathered the patrol. She had the lamps, ropes and water reserves checked, then asked everyone to name the person who would take over if the group were to separate.

A young soldier replied that he had no one.

"Then choose someone here," says Vhaelyn.

He appointed a guard of the same age. She protested, then tied her rope to hers.

"You can hold the exits, but no one shoots without my order. If travelers appear, you hold them on the cheek and wait."

Zaelyra understood what her sister was trying to do. A patrol that knew the names of its members would hesitate more before treating fugitives as cargo. Vhaelyn did not become sweeter; she simply made blind obedience more difficult.

Nym observed the preparation without comment. Near the door, he stopped in front of a small cart loaded with boxes.

"The left wheel is split."

The head guard put his hand on his blade. "You're not here to inspect our carts."

"If it breaks in the slope, you will lose the boxes. If they contain provisions, you will also lose your mission."

Vhaelyn sent the guard to check. The wheel was well split.

"You see? There are ways to make a prisoner useful without asking him to choose a camp," says Nym.

"And there are ways to stay alive without teaching his escort a lesson," Vhaelyn replied.

Nym smiles. "I'm still learning them."

The patrol set off. Nym advanced between two guards, his wrists free but monitored. Vhaelyn led the group; Zaelyra carried the official map, whose route had been corrected to avoid the places they already knew.

At the first crossroads, Zaelyra noticed on the face of the pillar visible from the three branches three lines of chalk, almost erased. The drawing recalled that of the old parchment and the scribe's wax, without proving that it came from the same hand.

She continued without slowing down.

She didn't know if the lines indicated a route, a warning or something else. She noted their location without choosing between these readings.

The young guard of the slit wheel had seen it too. She placed herself near Vhaelyn, without taking her eyes off the pillar.

"We should go back to the House," she said. "If someone observes, he knows that we have noticed it."

"If he observes us, he will also know that we have changed our route."

"What if he waits for the cistern?"

Vhaelyn asked him to name the three closest exits. The guard appointed two. The third was behind her, through a passage wide enough for one person.

"If we turn around, we will all be forced to go through this door," says Vhaelyn. "If we continue, we keep two options."

The young woman looked at Nym, then Zaelyra. "What if it's a trap?"

"So we won't go in without checking it."

Chapter 9 — The room without echo

The patrol reached the cistern without meeting anyone. Too easily.

The Cistern under Watch



Vhaelyn had two guards placed at each entrance. Nym was led near the wall, under the supervision of a crossbowman. Zaelyra put the map on a box and compared the chalk marks to the measurements taken the day before.

"The boat has disappeared," she says.

"They know we're coming," Vhaelyn replied.

A noise sounds above them. Then a second, closer. The guards raised their weapons. The water from the cistern shivered, but nothing came out of it.

Nym leaned on the floor. "It's not above. It's behind the wall."

A rattling answered behind the wall. A joint, invisible until then in the rock, was drawn; a panel pivoted inward, revealing a low room. The mechanism should have returned its noise against the walls; the sound went out as soon as the threshold was crossed. Three people were crouched there: an old drow, a teenager and a girl with pale hair. The girl held a wooden box against her. The old woman had a wound to her side.

The crossbowmen aimed at them.

"Lower your weapons," Zaelyra ordered.

"They entered the territory of the House," says Vhaelyn.

"They are unarmed."

"They can be baits."

The old woman raised her hands. "We are looking for the relay. We were told that the guide would come back."

Vhaelyn signaled to the guards not to move forward. The two closest ones retreated to the first corner, without lowering their weapons. "Do you know his name?"

"No."

"You received the plate of an open circle."

The old woman glanced towards the corridor. "I received a mark. Not a plate."

"How long have you been waiting? Zaelyra asked.

"Two days."

"Why didn't we leave?"

"The boy couldn't walk anymore. The old woman pointed to Pell. "And the guards had closed the way behind us. My name is Sszindi."

The soldiers exchanged a look. Vhaelyn noticed it.

"Did you see any house guards?"

"We saw their lamps. We didn't wait to see their faces."

Zaelyra knelt near the wound. The blood had dried on the bandage, but the wound continued to ooze. She asked for water and a clean band.

"If you take care of her, she will talk," says one of the guards.

"If I don't treat her, she will die before she can do it."

Vhaelyn let a silence pass, then stretched a strip of fabric herself. The guard who had spoken looked away.

"I transported goods for Houses that did not greet each other," says Sszindi. "My husband refused a shipment whose contents no one wanted to know. We declared him a thief and we seized our house. I fled with a group of travelers; the flooded gallery separated us."

"Are there others? Zaelyra asked.

Sszindi clenched his teeth while the band tightened around his side. "Maybe. I don't know who managed to get through."

"You don't tell us everything," says Vhaelyn.

"I don't know everything. It's different."

Vhaelyn displeased the answer, but she did not dispute it.

Zaelyra felt the weight of her sister's gaze. "Who told you that?"

"A man with an open circle plate. He said the road was safe."

Rhylor? She held back from looking at the entrance.

Vhaelyn approached the injured woman, without lowering her guard. "How many are you?"

"The ones you see."

"This is not an answer."

"It is the only one that will not put other lives in danger."

Zaelyra saw that the old woman had kept her right hand under her coat. Not near a weapon: near the inner seam. She could hide another sheet, a name, or nothing at all.

"Do you have another map? She asked.

Sszindi looked at Vhaelyn before answering. "I have a piece. It indicates a dry well, but I don't know if we can go down there."

"Why didn't you show it to us?"

"Because you asked me how many we were, not where we were going."

Zaelyra nodded. She could have insisted. Instead, she waited.

After a long time, Sszindi took out a folded leather square. The layout had been scraped in several places, then completed in a more recent ink. Three different hands had left marks on it.

"I didn't draw that," says the old woman. "The one who gave it to me said that he himself had received the piece from another."

"Do you know his name? Zaelyra asked.

"He didn't give me his name. He asked for mine."

Zaelyra examined the edge of the leather. The first route stopped at a crack; the second bypassed it, but without measuring the slope. She understood why Sszindi did not want to deliver the names. This map was perhaps the only proof that a road existed, and the only thing that could lead those who knew it to them.

"We can copy it without writing your name," says Zaelyra.

"What if the copy falls into the hands of the guards?"

"Then she will show them a well that we don't know if it's practicable."

Vhaelyn frowned. "This is not a guarantee."

"No. This is the limit of what we know."

Zaelyra returned the leather to Sszindi. The old woman didn't take it back right away. Then she slipped it under her bandage, where no register would look for it.

The girl opened her box. It contained tiny maps, folded into an accordion. Zaelyra recognized the writing of the open circle and a note on the back, written in an older hand:

Do'Urden. Didn't hit.

The name was no longer just a rumor of Bazaar. He reappeared, on the back of these maps, among the marks of those who had taken the passages.

A guard snatched one of the small unfolded maps from the girl. Vhaelyn grabs his wrist.

"Not like that," she says.

The order was not for Zaelyra. He was for everyone.

The moment was short-lived. A whistle split the air from the corridor. An arrow was planted in the box, near the map. A second struck the stone and detached a splinter that was planted in the thigh of a guard. The young soldier who ran to shoot him under cover hit the edge of the box; a cut drew a red line on his cheek.

The lights flickered; in the outer passage, silhouettes were running.

"Reply!" shouted Vhaelyn.

The guards dispersed to hold the angles. Zaelyra threw herself at the teenager, who had frozen. Nym guided the old woman to the cornice. Vhaelyn covered the girl, then turned to her sister.

"The low exit!"

So she knew. Or she had understood at the same moment.

Zaelyra picked up one of the maps on the cash register. The girl tightened her fingers around the box. They didn't shoot at each other.

"Can you take us to the relay? Zaelyra asked.

"If you don't deliver us."

The steps of the pursuers were approaching. Vhaelyn met Zaelyra's gaze. "Decide."

For the first time, his sister did not give him an order.

Zaelyra reached out to the girl.

The girl didn't take it right away. She inspected Zaelyra's fingers, the dagger on her belt, then the guards behind her. It wasn't fear without thought. She measured the distances and the exits.

Zaelyra put her dagger on the ground and slid it towards Vhaelyn.

"She won't follow me because I ask," she says. "She must be able to choose."

Vhaelyn took the weapon, then took a step back. "The low exit remains open until the next change of guard. After that, I will not be able to guarantee that she will still be."

"If we take it, Nym will not be at the temple before the ignition," says Zaelyra.

"No."

"You can still stop us."

"Yes."

"You let us go? Zaelyra asked.

"I leave a road open."

"Is it a difference?"

"This is the difference between saving you and helping you. I won't make one for you."

The girl then took her outstretched hand. She kept the other one on her box.

Chapter 10 — The first line

They escaped from the cistern through the gallery, without leaving the city. The approach to the low exit tightened into a gut practicable to one person at a time. Under fire, passing Sszindi and the girl would have left the others unprotected; Vhaelyn folded the group into an abandoned storage room, away from the main passage.

The First Line



Vhaelyn closed the door behind them. Two guards were injured. No one was dead. The old drow was called Sszindi; the teenager, Pell. The girl did not give her name. The other patrolmen still held the accesses to the tank. Their muffled calls passed through the door while they divided the corners.

The most seriously affected had received a stone splinter in the thigh. Vhaelyn tied a ternose above the wound, then asked the other guard to maintain the pressure while she rinsed the blood.

"You're not going to leave us here?" asked the injured man.

"No. The others still hold the accesses and will join you as soon as the passage is safe. But I can't carry you both."

"Will the temple send someone?"

Vhaelyn glanced at the door. "The temple will send someone to ask questions. I'll get you out of here first."

The other guard, a young drow with a notched cheek, helped him sit down. She looked at Zaelyra with an embarrassed hostility.

"You're going to leave and let us explain why?"

"You won't have to invent an answer," says Zaelyra. "You have been attacked. Your companion is injured. We are leaving."

"What if the Matron asks who let us do it?"

"Say it was my choice," Vhaelyn replied. "I ordered the retreat when the arrows arrived. I order you to hold this room until the patrol joins you, then enter through the north door as soon as your companion can walk. I will answer my itinerary in front of Mother."

The young guard did not answer, but she tightened the bandage to the right height.

"You let them go," Vhaelyn told Zaelyra.

"I prevented them from being captured."

"You have disobeyed a direct order."

"Yes."

Vhaelyn looked at her for a long time. "I can't fix this answer."

"I'm not asking you."

"But you want me to choose your side."

"I want you to choose yours."

The older sister looked down at her hands. They were barely shaking.

The girl handed the box to Nym, without taking her eyes off him. He studied the maps it contained. "Veyr Waystation is real. This road leads there, provided you bypass the toll station. There are two days of walking left. Then he returned the box to him.

"Not yet," said Vhaelyn. "We must first get out of the control zone. And I won't follow a line on a map without knowing who drew it."

The door opened. Rhylor entered, escorted by a single guard. He still wore the tunic of his quarters, but had taken back his belt.

"I heard the alarm," he said. "The Matron asked me to come."

"Did she free you? Zaelyra asked.

"She asked me to bring her daughter back."

"Which one?" said Nym.

Rhylor doesn't smile. "This is what I came to discover."

The guard who accompanied him put on the box a sealed tablet of the marks of the House and the temple. The order demanded a return before the ignition of Narbondel. Zesstra offered them one last chance: return with the fugitives, deliver the maps and present the incident as an ambush of smugglers.

Sszindi lowered his head. The girl pressed the box against her. Vhaelyn read the order and then handed it to Zaelyra. She checked the two seals before returning it to him.

"If we come back, they will be questioned," she says. "Maybe not condemned. Maybe."

"What if we leave?"

"The House will declare us traitors."

Rhylor detached the plate from the open circle of his collar and placed it near the tablet. "I won't tell you what to choose. I have already chosen quite often instead of others."

"Then choose for yourself," said Zaelyra. "You're coming?"

"Until the next crossroads. There, ask me again."

She didn't know if this was the answer she was hoping for. She accepted it without writing it as a certainty.

Zaelyra looked at the maps. A line had been scratched, then traced by an unknown hand. The road was not safe. She was not free. But it existed.

In the distance, the first rumble of Narbondel announced the new hour.

"We will resume the return route to the crossroads," says Vhaelyn. "The guards must believe that we are returning to the House."

His gaze went from the young guard to the bandage of his companion. The return route was true to the crossroads; the rest, she does not say in front of them.

"You will enter through the north door with the patrol badge. Do not give the names of Sszindi or Pell."

"What if the Matron asks where you are?" asked the young guard.

"Tell him what you know."

"She will know that you let us go."

"Yes."

The young guard looked down at his companion, then raised them. "I'll take him to the post. But I don't promise to lie to the Matron."

"I'm not asking you," Vhaelyn replied. "Only not to follow us."

Zaelyra looked at her sister. Their plan was not a clean leak. Two guards would leave with an injured person and a truth that exposed them. She would have wanted to offer them a less dangerous version; she had no right to impose another one on them.

She handed them the small map of the north corridor. "This is the path that avoids the scree. Keep it after your report."

The guard took her. "Why?"

"So that you don't have to believe a map that shows only one exit."

She pointed to the official map. "The House guards expect us to return through the north passage. We will leave them a track to the guard post. It will have to seem credible without leading to hidden families."

"And then? Nym asked.

"We will take the low exit to the crossroads. There, you will continue to the Relay. I will resume the route back to the House alone."

"So you're coming with us?"

"Up to the crossroads. No further."

Zaelyra understood: if Vhaelyn came home alone, Zesstra could claim that the eldest had tried to bring back the younger one.

"You will tell them that we have escaped you."

"I'll tell them you chose to leave."

"It's not the same thing."

"No. But it will be true enough for them to believe me."

Rhylor held out to the group of dark cloaks taken from the reserve. "The smallest in the middle. The injured between two people. If someone falls, we only stop when the passage is forbidden."

"You look like you've already done that," says Zaelyra.

"I've already failed to do it."

He gave no further explanation.

The girl stiffens. Nym looked away. Rhylor did not move.

Vhaelyn squats in front of the girl. "I'm not abandoning you. But don't ask me to pretend that I'm going with you."

"I won't ask you to justify yourself to me," Zaelyra replied. "Only to come back whole."

The young guard called his companion. She had not promised to lie; she had only agreed not to pursue them. That would be enough to give them a few minutes in advance.

Zaelyra thanked Vhaelyn with a nod. His sister saw him, but did not answer. They still had a corridor to cross before separating.

They left the room through a service door. Behind them, Menzoberranzan continued her day, vast and splendid, convinced that all her roads belonged to her.

In Zaelyra's hand, the first line of the new itinerary trembled under the light of the lamp.

It did not yet lead to freedom. She was leading off the map.

Chapter 11 — The service door

The door overlooked a staircase so narrow that Rhylor had to move aside. Zaelyra closed the march, the map of the new route rolled against her chest. Behind them, the storage room had become silent again. In front, the air smelled of cold dust and lamp grease.

The Service Door



Vhaelyn stopped at the first landing.

Pell raised his head. "Why not continue with us to the Relay?"

"Because if no one comes back, they will know exactly where to look."

"They will know anyway," says Zaelyra.

"Yes. But not right away. Vhaelyn slipped a silver pin into his sister's palm. "If you see two lines of chalk near a door, don't open it. A single line means that the passage is free."

"How long have you been making guide marks?"

"Since the priestesses decided that the corridors belonged to them."

Rhylor did not comment. He was examining the top landing lock. A black thread had been knotted there, almost invisible. He cut it with his dagger and wrapped it around his finger.

"Alert? Zaelyra asked.

"Or warning. This often comes back to the same thing."

They went down. Below them, a door opened, then boots hit the steps. Rhylor turned off his lamp. Everyone stopped on the stairs, their hand against the wet stone.

Vhaelyn went down two steps, alone, and put her ornaments back in place. She no longer seemed to be a sister who was fleeing, but a priestess interrupted in her work.

"Who gave the order to search the depot? She asked when the guards arrived.

"The captain of the west gate."

"Did he sign a tablet?"

The guard hesitated. "No, lady."

"Then you don't search. You keep the issues and wait for my instructions."

"The Matron ordered—"

"The Matron ordered an inspection. She did not order you to pursue a rumor on the stairs of the House."

The guard looked down at the seal embroidered on Vhaelyn's sleeve. She handed him the tablet received from Zesstra, the two imprints intact in the wax. The order was authentic; only its interpretation could be discussed.

"Stay at your post. If the captain asks why, tell him I'm waiting for him."

The soldiers left grumbled. Vhaelyn stayed until their steps moved away, then joined the others.

"You just gave them an order that doesn't exist," whispered Zaelyra.

"No. I gave them an interpretation that they can defend. It's safer."

"What if the captain understands?"

"He will understand. But he will have to choose if he wants to challenge my reading of the order before the Matron."

Zaelyra put this lesson in her memory. His sister did not always object to the system. Sometimes she knew exactly what part of the system could be forced to slow down.

A guard voice rose to them. "The room is empty. The track continues towards the old conduit."

Vhaelyn waited for the steps to move away.

"They found the room," whispered Nym.

"They had to find her," she replied. "That's why we don't take it."

At the foot of the stairs, a branch overlooked a service gallery. A copper plate indicated the former deposits of the House. Vhaelyn touched the spider symbol, then withdrew his hand as if the metal had burned it.

"The low passage reaches the Three Echoes, but it is monitored," she says. "We have to wait for the change of guard."

A service door opened in the opposite wall. Two lines of chalk crossed out the door. Further on, a low hatch bore a unique mark, almost erased by dust.

Zaelyra felt the silver pin in her palm. "The two features."

"We don't open," confirmed Vhaelyn. "Not even to check."

Rhylor examined the door without approaching it. The lock was new; a fine scratch ran around the post, as if it had recently been forced before closing it.

"Do you know what's behind it? Zaelyra asked.

"No. I only know that no one should enter it."

"And the trapdoor?"

Vhaelyn squats. The unique mark had been traced with white chalk, but a gray powder had been deposited on it. She passed her finger next to it, without erasing the sign.

"It can lead to low passage."

"Can?" asked Pell.

"A mark indicates what we knew at the time we made it. She doesn't promise that nothing has changed since then."

Nym takes a thread of oiled paper out of his bag. He slipped it under the hatch. The band rose towards them, then fell back.

"The duct sucks in the air," he says. "This confirms that there is an open volume behind. Not where it leads."

"Can we slip in? Zaelyra asked.

Rhylor measured the opening of the hand. "A person at a time. Without a bag. Sszindi will not pass if we force him to crawl."

The old drow had leaned against the wall. "I can move forward on my knees. I can't carry the lamp."

"Then you won't wear it," says Zaelyra.

They waited for the change of guard without taking their eyes off the hatch. Pell counted the steps on the stairs; Nym watched the wire; Rhylor distributed the bags so that no one was left with their hands when entering. With each noise, Vhaelyn checked the door crossed out with two lines. No one came close.

"How long? Zaelyra asked.

"A hundred breaths."

"Did you count?"

"I grew up here too."

They waited without speaking. Zaelyra heard Sszindi's short breathing, Pell's effort not to move and the rubbing of Nym's fingers on the handle of his bag. She would have liked to trace all this on a map: fears, wounds, hesitations. But no ink could make a decision less dangerous.

Pell looked at the door they had just crossed. "They know we're here."

"Yes," said Vhaelyn.

"Then why wait?"

"Because they wait too."

"What if we are wrong?"

"So we'll change our plans."

The boy seemed disappointed by this answer. He would have preferred a clear order, a safe path, something that did not depend on his attention. Zaelyra acknowledged this expectation. She had it, too, before understanding that adults sometimes had only a better way to hide their uncertainty.

"Do you want a task? She asked him.

Pell nodded.

"Count the steps when the patrol moves away. Don't try to guess when she'll be back. Just tell us what you hear."

He applied himself. About fifty steps went up, then went north. After a while, he raised a finger.

"They stopped."

Rhylor listened in turn. "He's right."

"How do you know? Zaelyra asked.

"The gallery no longer returns the steps. They are behind the hollow pillar."

Pell smiled, but did not move. He had understood that his task was not to be brave. It consisted of not inventing what he could not know.

In the end of Vhaelyn's account, Rhylor opened the door. The patrol had just turned north.

Vhaelyn lifted the hatch just enough to look into the opening. A flight of steps went down under the gallery; the stone, smooth in the center, had been polished by the passage. The unique brand had not lied, but it had not guaranteed anything beyond the threshold.

Rhylor passed first, then received the bags that Zaelyra handed him. Nym went down with his wire and his lamp. Pell followed, keeping a free hand to help Sszindi. The injured woman took the time to place each knee before transferring her weight. Zaelyra stayed close to her while Vhaelyn closed the hatch above the last one.

"If someone finds both traits? "Zaelyra whispered.

"He will know that he has to stop. What he will do next will belong to him."

"What if he doesn't understand the sign?"

"Then the brand won't protect him."

Vhaelyn pulled down the lid again. The light of the landing was reduced to a net, then disappeared. The low gallery opened in front of them, wide enough to advance bent, not enough to forget that they were entering a passage that no official map recognized.

They advanced until the gut widened into a small junction chamber. Three passages left. The one on the left went up to the service corridors; the middle one ended under an old landslide; the last one dived towards the Three Echoes.

Vhaelyn put a finger on the rolled map against Zaelyra's chest. "Here is the crossroads. I can return to the House through the service gallery. You have a road to the Three Echoes, not yet a safe road to Veyr."

Zaelyra turned to Rhylor. "You asked me to ask you the question again here. Do you continue?"

He observed the low opening, then the travelers waiting behind them. "Up to Veyr, if the brands confirm the way. Not further without talking about it again."

"Okay. Zaelyra did not turn her agreement into a bigger promise.

"This is where our paths separate," says Vhaelyn.

"Not forever," says Zaelyra.

"Don't promise what you can't guarantee."

His sister hugged him abruptly, too quickly for none of them to claim that it was a farewell scene. Then she stepped back.

"Go. And don't make Do'Urden's rumor a reason to believe you are invincible."

"I don't need it."

"So much the better."

Vhaelyn took the passage that went up to the service corridors. At the branch, she raised two fingers, then disappeared into the darkness.

Zaelyra waited for a heartbeat. Then she took the low gallery.

Chapter 12 — The corridors that breathe

The lower gallery had not been dug for soldiers. The ceilings there forced Rhylor to lower his head and the recesses seemed to move as we moved forward. The air circulated through invisible ducts, bringing in turn a smell of water, ash and mushroom.

The Breathing Corridors



Nym stopped at each branch to listen.

"Do you hear something? Zaelyra asked.

"I hear the gallery breathing. The current changes according to the opening of the doors."

"And it helps us?"

"It helps me to know when someone has opened a door."

Nym took a thin strip of oiled paper out of his bag and hung it from the crack. She shivered inward.

"The gallery behind the wall sucks in the air."

"What's there?" asked Pell.

"Another gallery."

"You don't know?"

"If I knew, I would tell you."

"The maps are not used to know before you go?"

Nym folded the paper. "The maps are used not to forget what we learned while going there."

Zaelyra noted the direction of the breath. The paper had revealed a passage, but not its length or destination. She indicated the crack by an interrupted line, not by a solid line.

"Did you learn that on your own? Nym asked.

"I learned to draw what the masters want to see. The rest, I'm learning now."

"This is how you become a cartographer."

"In disobedience?"

"Idmitting that a map can be wrong. Disobedience comes after."

He put two fingers on the floor. The air current came from the north, although the passage descended to the south. Nym pointed to a crack at knee height.

"A second gallery passes behind the wall. If it is open, we are not alone."

Rhylor squats. "This crack did not exist on the records."

"The statements are old," says Zaelyra.

"Or someone made them old on purpose."

They found the door after an hour of walking. It was hidden by a curtain of mineral roots, just flexible enough to let a person pass. On the other side, a slope descended towards a round chamber. Footprints covered the dust, some recent, others so old that they were just directionless footprints.

Pell set foot in the room.

"Not there," says Nym.

He stepped forward and showed him a row of holes at ground level. The traps had been disarmed, but the stone around the triggers was freshly chipped.

The girl had stopped behind Zaelyra. She held her box against her stomach, both arms clasped around the lid. His gaze went from Pell to the holes, then to the door through which they had entered. Zaelyra showed him the opposite wall. The girl nodded and got on it without letting go of the box.

"Does anyone want us to know that he has passed? Zaelyra asked.

"Or that we think he has passed."

Sszindi leaned against the wall. His breathing was wheezing. The wound on his side had reopened and his bandage was dark.

"We can't move fast," says Zaelyra.

"We can't stop for long," Rhylor replied.

Pell took Sszindi's gourd and handed it to him. The old woman refused at first, then took a sip. The boy was barely old enough to be sent to carry messages, but his gaze followed every exit.

"Did you learn how to treat wounds? Zaelyra asked him.

"My mother worked in the kitchens of a house. She said that cuts always happen when healers are elsewhere."

"Where is she?"

Pell tightened the cap. "She took another road."

He did not specify if she had chosen to leave, or if she had not had time to choose. Zaelyra didn't ask the question. She had already understood that a story did not belong to the one who wanted to hear it.

The old drow pushed Pell's hand away when he wanted to help her. "I can walk. I just can't run."

Before leaving, Nym examined the row of holes near the threshold. He measured them with the foldable rod, then compared their spacing to that of the steps in the dust. A trace stopped in front of the third cavity, as if its owner had understood the trap in time.

"Someone disarmed the first two," he says. "The third is intact."

Rhylor passed first, along the opposite wall. He didn't touch the traps. On the other side, he placed a copper slat near the wall.

"If someone comes back, she will move."

"What if the draft moves it?"

"Then we'll know the power has changed."

The lamella remained motionless.

Nym slid his stem along the wall. A few fingers from the ground, a narrow cornice ran around the room, interrupted by a crack but wide enough to put the foot aside. He measured the gap between the ledge and the three triggers, then asked Rhylor to check the stone from the other side. He hit twice with the knob of his dagger. The sound remained clear until the crack; beyond, it became hollow.

"You can go through the cornice, but not all at the same time," says Nym. "And no one puts their foot beyond this slot."

Rhylor attached a rope to an iron ring sealed in the wall. Zaelyra tested the anchoring of all his weight before letting Pell stretch the line towards the other edge. They put Sszindi first. She protested, then accepted when the wound pulled under her bandage. Zaelyra supported her by the forearm; Pell hold the rope without pulling, as she had been asked.

The girl crossed after them. She kept the box tied to her wrist by a strap. Halfway through, his boot slid on the wet stone. She froze instead of throwing herself towards the wall. Rhylor reached out from the other side; Zaelyra held the rope. The girl found her support and finished the crossing without opening the box.

Nym passed with his instruments. Pell followed him, then Zaelyra. None of the holes opened under their steps. When the last one had joined Rhylor, he unhooked the rope, but left the copper slat in place. She would signal a return, not an intention.

Zaelyra noted the location, then added Nym's measure and Rhylor's warning. The map became a conversation between their knowledge: each brand called for a verification by someone else.

Sszindi, who had observed them, said: "You make maps as we share a vigil."

"Is it different? Zaelyra asked.

"A day before, we know it ends. A map, people can keep it when you are no longer there."

His layout was no longer just a description of the terrain. He also kept the precautions of those who had traveled it.

The corridors behind them brought them closer to the guards; in front, the road remained unknown.

"We're making a stop here. Nym, is looking for a stable airway. Rhylor, check the entries. Pell, helps Sszindi change his bandage."

"Do you give orders now?" asked Rhylor.

"I distribute the tasks. If anyone has a better idea, let him say it."

No one spoke.

Pell unties the blackened bandage. He rinsed the edge of the wound with the bottom of a gourd, then cut a strip in the lining of his cape. Sszindi clenched his teeth while he tightened it; when he had finished, his breath became shorter, without the pain disappearing.

Nym found a narrow duct that pulled the air down. He fixed a copper wire on it and observed its vibration. Zaelyra sat near Sszindi. The old drow kept her eyes open, but every movement of her mouth seemed to cost her.

"Who told you about Veyr? Zaelyra asked.

"A man who had lost a son on the road."

Rhylor turned his head away.

"Did you know him?"

"No," replied Sszindi. "He never gave us his name. He told us to look for the open circle plate."

Rhylor's hand closed on his own plate.

"And you believed it? He asked.

"We needed a road. People who have the choice ask this question. The others try."

The answer remained in the room long after Sszindi closed his eyes.

When Nym returned, the copper wire vibrated in jerks, in the opposite direction of the first time.

"The power just changed. It may be a sign that a door has opened behind us. I don't know which one, or who would have opened it."

Rhylor turned off the lamps. "So let's get going again."

Zaelyra looked at the route she had started. The lower gallery was the only one whose slope they knew and that they had already traveled; it marked their stop with a sign, not their destination. "We'll pick up there. Slowly. If the current changes again, we stop before choosing."

Pell put Sszindi's arm around his shoulders. This time, she didn't push him away. They engaged in the gallery without light, each step transmitted from one to the other by the rope that Rhylor kept stretched between them.

Chapter 13 — The toll of the living

The air duct led them to a wider gallery, carved into a rock streaked with white veins. On the ceiling, rusty hooks marked the location of old lanterns. A toll door closed the other end: two black metal doors, a narrow window and a chain heavy enough to hold a beast.

In the enlargement, Rhylor turned on a lamp under his hood. The low halo illuminated the threshold and the door without going very far into the gallery.

Someone had set a table in front of the door.

The person sitting behind her was wearing a copper-colored travel coat, boots covered in dust and a brooch without a coat of arms. On the table were arranged spools of thread, hooks, two knives and a dented teapot.

The Toll of the Living



Zaelyra stopped before the threshold. Nym checked the floor near the chain; Rhylor took a seat between the table and the others. Pell supported Sszindi by the elbow. The girl stood behind them, her box tight against her. Kethra observed each one without asking his name, then turned his attention to Zaelyra.

"You're late," she says.

Rhylor pulled his blade halfway. "We didn't have an appointment."

"This is often what people who arrive late say."

She raised a cup towards Zaelyra. His smile revealed neither surprise nor gratitude. "Kethra. I sell ropes, guides and sometimes news. According to what is missing the most."

"Were you already there when we arrived? Zaelyra asked.

"Long enough to know that the door was opened three times this week."

"By whom?"

"By people who didn't pay."

"And you let them pass?"

"I didn't say I was up to the toll. I said I was there."

Kethra took back her cup. The teapot no longer smoked, but it kept its hands around as if the heat remained there.

Rhylor pointed at the knives. "You are armed."

"I'm sitting at a table in a gallery where no one keeps the accounts. You want me to be defenseless in addition to being honest?"

"The one does not prevent the other."

"In that case, you should know a lot of honest people."

Nym had stood near the counter. He observed the rivets, then the level of the chain.

"It's locked," he said. "The lever is not enough. A key or counterweight is missing."

Kethra put down her cup. "That's why I need a map."

"You knew the mechanism wouldn't work," says Zaelyra.

"I knew that the lever alone would not be enough. I wanted to see what it would take to open it."

"Were you going to send us?"

"I was going to propose to you."

The difference was small, but real. Zaelyra wondered how many times she had taken for each other.

Zaelyra did not move. "What is the price?"

"A map."

"You already have some."

"Not from you."

"What part?"

"The one that leads to Veyr."

Nym had a brief laugh. "You want an itinerary that you don't know, against the route that we haven't checked yet. It's a bold business."

"I try to live up to my reputation."

"What reputation?"

"The one I'm making."

Zaelyra approached the table. Kethra had not arranged his goods at random. The knives were too close to his right hand; the teapot, too hot to be forgotten. A chalk mark on the base of the table indicated a side exit.

"You want the map because you plan to sell it."

"Probably."

"At home?"

"Maybe."

"And you would let us go?"

"If you open the door yourself. I am not your mother."

Rhylor placed himself between Kethra and the others. Zaelyra felt the old reflex come back: let him decide, follow the route he knew, avoid immediate risk. She thought about Sszindi's question and his answer: people who have the choice ask questions.

"Not the map," she says. "You can have a copy of our statement up to the cistern. The rest will stay with us."

"An incomplete copy is worth almost nothing."

"Then you refuse."

Kethra turned the cup between her fingers. "I accept, with one condition. If you find a safe passage to Veyr, you will owe me the first right of way for two caravans. Not the property of the road. The right to borrow it."

"For how long? Nym asked.

"A crossing."

"A crossing can last a day or three seasons."

"That's why contracts exist."

Zaelyra shook her head. "A caravan. And only if people who are already on the road pass before your goods."

Kethra looked amused. "You negotiate like someone who still has nothing to sell."

"I negotiate like someone who knows what the road costs."

Kethra's smile faded for a moment. Then she got up and pulled a small black key from her sleeve, barely longer than a finger. She turned it in the padlock of the chain, released it, then operated the lever. The door opened with a metal moan.

Kethra put the key on the table.

"So you had the key," says Nym.

"I had a key. I didn't know if she was still spinning."

"And the counterweight?"

"A false track. The locksmith loved riddles."

Zaelyra looked at her. "You could have checked before negotiating."

"I could have. But I wouldn't have learned anything about you."

"You learned that we don't like to be tested."

"This is useful information."

"A caravan, after those who are already walking. We will note that when you have a road."

"Who will decide that they are already engaged?" asked Kethra.

"The people who keep the passage," replied Zaelyra. "We will notify them at the post office before sending anyone."

"Do you accept that they can make you wait?"

"Yes. If the road is common, the decision cannot be up to us alone."

Kethra took back the sheet. "Then write that the post will have to be warned. I don't want a caravan to discover too late that an injured family is already in front of it."

Kethra slid a sheet of thick paper towards her. "So we must write the conditions before one of us claims to have understood them otherwise."

Nym read aloud as she wrote: a single caravan, for a single crossing, and only after the path to Veyr had been checked by those who guard it; passage after the travelers already engaged on the road; notice to the post before the arrival of the convoy; no right of ownership; no copy of the route beyond the tank post; the pact annulled if Kethra sold the names of the travelers.

"You add a sanction that you can't apply," says Rhylor.

"I can apply the last condition. If I give their names, they won't owe me anything anymore."

"What if you sell the itinerary without their names? Zaelyra asked.

"So they will always owe me the passage, and I will owe them an explanation."

Nym took the sheet. "It's not a contract that makes you trustworthy."

"I know. It is a contract that prevents our memory from choosing a more convenient version afterwards."

Zaelyra rereads the clauses. She added that Kethra could not pass merchandise before an injured family, even if they could not pay. Then she put her sign, an interrupted line, at the bottom of the page.

"I don't sign for you," she told Kethra. "I sign to remember what we agreed to."

Kethra put the mark of her left hand next to it. "It's the only signature that's worth something."

"And your copy?"

Zaelyra took out a copy of the statement to the tank station. She had entered the verified branches and marked the post itself, without tracing the access to the stop or the continuation towards Veyr. Kethra took it without checking. She already knew this route, or had never expected anything else.

Before letting them pass, she handed Zaelyra a bobbin of fine rope, braided with turquoise fibers.

"Gift? Zaelyra asked.

"A sample. If the rope breaks, don't tell me about it. If it holds, you will owe me a real order."

Kethra pushed the table against the wall to clear the doors. The girl placed herself near Sszindi; Pell took back the injured woman's elbow. Nym brought his oiled thread closer to the opening. The current was pulling inward, but nothing yet allowed him to measure the depth of the water further.

"The door is open," he said. "The path remains to be checked."

Kethra did not offer to wear Sszindi. She would not have accepted. She just held the door while the group passed, one by one. The girl kept her box closed; she looked at the black key on the table, then Kethra, but did not reach out.

Rhylor passed last. "You know where we're going."

"Everyone knows where someone is going. The question is who will arrive before him."

Behind the door, the gallery plunged towards a surface of groundwater. Kethra's rope seemed solid, but its turquoise fibers recalled the wire slipped under the door of the annex.

Zaelyra tied the reel to her bag without thanking her.

Kethra watched them disappear, then took out of her sleeve a second leaf, apparently blank. Under the lamp, a pale ink revealed the mark of a spider.

She plied the paper and put it away.

The deal was done. The account was just beginning.

Chapter 14 — The currency of the roads

The gallery ran along an underground surface where the water fell drop by drop from a vault too high to be illuminated. After an hour, they reached an old weighing station. A stone scale occupied the center of the room; the trays were covered with dust, except for one, where someone had placed a handful of white pebbles.

The Stone Balance



Nym took one.

"Don't touch," says Rhylor.

"It's limestone."

"So he won't blame you if you let him."

Nym put the bble back. In the wall, a duct let in a trickle of air loaded with a smell of smoke and onions. Zaelyra knew this smell: a camp was not far away.

They discovered three shelters built under a rock advance. Duergars sold strips of fabric, dried mushrooms and vials of medicinal alcohol. No one carried a visible weapon. That didn't mean they didn't have one.

The camp leader, a dwarf with a shallow head and gray eyebrows, recognized Rhylor's plate.

"Open circle," she says. "It hasn't paid for a long time."

"We didn't come to ask for a toll."

"Everyone says that before asking for something."

Zaelyra put Vhaelyn's silver pin on a stone. "Sandages. Food. We can pay."

The duergar examined the pin, then the fugitives. His gaze stopped on Sszindi.

"How many days of walking?"

"Two until Veyr," says Nym. "If the road is open."

"He is not."

The woman pointed to the gallery behind her. A recent landslide had blocked the main road. Huge blocks were piled up to the ceiling.

"Did you know? Zaelyra asked.

"I know what's going on in front of my door. For three days, men have been looking for a passage to the west. They pay for maps and ask questions about a white-haired drow."

Zaelyra felt all eyes on her.

"The House Guards?" asked Rhylor.

"Not in uniform. The duergar shrugged her shoulders. "Maybe mercenaries. Maybe people who want to sell you to mercenaries. In the depths, differences are expensive."

She accepted the pin in exchange for bandages, two bags of dried mushrooms and the use of a service gallery. Nym negotiated the passage, refusing to deliver Veyr's exact direction.

The duergar put the pin on a plate of the scale. She did not look at the coat of arms; she only wiped the dust under the weight of metal, then waited for the plague to stop osciling.

"It's made of money," says Zaelyra.

"I see it."

The duergar took out two bags. The first contained dry mushrooms, the second had taken moisture near a seam. She emptied a handful, spread the softened pieces and started weighing again with the rest.

"I won't make you pay for what is not kept," she says. "But you won't transport it either."

She replaced the lost handle with strips of clean cloth and placed a small bottle of alcohol near the bandages. Zaelyra looked at Sszindi. The old drow could walk, but her wound required a dry laundry before they sank into the water.

"That will be enough for today," says Sszindi. "I don't know about tomorrow."

"Me neither," Durgna replied. "I'm not selling tomorrow."

Pell divides the provisions into two smaller bags so that no one carries all the load. The girl followed her gestures, then checked the closure of her box. She didn't ask Durgna anything; she didn't ask her name.

"Do you trust this svirfneblin?" asked the duergar to Zaelyra.

"No."

Nym looked up.

"I trust him to defend what he knows. It's more useful."

The duergar approved with a small head movement. "Finally an answer that does not claim that confidence falls from the ceiling."

"What's your name? Zaelyra asked.

"Durgna."

"You've been holding this camp for a long time?"

"Since the toll stopped reporting."

She said that she had transported food between the forges and the relay, until the road was closed by a landslide. The weighing station had become a point of exchange: travelers left some food or metal, camp people gave them information or a night in the shelter. There was no fixed rate. Those who had nothing could work.

"What were you carrying? Zaelyra asked.

"Bags of mushroom flour, pump parts, sometimes tools. Nothing that we would tell in a song."

"And why did you stop?"

Durgna arranged the strips of fabric on the stall, aligning their edges without looking at Zaelyra. "The last caravan was driven by my brother. He had promised to return before the replacement. The road moved during the night."

"He died in the landslide?"

"I didn't find his body."

The duergar put a vial of alcohol in the middle of the provisions. She checked the cap, tightened it, then wrapped it in a piece of wool.

"So you're waiting for him to come back?" asked Pell.

"No. I'm waiting for the passage to be safe enough so that we can stop losing others. It's not the same thing."

She had kept the position because travelers would continue to try, whether they had a map or not. As long as she stayed there, they could at least learn where the ground was resoling.

"Don't you want to know if he took the other gallery? Zaelyra asked.

"Of course it is. But wanting to know doesn't make a stone less heavy."

Durgna gave Nym a small wooden plate engraved at the level of the landslide. "Come back when you have a more recent measurement than this one. Not before."

Nym accepted it seriously. "If I don't come back?"

"Someone else will do it. That's why the measures are written."

"Why stay here if the track is cut off?" asked Pell.

"Because it will be reopened."

"When?"

"When someone needs her to be."

Durgna indicated the landslide. An old level mark on the wall showed that the rock continued to move. Digging more risked furing the gallery.

"Did the men who ask questions offer to clear the passage? Zaelyra asked.

"They offered to pay."

"And you refused?"

"They wanted me to open the passage before checking who was on the other side. I told them I wasn't their miner."

Durgna did not seek to protect fugitives. She protected her camp and the people who depended on it. This was enough to make his refusal valuable.

While they were loading the bags, Zaelyra noticed a spool of copper-colored rope on the stall. The first strand was turquoise. She didn't mention it.

"Kethra has already sent someone," she whispered to Rhylor.

"Or someone wants us to believe that she did it."

"You say that every time you know the answer."

"No. I say that every time I don't know her."

They left the post through a low gallery. The duergar did not wish them good luck. She only told them not to stop near the white pebbles.

Behind them, a dry noise resounded in the room: someone had just put a new pebble on the scale.

Chapter 15 — The voice on the other side

The new passage led them to a series of round rooms, connected by narrow openings. The voice ran from one wall to the other. A word spoken at the entrance could come back from three directions, sometimes after several breaths.

"The Three Echoes," says Zaelyra.

"Not the same galleries," Nym corrected. "The same builders."

He put a finger on the streaks of the wall. The lines converged towards a slot, then separated again. Nym whispered a number. The room sent him back, distorted by the corners.

To compare the returns, Zaelyra threw her name towards the opening. The word came back to him after two breaths, lower and as if it had come from elsewhere.

"If you get lost, you don't follow the voices," he says. "We follow the draft."

They advanced in pairs, connected by a rope. Pell was walking near Zaelyra. Sszindi leaned on Rhylor. The girl always kept her box against her.

Zaelyra let Nym choose the crossroads. He didn't look at the walls; he listened to the air temperature on his cheek and the vibrations of the rope. In each room, he asked Pell to count to five. The delay between the voice and its return gave an idea of the size of the next room.

"If I count too fast, does it change anything?" asked Pell.

"Only if you count badly."

"Then I'll count slowly."

"Good idea."

In the second room, Zaelyra's name came back from behind them, then from the ceiling. Rhylor stretched the rope and the whole group stopped.

"It's not my voice," she says.

"No," replied Nym. "It's yours, sent back by another room."

He made them wait for the air to stabilize. The current came from the passage on the right, but the voice came back even clearer. Pell wanted to follow the sound. Zaelyra asked him to close his eyes and describe what he felt.

"Dust on the face."

"In which direction?"

He slowly turned his head towards the central passage. "There."

The exit was actually in the center, hidden behind a pillar. Nym gave him a small copper ball.

"You deserved it. Do not throw it into a well."

Pell slipped it into his pocket with a ceremonial seriousness.

At the third intersection, a call rose from the left gallery.

"To the help!"

The voice seemed close. Zaelyra signaled the group to stop. Rhylor raised his fist to forbid him to move forward.

The call came back from the right, weaker.

"To the help!"

Pell pulled on the rope. "Someone is stuck."

"Or someone wants us to believe him," says Rhylor.

Zaelyra closed her eyes and listened. The cry had regular breathing, without the break of a person who lacked air. A staging, perhaps. Or an agreed signal.

Nym slipped a stone into the air slot. She was sucked into the middle gallery.

"The current goes through there."

"The voice came from the left," said Pell.

"The voice comes from everywhere here," replied Nym. "The stone only lies once."

They took the central passage. Beyond, they found a small collapsed room and, under the debris, a wounded drow, a young adult with a face covered in dust. His leg was caught under a slab. It was from there that the call came, distorted and scattered through the rooms. He wore the badge of a Minor House, torn with a knife.

Rhylor squats next to him. "Who did that to you?"

"Those who left me there."

"Why?"

"I was carrying a message. They took it."

Zaelyra examined the slab. It could be lifted by two people, but the ceiling above was split. Nym pointed to the supports of the room.

"If we move the stone, everything can come down."

"If we don't move it, it won't come out," says Sszindi.

Rhylor gauged the cracks. "We can wedge the ceiling and pull the slab. But we won't have time if the pursuers approach."

The stranger had a smile without joy. "They have already passed."

Zaelyra looked at the narrow passage behind them, then at the natural beams of the room. She distributes the roles: Rhylor and Nym would install the wedges; Pell would hold the rope; she and the girl would clear the stone splinters. Sszindi would monitor the cracks and give the fallback signal.

No one asked why she was deciding. This time, she had explained what she saw and what she risked.

The stone moved with a finger. The ceiling moans. They stopped, waited, then shot together. The slab slid enough to free the leg.

The young drow shouted. The room ringed.

Nym put his arm around his shoulders. "What's your name?"

"Orl."

"What was in the message? Zaelyra asked.

Orl hesitated. "A list of families looking for Veyr. I had read it before I was taken the fold."

"The House?"

"Not only. He laid his eyes on the turquoise reel tied to Zaelyra's bag. "There was also the name of Kethra."

Rhylor stiffens.

"Does she work for those who pursue us? Zaelyra asked.

"I don't know. The message said she had sold a road. Not to whom."

A new voice resounded in the rooms, this time without appeal or plea. A brief whistle, repeated twice.

Nym got up. "They found the room."

Zaelyra took the rope and tied it around Orl's waist. "Then we will no longer follow the path that Kethra has opened for us."

Rhylor observed the gallery from which the whistle came. "We'll have to find another one."

Orl shook his head. "There is none."

Zaelyra put her hand on the striated wall. The builders had planned air ducts, resonance chambers and maintenance passages. There was always another line. The question was who had paid to erase it.

"There is one," she says. "But it's not on any of our maps."

Orl tried to laugh, but the pain took his breath away. "You say that as if a map could make a passage appear."

"No. It can prevent us from confusing a passage with a promise."

Zaelyra knelt next to him. The leg was swollen, but the blood had stopped flowing. She unties the sleeve of her coat to improvise a splint. The young drow tensed up when she touched his knee.

"If you lie to me about the severity of the injury, we will see it soon," she says.

"I'm not lying. I don't know if I can walk."

"This is an answer that helps us."

She fixed the two metal sticks on both sides of her leg. Sszindi gave him a strip of fabric, then pointed to the inside pocket of his coat.

"There's something there."

Orl wanted to stop him, too late. Nym took out a copper capsule, flattened on one side. It bore the same three-stroke mark as the Bazar roll.

"Is it a messenger seal? Zaelyra asked.

"It was. Orl looked down. "The message has been separated from its envelope."

"By those who left you under the stone?"

"I don't know if they left me. Maybe they thought I was dead."

"You don't know much."

"I know what I was asked to do. I don't know if those who asked are telling the truth."

Zaelyra returned the capsule to him. He pressed her against his palm without opening it.

"Why don't you tell us who you had to give it to?" asked Rhylor.

"Because I don't know if you are the ones waiting for it."

"We are not," says Zaelyra.

Orl looked at her, surprised by this straightforward answer.

"So we have at least one thing in common," she added. "We don't know yet who can betray us."

Nym blew through his nose. "Formulated like this, it doesn't make anyone want to travel with us."

"I'm not trying to convince. I want everyone to know where they are going."

Orl put away the capsule. He had not agreed to trust them. But he stopped hiding his pocket.

Chapter 16 — The duct of breaths

The streaks of the wall widened near the ground. Zaelyra followed their inclination to a sheet of rock that the moisture had detached from its frame. Behind, a conduit was sinking into the mountain.

The Air Duct



"It's going to be fair for Rhylor," says Nym.

"I heard," replied the master of arms.

Orl couldn't stand up without help. His injured leg dragged behind him, leaving a dark line on the dust. The whistles continued to run through the rooms. They didn't get closer; they were looking.

Rhylor pulled up the rope of his waist under his shoulders, without squeezing his chest. Nym would pull him by small distances from the front; Rhylor would push him behind, while Orl would advance with his valid leg.

"If we take the conduit, we won't be able to fight," says Rhylor.

"If we stay, they won't need to find us," Zaelyra replied.

Rhylor took off his package and passed it in front of him. He engaged at an angle, without his shield, his shoulders grating the stone. The duct led to a horizontal chimney, so low that they had to crawl. The stone was dry. The air current pulled west, then forked abruptly after a few dozen steps. Zaelyra advanced in the lead, one hand on the wall, the other holding the lamp closed.

The first bifurcation only allowed one person to pass at a time. Zaelyra slipped a piece of chalk on it, then waited for the current to carry it away. He left to the left.

"The right passage is a cul-de-sac," she says.

Nym shook his head. "Or he doesn't breathe. It can lead to a closed room."

"Do you prefer me to write down both possibilities?"

"I prefer that you write down what we saw. The possibilities, keep them in your head until we check them."

She scratched the word "cul-de-sac" and replaced it with "absence of current". The gesture was small, but she felt his resistance. Since childhood, she had learned that assurance inspired more confidence than hesitation. Nym taught him the opposite: a map could be useful precisely because it showed what was unknown.

The duct narrows again. Sszindi had to advance to the side, his wound pressed against the rock. Pell spoke to her in a low voice, not to distract her, but to give her a rhythm. Every time she stopped, he counted three breaths before asking her if she could leave.

Zaelyra wanted to give him simple orders. Pell had found a fairer way to help him.

Pell followed, then Sszindi, the girl, Nym and Orl. Rhylor closed the march. The sound of the whistles became weaker, before turning into a dull rumble.

The conduit had just collapsed behind them.

They found themselves in complete darkness. The girl stifled a scream. Zaelyra turned on the hooded lamp. A fine dust covered everyone's hair.

The light revealed a collapsed stone elbow behind them. The passage they had just crawled through was now filled with blocks, with no interstice wide enough to let a hand pass. Zaelyra counted the lamps. Two worked; the third was just a split box.

"How long before the air runs out?" asked Pell.

"There is no shortage," replied Nym. "It circulates. For now."

He took the strip of oiled paper he had left and hung it from the crack in the vault. She rose slightly to the west.

"As long as it moves, we have a path that breathes."

Zaelyra divided the rope into two sections. One would remain attached to the group; the other would be used to probe each passage. She entrusted Pell with the task of keeping the first tense without shooting. To the girl, she gave the split lamp, which could still illuminate the ground if it was held tilted.

The girl examined the flame and then turned the case a quarter turn. The draft made her resume.

"Did you know she could hold? Zaelyra asked.

The girl shrugged her shoulders. She didn't pretend to know. She had tried.

Zaelyra noticed the crack, the collapse and the direction of the breath. A map could record the road we had lost as well as the one we followed. She added the approximate date and the number of people present, then stopped before writing their names.

"Is anyone hurt?"

"Only my pride," says Rhylor.

Nym coughed. "So it's less serious than most injuries."

A crack crossed the vault. The duct in front of them went up, but its end was invisible.

Zaelyra consulted the pocket compass. The needle turned on itself, disturbed by the ore. She put it away. The map she carried had never described this place. For the first time, she could not correct her route by referring to a previous route.

"We will follow the air," she says. "Nym, you check the forks. Rhylor, you stay close enough for me to hear you. Pell, if the rope is stretched twice, you stop. Once, you move forward."

"What if she tenses up three times?" asked Pell.

"You ask why."

They advanced to the touch. The duct often split, but the air always headed west. Zaelyra marked each crossroads with a small line of chalk. At one of them, she found two others, old, almost erased.

At the third bifurcation, the current reversed. Zaelyra's lamp flickered and the dust returned to her face. Nym signaled him to stop.

"There is a call of air behind us."

"The duct collapsed."

"He collapsed on one side. The air passes through a crack."

Rhylor turned back to the elbow and put his ear against the rock. On the other side, something was hitting at regular intervals. Three shots, a pause, then a fourth.

"It's not a voice," says Zaelyra.

"No. Someone may be knocking to tell us something."

They gave up the rhythm once and waited. Zaelyra repeated it. On the other side, silence continued.

"We can't come back," says Rhylor.

"I know. Zaelyra looked at the two lines of chalk she had picked up earlier. They did not teach him who had traced them or if they were related to the blows. She noted them separately, without giving them meaning.

Then she added to her map the place where the blows had resounded, without transforming them into a sign or giving them a name.

"These features are old," she says. "Do you recognize the hand?"

"No. I recognize the care."

He didn't add anything, but Zaelyra noticed that he followed the features as we follow the trace of a known person.

An hour later, the duct opened onto a high cave. Pale mushrooms grew at the foot of stone columns. In the distance, a stream of bluish light marked the exit of a crevasse.

Nym inhaled deeply. "We are under the road to Veyr."

"How long to reach it? Zaelyra asked.

"If the crevasse is practicable, half a day."

"What if she's not?"

"A whole day to find out why."

Pell laughed, then covered his mouth as if he had just made a mistake. The sound, small and clear, was lost in the cave without returning.

Zaelyra marked the exit on her map. She has not yet traced the road. She simply wrote: **air to the west; passage possible; check before driving other people there.**

She followed the survey with her finger until the next bifurcation, without connecting the duct to the Relay. They had a direction to check, not an itinerary yet.

Chapter 17 — Rhylor's debt

After a stop in the cave, they reached the crevasse. It was practicable for a good walker, but not for Sszindi. Orl advanced with small steps, supported by Rhylor, without putting all his weight on his injured leg. A narrow cornice ran along the side of a chasm where the water fell in fine rain. He would not cross it without support. Rhylor stretched Kethra's rope along the cornice and passed a loop under Orl's shoulders, wide enough not to compress his chest. For Sszindi, he made a harness with the straps of his own bag.

"You don't have to keep this rope," he told Zaelyra.

"She holds."

"This is how debts begin."

They crossed one by one. Halfway through, the girl slipped. The rope tensed, and Zaelyra tied against the wall. Rhylor caught up with her before she rocked. When they reached the other side, he put the rope on the ground as if it had offended him.

Crossing the Crevasse



"Do you hate her because she comes from Kethra? Zaelyra asked.

"I hate what it can cost us."

"Then tell me what you know."

Rhylor sat on a stone, his shoulders bent. For the first time since they left, he looked old.

"My son was called Dhal. He worked at the relays. He disappeared during an expedition eight years ago. The House said he died in a landslide."

"You didn't believe it."

"I believed what allowed me to stay."

He took out of his tunic a copper plate split in half. The open circle was engraved on it. On one edge, three close-to-head notches preceded a space, then a last notch.

"It was his. I found her on the way to Veyr."

"Why didn't you ever tell me?"

"Because I didn't know if he had chosen to leave or if someone had sent him. If I had asked the question, the House should have answered. And if she had answered, I should have acted."

Zaelyra looked at the plate. "That's why you recognize the brands."

"Yes."

"And the open circle?"

"It wasn't an official symbol. Dhal and two other guides used it to signal a safe stop. I took it back on my plate, without saying where the brand came from."

He turned the metal between his fingers.

"I let you believe that the sign belonged to an old team. I didn't lie about the team. I lied about why I knew her."

Anger came, but she was not alone. Zaelyra understood the desire he had had to keep part of the story safe, as she had hidden the mark in her sleeve.

"You're telling me that now because we're going to Veyr."

"I'm telling you because I don't want you to move forward on a map of which I deleted half."

"Dhal can be there?"

"He may be dead. He may have fled. He may have chosen not to come back. Rhylor put away the plate. "I want to know which of these things is true. But I will not make his disappearance a reason to put others in danger."

Rhylor was silent for a moment. The drizzle hit the rock around them, strong enough to cover the distant noises.

"The last day I saw him, he asked me if a road could belong to those who travel it. I replied that it belonged to those who kept it."

"He didn't agree?"

"He said that's why he wanted to learn to draw. Rhylor laughed without joy. "I thought he wanted to get out of arms. Above all, he wanted no one to be able to claim that a passage did not exist."

Rhylor took out of his pocket a wooden washer, smooth on one side and covered with marks on the other. Dhal had engraved arches, stairs and doors, too small to serve as a map, too precise to be a game.

"Did he do that during the exercises? Zaelyra asked.

"When I punished him for asking too many questions. I thought he was drawing the positions of his opponents."

"And did you understand?"

"After his disappearance."

He handed her the puck. A series of stitches followed the border, with a space left empty between two groups.

"He marked the places where he was wrong," says Rhylor. "He said that a mistake that you recognize only traps once."

Zaelyra looked at the puck. "You've kept it all these years."

"I didn't know what to do with it."

"You could give it back to him."

"If I find him."

"What if you can't find him?"

Rhylor closed Zaelyra's fingers on the wood. "Then you'll keep it until someone can read it."

She didn't take the puck right away. She knew what he was asking of her: not to look for Dhal at any price, but to let his work survive his absence.

"I will note it as an entrusted object, not as proof that it is alive."

"That's fine with me."

Zaelyra slipped the puck into the inside pocket of her case, separated from the roadmaps.

She thought of the cracked plate he had just put away. "You could have asked him what he meant."

"Yes."

"Do you think he resented you?"

"I think he had better things to do than blame me."

He took the rope back. "This is what is difficult to accept."

She understood that he was not looking for consolation. He tried to name the part of his fault that belonged to him, without inventing the rest.

Zaelyra handed him the rope. "So we keep it until it doesn't last anymore. After that, we will decide what we owe him."

Rhylor took it. "It's a bad way to negotiate."

"I learn from the best."

He had a brief smile, almost surprised.

They took the road again. Zaelyra wrote Dhal's name in the margin of her map, without linking it to a date or destination.

She did not yet have enough information to draw a line.

Chapter 18 — The name we don't give

Orl could walk again, but still leaned on Rhylor as soon as the ground became irregular. He had torn the torn badge from his coat; only the pale tattoo of an old House remained on his wrist, scratched to the point of blood. He always refused to say who he had worked for.

"Do you want us to take you to Veyr without knowing who is looking for you? Nym asked.

"I want to be taken to the place where I promised to bring the message."

"Your message has been taken," says Zaelyra.

"A part."

"I can no longer give them the list. I can still tell them that she was intercepted."

They were walking along an underground lake. Luminescent algae drew curves on the water. Below the surface, blind fish gathered near the rocks.

Orl ends up telling that he had worked as a copyist for a merchant branch. He had been instructed to deliver to Veyr a list of families seeking to leave the city. According to the instructions received, the fold was to help offer them a safe passage. Orl did not know who had made this commitment, and if it would be held. Strangers had intercepted him.

"Do you know who paid for this list?" asked Rhylor.

"No."

"Do you know why Kethra was appointed?"

"She sold a road to the highest bidder. The list said that. She didn't say who paid."

Nym shook his head. "A written accusation is not proof."

"That's what my sister said," Zaelyra replied.

"So your sister and I agree on something. It's worrying."

The remark pulled an amused breath from Pell. Even Sszindi smiled, then grimaced when his wound shot.

They stopped to redo his bandage. The old drow asked Zaelyra if Veyr Waystation was really a refuge.

"It's an old station," she replied. "I don't know who lives there now."

"So you can't promise that we will be welcomed there."

"No."

"But you lead us there anyway."

"This is the road we have."

Sszindi nodded. "It's better than a promise."

Further on, the shore narrowed and forced them to walk on a cornice. A small boat was moored under a ledge. On board, a svirfneblin woman was lifting a net. She saw Nym, then looked at the group.

"You come back with trouble," she says.

"I'm coming back with people," he replied.

"It's often the same thing."

The woman was called Rilla. She had known Nym for years, but she didn't give him a hug. Instead, she checked her hands and bag, then made sure that no guard had followed them.

"I didn't ask you to bring them."

"I'm not asking you to keep them. Just to show us the north shore of the lake."

"What if the House follows?"

Nym didn't answer right away. "I'll take my way, not yours."

Rilla ends up entrusting them with his flat boat and his two oars to run along the north shore to Veyr. They tied it to the ring of the relay; a conveyor would bring it back to the lake on occasion. She also gave them a bag of food, but refused to board. Before they left, she held Nym by the wrist.

"The bag comes from our reserve," she says. "This is not a donation. You will pay it back when you can."

"I know."

"Not mine. To the next group that will run out of food."

Nym nodded. He knew the rule: help had to go to the community, not to the person who had granted it.

Rilla turned to Zaelyra. "If you stay north of the lake, you will reach Veyr without going through the weighing station. But the bank collapses near the luminous algae. Do not put your foot on the blue stones."

"Why don't you come with us? Zaelyra asked.

"Because I keep the nets."

"There are other fishermen."

"There were some. They left six months ago."

Rilla let go of Nym's wrist. His decision was nothing like a refusal to help them. She simply kept the only place where her presence still mattered.

Before letting them go, Rilla asked Nym to accompany her to the end of the pontoon. She waited for the others to be out of reach.

"You always bring someone back when you come back," she says.

"Not always."

"Last time, you had a man with a burnt hand. Before him, two children. Now you have a whole family who doesn't know if they can believe you."

"They don't have to believe me. They have to check the road."

Rilla looked at him with the patience of a person who had already heard him defend himself. "You want the world to work like a map: everyone checks their passage, then no one owes anyone anything."

"I want us to be able to refuse."

"So learn to ask before bringing people to my door."

Nym looked down. "I should have sent you a signal."

"Yes."

"I didn't know if you were still here."

"You didn't need to know. You needed to let me choose."

He did not find an answer. Rilla handed him the shortest oar, whose handle had been repaired by a strip of red leather.

"This one shoots to the left. Correct before the elbow."

"You could have replaced her."

"It works. And I kept the broken piece. If I forget, I will do the same repair again."

Nym took the row. Rilla did not kiss him and did not wish him to come back. She remained on the pontoon until the boat passed under the vault.

Zaelyra offered him a ration of dried mushrooms taken from their provisions. Rilla pushed her away.

"Keep it. Your injured will need it more."

"Then take at least half of our provisions."

"I don't take half a debt."

Nym put the bag lent by Rilla intact, then opened one of theirs. He made two piles, one for the group, the other for Rilla.

"This comes from our provisions," he said. "The bag of the community remains due to the next travelers."

Rilla sighed, but she took her part.

"You're learning."

"Slowly."

"You can't save all those who get lost."

"I know."

"No. You know the words. It's not the same."

Nym looked down. He promised nothing.

On the boat, Zaelyra asked him if Rilla was his family.

"It's someone who has the right to say no to me."

"Is that an answer?"

"It's the only one that matters."

The lake carried them under a pale stone vault. Above, a chalk mark signaled the passage of a patrol. She was fresh.

Someone knew their route.

Chapter 19 — Veyr Waystation

The Relais de Veyr appeared at the turn of a canyon, built on a green rock wall. Its exterior doors were open, but planks blocked the windows. A watchtower leaned towards the void. The Xil'Nrae coat of arms had been removed from the facade; only a lighter rectangle remained.

They had moored the boat to the ring of the relay, then had hidden it under a recess on the shore, out of sight from the tower. The chalk mark seen above the lake came back to their mind: someone may have followed their path until then. But going back would expose the injured as much as knocking on the door.

Zaelyra recognized the old map station. She didn't recognize what she had become.

Veyr Waystation



When she was a child, her father took her to the canyon to show her the coat of arms of the House above the door. He had told her that every relay was a promise: a lit lantern meant that someone had kept the road passable.

Now, only a pale mark remained on the facade. The lanterns in the tower were off.

"Have you ever been there? Nym asked.

"Once."

"Did you hope to find the station as you left it?"

"I don't know how I hoped."

Nym nodded his head. "This is already a more useful answer than most."

Nym knocked three times, waited, then knocked once. A hatch opened above the door.

"Who's coming?" asked a voice.

"A cartographer who no longer has a map."

"This is a bad answer."

"So open for a better one."

The door unlocked. A duergar in a green coat signaled them to enter. Her name was Brakka, guardian of the relay, and knew the name of Nym. She examined the group without introducing herself further.

Once the door closed behind them, Zaelyra whispered: "The rhythm you just hit... is the one we heard in the conduit."

"An old shelter call, used in some relays. He does not give a name or guarantee."

"Do you think that's what the person behind the rock was trying to do?"

Nym shook his head. "It's possible. We answered, but nothing followed. I don't know if anyone was really trying to talk to us."

"The injured woman goes to the infirmary. The others stay in the courtyard until we know who accompanies you."

"There are six of us," says Zaelyra.

"I count seven."

Orl was the seventh. He had stood away, his face down. Zaelyra had counted the six for which she accepted responsibility. Orl walked with them, but had not yet revealed the whole reason for his trip to Veyr.

Brakka recognized him. "You had to arrive alone."

"The road has changed."

"The roads are changing. The agreements, no."

Brakka brought in Sszindi and Pell. The girl stayed close to Zaelyra. She always refused to say her name.

Brakka made them leave the weapons in a closet at the entrance. Rhylor protested, but she put her hand on the axe hanging from her belt.

"Here, no one points a blade at someone who sleeps."

"What if someone comes in with a blade?"

"Then we'll have time to wake up."

She did not speak like a sure guardian of her walls. She spoke like someone who had already seen these walls give way. Rhylor eventually put down his two daggers, but kept Dhal's plate around his neck.

Brakka led Zaelyra to the inner courtyard. A cistern collected the water that flowed from the canyon. The well was no longer fed, and the inhabitants rationed each tucket. In the old map room, beds had been installed on the tables. Chalk marks indicated the guard towers, reserves and areas that should not be used.

"Why keep this place if you lack everything? Zaelyra asked.

"Because people keep coming."

"And when you can no longer feed them?"

"So they will choose to leave or help us find something else."

Brakka pointed to the empty register. "We don't write down the names. Names travel faster than people."

Zaelyra looked at the improvised beds. She understood that the absence of a register was not a comfort rule. It was a way to make each inhabitant more difficult to find, even at the cost of never knowing how many they were.

The relay housed a dozen people: two drows families, a duergar merchant, three svirfneblins and a former soldier whose armor had been repainted. They were not a community. They only shared a roof, because no one had offered them better.

"How long can we stay? Zaelyra asked.

"It depends on what you bring."

"maps, arms and no certainty."

Brakka had a sneer. "The arms, I take. I check the maps. Certainties, keep them. They take up space."

Zaelyra showed him the statement of the official gallery. Brakka didn't touch him.

"This road is wrong."

"It is incomplete."

"Here, it's the same."

Nym intervened. "She led us here."

"So she was lucky."

"Or she looked where she put her feet."

Brakka observed Zaelyra. "What do you want?"

"A night for the wounded. Then, we will go back to the Marches de Lune."

"There are not enough provisions for a caravan."

"We are not a caravan."

"Not yet."

The word remained in suspense between them.

In the courtyard, a child brought water to Sszindi. Another handed a piece of bread to Pell. The girl observed the scene as if kindness were a foreign language of which she recognized some sounds.

Zaelyra understood why the relay had been kept despite the abandonment of the road. He wasn't sure. It was simply a place where you could choose not to close the door.

In the map room, Brakka had stopped in front of an alcove whose stone had been freshly plugged. She put her fingers on the mortar, without touching it at all.

"What was there? Zaelyra asked.

"A register."

"Did you destroy it?"

"No. I moved it."

Brakka took a lamp and led it behind a row of beds. Under a removable slab, an iron box slept in a niche. She opened it with a key under her shirt. Inside, leather sheets were rolled around small copper plates. Some had dates, others marked in passage.

Zaelyra recognized the writing on the first plate. Fine, leaning to the right, with the "y" loop almost closed. His father had drawn the same letters in his first statements.

"Did he work here?"

"He helped to restore the relay, before you were born. He convinced the Houses to pay for maps that would not bear their coats of arms. Brakka half closed the box. "He said that a road was easier to keep open when no one could claim to own it."

Zaelyra touched the air above the plate. "My mother told me that he was drawing for the House."

"He also drew for those who could not pay. That's why he stopped coming."

"Is he dead?"

"I don't know. He left Veyr one morning, alone. He left me the key and asked me never to keep a register of the living. I didn't know if it was an instruction or a goodbye."

Brakka was not trying to give herself importance. His voice kept the dryness of a person who had repeated these facts to no one, precisely because she did not get any answer.

"Why show it to me? Zaelyra asked.

"Because you brought a map, not a coat of arms. I wanted to know if you understood the difference."

Zaelyra looked at the plates. "Do these marks indicate who has passed?"

"Only the groups that asked to remember their passage. The others remained nameless."

"And those who asked?"

"Some have come back. Some sent a message. For the others, the register does not claim anything."

Brakka showed him a plate split in half. Three lines were engraved on it, then covered with a deep notch.

"Is this Dhal's brand? Zaelyra asked.

"It's a brand that he copied. He never registered his own."

Rhylor had joined the entrance to the alcove. He did not advance.

"Did you see him? He asked.

"Once. He asked me if the north door could be opened without alerting the tower. I told her that she could, but that the passage behind was unstable."

"When?"

"It was eight years before his disappearance. He didn't come back to tell me if he had taken this door."

Rhylor's hand rested on his split plate. He didn't ask why Brakka hadn't spoken earlier. Perhaps he already knew that late answers had their reasons, even when they were not enough.

They waited for Brakka to leave them alone in the corridor. Rhylor sat at the foot of a column and put the plate on his knee. His thumb followed the notches as if he was checking the number.

"I taught Dhal to fight before teaching him to read a road," he says.

"Do you regret it?"

"I regret having believed that order could replace an explanation. He asked why some doors had to stay closed. I told him that a guard did not choose which ones."

"He chose anyway."

"Yes."

Rhylor brought the plate back into his palm. "The last time we spoke, he asked me if I would let him go if the House ordered him to stay. I said I wouldn't let him throw himself into the dark to prove he was free."

"You wanted to protect him."

"I wanted him to choose what I would have chosen."

The difference left them speechless. In the courtyard, someone moved a box; the wood rubbed on the stone and the noise resounded for a long time.

Zaelyra took out her notebook. She drew the plate on the ladder, marking the place where the metal had broken. She did not add the word "dead" or the word "disappeared". She only wrote: **found on the road to Veyr; date unknown; testimony of Rhylor.**

"You're not going to write what you think? He asked.

"I can believe it without engraving it on the map."

"It's a good distinction."

"Did I learn it from you?"

"No. Of your refusal to listen to my answers."

This time, his smile was real, although brief.

Zaelyra studied her father's traits, then those left by Dhal. They did not form an itinerary. These were the traces of two people who preferred to leave a possibility rather than a certainty.

"Do you keep these plates here, even if the relay falls? She asked.

"I'm taking them if I leave."

"What if you can't?"

"Then they will stay. A brand is not a life."

Zaelyra closed the box carefully. Her father's name had just joined that of Dhal in the margins of her map, but she had no more line to draw.

"Is there a corridor under the cistern? She asked.

Brakka stared at her. "Who told you that?"

"Nobody. The tower leans to the side of the canyon, but the foundations do not shoot in the same direction. There must be a drainage gallery."

Brakka had a brief smile. "Your father would have asked the same question."

"Then there is one."

"There was one. If it is still open, it leads to a narrow exit under the wall. Not on a road."

"An exit is enough to check."

"An exit is also enough to let someone in."

"You're right."

Brakka seemed to expect an argument. Zaelyra instead handed him her map.

"Show me where it opens. We will rate it as dangerous until we have inspected it together."

The duergar took the parchment. "That's a way to start."

Brakka granted them the night, on one condition: no name would be entered in the register. Even that of Zaelyra.

She accepted.

Above the relay, the watchtower creaked in the draft. In the distance, a burst of light signaled that we had seen the door open.

Chapter 20 — The sold road

The night at the Relais de Veyr was not silent. Steps went up and down the stairs, the children cried in their sleep, and Brakka's guards changed posts every two hours.

Zaelyra slept near the box of maps. She woke up when Nym put a hand on her shoulder.

She had dreamed of a gallery closing behind her, but the sound that had pulled her out of sleep came from a bell hanging at the entrance. Only one ring: someone was approaching without hiding.

In the courtyard, the inhabitants had already divided. The children joined the inner staircase. The adults took the pills, the ropes and the few weapons left in the closet.

Alarm at the Waystation



Brakka seemed to know what was going to happen. She didn't ask who Zaelyra was; she asked which door they should keep.

"The outside door," replied Rhylor. "And the exit under the cistern."

"Do you have a map?"

"Not a complete map."

"So don't give me a fake one. Just tell me what's not on it."

Zaelyra showed him the old drain pipe and the passage under the tower. Brakka chose three positions, then sent a child to warn the families not to gather near the well.

"The lights of the canyon have changed."

She joined the tower. Three lanterns shone on the low road, then two on the upper road. A patrol code. Rhylor identified them before her.

"They're closing the exits."

"How much?" asked Brakka.

"Enough that we don't want to count," he says.

The outside door resounded with a single blow.

A voice rose on the other side. "We are looking for a fugitive from the Xil'Nrae House and a svirfneblin cartographer. Let them out. The relay will not be worried."

Brakka looked at Zaelyra. "Your decision."

"They have already decided that I was the only person here."

"This is often the beginning of a miscalculation," Brakka replied.

The door received a second blow.

Kethra then came out of the shadow of the inner passage. His copper coat was torn at the shoulder. She had a cut on her forehead.

"You were here since we arrived? Zaelyra asked.

"I entered through the old drain after you. I stayed in the conduit. I didn't want the broker to enter the yard with me."

"And you came out?"

"Before dawn, by the exit under the cistern. It opens to the east. I'm coming back; the stone opened my forehead and tore my coat."

Rhylor raised his blade. "You brought them here."

"I sold a road. Not the relay."

"To whom? Zaelyra asked.

Kethra did not answer.

"At home?"

"I had a debt. They offered to delete it against information. I gave them the wrong way."

"When did you realize that their offer didn't hold? Zaelyra asked.

"When they stopped talking about debt and started talking about you."

Kethra had tried to resume the negotiation. She had proposed another map, a foreman's name, even one of her own hiding places. The broker had refused everything. He no longer wanted an itinerary; he wanted confirmation that the young drow who carried the box had reached Veyr.

"You could not have confirmed anything to them."

"Yes."

"Then why did you do it?"

"Because I thought a limited response would remain limited. I told them that I had seen a drow with maps. I didn't give your hair color, your name or Nym's."

"But you've given enough."

"Yes."

She said that she had left the relay before the lights went up and walked alone to the first post. She could have come back to warn Brakka. Instead, she had waited for the broker to confirm the delivery of the Saira loop. He had never promised to return it; only to prove that he had it.

"And when did you realize that you had been led?" asked Rhylor.

"When I saw the lanterns of the canyon."

"You still waited."

"Yes."

Kethra supported his gaze. "I'm not going to fix the story to make it less cowardly."

Zaelyra did not answer him. She did not want her anger to become a simpler condemnation than the facts.

"What was the real road?" asked Brakka.

"I didn't know her."

"You were negotiating a passage that you didn't know?"

"I was negotiating a map that I knew was wrong. It's not the same."

"It is for those who have been prosecuted."

Kethra looked down. The movement was too small to be a shame, but enough to show that she had heard.

"The debt was not mine alone," she says. "They had taken someone from my network. I thought information would regain his freedom. They kept the debt and took the route."

"You could have given them something else," says Zaelyra.

"Yes."

"You could have warned us."

"Yes."

She did not offer an excuse. In the sound of the door, his silence had more weight than a well-arranged story.

"And they have followed us so far."

"They already had your names. I sold them the route you didn't take. Someone else gave them Veyr."

The door shook under a third blow. One of the boards split.

Brakka distributes the defenders: two to the killers, three behind the inner door, one by the tank. She did not place anyone on the exposed ramparts.

"Why not take the tower? Zaelyra asked.

"She leans. If the enemy hits her, she will fall on us."

"It could give us a better view."

"A better view is worth nothing if it buries us."

Zaelyra had already heard Rhylor say almost the same thing about an over-assured plan. She understood that these people did not need her to give them courage. They needed her to share the real risks.

"You could have told us," says Zaelyra.

"I didn't know they had a second informant."

"Or you didn't want to lose the price of your market."

Kethra accepted the sentence without protesting. "It's possible."

Brakka went down to the cistern with two guards. The families were gathered in the courtyard. Some wanted to stay; others refused to be drawn into a war that was not theirs.

Zaelyra opened the box of maps. "The exit is too narrow for everyone at the same time. We let the children, the injured and those who know the route pass. The others follow through the west door while Brakka holds the entrance."

"If we do that, the relay will fall," says Rhylor.

"If they come in, he falls too."

Rhylor looked at the map, then Zaelyra. "I'm staying with Brakka."

"No. We stay together."

"The cistern is too narrow. If I come, I slow down the others."

He didn't try to protect her. He had just told him what he chose.

Zaelyra felt his refusal rise, then let him fall back. She gave him the spool of rope.

"Then you join me through the west exit. To the next light."

"I don't promise what I can't guarantee."

"I know."

The girl pulled Zaelyra by the sleeve and showed her a small shot that she had hidden in her box. A drain pipe connected the tank to the throat. The exit was drawn there, but it ended at the edge of a ravine.

"Did you know she existed? Zaelyra asked.

The girl shook her head. Then she took the chalk and drew a small mark at the end of the line: an open circle.

Kethra approached the plan. "I'm going to open the valve under the tank. The exit will not remain free on its own."

"You're not coming? Zaelyra asked.

"Not as long as Brakka needs me."

Rhylor saw the drawing. His face emptied of all color.

"Dhal," he breathed.

He detached the split plate from under his collar and handed it to Zaelyra.

"Take it. If you find another brand of Dhal, you can compare."

"You just told me that you want to know if he is alive."

"Presely. I can't keep both doors."

The door of the relay was given way.

Brakka shouted to hold the passage. Zaelyra took the girl's hand and followed Nym to the cistern. Behind her, Rhylor was walking away towards the west door, Kethra's rope on her shoulder.

The group was separating at the very moment when it had begun to become a community.

And somewhere under the relay, Dhal's map indicated an exit that no one had yet dared to borrow.

Chapter 21 — Under the cistern

The emptying pipe forced Zaelyra to move forward bent, one hand on the wall and the other tight around the girl's. The water rose to their ankles. Each step raised a smell of metal and cold earth.

Escape through the Drain



Nym was walking in front. Behind came Pell and Sszindi, then Orl, who leaned on a stick cut into a slat of the relay.

"How long before the throat? Zaelyra asked.

"If the girl's map is right, ten minutes. If it is not, we will know when the water rises."

"You have a comforting way of guiding people."

"I prefer a truth that worries to a promise that drons."

The passage was divided in two. On the right wall, someone had engraved the open circle, then an almost erased arrow. Zaelyra followed her with her finger.

The water came from the north, in irregular puffs. Nym tasted a drop and spit it out.

"Tistern water. She was released upstream."

"They're trying to drown us?" asked Pell.

"Kethra said she would open the valve. It's probably the drain. But I can't promise you that the water won't go up any further."

Zaelyra marked the height of the water with a line on the wall. She entrusted Pell with the task of observing the level and Orl with counting the breaths between each wave. If the water rose faster than the current, they would turn around towards the dry niche.

"What if the niche is submerged? Orl asked.

"Then we'll find the next opening."

"You say that as if it necessarily exists."

"No. I say that because we have to start by looking for her."

Zaelyra felt in her answer the same empty assurance that she had sometimes used in Menzoberranzan. She continued: "I don't know if it exists. If the level goes up to the red line, we change route."

Pell nodded. He would watch the red line.

"Is this Dhal's brand?"

The girl nodded her head.

"Did you know him?"

She hesitated, then raised two fingers and folded them against each other. A small size. Two people walking side by side.

"Did he accompany you?"

The girl shook her head. She took out of her box a strip of leather covered with lines. A name was engraved on it, in regular writing: **Tazri**.

"Is that your name? Zaelyra asked.

Tazri nodded.

"And Dhal taught you the marks?"

She showed the drawing of the driving. Then put two fingers on his chest and turned them to the west.

Nym examined the engraving. "He left a second arrow. She passes behind the cistern."

At the same moment, a dull rumble made the water vibrate. The driving bowed. A black wave deled down the conduit from the back.

" Run! Zaelyra shouted.

They rushed towards the engraved arrow. Nym pulled on a rusty ring; a plate pivoted into the wall and revealed a dry niche. The fugitives piled up there as the water filled the passage. Zaelyra held Tazri against her. A board torn by the current hit the entrance and blocked it in half.

They waited for the flow to go down.

Meanwhile, Zaelyra counted the people in a low voice. Sszindi, Pell, Orl, Nym, Tazri and her. Six. She checked the gourds, the rope, the two lamps and the care kit. The water had taken one of the pocket maps, but not the box.

"Can we leave?" asked Sszindi.

"We can walk. I don't know yet if the gallery holds."

"It's enough for now."

Tazri wiped the lid of his box with his sleeve. She had blood under her nail, without Zaelyra knowing if it was hers or someone else's. The girl noticed his gaze and closed her hand.

Zaelyra didn't ask him to open it.

Sszindi put his back against the wall. "This passage has closed behind us."

"It filled with water," says Nym. "The pressure will go down."

"You're sure?"

"No."

Zaelyra looked at the drowned conduit. Part of her wanted to leave right away, before the level changed again. Another wanted to stay long enough to understand the water push and not lead the families into a second trap.

"We will wait for three measures," she said. "Pell, you're marking the level now. Then in ten breaths, then in twenty. If the water continues to rise, we will exit through the right passage, even if we have to leave the maps."

"What if it goes down?" asked Pell.

"Then we will wait for another measure."

Pell drew a line on the stone. He did not ask what would happen if he forgot to count. He counted out loud, slowly, and the others settled their breathing on his.

At the second mark, the water had dropped by a finger. At the third, she had stabilized. Nym examined the debris that blocked the exit.

"The flow comes from a valve. This is probably the one Kethra was supposed to open, but we don't know how much water remains upstream or if the closure is still accessible."

"Can we close it?" asked Rhylor.

"Not from here. And we don't know if it will reopen."

Zaelyra noted the time, the three measures and the uncertainty. She had learned that a group could accept danger if they were told exactly what they knew about them.

"Did the relay give way?" asked Pell.

No one answered.

When the water withdrew, she left behind a piece of black cloth hanging on the threshold. A fragment of the House guard uniform.

"They came in," says Orl.

Zaelyra looked at the plan. The exit indicated by Tazri opened at the edge of a ravine, exactly as on the map. She could lead the survivors to the east, away from the pursuers. The relay was in the west.

Nym put a finger on the other branch. "There may be an old service gallery."

"Maybe?"

"The plan doesn't talk about it. But the draft comes from there."

Zaelyra listened. A regular breath passed behind the wall, mixed with a weaker sound: three strokes spaced, then a fourth.

She took out of her pocket Rhylor's copper plate, which he had entrusted to her before separating. On the reverse, the notches of the plate associated with Dhal took up the same count: three, a break, then one.

Three blows. A break. One last.

The rhythm could be the old shelter call that Nym had talked about. The notches showed that Dhal knew the same account; they did not reveal who was striking behind the rock, nor if this signal was intended for him.

Chapter 22 — The guide's signal

Zaelyra hit the wall with the handle of her dagger. Three shots, a pause, then a fourth.

The Guide's Signal



They waited.

The signal came back, closer this time.

Nym stuck his ear against the stone, then straightened up. "It's not a noise from the gallery. It passes through a metal duct."

"Does anyone answer us? OrI asked.

"Someone, or the water pressure."

Zaelyra knocked again. Three strokes, one pause, only one. The answer came twice, at equal intervals.

"It doesn't look like a person," says Pell.

"Or to a person who matters," replied Nym.

They looked for a conduit behind the stones until Tazri discovered a small copper tube, clogged with mud. The blows traveled there more easily than in the rock. The system had to connect the tanks teams to the relay.

"So someone heard it there," says Zaelyra.

"Maybe. Nym cleaned the tube. "But we don't know who, or if the passage is still connected."

Zaelyra drew a question mark on the map. She wanted to write "Rhylor", but the name would have turned hope into proof.

Nym found a stone shutter hidden under the mud. He opened it with the help of OR. Beyond, a gallery descended to a pocket of dry rock. The ceiling was low, but the walls had guiding lines: open circles engraved at hand height.

"This passage was built for the relay teams," says Zaelyra.

"Or for those who wanted them to come back," replied Nym.

The corridor leads to an alcove pierced with a narrow slot. Zaelyra looked through the opening. She saw part of the relay courtyard, but not the main door. Shadows ran between the buildings. A cry rose, immediately muffled.

Nym touched his arm. "You can't know who's still there."

"I know who is not with us."

"Rhylor chose to stay."

"I can't decide that he chose to die."

The sentence came out faster than she would have liked. She was also afraid of finding Rhylor dead than of discovering that he had chosen not to leave with them. The two possibilities were different, but neither belonged to him.

Nym does not contradict her. "So we will look for a passage that allows us to return without condemning those who have already left."

"You said I didn't put people before the plan."

"I still say that you don't always know how to do both. But you try to ask before you decide. This is an improvement."

"You could try to congratulate people without reminding them of their faults."

"I could."

He didn't do it.

Zaelyra tried to look at the court like a map. Two guards held the north entrance. A lantern went out near the well. The attackers had found the west door; they had not yet taken the central building.

"We can open the passage from the inside," she says. "If the families reach this alcove, they will leave without crossing the courtyard."

"What if he is kept? Orl asked.

"So we will warn them before they commit to it."

Nym sighed. "You still don't know how to put people before the plan."

"I'm trying to do both."

Tazri indicated a second series of more recent traits. They went up to a trapdoor hidden under an empty tank. Zaelyra understood that they could reach the courtyard from behind, but that they would have to cross a room below.

Nym examined the hatch without touching it. "It opens upwards. If someone has put weight on it, we will not be able to move it from here."

Tazri took out a small corner of wood from his box. She slipped it into the groove, then turned it. A click was heard above them.

"Have you already taken this passage? Zaelyra asked.

Tazri shook his head. She had only found the mechanism on one of her drawings.

"So we don't know if the room is free," says Orl.

"No," Zaelyra replied. "We only know that the trap opens."

She asked Nym to stay at the bottom of the ladder and listen. Zaelyra climbed three steps, stopped, then went back down. No noise came from above. On the second attempt, she saw under the hatch a line of light that trembled to the rhythm of a flame.

"There is a lamp," she whispered.

"That of a guard?"

"Or of an inhabitant."

They decided not to bring up Tazri first. The girl protested silently, tapping her finger at the map she had drawn. Zaelyra handed it to him.

"You know the brands better than we do. But we don't know what's in the room. Show me what your drawing can't guarantee."

Tazri observed the line, then added a small circle around the lamp. She then put her finger on Zaelyra and Nym, then on the hatch.

"The two of us first? Nym asked.

Tazri nodded.

The decision did not come from the experience of a single person. It came from what everyone could see and what no one could assure.

Tazri stared at Zaelyra, then shook his head.

"Do you want to come with me?"

The girl nodded.

Nym opened his mouth to protest, but Tazri had already taken the lamp.

"Then you stay behind me," says Zaelyra. "If I say to leave, you leave."

Tazri nodded his head without promise.

"Orl, Sszindi and Pell remain in the alcove," says Zaelyra. "Nym, you check the exit and pass those who arrive. Tazri accompanies me."

The hatch opened into a storage room. Two guards were searching the shelves. The first wore the colors of Xil'Nrae; the other, a chain mail without a coat of arms. They didn't see Zaelyra come out of the shadows.

She could have attacked them. Instead, she threw a pebble into the opposite corridor. The noise drew them away from the door.

Tazri sneaked behind her and unlocked the door. In the courtyard, a handful of refugees were running towards the cistern. Brakka guided them, an axe in hand.

"This way! Zaelyra shouted.

Brakka recognized his voice and diverted the group to the reserve. As the survivors descended, Zaelyra counted the faces. Six, eight, eleven.

Rhylor was not among them.

Chapter 23 — The absent

Brakka closed the door of the reserve and leaned against it. Blood flowed from his forearm, but the wound did not seem deep.

The Missing



"How many are left in the yard? Zaelyra asked.

"The two guards, me, before I go down. Rhylor is at the west gate. Kethra... I don't know."

"Did you see her?"

"She opened the cistern. Then, she left."

A rumble made the room tremble. Somewhere above, the west door wended.

Zaelyra walked towards the stairs.

Brakka blocked his way. "You brought out the ones you could."

"Rhylor is still here."

"And if you die looking for him, he will have held the door for nothing."

Zaelyra looked at the refugees. Pell carried one of the children on his back. Sszindi had sat against the wall. Tazri held the box of maps, his fingers clenched on the lid.

She had wanted to go alone, in the past, because a person could slip where a group did not pass. She now understood that the same logic could abandon someone on the other side.

"I'm not going alone."

Brakka swore. "That doesn't make the idea any better."

"How long before they reach the stairs? Zaelyra asked.

Brakka calculated in silence. "If the west door still holds, a few minutes. If she fell, they are already in the yard."

"How many people can you bring down through the passage?"

"All. Not fast."

"What if the mercenaries find the reserve?"

"They will find a closed door and people who don't want to be caught."

The answer did not contain any battle plan. Brakka did not pretend to protect the refugees; she told them what she could hold and what she could not guarantee.

Zaelyra turned to the families. "The passage is narrow. Those who can walk alone will go to the center. The injured between two adults. Children stay with the person they know best. If you don't want to leave, say it now."

No one answered right away.

A woman with curly hair asked: "Will you come back to pick us up if we stay?"

Zaelyra felt the promise rise to her lips. She stopped him.

"If the passage remains open, we will try. I can't promise you that we will succeed."

The woman looked at the door, then at her companion. "Then we go together."

It was the group's first decision that came neither from Zaelyra nor Brakka.

Nym stepped forward. "There is a second staircase from the alcove. He joins the parapet."

"Were you coming with us?"

"I come to check that you don't make a map with only one path."

Brakka put his axe back in hand. "I accompany you to the parapet. No further. Someone has to get the last ones out."

They went up the narrow steps. Through the killers, Zaelyra saw the courtyard below. A group of mercenaries had crossed the west door. They wore gray coats and armbands with no distinctive sign.

Rhylor held the passage in front of the well. He retreated slowly, a blade in each hand. Kethra was a few steps away from him, her arms raised to show that she was not armed.

"She delivered it," said Zaelyra.

"Or she tries to get him out," whispered Nym.

The leader of the mercenaries handed a leaf to Rhylor. "We want Dhal's plate and the girl. Tell me where to find them, and the rest of the relay can leave."

Rhylor did not move.

Kethra approached by one step. "This is not what we agreed."

The leader slapped her with the back of his hand. She fell against the wall.

Zaelyra made a move. Brakka held her back.

"Not yet," she said.

The leader raised two fingers. A crossbowman saw Rhylor. Zaelyra took out the copper plate and hit three times on the pipe that ran under the parapet, then once.

Rhylor's first answer did not come. She started again, stronger. The plate vibrated in his palm.

"What if he doesn't answer? Nym asked.

"Then we will still follow the exit from the east."

"It's not the same as joining him."

"I know."

Brakka put a hand on the pipe. She felt the vibration before hearing the blow: a short answer, then a long one.

"He got the signal," she said.

Brakka signaled Zaelyra to lower the plate. "Not a second call. If someone else hears it, he will know that there are two groups in the conduit."

"Can Rhylor believe that we heard his answer?"

"He knows you've been hit. He doesn't know who's near you."

Zaelyra wanted to hit again, but she put away the plate. She understood the rule; she did not accept the helplessness that accompanied her.

Nym traced the angle of the pipes on a piece of wood with charcoal. Two pipes converged towards the relay, but one had broken. Rhylor's signal had to go through the drain line.

"If we open the valve, the water will take away the sound," he says. "We can make it vibrate from the niche."

"What if the valve is blocked?"

"Then we'll know the pipe is clogged."

"Do you have an answer to everything? Zaelyra asked.

"No. I have experiences that fail in a predictable order."

They gently hit the drive. The vibration crossed the stone, but no answer came back. Zaelyra added a dotted line to the map, not a full line. It was perhaps the only way to call Rhylor without promising her that she would come.

Zaelyra didn't ask what the answer meant. She didn't need to do more than an agreement: the passage remained open, and Rhylor would do what he could.

Rhylor raised his head, as if he had understood that a path remained open. His first blade hit the lantern above the well. Darkness fell on the courtyard. The mercenaries shouted. Zaelyra rushed to the stairs.

Brakka followed her.

"I said I was staying at the parapet."

"And I changed my mind."

Chapter 24 — The doors of Veyr

The courtyard was a tangle of silhouettes, screams and blades sparkling in the dark. Zaelyra did not try to reach Rhylor directly. She went to the harrow mechanism, where two guards held the chain.

The Gates of Veyr



"Open the inner door! She shouted.

One of the guards recognized her. "The Matron ordered it to be kept closed."

"The Matron is not here."

Brakka hit the lever with the handle of his axe. The harrow rose half a meter, then froze. Nym passed underneath and slipped to the other side.

"We must release the wheel! He shouted.

Zaelyra turned the winch with the guard. The mechanism creaked. The harrow rose enough to let one person pass at a time.

The refugees from the reserve began to cross. Pell helped the children. Tazri, still mute, guided Sszindi. Brakka returned to hold the corridor while Zaelyra searched for Rhylor in the shadows.

The passage was not wide enough for two people in front. A woman stopped in the middle, unable to go down the step. Behind her, a child was crying and the silhouettes of the mercenaries moved in the smoke.

"Look at me," says Zaelyra. "Not the door."

The woman stared at her face.

"Set your foot on the light stone. Pell is on the other side. You don't need to go faster than him."

She advanced. The child stopped crying when he found his mother.

A tile hit the winch. Nym jumped to the other side of the harrow and stuck the mechanism with an iron bar. The door remained raised narrowly.

"How long? Zaelyra shouted.

"I don't know!"

"How much?"

"Pretty enough for the last, not enough to start over!"

Zaelyra saw Rhylor move in the shadows. He could have joined the harrow, but two mercenaries separated him from the exit. Kethra motioned for him to step back towards the well.

The scene was recomposed in his mind: it had not led the mercenaries to the relay, but it had helped them to recognize their target. Now, she risked being hit by trying to correct a choice she had made alone.

Zaelyra grabbed a rope and threw it around a hook on the wall. "When I shoot, you pass under the hrow! She shouted at Rhylor.

"You can't hold the winch and the rope!"

"I didn't say I would hold it alone."

Pell and two residents took the rope with her. The metal went up another half meter. Rhylor threshed to the ground and slipped under the harrow, followed by Kethra. Nym's bar immediately folded; the battant fell behind them with a crash that shook the court.

She found him near the well, unarmed with a blade and his left arm injured. Kethra was kneeling next to him. The leader of the mercenaries kept them in the cheek.

"The map," he said. "And the girl."

Zaelyra stopped uncovered. "You already have a map."

"A fake."

"You paid for her."

"I paid for a passage."

"So you bought what we sold you."

The mercenary raised his crossbow. "The box."

Tazri came out behind Zaelyra. She held the box open. Inside, the folded maps seemed to be just worthless pieces of scroll.

"Give it," said the man.

Tazri shook his head.

A guard of Brakka dropped a lantern. The flame rolled to the ground, spreading an amber light. The mercenary turned his eyes to her. Zaelyra advanced.

Kethra threed against his legs.

The crossbow left. The tile hit the stone. Rhylor grabbed the mercenary's arm and pulled him towards him. Zaelyra reached the leader before he could recharge.

She didn't kill him. She hit his wrist, then pushed him towards the harrow. The guards disarmed him.

"You could have killed him," said Rhylor.

"I know."

"Why didn't you do it?"

"Because I wanted the others to see that we could stop him without massacring him."

The leader of the mercenaries tried to get up. Brakka put his boot on his wrist, without pressing hard enough to break it.

"Who hired you? She asked.

"I don't know. We were paid by an intermediary."

"Where should we put the maps back? Zaelyra asked.

The mercenary was silent.

Kethra approached, still trembling. "He won't say anything as long as you treat him like a prisoner."

"And how to treat it?" asked Rhylor.

"Like someone who has already accepted a prize. Make him understand that he can still choose what he sells."

Brakka spread his boot. "Do you want me to pay for it?"

"No. I want him to know that the next intermediary may not keep his word."

He looked around them. The courtyard was emptying. The mercenaries retreated, deprived of the leader and the effect of surprise. The outside door was open, but beyond the canyon, other lanterns lit up.

"They will come back," said Brakka.

"Yes," Zaelyra replied.

She did not try to claim the opposite. "How many people are left?"

"Twenty-three, if no one has hidden."

"And how much can work?"

"Seventeen."

"So we're not leaving yet."

Rhylor tightened the bandage around his arm. "Do you want to take over?"

"I want to give them time to choose their path."

At the other end of the courtyard, Kethra had stood up. She wasn't looking at anyone.

Zaelyra picked up Tazri's box. The maps were intact. On the oldest, a road continued beyond the canyon, to a door drawn in red ink.

The relay was not the end of the trip. It was the first place where they could decide together what to do next.

Chapter 25 — Vhaelyn's mission

The third day before had just begun when a patrol appeared on the ridge. Brakka raised her hand to silence the court. The refugees retreated behind the walls. Nym turned off the lamps one by one.

Vhaelyn's Patrol



Seven silhouettes descended towards the relay. Their cloaks carried the silver spider of the Xil'Nrae.

Zaelyra counted the silhouettes twice. Vhaelyn and six soldiers, but only five lanterns: one of the guards advanced without light, on the outer edge of the ridge. He didn't try to hide the patrol. He checked that no group was following her.

"She took the youngest," whispered Rhylor. "They do not yet know what orders can be refused without losing your mind."

"Or she took them because they have not yet learned to disobey her," says Brakka.

"Do you think she protects them? Zaelyra asked.

"I think she placed them where the crossbows will see them. It can be a protection. It can also be a way to make them take the risk in his place."

Zaelyra observed Vhaelyn in the lead. She knew her sister well enough to recognize that she had not chosen the land at random. The guards stood above the northern road, out of the immediate reach of mercenaries, but visible from the killers.

"They're coming for us," said Pell.

"They come with a flag," Brakka replied. "It's not the same thing."

The patrol stopped within reach of voice. At her head was Vhaelyn, dressed in the priestess' dress and light armor. She raised her hands, palms open.

"I come on behalf of the Matron Zesstra. Zaelyra Xil'Nrae must come back with me. The others will not be worried if they lay down their weapons."

Brakka glanced at Zaelyra. "She chose her words."

"She chose not to say that the door is already taken."

Vhaelyn turned his head slightly towards the ridge. A crossbow tile protruded from the rock, pointed towards his group.

"The House hired mercenaries," shouted Zaelyra. "They attacked the relay."

"I know."

"You're driving a mission to stop them?"

"I'm driving a mission to bring my sister back."

She had chosen the truth, but not the whole truth.

Vhaelyn asked to enter with two of his guards. Zaelyra accepted. The others remained on the ridge, where their insignia could be seen from the mercenaries. It was a protection as well as a threat.

In the courtyard, Vhaelyn looked at the wounded, then at her sister. "You look exhausted."

"You too."

"I walked fast."

"Me too."

Their eyes met. No one asked for forgiveness.

Vhaelyn approached the open map on the cash register. "The Matron demands that you bring her back. She says that the road belongs to the House."

She also put a small bag of healing powder and a sealed letter on the table. "The Matron says she will send an escort to evacuate the relay. She doesn't say when."

"Do you think she will send this escort?"

"She will send soldiers. The question is whether they will protect people or bring them back."

Vhaelyn had chosen six guards, all young enough not to serve during Dhal's disappearance. She didn't tell them she was coming to help. She had given them an order: to prevent the mercenaries from controlling the northern road. It was correct, but incomplete.

"Will they follow you if you ask them to take over? Zaelyra asked.

"Some. The others will follow the written order."

"And you?"

Vhaelyn looked at the badge in his hand. "I follow the written order to the point where it ceases to be defensible."

"Do you think Mother sees the difference?"

"Mother sees all the differences. She chooses only those she can recognize."

The answer did not say if Zesstra already knew that her eldest daughter was challenging her. She said that Vhaelyn no longer relied on ignorance to protect her.

"And you?"

"I think the road existed before the House."

She put a small silver spider on the map, the badge she wore from the temple. Then she toot him.

"If my soldiers see this in the yard, they will understand that my mission has changed. I won't be able to hold them for long."

"Why did you come?"

"Because I didn't want the order to be given by someone else."

A whistle sounds on the ridge. The patrol leader called Vhaelyn to leave.

She put her badge back on her sleeve. "The next time you see me, I may be forced to play my role to the end."

"And next time, I will know that there may be another sentence behind the first one."

Vhaelyn had a joyless smile. "Learn to hear them without deciding that they say what you want."

She came out. On the ridge, she ordered her patrol to hold the north road. The mercenaries turned their crossbows towards the drows of the House.

For the first time since their escape, Zaelyra saw the Xil'Nrae insignia protect the relay instead of threatening it.

Once the patrol went up on the ridge, the guard who had walked without a lantern remained behind for a few moments. He looked towards the relay, then placed a white stone on the side of the road. The gesture could signal a free road, or mark the place where a shooter had to aim.

Zaelyra did not follow him long enough to pretend to know. She only added the stone to her map, with the time and direction of the patrol.

"Are you really going to write everything down?" asked Brakka.

"What I can observe."

"Even things that don't serve you?"

"Especially those. Someone else may be able to read them."

Brakka considered the ridge. "Then also write that a sign can be a help or a threat."

Zaelyra inscribed it in the margin. She now understood that the maps were not becoming honest because they contained all the details. They became so when they showed the limits of their author's gaze.

Chapter 26 — The margins of the story

A boy arrived through the reserve duct, his fingers black in ink and his sleeve torn. He wore under his tunic a leather case sealed by a red thread.

The Archivist and the Red Thread



"Ithryl? Zaelyra asked.

The archivist blinked. "We've already met?"

"No. But you have the face of a man who ran with too much paper."

He looked at the case. "I didn't run enough."

Ithryl explained that he had worked in Sorcere's archives. A copy of the report mentioning Drizzt Do'Urden had disappeared from the official records; he had found a fragment of it in an inventory of equipment. The note "Did not hit" came from the testimony of an injured guard, but the document did not specify who had been threatened or why the guard had survived.

He put his case on the table without opening it. His fingers were covered with a purple ink, used in archival copies that were to remain visible under the light of the mushrooms. A cut crossed his palm.

"Did you run away from Sorcere? Zaelyra asked.

"I left before I was asked to sign a declaration."

"It's a leak."

"It's a way of naming things after the day."

Ithryl had first looked for the report to verify a quote copied from a Melee-Magthere manual. The version of the textbook presented Drizzt as an undisciplined student whose disobedience had been neutralized by his superiors. The original report did not confirm any of this. He only told an order, a door and a witness unable to understand why the young warrior had stopped.

"Did the priestesses delete the page? Nym asked.

"The consultation register bears a signature. Not the name of the one who took the page. I suspect an archivist who wanted to protect her. I could be wrong."

"Did you see the signature?" asked Vhaelyn.

Ithryl nodded. "A brand of Sorcere, then a rasure. The person who consulted the file knew that she would be identifiable. She tried to erase it afterwards."

"Why don't you keep this information to yourself?"

"Because it doesn't help me identify the hand. It only indicates that one hand wanted to disappear."

He took out of the case a sheet covered with narrow columns. It was not the report, but the list of documents that had been transferred from one room to another. Several lines had the same withdrawal symbol.

"The fragment on Do'Urden was moved three times before the index was burned. Each time, someone copied the date, but not the reason for the trip."

Zaelyra compared the dates. "The copies were made by different scribes."

"Yes. But each scribe left the same blank margin."

"Maybe it's an archive rule."

"It's one. The disputed documents must not touch the other entries."

Ithryl placed the sheets side by side. At the location of the margin, a sequence of numbers was noted in purple ink. It corresponded to the hours recorded in the report.

"This is not a lead to the person who hid the document," he says. "This is proof that many archivists have chosen to keep it, while refusing to pretend to know why it counted."

"Did you know them? Zaelyra asked.

"No. I didn't work with any of them. But I copied their records. I spent years believing that the order of the pages was neutral. Then I understood that someone was choosing what we could find."

He paused, his fingers on the case. "I tried to add a note to the catalog: "disputed provenance". My superior refused it. He asked me if I had proof that it was disputed."

"And you had one?"

"Three incompatible versions and one missing page. I replied that the absence was the proof. He told me that the absence does not testify."

"He was right," Nym said.

Ithryl looked at him, surprised.

Zaelyra finally put two fingers on the case, without taking it from him. "How to distinguish a faithful copy from a copy made to convince us?"

"You can't do it from a single piece."

Ithryl showed them the irregular edges of the fragment, the traces of old glue and a series of storage marks that did not appear on the transcript.

"I can establish that it has been kept with other reports from this period. I can compare ink and paper. I cannot prove that every sentence is true, nor that the witness understood what he saw."

"What if the document has been made?" asked Vhaelyn.

"So it was made early enough to deceive several archivists, or late enough to imitate their method. In both cases, we need more parts."

"Do you have other pieces?"

"Slips, dates, two lists of witnesses. Nothing that tells the scene."

Nym looked at the fragment. "A road that stops before the place you want to reach."

"Yes," said Ithryl. "The difference is that I can show you where it stops."

Zaelyra removed her fingers from the case. She didn't need a story that persuades her. She needed a clear enough origin so that others could challenge hers.

"The absence does not speak," continued Nym. "But we can note who decided not to leave him a place."

The archivist looked down at the sheets. He doesn't smile. He wrote the remark in the margin, with the date and name of Nym.

"Why keep such an incomplete document?"

"Because complete stories are often the most convenient. This obliges us to leave open questions."

Zaelyra looked at the fragment without touching it. She had heard of Drizzt as a hero, a traitor, a monster and a lie. The piece of paper did not confirm any of these names.

"Do you plan to show it to the refugees? She asked.

"Only if someone asks me."

"What if they ask you what he proves?"

"I will tell them what he does not prove."

Ithryl unfolded a copy. The writing was damaged, some lines were missing. The name of Do'Urden appeared next to an order from Melee-Magthere. There was no prophecy or explanation. Just hours, witnesses and the mention of a door left open.

"I thought this report would prove that we could change things," he says. "Then I understood that it proved above all that a choice leaves traces that someone can erase."

"Why did you win it? Nym asked.

"Because the priestesses burned the index finger. Not the report. Someone knew he mattered."

He handed the document to Zaelyra. She didn't take it.

"You risked it for me to read it?"

"I risked it because I didn't know who to give it to."

"Keep it."

Ithryl seemed surprised.

"We don't need you to tell us what it means. We need to know where it comes from, and what is missing."

The archivist carefully folded the copy. "So I stay until the pages are compared."

"It could last."

"Archives always last longer than archivists. It's a mediocre consolation, but it's the only one I have."

Zaelyra noted the origin of the fragment on her map, without adding an interpretation. Drizzt's rumor had been the first thread. She would not become the model of their path.

In the distance, the mercenaries began to knock on the north door.

Chapter 27 — The price of Kethra

Kethra was waiting in the old rope storage. She had cleaned the blood from her face, but her forehead remained swollen. The copper rope rested between his boots.

Kethra's Debt



"You sold our road," says Zaelyra.

"I sold a road that no longer existed."

"You sold our names."

"I didn't know them all."

"But you gave mine."

Kethra does not deny. "Yes."

Frankness displeases him more than a lie.

"Why?"

"I had a debt with a broker in Bregan D'aerthe. He didn't ask me to kill anyone. He asked me for information that should have no value. I thought I could choose what it was worth."

"You could have refused."

"Yes."

"You could have warned us."

"Yes."

"Why didn't you do it?"

Kethra looked at the copper rope at her feet. "Because the broker showed me the Saira loop. He knew where she had been found, who had carried her and how many times she had been repaired. He had details that a kidnapper would not have invented by chance. I wanted to believe that it meant that she was alive."

"And you chose the interpretation that suited you."

"Yes."

"You knew that the price would be paid by others."

"I knew there was a risk. I told myself that I was controlling it because I had chosen the piece of map I was delivering."

Zaelyra put the list in front of her. "How many times have you done this?"

"Sell a road? Several. Give names? Never before this time."

"How can I know?"

"You can't."

Kethra finally took out the belt buckle. The metal had been split near the spin. A clumsy repair had left two uneven welding points.

"Saira was repairing her own things," she says. "The left point is his. The one on the right, mine. We had to replace the entire loop when we had enough money."

"You had to?"

"We had planned to leave the forges together. Not towards the surface. Just to a city where no one knew our debts."

She folded her fingers around the metal. "I didn't sell this loop. I didn't manage to throw it away either."

Zaelyra understood that this memory could be true without making Kethra trustworthy. She didn't ask him to prove it. There was nothing to check in the way she held the piece of metal.

"You're going to keep looking for her?"

"Yes. But I won't ask you to help me."

"Good."

"You don't believe me?"

"I think you want to find her. I don't know yet what you will do to achieve it."

Kethra put away the buckle. For the first time, she did not try to turn uncertainty into bargaining.

Kethra put in front of Zaelyra a list of names crossed out with black lines. She had recovered it from the leader of the mercenaries.

"You can keep her," she said.

"It's not a gift. You won't pay for your betrayal with a piece of paper."

"I didn't say I would pay. I said I had to. It's different."

Kethra explained that the broker had demanded proof of passage: the marks recorded on the Veyr road. She had given him a copy of the official route, the one that led to a cul-de-sac. But she had also confirmed that Zaelyra was traveling with Nym. This precision had allowed the pursuers to recognize their group.

"You delivered enough to make us spottable and not enough to stop them," says Zaelyra.

"Yes."

"And now what do you want?"

"Nothing."

"No one risks their life for nothing."

Kethra looked at the door. "I want you to know that the road I sold did not come from you. She came from me. That's all."

Zaelyra took the list. "You won't be alone in deciding if your debt is paid."

She went through the crossed-out names. Some were accompanied by a date, others by a simple question mark. Two people present at the relay were not there; several names told him nothing.

"Do you know where they got this list from? She asked.

"Part of it comes from the passage registers. Another was added by hand. I don't know who wrote it."

"Did the crossed-out names die?"

"Or found. Or removed from the search. The line does not say which one."

Zaelyra closed the sheet. She refused to copy it into the common map. Names and paths would not be kept together. If one fell into the hands of mercenaries, the other would remain unusable.

"You could burn her," said Kethra.

"Then no one would know that they were wanted."

"What if the list puts them in danger?"

"It will remain separate from the routes, in a place that families can find without us."

Kethra did not offer a cache. For once, she let Zaelyra decide without offering a price.

"I didn't expect you to forgive me."

"Good."

Kethra showed him a trapdoor to the reserves. "The mercenaries will try to enter through the mushroom conduit. They found the opening. If you move the families now, you will avoid the first assault."

"Why warn us?"

"Because a relay full of deaths brings nothing to anyone."

Zaelyra didn't know if she should believe her. She checked the trapdoor herself, then organized the travel of the families. Kethra did not insist on being thanked.

In the hallway, Vhaelyn was waiting.

"You're going to let her go? She asked.

"No. But I will listen to him as long as his information is verifiable."

"It's a difficult line to keep."

"That's why you have to trace it."

Chapter 28 — What we don't burn

The Matron's message arrived in a glass box carried by a white spider. The creature came down from the vault and placed the cylinder on the map table.

The Matron's Message



Zesstra demanded the return of Zaelyra and Vhaelyn. The fugitives would be handed over to the relay authorities. The maps, all the maps, had to be burned before the arrival of reinforcements.

"She wants to erase the road," says Rhylor.

"She wants to prevent others from taking her," Vhaelyn replied.

"Isn't it the same thing?" asked Brakka.

"Not always."

Zaelyra reread the order. The Matron did not mention either mercenaries or the wounded. She didn't say she sent them. She didn't need to do it.

"If the maps are destroyed, the mercenaries lose their advantage," says Vhaelyn. "But so do we."

Nym put his hand on the parchment. "A map is not the road."

"No. But without it, people will die in the passages."

"Then we don't burn everything."

Zaelyra pulled several blank leaves from the case. She chose the official map, the one that led to the cul-de-sac, and put it aside.

"We keep what allows families to go out. We remove the marks that reveal the stops of those who are still hidden. And we make different copies for each group."

"Incomplete maps?" Ithryl asked.

"Useful maps. Each person will know the path they must take, not that of others."

"It's dangerous," says Brakka.

"Yes."

"This is also what smugglers would do."

"Then we'll do better than the smugglers. We'll tell people what they don't know."

Nym nodded. "And we will not promise them that the road is safe."

Each copy would include the date of the last audit, the conditions under which it was made and the questions that remained open. A map without a date could turn an old danger into an eternal rule; a date, at least, would indicate when it had to be checked again.

They worked around the table. Ithryl checked the old legends; Nym indicated the air currents; Zaelyra traced the main routes. Vhaelyn erased the signs of the House's observation posts. Brakka dictated the unstable areas of the relay.

In the middle of the work, the old svirfneblin who was waiting near the wall put a small fragment of leather on the table. It had four names, written in brown ink.

"I want them to be on the map," she says.

"They are not roads," Brakka replied.

"These are the people I've been looking for since I arrived here."

Ithryl reached out to the fragment, then stopped. "If we add their names, those who find the map will know who it concerns."

"If we remove them, I won't know if I've found the right family," says the old woman.

Zaelyra turned the leather. "We can keep the names on this side, and the layout on the other. But it will not have to be separated."

"Then someone can take both."

"Yes. Zaelyra left the decision to the woman. "You can choose to keep your fragment, destroy it or entrust it to someone. We can help you make a copy without the names, but we will not choose for you."

The old woman kept the leather between her fingers for a long time. Then she copied the names on a separate sheet, which she fold in her sleeve. On the map, she drew four small circles, without initials.

"This is not a perfect answer," she says.

"No," Zaelyra replied. "It's an answer that you know the risk of."

The woman nodded and resumed her position near the wall. The map would not bear the names, but someone would keep them.

When the first copies were ready, Brakka took one and put it in the hands of an old svirfneblin who was waiting near the wall.

"Read it."

The woman followed the route with her finger. "This elbow is too narrow for a cart."

Nym checked the measurements, then nodded. "She's right."

Zaelyra erased the line and redrew it around a storage room. The old svirfneblin examined the new version, then passed it to a child who could read the marks but not the words.

"And him? She asked.

The boy found the entrance without help.

"Then this map can go," says Zaelyra.

Ithryl raised an eyebrow. "You have it checked by people who didn't draw it."

"Those who follow her didn't draw her either."

Each map received a different sign, chosen by its group: a notch, two dots, a blue line. No sign revealed the entire network. Nym kept the legends; Zaelyra kept the main routes; the refugees took the passages they needed.

Their work was slower than a single map. It would also be more difficult to use against them.

For the first time, no map had a single signature.

The cries of the mercenaries rose from the north gate. The beams moaned. A guard came running in.

"They opened the first door."

Brakka got up. "Everyone towards the exit is. Those who can hold a gun stay with me."

The girl, Tazri, approached the map. She added a tiny line in red ink, in a passage that no one had yet seen.

"Is this Dhal's road? Zaelyra asked.

Tazri nodded. Then she put a finger on the mark and said, in a hoarse voice that she had not used until then:

"He said not to burn it."

Rhylor stopped.

"Did you know my son?"

Tazri looked down. "He led us to the lake. He taught me how to draw the exits. He said that a road is useless if whoever finds it has to keep it for himself."

"When was the last time you saw him?"

"A long time ago. He left with others to the west. He didn't tell me if he would come back."

Rhylor closed his eyes for a second. No proof of life. No grave. Only the choice of a man who had held a door open for strangers.

He took the map back and put it in front of Zaelyra. "So don't burn her."

Chapter 29 — The last passage

The second door of the north door gad just before the change of guard. The mercenaries rushed into the vestibule. Brakka and his defenders held the line long enough for the families to reach the east staircase.

The Last Passage



The first wave did not carry shields. She advanced with hooks and ropes, trying to pull the defenders out of the door. Brakka made them throw bags of mushroom dust. The powder ignited on contact with the lanterns and filled the vestibule with a green glow.

The first mercenary who crossed the threshold slid over the damp dust. Brakka disarmed him without hitting him in the head, then rolled him behind the defense line.

"Why are you keeping him alive?" asked a young guard.

"Because he can tell us how many they are."

"What if he lies?"

"Then he will have taught us that he is lying."

The guard had a look at Zaelyra, as if he was waiting for her to decide. She instead pointed to the hook that had fallen near his boots.

"Give it to Nym. He may know how to use it to block the door."

The boy obeys. Nym fixed the hook in the hinge; the bat slows down enough to gain a few breaths. Brakka and Zaelyra did not command the same thing, but each task now passed from one person to another without the group having to wait for a single order.

"Don't shoot at the silhouettes," Vhaelyn shouted from the courtyard. "Wait for them to cross the threshold!"

The House guards heard him. The mercenaries too. The green light revealed the gray armbands, but hid the faces.

Zaelyra joined the door with the last rolled map. A young guard held his crossbow towards the entrance, his hands trembling.

"Is this the first time? She asked.

"The first time someone can answer me."

"So don't shoot until you hear his answer."

A silhouette crosses the threshold. The guard did not shoot. Brakka hit her on the shoulder with the plate of his axe and disarmed her.

"You see?" says Zaelyra.

"I don't know if it was the right decision."

"Me neither. But he is alive."

Zaelyra stayed at the table to finish the maps. Ithryl's hands trembled; Vhaelyn continued to trace with cold precision.

"You should leave," she said to her sister.

"Not until I'm done."

"If you are taken, the House will know where to look."

"She already knows it."

Vhaelyn handed him a folded map. It was the route to the next stop, with a detour added to the silver ink.

"I made a copy for you."

"And you?"

"I'll stay with the patrol."

"You're going back to Menzoberranzan?"

"I command the mission. If I leave with you now, the guards who remained on the ridge will be abandoned."

Zaelyra understood that she could not ask him to make the same choice as her. "You've decided?"

"Not yet. But I won't let the House decide for me."

In the vestibule, a shock caused dust to fall from the ceiling. Rhylor joined Zaelyra, his arm bandaged and Dhal's plate around his neck.

"The door is lost," he says. "Brakka holds the corridor."

"What about civilians?"

"They are moving forward. Nym is with them."

"Kethra is missing."

As in response, the merchant appeared in the doorway, dragging a bag of ropes. "I opened access to the old freight elevator. You can thank me afterwards."

"I won't thank you for repairing some of what you broke," says Zaelyra.

"I didn't expect it."

They left through the service corridor. Vhaelyn stayed at the last branch with his soldiers. Before Zaelyra disappeared, she removed her priestess badge and slipped it into her pocket.

"If you come back, don't come alone," she says.

"If I come back, I won't come to save you."

"So much the better. I don't want to be saved."

The freight elevator descended along a wet well. The platform creaked with every movement. Nym, Sszindi and the families had already engaged in the lower passage. Fighting noises were approaching above.

Brakka appeared, covered with dust. "I stay. The relay will not defend itself."

Zaelyra wanted to protest.

"I chose," said Brakka. Don't take that away from me."

She closed the grid. The platform went down.

Before the gate closed, Vhaelyn put her fist against the metal. Zaelyra did the same on the other side.

"I didn't choose the House," says Vhaelyn. "Not yet."

"You chose what you were doing today."

"It may not be enough."

"This is what we have."

Vhaelyn nodded, then stepped back. She didn't ask them to wait for her.

In the well, Tazri held the box of maps against her. Rhylor kept his eyes fixed on his son's plate. Kethra watched the rope, without trying to hide it.

Below, the darkness opened in several galleries. Zaelyra had traced three possible routes. None guaranteed survival.

She showed them the maps and explained the risks of each.

This time, the group chooses together.

Chapter 30 — Off the map

The passage led to a natural room where several families had taken refuge. Some came from the relay; others had been waiting there for days, guided by chalk marks and contradictory stories on a safe road.

Off the Map



They were more numerous than Zaelyra had expected. Children slept in rolled coats. A woman was treating a burn with cold water. An old man held a map that showed only one wall.

Some had waited three days. Others had just arrived. A family had crossed the galleries without shoes; a young man was carrying his injured sister on his back. No one asked if Zaelyra was noble. They asked where the water was, how long the walk would last and if the children could follow.

She answered every question without embellishing the road. When she didn't know, she said it. Nym completed his answers with air currents and water levels. Brakka joined them an hour later through a side gallery. She had held the baton while the last families came out, then left the door before it collapsed. The building was lost; its inhabitants, not.

"Shall we go back to help?" asked Pell.

"Brakka chose to stay," Rhylor replied. "We can't take back his choice in his place."

"But we can prepare a road for those who go out."

Zaelyra looked at the boy. "Yes. That's what we are going to do."

They drew a marching order. The slowest would leave in the center; the guides would open and close the line. Each adult would receive the name of two people to watch, never more. If one group were to stop, the others would continue to the next shelter instead of turning around without a plan.

They repeated the departure once, without leaving the room. Nym gave the instructions to the guides; Zaelyra asked the families to reformulate them in their own words. The first mother had retained the wrong stop signal. An old man confused the sign of refuge and that of unstable passage.

"If we had already hit the road, we would have discovered these mistakes outside," says Zaelyra.

"And outside, they would have cost more," replied Nym.

They started again. This time, each group chooses a person capable of reading the marks and another capable of explaining them to those who did not read. Pell volunteered to accompany the children. Sszindi wanted to stay close to the injured, even if his own wound was not closed.

"You can't run," says Zaelyra.

"Then I won't run. But I can count people."

She was entrusted with the list of those present, which she kept in her memory rather than on a sheet. She repeated the names in a low voice, then started again in the opposite order. If the group dispersed, she would know who was missing without leaving a record to those who were chasing them.

It was not an army. It was a series of decisions that they could still change.

"Are you Veyr's?" He asked.

"We come from the relay."

"Is he still standing?"

Zaelyra hesitated. "I don't know."

The man accepted the answer without lowering his head. "Then we'll wait to know."

Nym counted the food. They had for one day, two by rationing. The path to the Marches de Lune was possible, but the road required to cross an unstable area and an abandoned toll station. Not all could follow at the same pace.

"We're leaving for the next change of air," says Zaelyra. "Those who cannot walk will stay with a guard group. We will relays. No one will be forced to follow us."

"What if the mercenaries arrive?" asked a mother.

"We will defend the entrance."

"How long?"

Zaelyra looked at the adults, the children, the almost empty bags. "I don't know."

The answer did not calm anyone. But she didn't lie.

Rhylor approached. "A night. We stay one night, time to prepare the groups. Then, we leave."

"What if the road is closed? Nym asked.

"Then we'll look for another one."

"It's not a plan," he says.

"No. This is what we will do if the plan fails."

The old svirfneblin who had brought the map to the wall looked up. "What if the second road is closed too?"

Zaelyra put her palm on the common map. "We'll stop early enough to find out. We won't wait until we're stuck to decide."

The woman did not seem reassured. "You can't promise us that we'll go out."

"No."

"So what can you promise?"

Zaelyra looked at the marks they had added together. "That no one will be sent on a road whose dangers we hide. And that we will not say that a person is lost as long as there is still a way to check."

The woman nodded slowly. It was not a promise of salvation. It was a rule she could judge.

Tazri put the box in the center of the circle. She took out the marked map fragment of the open circle and unfolded it in front of everyone. The line led west, then stopped before the Moon Marches.

"Is this Dhal's road?" asked Rhylor.

Tazri nodded. Then she shook her head, as if to correct the question. She indicated the line, then the group around her.

"It's not just his anymore," says Zaelyra.

Rhylor looked at the sign without touching it. "No. But he started it."

They decided to stay one night, no more, to prepare the departures in small groups. The road to the west would not be taken until the next dawn. Everyone could still choose to stay, leave alone or follow the group. No one would be counted as a traitor for choosing another outcome.

When the lamps were reduced to their lowest glow, Zaelyra sat near the map. The noise of the room gradually calmed down: a cough, a child whispering in his sleep, the rubbing of a feather on the parchment.

She added to the edge of the route: **temporary stop; departure at dawn; road not checked beyond the west bend.**

Then she left the line unfinished.

"It's not a plan."

"No. It's a decision."

Kethra distributed the ropes and noticed who owed her what. Zaelyra let her do it, but had each debt written on a second sheet, visible to all. The merchant protested, then finally laughed.

"You just made my job much more complicated."

"It was already complicated."

"Now it's public. It's worse."

At the entrance, Ithryl copied the maps in several versions. Nym checked each of them. Tazri drew Dhal's passage on the smallest, then slipped it into Rhylor's hand.

"He said you could read the marks," she whispered.

Rhylor squeezed the map. "I read them too late."

"Maybe. But you are here."

Above the room, a rumble ran into the rock. The light changed, weak reflection of Narbonnel, filtered by several layers of stone. Menzoberranzan continued his cycle, ignoring those who had just left his roads.

Zaelyra took out the official map of the House. She unfolded it, then put it on a stone. The route led to a passage that no longer existed. She didn't burn it. She folded it and put it away with the others, as proof of what a map could hide.

Ithryl wrote on the back the approximate date, the name of the scribe who had sealed it and the places where the line no longer corresponded to the land. He did not copy Zesstra's seal.

"Why not keep a full copy? Zaelyra asked.

"Because a complete copy would be easier to confiscate."

"And a partial copy?"

"It can be completed by someone else."

Nym added to the edge a sign for the drafts. Rhylor noted the location of Dhal's plaque, without writing his own name. Pell drew the copper ball in a corner and returned it to Nym.

Tazri, on the other hand, drew a small arrow to the west. She didn't sign.

"Do you want us to keep your name? Zaelyra asked him.

Tazri shook his head.

Zaelyra did not register it.

Outside, the road to the Steps was waiting. Behind them, the relay was still holding. In front, no one knew what was there.

Zaelyra drew a new line on the common map.

She didn't give him a name.

It belonged to those who decided to follow it.

Chapter 31 — The first departure

The room was not emptied at dawn. She shared.

The First Departure



Some left before the drafts turned, taking the lightest injured and a map marked with two blue dots. Others remained near the reserves, unable to decide whether to risk an unknown road or wait for news from the relay. Most didn't say they were afraid. They asked how long it would take to walk, if the galleries were high enough to carry a child, and how much water was left in the doles.

Zaelyra answered everything she knew. For the rest, she showed the blanks that they had not been able to fill.

A young drow, a cut in her chin, was waiting near the entrance. His mother held his wrist without squeezing it. "You're going with them? Zaelyra asked.

"I can walk."

"This is not what I asked you."

The girl looked at her mother, then at the gallery. "Yes. But not because she asks me."

The mother let go of her wrist. Zaelyra noted the name of the young woman on the list that Sszindi kept in mind. She did not ask if the decision was final. The group would need everyone, but the need could not become a chain.

Nym checked the lanterns, then the copper wire stretched between two stones. "The current is coming down. We have a four-hour window before it turns."

"Is four hours enough?" asked Rhylor.

"To reach the first shelter. To get out of it, I don't know."

Kethra divided the food into equal piles, then set aside the provisions she had taken from the relay.

"These are mine. The rest comes from Veyr's reserves."

"Do you want us to write each piece?" asked Brakka.

"I especially don't want to find out tomorrow that I sold the last one without realizing it."

Zaelyra let her trace two columns: common reserves and personal property. Kethra noted each quantity, including her own share. She did not try to take back the ropes she had distributed the day before.

The start was in groups of six. The first opened the road; the second carried the water; the third closed the step. The children traveled in the middle with people able to stop without slowing everyone down. The wounded were distributed, so that no fall would leave an isolated family.

"Who decides if we change course?" asked the guard who had volunteered to open.

"The one who sees the danger first reports it. We stop, we check, then we decide," answered Zaelyra.

"What if we don't have time?"

"So the person in the lead chooses the passage that seems least dangerous to him and then explains why."

"It's a strange rule."

"It's a rule for a bad time."

The guard turned his spear in his palm. Pell offered to accompany him to teach him the marks of Nym. The guard accepted.

Before leaving, Zaelyra checked that no complete map remained within reach. They had torn the old official sheet into three pieces: Nym kept the air measurements, Ithryl the historical annotations, and herself the layout of the galleries. No fragment was useful alone.

"Aren't you afraid of losing one?" Ithryl asked.

"Yes."

"You could copy everything."

"And someone could take it all."

The archivist stored his piece in a lining sewn inside his coat. "A memory is not confiscated so easily."

"She can be wrong."

"She does it often. That's why I note who told me everything."

Zaelyra observed her notes. Ithryl distinguished the facts he had seen, those he had read and those he could only report. She had first taken this caution for a weakness. She was beginning to understand that she was especially preventing stories from posing as evidence.

A mark ran at the bottom of the fragment: three notches gathered in a circle. Zaelyra had already seen it on an old copy. This was the sign that some attributed to Drizzt, the drow who had left the city two decades earlier. The stories rarely agreed on his reasons. Some made him a murderer, others a traitor, some a hero. They agreed even less on what he had found beyond the doors.

"Do you think that's really his sign? She asked.

Ithryl studied the drawing. "It is a sign that has been attributed to him. I have never seen a document signed by his hand."

"But he's gone."

"Witnesses said so. The official version has changed several times."

"We say that he chose another life."

"It is also said that he massacred all those who pursued him. Stories remember blades better than reasons."

Zaelyra folded the fragment. "I don't want to become his story."

"So don't walk in his steps. Find yours."

Drizzt's name had not opened any door. He only recalled that a door could be left, and that those who remained behind did not have the entire story.

The first group engaged in the gallery. Nym opened the walk with a lamp protected by a blue plate. Rhylor followed, then Zaelyra. The others advanced at regular intervals, close enough to get along, spaced enough not to be trapped in the same place.

The rock descended gently. Ancient marks ran on the walls, much higher than the shoulders. Some had been scraped, others covered with limestone. Nym stopped to measure the breath of the galleries with thin silk threads.

At the first elbow, the air smelled of wet earth. In the second, he had a taste for metal.

Nym raised his fist. The line froze.

Three passages were in front of them. The widest one went down to an old commercial road. The one in the center tightened under an overhang. The last one was just a dark slit behind a stone column.

"The air should come out of this crack," says Nym. "He comes in."

Zaelyra illuminated the wall. A stream of dust rose towards them, but drops flowed in the other direction on the ground.

"Two currents," she says.

Nym fixed a strand of silk at the top of the wall, then another near the ground. "At two heights. The wide passage sucks. The one in the center should reject the air, but it is blocked."

"And the slit?"

"She breathes from below. I don't know where she's leading."

A child sneezed behind them. The rumor went back to the leading group: they asked if we should move forward, if the road was collapsed, if the mercenaries were approaching.

Zaelyra saw a line of dried clay on the ground. It marked an old water level, almost at hip height.

"When?" asked Rhylor.

"I don't know. But not long enough to consider that the danger has passed."

They chose the wide path, despite the aspiration. Nym passed a pebble on a rope and listened to his friction against the stone. Further on, the road was divided into two: a paved tunnel on the left, a slope below the old water level on the right.

At the bifurcation, someone had drawn an incomplete circle.

Rhylor touched the edge of the symbol. "Dhal."

"You're sure?"

"No. He used several brands. This one looks like the ones he left when he couldn't check the rest."

They separated into two reconnaissance teams, connected by a rope. Zaelyra left with Nym and Pell. Rhylor went down to the right with Sszindi and two guides. After a few minutes, the agreed signal was heard: two pulls, one pause.

The right passage was practicable, but tightened under a cracked slab. On the left, a stone plate almost completely obstructed the road. Pell spotted a rope under the dust, stretched to a piton in the wall. It was not a trap: someone had set it to guide travelers in the dark.

They followed her to an alcove. The wall bore marks of height, lines counted by floods or by seasons. In a crack, a small copper box contained a lamp wick, a piece of green chalk and a piece of gray fabric, woven like a caravan canvas.

A sign was embroidered on it: three lines that moved away from an open circle.

"Dhal? Zaelyra asked.

Rhyllor shook his head. "I don't know."

He did not claim that his son had passed recently. They could only say that a traveler had wanted to leave an indication to the one who would follow. They copied the sign into a separate notebook from the plan and put the box back in its place.

The old svirfneblin who kept the four names asked if this meant that she would find hers.

"No," Zaelyra replied. "Only that a passage was taken."

The woman tightened the leather in her sleeve. "It's less than I expected."

"Yes."

"But more than anything."

They reached the first shelter before the draft turned. It was an old caravan stop, carved into stone, whose ceiling rested on pillars carved from the rock. Almost erased engravings represented carts and travelers carrying lanterns.

The door had been walled from the inside.

Nym ran his fingers over the joints. "It's not a collapse. Someone closed it."

"To prevent people from entering?" asked Pell.

"Or something to go out," says Brakka.

A low opening, hidden behind a limestone plate, made it possible to reach a side chamber. There were empty lamps, hooks and stone bowls. The soot on the ceiling indicated that people had slept here for a long time. Lines of different sizes marked a wall, including four child-high notches.

The old svirfneblin approached it. "Could it be them?"

"It could be anyone," says Rhylor.

She nodded. "I don't want their names to be written here."

"Okay," Zaelyra replied.

They made the stop for a few hours. Before leaving, Zaelyra discovered behind the walled door a sentence engraved in an ancient form of the common:

The road remains open as long as someone agrees to describe it.

"A motto? Nym asked.

"Or the warning of someone who saw a road disappear from the maps," Ithryl replied.

Zaelyra wrote down the sentence in her notebook, with the name of the stop and the approximate date of their passage. She did not place it on the routes.

The road to the west had not come closer. But it was no longer just a line drawn by Dhal, nor the dream of a young cartographer who wanted to flee the House. It was made of the choices of all those who had walked until then.

Chapter 32 — The walled stop

They didn't all leave together.

In the shelter, an argument broke out around a bag of flour. A man claimed that he had brought half of the reserves. A woman replied that he had taken two owls when he left the relay. He said they belonged to his group; she replied that they came from the common reserves. The voices rose, soon followed by those of two cousins who had not exchanged a word since Veyr.

The Walled Halt



Zaelyra let them speak long enough to understand that no list would settle the dispute. The bag had changed hands during the flight; several had contributed; no one remembered the exact weight.

"We can share it now," she said. "Tomorrow, we will separate the reserves of personal affairs."

"Why would he have as much as me?" asked the woman.

"I don't know what he has already received."

"Then you can't distribute fairly."

"No."

The man crossed his arms. "Do you want me to return the others?"

"If they are common, yes."

"What if they are mine?"

"Then you can keep them. But the others will know that you have two and will decide if they want to travel with you."

He protested, then put the dotres against the wall. No one took them. The woman divided the flour equally, not because Zaelyra had ordered it, but because it was the only gesture that allowed the group to get back on the road without turning the bag into a trial.

The stop had changed the travelers. In Veyr, the danger was visible: the mercenaries, the doors, the marks of the House. Here, he had the face of a misunderstanding that no one could verify. A road did not only separate the place; it revealed what everyone thought they had the right to take.

Nym remarked that the quantities written on chalk on the wall could be read by pursuers.

"They will know what we don't have left," says Zaelyra.

"And the next group will know what it can take."

"This is the risk."

They had to decide who would continue. The gallery sank into a region that the maps called the Clay Faills, although no one agreed on the extent of the name. The old passage was narrow and fast; the detour followed an abandoned caravan road, longer, but wide enough for the wounded.

Some travelers choose the narrow passage under the guidance of the guard. He had learned the signs of Nym during the night. Others stayed near the stop until the next change of air. Two families preferred to turn around, hoping to find a well-known group.

Zaelyra gave them the map until the next crossing. "After that, you'll have to check."

"You're not coming with us?" asked the father.

"Not today."

"You don't know if this path is safe?"

"No."

The man took the map, folded it carefully and waved to his family. He didn't thank her. It was not necessary.

Nym prepared three starting marks: a green line for the passable road, an empty circle for the place where it was necessary to check, two bars for the prohibited passage. The signs did not resemble the codes of the House. A traveler who finds a map without a legend could not interpret it immediately.

"We make them deliberately difficult to read?" asked Pell.

"Difficult to use against those who did not draw them," replied Nym. "Those who leave with us will have the legend."

"What if they lose her?"

"They stop and ask."

"To whom?"

"To someone else."

The boy seemed to find the answer insufficient. Nym did not claim otherwise.

At the time of leaving, a noise sounds behind the walled door of the shelter.

A shot. Then a second, weaker.

Everyone was silent. Brakka put his hand on his axe. The guards raised their weapons. Zaelyra pushed the children back to the side room.

A third blow struck the stone.

"Is there someone behind?" asked Pell.

"Or something that moves," says Nym.

Dust accumulated at the bottom of the wall. Above, the engraving of the three interrupted lines seemed deeper than the day before.

"Shall we open?" asked the guard.

"No," said Zaelyra.

"There could be people."

"Or a toxic air pocket, a drowned gallery, a collapse ready to fall. We don't know what's behind it."

"We can make a small hole."

Nym shook his head. "Even a small hole changes the pressure."

The guard clenched his jaw. "Then we abandon someone."

"We don't know if there is anyone," Zaelyra replied.

"It's a convenient answer."

"Yes. It is also true."

She asked that we note the door, the draft and the blows heard. They placed a warning mark on the plan, not a sign of passage. Nym added the hours and the direction of the breath. Ithryl wrote a message for the next travelers: do not dig without equipment and without air reserve.

Before leaving, Rhylor put a hand against the stone. He listened. The wall did not respond.

In the corridor, the guard walked in the lead without waiting for him to be asked. The young drow with the chin cut stood next to him.

"I heard the blows too," she says. "I don't know what was behind it."

"Do you think we should have opened?"

"I don't know. But I can help keep the brand visible if we come back."

He nodded his head. It was neither a pardon nor an agreement. It was a way not to turn their disagreement into separation.

The Gallery of the Clay Failles began with a natural bridge, too low to stand on it. Veins of red mineral crossed the walls. The water infiltrated it drop by drop and formed small basins at the foot of the bridge.

They advanced by keeping one hand on the rope. In the middle, the ground sank under the last bearer. The stone gave way with a finger, then with a palm.

The rope stretched. The carrier remained suspended above a narrow ravine. A second person went to bed to hold him; a third hung the rope on a natural piton.

"Don't shoot all at the same time!" shouted Nym. "The edge will give way."

Zaelyra planted herself on the ground and advanced to the lip of the ravine. The stone was striated by water. Their weight had to be distributed on the left side, where the rock seemed more solid.

"A person at a time. Nym, keep the rope taut. Rhylor, show him the fulcrum."

The wearer caught a roughness and slowly went up. Once on the bridge, he remained lying down, his face against the stone.

"I lost a bag," he said.

"What did it contain?" asked Kethra.

"Tools. Nothing worth a life."

They waited for his breathing to become regular again. Nym marked the edge of the bridge with three red lines and recommended distributing the loads before the next passage.

"Do you think we can go back here?" asked Pell.

"Maybe."

"You often say that."

"Because that's often all I know."

"What if you're wrong?"

"Then we will correct the map. If we have time."

The boy observed the void under the bridge. "I prefer when stories say that we always find the right way."

"Me too."

They advanced further to a wider room, crossed by the sound of fast water. On the ceiling, a pale glow dyed the stone gray. It was not the day, but it was the first light that did not come from their lamps.

On the wall, a sign resembled that of the copper box. Three lines were away from an open circle. A more recent mark had been engraved underneath. A name: **Saira**.

Kethra stopped. She didn't touch the stone.

"Do you recognize the writing? Zaelyra asked.

"No."

"The name could refer to someone else."

"Yes."

The merchant looked away, then took the repaired loop out of her pocket. She asked it near the name, like a question she didn't know how to ask. They noted the location in a separate notebook. Kethra resumed the loop.

Zaelyra did not know if the glow came from a crack, an underground lake or an exit to the surface. She did not write any of these words on the map. She drew an empty circle and noted: **observed light; unknown origin.**

Chapter 33 — The high salines

They followed the glow without following it completely.

Nym refused to take a light for an outing. It could come from a mushroom, a mineral or a narrow opening that would only let a child pass. Zaelyra had therefore marked three routes: the one that led straight to the glow, the one that bypassed it, and the one that allowed you to return to the stop without crossing the ravine.

"Which one do we choose?" asked Brakka.

"Those who will walk on the road," Zaelyra replied. "Not only those who draw the map."

They held councils near the pools, away from the children. The detour was longer, but the draft of air was maintained there. The direct path crossed a slope of gray sand. No one knew what was under the dust. The third route passed near the glow, then stopped in front of a crevasse.

The High Salines



"If we walk along the sand, we will know before hiring everyone," says Nym. "Two scouts, tightrope. No charges."

"What if the ground gives way?" asked the guard.

"They come back on the rope."

"What if the rope gives way?"

Nym looked at him. "Then we will have learned that the rope was not enough."

The guard did not appreciate the answer, but offered to take the lead. The young drow with a chin cut volunteered to accompany him. They left without long weapons, with two spikes, a safety rope and a covered lamp.

Zaelyra remained on the edge of the sand with the others. The scouts advanced with short steps, testing the ground with a metal rod. For a few minutes, nothing changed. Then the stem sank to the guard.

The guard stepped back. The surface opened, letting sand flow into a narrow fault. A warm breath rose from below.

"Not the direct road," he shouted.

The girl planted a piton in a vein of rock. They came back together, without anyone pulling the rope. Nym measured the current. He went up a deep duct, loaded with a saline smell.

"It's not an opening to the surface," he says. "It's an old drying well."

"Do you recognize him?" asked Pell.

"I recognize the smell. Mine sometimes use similar chambers to preserve the roots. This one is bigger."

The route of the glow remained the only one that had not been verified. They engaged in small groups, leaving the most vulnerable in the shelter with Brakka. Kethra remained with them, although she had initially claimed not to need rest.

"You're hurt? Zaelyra asked.

"I'm tired. It's not the same thing."

"It can become it."

"So I'll stop when I can't walk anymore."

"Don't force us to guess."

Kethra stared at her, then nodded. "I'll tell you."

The glow got stronger as they moved forward. It did not come from a crack in the ceiling, but from a series of shallow basins. Milky crystals lined the edges and sent back the light of the mushrooms of the gallery. From afar, one could have thought that a pale day was filtering from above.

Zaelyra squats. An iridescent film covered the water.

"We don't drink," says Nym.

Pell had already approached a gourd. He moved him away.

"We don't know anything about it," he says.

"There you go. Nym put a piece of cloth in the water. He changed his color almost immediately. "Now at least we know it contains something that wasn't on the fabric."

They looked for a dry passage around the basins. The gallery widened behind a curtain of petrified roots. There, the air was colder and had a regular noise: three strokes, one pause, then three others.

Rhylor put his hand on the wall. "A signal."

They answered with a single note, the agreed code to announce their presence without pretending that they were friends.

The rhythm behind the rock stopped.

A voice rose in the tunnel. "How many of you are?"

"Fourteen in this gallery," replied Zaelyra. "Others are waiting behind."

"Armed?"

"Some."

"Drows?"

"Most of it."

There was a silence. Then a stone panel pivoted, just enough to reveal a dark eye and the tip of a spear.

"Go back to where you came from."

"We are looking for a passage to the west."

"You'll find one elsewhere."

Zaelyra didn't ask to be opened for them. She only asked for the name of the room.

"Why?"

"So as not to confuse it with another on our map."

"She has no name."

"So we will rate it as the room of pale pools."

"Do what you want. As long as you leave."

The door closed.

Nym had noticed a small air duct at ground level. He was blowing in jerks, at the same pace as the blows struck behind the wall. Someone used it to measure pressure, not to communicate.

"They know we're here," he said. "But they also want to know if the air changes when we approach."

"Do you want to use the conduit? Zaelyra asked.

"No. I want them to know that we have seen it and that we will not touch it."

He placed a copper slat next to the opening, without inserting it. The shots resumed: three, then a pause. The panel did not open.

They retreated. A lateral passage went up to the High Salines, an old series of drying chambers. The name appeared on Ithryl's trade maps, but none indicated the occupants. Zaelyra wondered if the walled stop and these rooms had been used for the same network. A road could keep its name when the people who used it had disappeared.

The first staircase was covered with salt crystals. They cracked under the boots. Half-height, they found a niche containing broken bowls and a clay figurine representing an animal with long ears.

"A toy?" asked Pell.

"Or an offering," said Ithryl.

Zaelyra left the figurine where it was. She noted its location, but not its exact shape. It was not up to him to transform the memory of a stranger into a travel curiosity.

At the top, the corridor opened onto terraces carved into a huge rocky pocket. The walls shone with white dust. Corridors rose in steps, each separated by empty basins. An old pipe brought air from a natural chimney.

They were not alone.

A svirfneblin stood on the middle terrace. She had put her tool on the floor and raised her hands, palms open. A small axe hung from his belt. His hair was pulled into two short braids, tightened by copper rings.

"You crossed the bridge? She asked.

"Yes," says Zaelyra.

"And the walled door?"

"We didn't open it."

The woman looked at Nym. "You found the conduit."

"I saw it. I didn't touch it."

"Good."

"You knocked behind the wall? Zaelyra asked.

The svirfneblin took the time to answer. "Not me."

She introduced herself as Ilda Brisecendre, guardian of the pipes of the old salt pan. She did not pretend to speak for those who lived behind the door. The terraces now served as shelter for some Svirfneblin families, refugees after the collapse of their neighborhood further east.

"Will you let us pass?" asked Rhylor.

"I don't decide alone. And you don't have to stay to get an answer."

"We need to know if the road to the west continues."

"She continues. It is not open to your group."

The tone was calm, but Ilda's hand remained near her axe. She had recognized the armor of the drows and the bags of the relay. Nothing obliged Zaelyra to interpret her distrust as an insult.

"What would make you change your mind? She asked.

"That you don't do like the last ones."

"What happened to them?"

"They came in without asking. They took water, opened a door and swore they would come back before nightfall. They never came back."

"Drows?"

"People who knew they would be more afraid if we called them drows."

Ilda pointed to the terraces, where several silhouettes had withdrawn behind the pillars. "You can wait at the threshold until the council hears you. Not closer. The water of the basins is reserved for those who live here."

Nym bowed slightly. "We won't take it."

Zaelyra took out a copy of the map, the one that showed the passage from the bridge, but not the other roads. She put it on the stone in the middle of the terrace and stepped back.

"You can check our brands. We noted what we did not control."

Ilda did not approach. "Why give it to us?"

"It's not a gift. It shows the bridge and the low corridor. You can keep it, destroy it or correct it."

"You don't know what we're going to do with it."

"No."

Ilda waved to a young man posted behind a pillar. He went down cautiously, picked up the map from a corner and brought it to the caretaker.

She studied the route. "Your bridge is badly marked. The left edge sagging two days ago."

Nym approached one step, without crossing the limit. "We went through it this morning."

"So he's collapsed since then."

"Are you sure?"

"I sent my nephew there with a basket of salt."

She corrected the sign with the coal. Zaelyra retained the date. A map was not true because someone had checked it once; it was true for a specific place and time.

"The council will receive you after the rest," says Ilda. "You won't sleep in our rooms. You will keep your weapons in their sheaths. Whoever breaks this rule will leave alone."

Brakka stiffens. "You can't impose on us—"

Zaelyra raised her hand. "We can refuse."

Ilda nodded. "Yes."

"What if we accept?"

"You will have a threshold to rest while we decide. Nothing more."

Zaelyra turned to the travelers. Everyone heard the rule and its limits. After a short exchange, they accepted. Kethra put down her dagger with the other weapons, the handle facing her.

"Do you think they'll let us pass? She asked.

"I don't know."

"What if their answer is no?"

"We're going to find another way."

"It still doesn't look like a plan."

"This is the rest of the plan, when it doesn't work."

Ilda made them bring water in cups that she immediately retrieved. She offered no food or indoor shelter. Zaelyra does not confuse this measure with hostility. The Svirfneblins had granted what they could without giving up what they did not want to share.

When the pale glow reached the upper terraces, the inhabitants got to work. They scraped the salt, checked the pipes, then rolled canvas plates on wooden frames. Their lives had not stopped to welcome travelers.

Zaelyra corrected the charcoal map. Next to the road, she wrote: **Les Salines hautes - passage subject to the agreement of the inhabitants. Unusual water.**

Ilda read the sentence.

"You could only write 'closed passage'."

"It would be wrong. You let us in to the threshold."

"It's not a permission to pass."

"That's why I specified the limit."

Ilda had a thin smile. He disappeared almost immediately, but Zaelyra saw him.

"Maybe the council will want to hear from you, after all."

Chapter 34 — The threshold measurement

The council meets in a chamber above the basins, where the ceiling formed a low vault. Five svirfneblins took a seat around a stone table. Ilda stood near the entrance, without sitting with them.

The Council of the Salines



Zaelyra was allowed to enter with Nym and Rhylor. The others would wait at the threshold, weapons lined up. Before crossing the door, Zaelyra asked if anyone wanted to stay behind.

The guard who had opened the step raised two fingers. "I stay with mine."

"Good."

She didn't ask him to justify himself. He took his place near Brakka, and the door closed silently.

The oldest of the counselors was called Nara Grise-Mèche. A dark spot marked his cheek; a copper compass hung from his neck. She began by examining Zaelyra's hands, then her boots, as if she was trying to find out what terrain had led her there.

"Are you being prosecuted?"

"Yes."

"By whom?"

"Mercenaries who attacked the Veyr relay. The House I come from also asked for our return. I don't know if she sent these men."

"You don't know or you refuse to say it?" asked an advisor.

"I don't know."

"Yet you are the daughter of a Matron."

"Yes."

"That should allow you to answer."

"It should."

The counselor crossed his arms. Nara, on the other hand, seemed more attentive to the confession than to the answer.

"What are you looking for here?"

"A passage to the west. We have families, the injured and little food. We ask for the right to cross the High Salts."

"And what do you offer?"

"A map of the road to the bridge. We noted the hazards and unchecked parts. We can also examine your conduct, if Nym thinks he knows how to do it without damaging them."

Nym tilted his head. "I don't know your network. I can examine a conduct with the agreement of your guardians. I don't promise to fix it."

"You refuse to offer a service you don't know how to render," says Nara.

"Yes."

"It's rare."

"It's safer than the other way around."

The cross-armed advisor leaned forward. "Drows have already promised us maps. They asked us to open a passage. They left with our water and our son."

Rhyllor tensed up. Zaelyra put two fingers on the edge of the table to prevent him from answering too quickly.

"Your son has disappeared? She asked.

"He followed them. He thought they knew a road to the surface."

"When?"

"Three years ago."

"Did you find a trace?"

"A button near a collapsed passage. No body."

The counselor stared at her, perhaps looking for a promise that she had no right to make.

"I don't know what happened to him," she says. "I won't tell you he's alive."

"But would you look for it?"

"If we get the right to pass and if we discover something that can help, we will let you know. I can't promise to come back here."

"That's a very convenient promise."

"Yes. She is for me. It is also for you, because it does not force you to believe us."

The dean exchanged a look with Ilda.

"Do the houses of Menzoberranzan still fight the roads?" asked Nara.

"Yes."

"And Drizzt?"

Zaelyra did not expect this name. "What, Drizzt?"

"It is said that he left, that he crossed the tunnels, that he fought armies. The drows say he was a traitor.

Merchants say he protected caravans. Some say he's back. Others that he died. You come from the city. Which version is true?"

Zaelyra took the time to choose her words. "I've never met Drizzt. I have never seen a reliable document that confirms the exploits attributed to it. I heard his name used to scare children, justify hunting and give courage to those who wanted to leave."

"And you, what did you do with it?"

"I thought he had left the city. I don't know what he did next."

Nara put the copper compass on the table. "Why does his story matter to you?"

"Because I was taught that there was only one way to be drow. His departure may prove that it was wrong. Not that he was right about everything."

The counselor nodded slowly. "A legend can open a door. It can also become another cage."

"Yes."

The silence was interrupted by hurried steps in the corridor. A young svirfneblin entered without waiting for him to be invited. He spoke too fast, his hands waving.

"The low driving has lost its pressure. Room three fills with water."

Ilda stood up before the council responded. Nym looked at Zaelyra.

"Do you know how to isolate driving? She asked.

"I can try to understand your device. I can't guarantee that I'll fix it."

Nara got up. "Come. But you don't touch anything before the guardians allow you."

Room three was two terraces lower. The water flowed from a copper duct, fast and cloudy. Several residents tried to hold the flow with rags and boards. A little girl was perched on a box, clutching a bag of seeds against her.

Nym crouches near the joint. He observed the marks, but kept his hands behind his back.

"Is there a valve?"

Ilda showed him a stone wheel stuck between two pillars. "She commands three conduits. If we close it, we cut the water from the high terraces."

"What if you don't?"

"The lower chamber will be flooded."

"Is there anyone in it? Zaelyra asked.

"Two people," replied the messenger. "They are looking for my sister's child."

The girl on the box got up. "He's with me."

The messenger looked at her, then swore softly. He had run before checking.

"We can divert the water towards the salt gutter," says Nym. "But you have to know if it's clear."

Ilda indicated a passage at ground level, too low for an adult to slip in without tools.

The girl put down the bag of seeds. "I can look."

Her sister held her back. "No."

Nym shook his head. "No one should be sent into the gutter."

He asked for a rope, a flexible rod and a lamp. With Zaelyra, he slid the rod into the conduit, gently, counting the elbows. In the third, she encountered an obstacle. They started again from the other side. The metal hung something flexible.

"Roots?" asked Ilda.

"Maybe."

The caretaker had a hook brought. Nym tied it to the rod and pulled slowly. A package of tempered canvas came out of the gutter, followed by twigs and a wooden plate.

The water gushes harder for a few seconds, then the flow is reduced. The stone wheel was still blocked, but Ilda and two residents managed to turn it a quarter in a circle. The conduit stopped leaking.

No one applauds. They had prevented the flood, not repaired the driving. A line of cracks still ran through the copper.

"The seal will have to be replaced," says Nym. "Today, we only cleared the gutter and decreased the pressure."

"You could fix it?" asked Ilda.

"If I have the right metal and if I understand how to close the three pipes without cutting off the water. I don't know yet."

Nara examined the wheel, then Nym's hands. "You just helped without touching what didn't belong to you."

"The guards showed us what we could do."

"This is not what the others did."

The girl's sister put the bag of seeds on the crate, sheltered from the water. "You prevented my daughter from driving."

"She had offered her help," says Nym.

"She does not always have the right to measure the danger."

"It's true."

The woman did not smile, but her shoulders relaxed.

The council meets a second time, standing in the wet room. The decision was not unanimous. Two councilors agreed that the group would cross the Salines Hautes by the eastern route, provided that they did not approach the living rooms. The third asked them to go back to where they had come from.

Nara proposed a period of observation: Zaelyra and four companions would follow Ilda to the next door. The rest of the group would wait at the threshold under the supervision of the guards. There, they could check the passage and come back to report. If the information agreed, the council would re-examine their application.

"It's not yet the right to pass," says Zaelyra.

"No," Nara replied. "It's the right to check what we told you."

"What if the road is closed?"

"You will leave."

Zaelyra looked at the travelers waiting behind the door. Some would have wanted to refuse. Others would have followed anyone to the west. She presented the proposal without presenting it as a victory.

Rhylor was chosen to accompany him, with Nym, Kethra and the guard who had opened the march. Brakka would remain on the threshold with the injured. Zaelyra did not take Tazri: the child had already walked a lot, and no one knew what the passage contained.

Before departure, Ilda gave them a copper flap lamp.

"If you see two lights, you come back. Only one means that we are waiting for your response."

"What if we don't come back?" asked Kethra.

"Then we will know that we were right to hesitate."

Kethra accepted the lamp. She did not seek to negotiate another rule.

They crossed the eastern gate. Behind them, the salt pan resumed its work. In front, the tunnel descended towards a darkness that smelled of cold water.

Zaelyra finally had a road to the west.

She did not yet have permission to take it.

Chapter 35 — The three lines

Ilda led them to a copper door almost dropped in the rock. She didn't open it right away. She waited for Nym to check the air current, then turned a handle hidden under a plate of salt.

The Copper Door



"This door leads to an old control chamber," she says. "She's been out of service for years. You don't touch the wheels, even if they seem to turn."

"Understood," replied Zaelyra.

Ilda stared at her. "I told everyone."

"And everyone heard."

The caretaker opened the door just enough to pass by. The metal creaked. A smell of stagnant water and dust jumped in their faces. Rhylor signaled to the other two to stay behind him, but Zaelyra waited for Ilda to enter first.

The chamber stretched under the Salines, supported by low arches. Copper pipes passed through the ceiling. Some were split, others had been removed. In the center, a circular basin was empty, except for a layer of brown salt and old footprints.

Nym squats near the first valve. "The leak from your room three comes from here?"

"Maybe. We have condemned the main driving, but we do not know if the drift is still stable."

"I can follow her to the wall. No further without your tools."

Ilda handed him a stem and remained by his side. Nym advanced slowly, describing every sign and every change in pressure. The guardian corrected two of her guesses. He did not protest; he changed his notes.

Zaelyra, on the other hand, studied the footprints around the basin. Most were erased. However, three series were distinguished: heavy boots, narrow soles and bare feet. The traces were not clear enough to say how many people had passed, but the dust had settled differently at the bottom of the steps.

"The fingerprints are not all the same age," she says.

Rhylor observed the edges of the pool. "Some are recent?"

"I don't know. But they cut the dust."

Ilda bent down. "The goalkeepers come to check the valves once a season."

"And the others?"

"Smugglers, maybe. People hiding. I don't ask questions until they enter our rooms."

To the north of the basin, a smaller door had been forced. The lock had been removed cleanly, without metal splinters. Someone knew the mechanism.

Ilda put his hand on the frame. "This play is doomed."

"Since when? Zaelyra asked.

"Since before I arrived."

"You never opened it?"

"No."

"Why did you show it to us?"

"Because you're looking for the road. She may pass behind. And because I don't want another open door without witnesses."

Ilda took out a flat key, but did not slip it into the lock. "If we open, you don't cross the threshold until I've inspected it."

They accepted. She turned the key. The door opened onto a narrow corridor, whose walls were covered with a white mineral powder. The footprints continued there. Here, the bare steps had stopped; the heavy boots continued.

Kethra approached the doormanle. "The three traits."

On the interior wood, someone had engraved three oblique marks. The same as with the name of Saira, in the gallery.

"Do you recognize the sign? Zaelyra asked.

"I recognize a habit. Saira had three lines when she didn't want to sign. She said that names traveled faster than people."

"You're sure it's his brand?"

Kethra passed her thumb over the notches without touching them. "No. I'm sure she used these three traits. I can't prove that she was the one who engraved them here."

Ilda seemed neither convinced nor surprised. "The room remained closed. These marks may date from before his conviction."

"So they are old?" asked Rhylor.

"I don't know. The wood has dried, but it has also been salted."

They didn't open the room anymore. Ilda passed a rod through the gap and checked that no obstacle was blocking it. The air circulated there, weak but regular. Nym measured the pressure. The passage was not drowned, but a sound of water persisted beyond.

"We have to see how far the corridor goes," says Zaelyra.

"No," replied Ilda. "You have to tell me what you know. I will decide if our guardians explore it."

Zaelyra refrained from replying. The agreement gave them only a limited right of observation. She did not have the right to make a broader permission because the discovery interested her.

Kethra was still staring at the three lines.

"If she has passed here, you will want to continue," says Zaelyra.

"Yes."

"Even if Ilda says no?"

Kethra hesitated. "I don't know what I'll do."

"Say it before you decide."

"I just did it."

"Good."

Ilda brought the door back against its frame, without locking it. She made a survey of the room, then asked the visitors to describe what they had seen. Nym gave the air measurements, Rhylor the traces and Zaelyra the location of the corridor. Kethra, on the other hand, described the three brands and Saira's habit, specifying that she could be wrong.

Ilda recorded each testimony on a wax tablet. "It will be enough to ask the council for an inspection, not enough to open the room."

"And the road to the west? Zaelyra asked.

"She goes through the next gallery, if she hasn't given in. The door is blocked on the other side."

"Who blocked her?"

"No one knows."

"Do you want us to check?"

"No. I want you to come back with what you already know."

The answer disappointed Kethra. She turned away from the door.

On the way back, they found a wooden tablet stuck behind a pipe. Ilda forbids them to remove it. She examined it in the light, then wiped it with a dry cloth. A name, almost erased, was engraved in common letters: **Saira V.** Below, a date was distinguished according to the old svirfneblins calendar.

Ithryl was not with them; Zaelyra could not convert the date with certainty. She copied it exactly, sign by sign.

Kethra approached without crossing the limit that Ilda had drawn with a finger on the ground.

"Is it his writing? Zaelyra asked.

"I don't know. She wrote her name with an angle in S, but so many people were able to copy a letter."

"But this date establishes that a Saira came here."

"If the date was engraved at the same time as the name."

Ilda raised the tablet towards the light. The depth of the letters differed. The name had been engraved later than the date, or with a different tool.

"This is not proof," says Kethra.

"No," Zaelyra replied. "It's a better question."

They reported to Ilda, then left without opening the room. The return trip seemed longer to them. Each door they had walked through had asked them for permission that they were not used to asking for. The Salines were not an empty road made available to them; it was the territory of people who had already paid the price of hospitality.

When they reached the threshold, Brakka was waiting for them, arms crossed. Tazri was sitting next to her, the box of maps on her knees.

"So?" asked Brakka.

"The road continues. It is blocked by a door that we are not allowed to open."

"Did you see what's behind?"

"No."

Kethra added: "We found the name of Saira. Not his person."

She showed the transcription of the tablet, without interpreting it further. Brakka read it and returned it.

"Does it help you?"

"That prevents me from saying that she has never been here."

"It's not much."

"No. But it's honest."

Zaelyra reported to the group the measures, risks and limits imposed by the inhabitants. Then she waited for their questions before telling them what she herself hoped for. The council had not yet decided whether they could continue.

Tazri put a finger on the map. "The road is here."

"Yes," Zaelyra replied.

"But it doesn't belong to us."

"No."

The child folded the map carefully. "Then you have to ask again."

Chapter 36 — The right to return

Nara received them before the end of the air cycle. Ilda had already presented his report. The dean placed the two tablets on the table: the one where Nym's measurements appeared and the one where Ilda had copied Saira's name.

The Right to Return



"You could have opened the door," said the counselor who wanted to send them back.

"Yes," Zaelyra replied.

"It may have contained a road."

"Yes."

"And you left it closed."

"That was the condition."

"If the conditions of a foreigner matter more than the need of his group, then he cannot protect anything."

"We could choose not to ask for passage. We couldn't promise to obey and then do the opposite."

The counselor turned against his seat. "You talk as if the rules are enough."

"They are not enough. But their absence would not have helped us."

Nara took the tablet marked with the name. "Kethra, do you recognize the hand?"

"No. I recognize the three strokes, but not the engraving. The Saira I'm looking for used a similar brand. It's possible that it's her."

"Do you intend to stay?"

"If we are allowed to pass, I will follow the group. I will not ask your inhabitants to accompany me."

"What if we refuse?"

Kethra looked at the tablet. "I would go back with them."

"You wouldn't try to open the door alone?"

"No."

The answer had cost something. Zaelyra saw him in the way Kethra kept her hands on her knees, away from the tablet.

The council moved away to deliberate. From the threshold, Zaelyra heard the voices, but not the words. She did not try to listen to them. Brakka had gathered the families in the courtyard and made them aware of the possible outcome: stay in the Salines under observation, leave for the stop, or follow the eastern route if it was granted.

No option was suitable for everyone.

A woman wanted to leave as soon as possible. His brother, injured in the leg, preferred to wait. A young merchant thought that the svirfneblins were wasting their time. The mother of the girl with the notched chin wanted her to stay close to her; the girl replied that she had not yet chosen her next move.

"You have the right not to know," Zaelyra told him.

"That's what everyone here says."

"Because it's true."

"What if I never choose?"

"Then the others will have to decide what they do without pretending that you have chosen for them."

The girl sat near the door. Her mother put a blanket next to her, without touching her.

The Council returned with an interim decision. The group could stay three days in the outer courtyard, without access to the living rooms. A svirfneblin team would inspect the door to the north, accompanied by Nym as an observer. Two travelers from Zaelyra could participate in the repairs of the low conduit, under the direction of Ilda. At the end of these three days, the inhabitants would decide whether to allow the passage to the west.

"It's not an open road," says Nara. "It's a trial period."

"We accept," replied Zaelyra.

"Your group hasn't responded yet."

Zaelyra turned to the court and repeated the conditions. No one answered right away. The man at the two doors asked if the food would be provided. The answer was no. The injured woman asked if she could leave if her condition worsened. Ilda replied that they would help her reach the stop, but that she could not promise the safety of the journey.

At the end, everyone raised their hand to say if they agreed to stay three days. Many refused. They would leave the next day by the way back, with a corrected map of the bridge. The group did not try to hold them back.

Kethra volunteered to work on driving. Nym preferred that Pell accompany him, but the boy was too young to carry the tools. It was the guard, the one who had opened the march, who left with them.

"Do you know how to listen to orders?" asked Ilda.

"I know how to listen to the instructions."

"It's not the same thing."

"I'll find out."

Ilda handed him a pair of gloves. "Start by not touching anything."

The inspection lasted the rest of the day. Nym drew the pipe network from what Ilda showed him. Kethra sorted the tools, noting those that were missing. The guard held the lamp and asked questions before moving. In the second hour, Ilda entrusted him with a key.

"Turn until the first stop. No more."

He obeys. The wheel resisted, then gave way by a quarter turn. The water changed its sound in the copper.

"There you go," said Ilda. "You followed an instruction without turning it into a test of courage."

"Can I get a pride out of it?"

"No. You can remember the difference."

The guard smiled in spite of himself.

Meanwhile, Zaelyra helped Nara compare the travelers' map with the old Salines surveys. The layouts overlapped badly. Some corridors had been closed after landslides; others existed only on second-hand copies.

"You kept the maps of the people who betrayed you? Zaelyra asked.

"We kept the facts they had left behind. Intentions, we cannot archive them."

"And the name of their son?"

"Nara put his hand on the edge of the statement. "His name was Ulven. He is twenty-seven years old today, if he is alive."

"Do you think he followed the travelers?"

"I think he chose to go out. I don't know if he understood who they were."

"Are you waiting for him?"

"No. Nara folded the plan. "I'm waiting for someone to come back with information. It's not the same thing."

In the evening, Zaelyra drew two maps. The first showed the passage they had followed, with the team's records. The second indicated the places where they had been welcomed and the limits imposed by the inhabitants. She did not join the two leaves.

Ithryl, who had spent the day inventorying the stories, sat in front of her.

"You changed the way you draw."

"What do you mean?"

"Before, you wanted a map to lead somewhere. Now, you also mark where to stop."

"I've always marked obstacles."

"The obstacles, yes. Not the refusals."

She observed the two leaves. "A refusal is also a limit of the field."

"Not for everyone. Some will try to pass anyway."

"Then the map must tell them that it is not only dangerous. It is forbidden by those who live there."

Ithryl nodded. He wrote the date and name of Nara next to the limit, without noting that of his son. The council had not allowed this information to travel.

At the dawn of the second day, a signal sounded from the north gallery. Two lights appeared on the shutter of Ilda's lamp.

The travelers gathered in the courtyard. Zaelyra took the map, Rhylor the rope and Nym his pencil case. Kethra stood still near the door, her hand on the repaired buckle.

The first light meant they were waiting for an answer.

The second said they had to come back.

But Ilda had not yet returned from the tunnel.

Chapter 37 — Two lights

The signal did not repeat itself.

Nym put his ear against the door of the salt pan. "Was it two splinters?"

"Yes," says Zaelyra.

"Then we come back," replied the guard.

Kethra looked at the north gallery. "Ilda didn't come back."

Two Lights in the Gallery



"The signal was not a call to follow her," says Rhylor. "It was the order to turn around."

"What if she's hurt?"

"We don't know."

Zaelyra asked Nara. They waited near the door, without touching the lamps. The dean arrived with two guards, still dressed in her work tunic.

"Who was with Ilda? She asked.

"No one," replied the guard. "She wanted to inspect the north gate herself."

Nara turned to the messenger. "Where is the second guardian?"

The young svirfneblin looked down. "He had to join her. He didn't come back either."

Zaelyra did not offer to leave immediately. She explained what they knew: Ilda had gone to inspect the door, two lights had been given, no answer had come back. The signal meant they had to come back, but it didn't say if the door was dangerous.

"We have to go get them," says Kethra.

"This is our gallery," Nara replied. "We're going to decide who's in."

"I know. I'm not asking you to open the passage for us."

"You ask for it anyway."

Kethra looked away. Zaelyra understood that she would not give up the search for Saira, but this time she did not confuse her concern with a right.

Nara had the plan of the conducts brought. The light signal came from a shutter lamp installed near the north door, visible from the Salines hautes. If Ilda had activated it twice, she asked the team to come back. But the absence of the goalkeeper complicated the interpretation: they could be in difficulty, or have simply chosen another exit.

"I'm going to send two people," Nara said. "You will stay here."

Kethra took a step, then stopped.

The dean noticed it. "Do you have anything to add?"

"No."

The two guards left with a rope and an emergency lamp. Nara gave them a delay of one hour. After forty minutes, only one light appeared, then disappeared immediately.

"They saw us," said Rhylor.

"Or someone turned the lamp," Nym replied.

Nara didn't move. "We are waiting for the report."

Patience lasted less than an hour. A guard came back alone, pale with dust. Ilda was stuck in the control chamber. The second guard had slipped into an evacuation duct and fractured his ankle. The main door could no longer open without moving a valve that risked breaking.

"They are alive?" asked Nara.

"Yes. The water rises in the room, but slowly. They closed the inner shutter."

Nym asked for the plan. He followed the network to the bypass valve. "If the low pipe is still under pressure, the water fills the room from the east. It is necessary to isolate the return before pushing the door."

"Can you do it?" asked Nara.

"I can tell you how to check. The goalkeepers will have to turn the wheel."

The council met without leaving the court. Nara asked Zaelyra to choose four people to accompany the guards. She did not grant a general passage; she authorized a rescue team, for a specific duration, with Ilda to find and then bring back.

"If you touch another door, the agreement is canceled," she says.

"Understood," replied Zaelyra.

This time, Kethra was chosen. She did not protest. Rhylor took the ropes, Nym the tools, keeps his lamp. Zaelyra followed them with a copy of the plan.

The control chamber was noisier than before. The water was hitting somewhere behind the walls. They found the first mark on the ground: Ilda's lamp, placed on the side, its flap stuck halfway through the race.

Two splinters could have been a signal. The third had been suffocated by the mechanism.

Nym indicated the return valve. The guards turned her around an eighth circle. The noise changed, but the water did not go down. They waited for the pipes to empty, without forcing.

"We have to close the secondary return," says Nym. "But only after this pressure has dropped."

Kethra observed the marks on the wheel. "She hasn't moved since the last inspection."

"How do you know? Zaelyra asked.

"The dust is intact around the third notch."

Nym checked. She was right. They waited again. The injured guard called from the other side of the wall. His voice was weak but clear.

"We're here," Zaelyra shouted. "Don't move."

"I didn't plan to dance," he replied.

The stroke of humor reassured Nara more than the measures. She put her hand on the wall, then signaled to continue.

After several minutes, Nym gave the signal. The guards turned the wheel. The pipe vibrated, then the pressure relaxed. The water stopped rising.

The door opened through a side passage, just wide enough to let in one rescuer at a time. Ilda was sitting in the water up to her knees. She held the guard's leg still with a strap. She had a cut in her temple, but remained conscious.

"I told you to come back," she said when she saw Zaelyra.

"We're back."

"After."

"Yes."

Ilda closed her eyes, exhausted. "This is the answer I was waiting for."

The guard was out first, tied to a board. Ilda refused to be wear it. She walked leaning on Kethra, without complaining. Once in the corridor, she asked if anyone had opened the north door.

"No," Zaelyra replied.

"The room?"

"Just to help you."

"And the register?"

"It stayed where you left it."

Ilda observed the small wound on his hand. "You could have taken the opportunity to continue."

"Yes."

"Why didn't you do it?"

"Because we came to pick you up."

Nara signaled them to follow her. She didn't thank them in front of everyone. She first asked the guard what he had seen, then Nym to confirm the order of the valves. Everyone gave their version separately. The facts agreed, with one difference: Kethra said that the dust of the third notch had moved; the second guard had not been able to verify it.

"This detail must remain an observation of Kethra," says Nara. "Not a certainty."

"Okay," she replied.

Upon their return to the Salines, the council lifted the ban on staying in the outer courtyard. He still did not grant free access to the galleries, but accepted that a small caravan crossed the eastern route under Ilda's guidance.

"You will go to the watch post," says Nara. "There, you will stop and wait for a guide from the next refuge. You will not continue without his agreement."

"We accept," says Zaelyra.

"You haven't asked those who follow you yet."

She turned to the group. Those who had chosen to leave had already left. The others discussed, then accepted the road, except for the woman whose brother was injured. She preferred to wait for her recovery at the Salines.

His brother hesitated. "I can walk."

"You can walk to the first slope," she says. "After that, you don't know."

He looked at Zaelyra. "Can't you carry me?"

"Yes. But it will take strength from those who will carry you. You have to choose with them, not for them."

He told the two volunteer porters about it. After a while, they decided to leave together, with more frequent stops. The sister stayed in the Salines. She did not kiss her brother; she only gave him a bottle of water and asked him not to lose it.

In the morning, Ilda escorted the group to the eastern gate. She did not go beyond that.

"If you come back, knock three times, wait, then once," she says. "Don't take our old sign for an invitation."

Zaelyra repeated the code. She had the guides repeat it. Then she wrote down the rules in the road book, with Ilda's name and the date.

"Do you always write the names?" asked the caretaker.

"Those of the people who gave us information. Not the ones we are looking for."

"Why?"

"To know who to ask if the map becomes fake."

Ilda thought, then approved. "Then write my name."

The door closed behind them. This time, no one tried to keep it open.

Chapter 38 — The watch post

The oriental gallery rose in a spiral. The walls were streaked with white veins, and the floor bore the marks of old wheels. Nym recognized the road as a salt transport route, once used to connect the Salines to several shelters in the west.

The Watch Post



"Do you know where it ends? Zaelyra asked.

"I know where he was going when mine borrowed it."

"And now?"

"Now the map is older than me."

Ilda walked with them to the first crossroads, then entrusted them to a pair of guides from his community. She didn't go any further. Before leaving them, she gave Nym a small package of copper recovered from the pipeline.

"It's not a payment," she says. "It's a sample of the metal. If you want to understand the crack, you can study it. You won't touch driving without us."

Nym put away the fragment carefully. "I don't promise to find the cause."

"I'm not asking you for a promise."

The first guide was called Vek. He knew the passages to the watch post, but not beyond. His companion, Lurra, wore a short crossbow and rarely answered questions. They had not been chosen to be pleasant; they had been chosen because they knew the terrain.

After two hours, the path divided around a huge stone column. Vek led the group to the left. Nym stopped near an old conduit.

"The map says on the right," Zaelyra remarked.

"The map was made before the column fell," Vek replied. "On the right, the passage is blocked."

"Did you check it?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Last year."

Zaelyra noted the date. She asked to see the blockage, not to put Vek to the test, but so that the map would distinguish her testimony from their observation. They advanced to the branch. On the right, the tunnel was indeed obstructed by debris. A vein of water ooped above the pile and had turned the ground into compact mud.

Nym checked the conduit. "The water comes from higher. If the blockage gives way, the passage could fill up."

"Can we open it?" asked the guard.

"Maybe, but not today."

"However, we will need this road if the detour closes."

"Then it will be another decision, with tools and an estimate of the water level."

The guard nodded. He no longer offered to clear the stones himself.

They took the left. The gallery was narrower than what the map indicated, and a section of the ceiling forced the tall ones to move forward curved. The injured brother slowed down. The porters took turns without comment, until his sister who left the Salines became the subject of a joke that he did not appreciate.

Zaelyra did not take sides. She proposed a stop and asked the group if they wanted to continue at the same pace. The answers were shared. They chose a longer break rather than a forced step.

While they were resting, Kethra examined Ilda's copper fragment. An almost erased engraving ran along the edge: three strokes, then a small angle. She took out Saira's loop and put it next to it. The welds were different, but the angle was repeated.

"Do you recognize something? Zaelyra asked.

"Saira marked his tools like that. Not the tools she sold. The ones she kept."

"This piece comes from a conduct of the Salines."

"Or a stock used by the entire community."

"You're going to ask Ilda?"

"Yes. But not before I can show him why I ask the question."

Kethra put away the copper. She did not turn the similarity into evidence. Zaelyra noticed that she was learning to wait, even when the wait did not suit her.

At the next turn, Lurra raised his fist. Everyone stopped. A red thread crossed the passage at knee height, attached to two pitons. Small pieces of shell were hanging there.

"An alarm?" asked Rhylor.

"Or a mark of territory," Vek replied. "Don't touch him."

The wire did not resemble any of the saline signals. Nym signaled to the last groups to retreat. Zaelyra observed the ground beyond the line. He had light, almost erased footprints that headed towards a niche in the wall.

"Someone went under the wire," she says.

"Or he put it down after his passage," Lurra replied.

They waited. No noise came from the niche. Vek knew the thread, but said he hadn't seen it there before. He refused to cut it.

"The watch station is an hour from here," he says. "We can come back with the guard."

"What if someone is behind?" asked Brakka.

"Then he already knows we're here."

Zaelyra had a stop mark placed away from the wire. She did not want to send a smaller child to go under it, nor throw a stone into the niche. They retreated to a side room and sent Lurra to get the post guard, with Vek as a guide.

Their wait lasted almost two hours. The silence raised the worries. Part of the group feared an ambush; another feared that the mercenaries had found the passage. Rhylor organized the watch rounds. No one left the room alone.

Kethra stayed near the rope. "If it's Saira, she won't want us to wait for her in the hallway."

"If it's Saira, she will know that we didn't enter without permission," Zaelyra replied.

"What if she's in danger?"

"So we'll have to know before we act."

"You can always say that."

"No. I can say it as long as we don't know what's behind the thread. After that, you will have to choose."

The guard returned with Vek. His name was Sarn and he had an old burn on his cheek. He examined the wire without approaching it.

"It's not an alarm from home."

"To whom does it belong? Zaelyra asked.

"I don't know."

Sarn took out a small engraved plaque from his pocket. He put it on the ground, at a distance from the wire, then stepped back. The shells did not move. He waited again, then repeated the gesture with a pebble. Still nothing.

"The thread is not connected to a trap," says Nym. "It is used to hear if someone touches it."

"Or to make believe that we are heard," replied Sarn.

Lurra pointed to a small mark on the wall, near the niche. An open circle, crossed by three lines. The sign was different from those of Drizzt, Dhal and the saline, but Kethra turned pale when she saw it.

"Is it Saira's brand? Zaelyra asked.

"I saw her on her old packages. She used it when she wanted to find something without writing her name."

"And are you sure?"

"I'm sure I've seen it before. Not that she was the one who left her."

Sarn allowed a group approach, but not entry into the niche. They called first. No echo responded. Then the guard ranged a coin on the stone, the signal that the travelers used to announce that they were not approaching with a raised weapon.

The niche was empty. There was a strip of gray fabric, a piece of rope and a flattened metal box. The box was not locked. Sarn opened it with a tip, keeping it at a distance.

It contained dry seeds, two buds and a folded leaf, protected in a thin wax envelope. The writing had drooled on the edges. Ithryl was not there to read it, but Kethra recognized a particular way of separating the letters.

"Is it from Saira?" asked Rhylor.

"I can't swear."

She unfolded the sheet without taking it. The first words were almost gone. There were a few left:

... the salt route is no longer safe. Those who pass after us...

Then a truncated name: **Keth...**

Kethra stood still. She did not reach out.

"Shall we take it? Zaelyra asked.

Sarn answered before her. "It's on our territory. She stays here."

Kethra nodded. "It's fair."

They copied only the visible words, noting the state of the paper and the fact that they could not confirm the writing. Sarn closed the box and put it back in the niche. The common thread was left in place.

"We still have no proof that she is alive," says Kethra.

"No," Zaelyra replied.

"But she may have taken this path."

"Maybe."

Sarn authorized the group to continue to the watch post. He did not grant them access to the gallery beyond that. This time, no one was discussing.

The post was a round room built around an air chimney. An iron gate condemned the western passage. Above, a sign indicated the three rules of the old road: wait for the guide, report the missing, never travel alone.

"Is it still in force? Zaelyra asked.

"The first two," replied Sarn. "The third was added after Ulven's disappearance."

Kethra looked at the iron door. "You looked for her on the other side?"

"Yes. The door has been sealed for three years."

"And the passage continues?"

"We don't know."

The answer was familiar, but here it had a different weight. The watch station was not the threshold of an unknown road. It was the edge of an absence that the inhabitants had learned not to fill with stories.

Zaelyra had each observation recorded: the door, the wire, the incomplete message, the truncated Kethra's name. She made it clear that Kethra's interpretation was personal. Sarn checked the copy and asked him to remove the name.

"The word is almost readable," says Kethra.

"It's almost not an authorization."

She hesitated, then scratched the last letters on the copy. The original sheet would remain in the custody of Sarn.

When they resumed the road to the Salines, the map had gained three places and lost a name. Zaelyra looked at her without satisfaction. The passage to the west existed. We could follow him to a closed door. Beyond that, there was only an incomplete testimony, an old rule and the people who had chosen to keep the threshold.

This time, she wrote in the margin: **do not continue without a guide to the Salines.**

Chapter 39 — Those who have not returned

The council had not met when Zaelyra returned to Les Salines. Sarn made them wait in the outer courtyard, near the salt baskets. The inhabitants passed in front of them without stopping. No one chased them; no one welcomed them anymore.

Kethra asked to speak to Nara. The dean accepted, but demanded that Zaelyra and Ilda be present. The conversation would take place in the room where the maps were kept. Sarn kept the copy of the notes, face down on the table.

"You have information about my son," says Nara.

Kethra didn't look away. "We found a sheet whose name is incomplete. It could contain the beginning of mine. The brand near the niche looks like a brand used by Saira. I don't know if she left her."

Those Who Did Not Return



"Do you think she knew Ulven?"

"I don't know."

"Do you think she left with him?"

"I have no proof."

Nara put her hands on the table. "You say that as if you wanted me to believe you."

"I don't ask to be believed. I want to know if the name I saw can help you recognize its route."

Ilda intervened. "The salt path leads to several shelters. The watch station is not the only way out. If they crossed the door before it was sealed, they were able to reach the western galleries."

"When was the door sealed? Zaelyra asked.

Nara hesitated. "After Ulven's departure."

"Why?"

"Because the travelers who accompanied him had taken water and forced a room. We didn't know if they would come back. The council closed the road to prevent others from entering."

"You also closed the passage through which your son could have returned."

Nara's face hardens. "Yes."

"And did you know?" asked Kethra.

"I understood it later."

Neither of them added any consolation. Silence did not require the response to be softened.

Nara looked at Sarn. "When did you find the sheet?"

"She was already in the niche during the last inspection. I hadn't opened it."

"Why?"

"The red thread warned not to touch the cache."

"You respected the brand," says Nara.

"Yes."

"And then you let Zaelyra discover it."

"She didn't cross the thread."

Nara closed her eyes. When she reopened them, her look was more tired than suspicious. "We still don't know if this sheet comes from Ulven or Saira."

"No," says Kethra.

"But you want to continue to the west."

Kethra thinks. "I want to know if Saira has been here. I also want to follow the road. I don't know yet which of these two desires would make me change direction."

Zaelyra would have preferred her to choose now. That would have made the rest easier, and a clear answer would not have been more honest.

Nara took out an old map from a drawer, folded around a piece of leather. She didn't open it right away.

"Ulven didn't go alone. According to the last register, two other people accompanied him: a drow woman who said her name was Saira, and a merchant from the surface. The merchant's name has been scratched."

Kethra stopped breathing for a moment.

"Did you see him? Zaelyra asked.

"I saw him go to the salt pan years earlier."

"Why didn't you tell the council?"

"Because at the time I had no reason to believe that it was the same person."

"And now?"

"Now I still don't know."

Nara put the map on the table. It showed the way of the salt beyond the watch post, then three branches. Two were crossed with a black line. The third stopped in front of the drawing of a bell.

"This road led to the Refuge des Cloches," she says. "The community that had settled there moved after tremors. We don't know where she went."

"Did you send someone to pick her up? Zaelyra asked.

"Yes."

"And?"

"The team found the shelter empty. The bells had been carried away."

"When?"

"The year Ulven disappeared."

Kethra put her hand flat on the table. "Then he could have gone there."

"He could have."

"What if the community moved?"

"We don't know where she is."

The old map did not promise to find the missing. It offered only a series of places, some of which had ceased to exist as refuges.

Nara refused to let them take the original. She authorized Ithryl to copy the western part, without the name of the merchant or the details of the houses. Ilda added the conditions of passage. Sarn noted what was uncertain.

Zaelyra observed the barred branches. "Why did you close them?"

"The one leads to an unstable gallery. The other has an abandoned guard post. We haven't sent a team there since Ulven left."

"They should be checked."

"Maybe. Not with families, not without a guide, not before knowing if they are still open."

They were limits, not prohibitions made to humiliate them. Zaelyra enrolled them in this way.

At the end of the meeting, Nara authorized the group to stay one more day. She would then give them the name of a guide who could lead them to the first inhabited shelter, if that shelter agreed to receive them.

"You won't go through the sealed door," she said.

"Understood," says Zaelyra.

Kethra did not protest. She kept her eyes on the branch that led to the Refuge des Cloches.

"You want to go get it," said Zaelyra, once they were out.

"I want to know where the road leads."

"It's not the same thing."

"Not yet."

"If you leave alone, you risk compromising the passage of the whole group."

"I won't go alone."

"If the road opens, you could decide to follow this track rather than us."

Kethra didn't answer right away. "Yes."

"Then we'll have to say it before we leave."

"I'll say it."

She didn't promise to stay. Zaelyra had no right to ask him more.

Chapter 40 — A three-voice map

The next day, the Salines prepared their departure. Zaelyra's group would not leave yet; they would wait for the name of the guide and the agreement of the refuge. While waiting, Nym examined the copper fragment with Ilda. They compared the corrosion to the old parts of the pipes, then to the few fragments found in the reserves of the salt pan.

"Metal is of the same composition," Nym concludes. "But this type of copper has served for generations."

"And the brand?" asked Kethra.

Ilda placed the fragment on the fabric. The small angle engraved could be an initial, a sign of manufacture or a repair.

"She may be from Saira," she says. "It can also belong to the workshop that provided the pipes."

Kethra did not defend herself. "I wanted it to be her."

"It's different from believing it," says Zaelyra.

"I know."

Ilda returned the fragment to Nym. "Keep it as a sample. Not as proof."

The sentence entered the caption of the map. Zaelyra reserved three signs for human information: direct testimony, reported story, uncertain identification. Ithryl proposed to add the date and name of the interviewee each time.

"It will make the maps more difficult to read," says the guard.

"They are made to be read," Ithryl replied. "Not to be simple."

Zaelyra traced three versions of the path to the Refuge of the Bells. The first gave only the necessary branches. The second contained air measurements and water levels. The third kept the stories, dates and uncertainties.

Nym examined the foreground. "If the group loses the second map, it will not know where the air changes."

"The guides will know the measures."

"What if a guide disappears?"

"So we go back to the place where the three maps meet."

"What if this room is inaccessible?"

Zaelyra removed the pen from the parchment. She had no answer. Nym didn't ask him to invent one.

They decided that each group would carry at least two complementary fragments, carried by two different people. The stories and names would remain on a separate sheet, entrusted to a person who would not travel in the head.

A Map in Three Voices



"We can make the maps less useful to the pursuers without making them useless to those who follow them," says Zaelyra. "That's all we know how to do."

Kethra heard. "You changed your mind about the complete maps."

"I changed my mind about who should be able to read them."

"It's not the same."

"No."

In the afternoon, Nara announced that a guide had agreed to drive them. His name was Orven, a svirfneblin who had left the Bell Refuge before his abandonment and now lived in a community several days away. He did not know the galleries beyond the last point noted on the map.

"He doesn't promise to take you to a city," Nara explained. "He undertakes to drive you to the first stop and request a hearing."

"Will he travel with us?" asked Rhylor.

"Until you reach the stop, or until he decides that you no longer listen to his warnings."

"It's a reasonable condition," says Zaelyra.

"It's a condition that can put him in danger," Nara replied. "He will not leave without an explicit agreement from your group."

They held their own council in the courtyard. The families had questions. How many days? Two or three, depending on the rhythm. Water? A reservation for the journey, but the following source was not confirmed. Enemies? No recent signal, which did not mean that there was none. A way back? Up to the Salines, yes; beyond that, the maps remained incomplete.

The woman whose brother was injured finally chooses to stay. His brother would leave with the group, accompanied by the carrier and a guide. She entrusted them with the vial, then changed her mind and took it back.

"I'll give it back to you when you come back," she says.

"What if I don't come back?"

"Then she will remain mine."

He smiled for the first time since Veyr's departure. They didn't promise to meet again. They only said to each other where the other could ask for news.

Tazri was placed in the middle group. She did not protest. The box of maps would not be entrusted to her; she would carry the bag of lamps, lighter and necessary for all.

"Do you still want to follow Dhal's sign? Rhylor asked him.

Tazri touched the box. "I want to know if he has passed."

"What if you never know?"

She looked at Zaelyra, as if she was waiting for an adult answer. No one did it.

"Then I will at least know where I walked," she finally said.

Rhylor tilted his head. "It's already something."

In the evening, Zaelyra sat with Nara near the air chimney. The old counselor gave him a strip of cloth bearing the sign of the Salines.

"If you have to come back, show this to the first goalkeeper. It doesn't give you passage, but it proves that we sent you."

"What if someone else takes it?"

"Then he will still have to convince the goalkeeper."

Zaelyra put away the band with the maps, separated from the names.

"Why help us? She asked.

Nara followed with her eyes the streams of dust that rose in the chimney. "I'm not helping you yet. I give you a way to ask without being taken for an intruder. It's different."

"Yes."

"You seem to understand."

"I'm trying."

Nara nodded her head. "This is a more useful answer than many oaths."

Chapter 41 — Orven's invitation

Orven arrived at the Salines with the next air cycle. He wore a short cape, a miner's hammer and a pack of small copper bells sewn to his belt. They didn't jing when he walked.

Orven's Invitation



He greeted Nara, then Ilda. To Zaelyra, he gave a cautious nod.

"Did you draw the map?"

"Some parts. Nym measured the air. Others have indicated the dangers."

"So you didn't draw the map. You did it."

"Yes."

"It's already better."

He asked to see the versions. Zaelyra only gave him the one that showed the route to the Salines and the beginning of the western way. Orven checked the distances with the memory of the place. In two places, he corrected the indications. To a third, he wrote only: **I heard that there was a passage there.**

"You've never seen him? Zaelyra asked.

"No."

"Why write it down?"

"Because someone told me about it and I want to remember who. Not to tell you to take it."

He did not sign the map. He engraved his name on the back of a wooden plate that he kept on him.

"Don't you want us to know that you're guiding us?" asked Rhylor.

"I want people to know who I am if you lose me. Not that everyone who finds the map knows where to look for me."

Zaelyra understood the distinction. She noted that Orven would guide them to the first stop, subject to his continued agreement. The sentence seemed unusual to him on a map, but faithful to what they had agreed.

Before departure, Nara had the conditions read aloud. The travelers repeated them. No water collection without permission. No open door without the guard. No gap from the group without warning. In the event of separation, everyone would return to the last common point, unless the guide gave another instruction.

"What if the guide is wrong?" asked the merchant.

Orven shrugged his shoulders. "Then you'll tell me, and we'll check. I'm not a compass."

"You ask to be followed, but you can be wrong."

"Like you. Like her. Like the one who engraved this map."

The merchant found nothing to answer.

The group left at the end of the day, when the air chimney sucked to the west. Orven walked in the lead, but Nym checked the passages. Zaelyra remained in the middle, near Tazri and the injured. Rhylor closed the march with the guard.

The first part of the road was known to the Svirfneblins. Hammer marks indicated the areas where the ceiling had been consolidated. Orven explained that the Salines had provided salt to several communities before the roads closed. The inhabitants carried the bags by relay, never by a single caravan. Each stop had its own code and rules.

"Why was the road abandoned? Zaelyra asked.

"Several reasons. The stone has moved. Caravans have decreased. Some passages have become too expensive to defend. When a trip stops paying, people declare it cursed to avoid having to explain that they no longer want to pay the guards."

"And the monster stories?"

"Sometimes there's a monster. Sometimes, there is a predator who knows that we prefer to talk about a curse rather than recognize that we have abandoned a stop."

"And in this case?"

"I haven't decided yet."

An hour after their departure, they heard a distant tinkling. Orven's bells remained silent.

He raised his hand and led the group into a side cavity. No one spoke until the sound stopped.

"What was it?" asked Pell.

"A bell," Orven replied.

"A one of yours?"

"No."

"So who made it ring?"

"I don't know."

They waited again. The tinkling did not come back. Orven advanced two scouts to a visible angle, then called them back before they reached the next crossroads.

"We're not going to check?" asked the merchant.

"Not without knowing if the sound calls us or attracts us."

"Maybe there are travelers in trouble."

"Maybe."

The word remained in suspense. Zaelyra did not want to go ahead of a request for help. She also didn't want to send someone into a trap on the strength of a noise alone.

They looked for a second clue. Nym measured the air. The current did not come from the tunnel from which the tinkling had risen, but from a crack above. The sound could have been carried from another gallery.

Orven asked the queue if anyone knew of a bell signal used in the area. Many answered no. The old svirfneblin who was looking for her four loved ones hesitated, then showed the rope tied to her wrist. A small bell hung there, wrapped in fabric.

"My family used three blows to ask us to wait," she says. "A single bell could mean that we had stopped."

"The sound we heard was just one? Zaelyra asked.

"Yes."

"So maybe it's a stop."

"Or an abandoned bell that the current moves," says Nym.

The woman squeezed her bell. "You can't know."

"No. But we can check the current without approaching the bell."

They installed a silk thread at the branch. The current made him vibrate twice, then stopped. The sound returned at the same time, weak and isolated.

Orven agreed to move forward with a guard and Zaelyra, but the rest of the group would remain hidden in the cavity. They followed the wall to a small overhanging gallery. There, a copper bell, split on the side, was suspended from an almost broken wire. With each change of current, it hit the rock.

No one had made him ring. No traveler was waiting for them.

The old woman took a breath that she had been holding since the start. "I'm glad we watched."

"Me too," says Zaelyra.

They didn't take the bell. Orven detached it so that it would stop ringing and put it in a niche, out of the passage. On the map, Zaelyra indicated the sound, its probable origin and the conditions in which they had verified it.

"You wrote 'probable'," Orven remarked.

"We saw the bell. We didn't see the current hit her every time."

"However, you heard the sound at the same time as the wire vibrated."

"It's a good reason to believe it. Not the only possible explanation."

Orven nodded. "You would get along well with my old master. He only believed in the things that had already disappointed him."

"And you?" asked Rhylor.

"I prefer to be disappointed early."

They resumed their march. The incident had taken time, but the woman moved forward more calmly. The merchant no longer spoke of a curse.

At the next stop, they found a sign of three bells engraved on a pillar. Orven said the shelter was nearby. He did not know the current name or the guardian.

Zaelyra drew the pillar, then left the route line unfinished. Behind them, the Salines had moved away; in front, a community may have been waiting, or a passage that had been deserted for years.

Orven rang one of his bells, only once.

No one answered.

He didn't start again.

Chapter 42 — The nameless refuge

They reached the pillar with three bells in the middle of the cycle. The gallery opened into a low, almost round room, whose walls had been polished by generations of passage. The bells were gone. There were only three brackets and an inscription in svirfneblin language, half erased.

The Nameless Refuge



Orven read it in silence.

"What does she say? Zaelyra asked.

"That travelers must wait for the answer."

"What if no one answers?"

"So they're still waiting."

"How long?"

"It's not indicated."

The merchant sighed. "We can't stay here until we run out of water."

"We won't stay there," says Orven. "We can wait at the scheduled location, or turn around."

"There is no other choice?"

"There are always other choices. They are not all good."

Nym examined the hooks. They had been torn off recently, but no tool had left a clear mark. Zaelyra approached a lamp. Under the dust, three small notches appeared above the central hook.

"The bells have been removed. The brand is more recent."

Orven passed the nail in one of the notches. "It's the wake signal. A bell should have remained."

"Why remove it?"

"So that no one can call the shelter without knowing the code."

The gallery had two openings. One went down to an underground stream; the other went up, too narrow for the line. Orven confirmed that the shelter was beyond the climb, but that he could not guarantee that it was still occupied.

They sent two scouts to the first elbow, rope tied. They returned without having seen any light or heard a voice. Nym checked the air. The current went up towards the narrow passage, but turned down near the stream.

"Someone may have closed the chimney," he says. "Or the gallery is collapsed higher."

Orven sat against the pillar. He seemed more tired than he had shown so far.

"I grew up in this shelter," he says. "My sister was still living there when I left the area. The bells were used to announce who was coming. One for well-known travelers. Two for the injured. Three for those we didn't want to see enter."

"And you heard three bells? Zaelyra asked.

"No. The engraved sign only says that there were three hooks. I don't know what code they use now."

He doesn't say he hoped to find his sister. He didn't need to say it.

They set up a temporary camp in the room, at a good distance from the two galleries. The travelers made an inventory of water and food. They could wait until the next cycle, maybe a little longer by rationing. Orven advised not to drink from the stream before Nym had tested it.

The guard proposed to ring the hooks with a stone. Orven opposed it.

"If the community is there, they will know that we have come. If it is gone, we have no reason to wake up everything that lives in the ducts."

"Don't you want us to call your sister?" asked the guard.

"I want to know who will hear. It's not the same thing."

Zaelyra asked travelers to choose between waiting, leaving or sending a single messenger to the uppassage. The scout's proposal won, but he would not leave alone. Orven would accompany him to the first elbow, then come back.

Before they got involved, Tazri handed Orven one of the small blue lanterns. "So that you can find the rope."

Orven accepted it. "Thank you."

"Don't say you're coming back if you don't know."

"I won't say it."

He left with the guard and returned less than an hour later. They had not reached the shelter. The passage had narrowed under recent scree, but a breath of hot air came out. They had heard a weak sound, three separate notes.

Orven didn't know if it was a signal or a stone noise.

This time, Nym thought they could check the air movement with a thread stretched from the threshold. The thread vibrated according to an almost regular rhythm. There were not enough clues to conclude. But the last sound was clearer.

"An answer? Zaelyra asked.

"Maybe," says Orven.

The old svirfneblin who was looking for her relatives asked if she could call in turn. She knew a song from her family, she said, but didn't know if the four people she was looking for had heard it.

Orven refused to let her enter the passage. He offered her to sing from the room, only once, then to wait.

She put her hand on the leather hidden in her sleeve and sang three slow notes. His voice trembled on the last one. The gallery offered no echo.

They waited.

After a long time, a fourth note came to them, so weak that it could have been a dropper.

The old svirfneblin straightened up. "They are here."

Orven did not confirm. "Maybe someone is there."

She closed her eyes. "I know."

The answer had given them a possibility, not a family. Zaelyra wrote it in this way.

Chapter 43 — Three notes

In the morning, the group discovered a new mark on the pillar. A line of chalk crossed the incomplete circle, then stopped at the lower edge. Nym said she wasn't there the day before. Orven says he had never seen her.

Three Notes



The mark could mean "wait", "detour" or simply indicate a measurement point. No one knew the code. They decided not to engage in the climb without interpreting it.

"We heard three notes," said the merchant. "That's enough to say that someone knows we're here."

"The mark may have been drawn before our arrival," Zaelyra replied.

"The dust underneath is intact," says Nym. "It's recent."

"So someone came to the pillar during the night."

"Yes."

Orven examined the ground. No fingerprint was clearly visible. The person had set foot on the dry stones, then left the same way. She knew the habits of the shelter.

They sent a new signal: a blue light, then three blows spaced on the stone. Then they waited, without repeating.

The first cycle went unanswered. In the second, a voice rose from the climb.

"Orven?"

He got up so fast that his bell finally rang.

"Who is speaking? He shouted.

"The one who told you not to come back without your boots."

He remained motionless. "Mara?"

"Your boots are always bad."

Orven lowered his head. He didn't laugh, but his face had gotten rid of a tension that Zaelyra hadn't noticed until then.

A svirfneblin appeared at the first elbow, leaning on a stick. She was older than Orven, with almost white hair and a strip of yellow fabric tied around her arm. Behind her stood two teenagers wearing crossbows.

"You brought a lot of people," she says.

"They're asking for a passage to the west."

"All?"

"Yes."

"So you brought a lot of questions."

Mara didn't invite them to go up. She first asked Orven why he had left, then why he was coming back now. He replied that he had left the shelter after the community moved. He didn't know where the others had gone. Nara had asked him to guide a group to the stop; he had agreed to lead them there, not to guarantee that they would be received.

Mara nodded her head. "You learned to talk less than you know."

"I'm trying."

She examined Zaelyra and the travelers. When she saw the symbol of the Xil'Nrae House engraved on a buckle, her hand closed on her stick.

"I don't want Menzoberranzan guards here."

"I don't order any," Zaelyra replied.

"But you were formed of it."

"Yes."

"And you ran away?"

"I left the city."

"It's not the same as fleeing."

"No."

Mara doesn't smile. She asked if Drizzt was among them. The question surprised even Orven.

"No," said Zaelyra.

"Do you know him?"

"No."

"Do you wear his sign?"

"No."

"So why does his name come up in the stories that the drows bring?"

Zaelyra hesitated. "Because many need a departure to mean something."

Mara watched him for a long time. "And you?"

"I haven't yet decided what mine means."

"Maybe that's why you don't seem to sell a story."

Mara exchanged a few words with the two young guards. She did not give permission to the group to cross. She gave them only one interview, at the foot of the shelter, the next day. In the meantime, they had to stay in the lower room and not approach the upper rooms.

"Why tomorrow?" asked Kethra.

"Because tonight we have to decide if you're lying, if you're dangerous or if you're just tired."

"What if we leave before?"

"Then you will be tired elsewhere."

Mara made them bring a jug of water and two breads of dried seaweed. She did not share them with them; she put them on the threshold and waited for them to take them. Zaelyra asked who they owed the payment to.

"To no one. This is the meal given to waiting travelers."

"What if we are not received tomorrow?"

"Then you will still have eaten."

They didn't all sleep at once. Orven remained near the entrance, without trying to join his sister. Zaelyra asked him why.

"She asked me to wait."

"You could talk to him."

"She has already spoken to me."

"Isn't that enough?"

"For tonight, yes."

At dawn, Mara led them to a room open to a natural fireplace. A thread of green light fell from a crack so high that we could not distinguish the sky. The room seemed less dark than the galleries, without being bright. The children of the refuge had gathered there, curious about the travelers.

Mara asked them to tell their journey, but forbade Zaelyra to make a speech. Each person had to say what they had seen themselves. Nym described the drafts. The guard spoke of the collapsed bridge. Kethra mentioned Saira's name, specifying that she did not know if the brand was hers. Rhylor told Dhal's signs without saying that his son had traced them.

When Zaelyra spoke, she told Veyr's escape and the map they had built. She did not speak on behalf of those who had remained in the Salines.

"Why are you looking for the west?" Mara asked.

"Because we can't go back to the House."

"It's a reason to leave. Not a reason to come to us."

"We are looking for a place where people can choose their route without a single person owning it."

"That sounds like a good idea. What will you do when two groups want the same gallery?"

Zaelyra had no immediate response. She looked at Nym, then Orven. No one spoke in his place.

"We'll have to negotiate," she finally said. "Or look elsewhere."

"What if elsewhere does not exist?"

"Then we'll have to decide what we can share and what we can't. I won't pretend it will be easy."

Mara considered the children, then the adults gathered behind her. "This is not an answer that guarantees peace."

"No."

"But she is one who does not promise to do it for us."

She gave them the passage to the next stop, with a different guide, chosen by the refuge. Orven would stay by Mara's side. The group could not keep the road beyond this point without coming back to ask for a new agreement.

Kethra asked if they had heard of a drow named Saira.

Mara thinks. "A woman with that name crossed the shelter. She came with a svirfneblin boy and a merchant without a banner. They went west again. It was several years ago."

"Do you remember his face?"

"No."

"From his writing?"

"No."

"The boy?"

"He had a split bell that he refused to leave here."

Mara didn't know if it was Ulven. She did not know the rest of their trip and did not know if anyone had survived beyond the last stop.

Kethra closed her fingers around the repaired buckle.

"She was the first person to tell me she saw her," she whispered.

"This is not the first proof that she is alive today," Zaelyra replied.

"I know."

Mara waited for them to write her testimony and her limits. She checked the wording, then allowed the copy to remain in their notes.

The guide to the refuge was called Veli. He did not carry a weapon, but a clay lantern whose flame was almost white. He showed them a map made of small plates connected by a rope. Each plate represented a stop, a well, a door or an unstable land. Veli detached one and handed it to Zaelyra.

"This one is for the way to the next stop. You will return it when we arrive."

"What if she gets lost?"

"Then you will say it."

"What if you don't believe us?"

"Then we'll look for her."

Zaelyra took the plate. The journey was short on the map, but the rope continued beyond the last knot. She didn't ask what to expect next.

Behind them, Mara and Orven remained at the threshold. The sister did not ask him to come back soon. He didn't promise anything.

The group left west with a road, a guide and a single plate to return.

For the first time since they left Veyr, the map did not belong to them at all.

And yet, they knew where to take the next step.

Chapter 44 — The plate returned

Veli did not give them a whole map. He walked with the rope of small plates wrapped around his wrist and untied a sign only when they reached the place he represented.

At the first stop, he put the plate on a flat stone. The drawing of a well was engraved on one side; on the other, a mark indicated that the water had not been checked for two cycles.

The Returned Plaque



Nym examined the opening without approaching it. The air that rose had no smell, but the silk thread was covered with condensation.

"Can we fill the gourds?" asked Veli.

"Not before testing the water."

"The community is using it."

"Then she knows what to expect. We don't know if our group will react in the same way."

Veli is not offended. He called an old svirfneblin who worked not far from there. She showed them the signs of the source: the taste changed after the rains, and the children should not drink it when the foam turned red.

Nym took a small amount and waited. They only filled a gourd, which they marked with charcoal. The others remained empty until the next stop.

"Do you always make so much fuss before drinking?" asked the merchant.

"Only when you don't know what's in the water," Nym replied.

"What if we are thirsty?"

"So we decide if risk is better than thirst. But we do not claim that the risk does not exist."

The source was not toxic. It contained an amount of salt that could make you sick if you drank too much. Veli noted the result on his plate, then returned it to Zaelyra.

"Is she yours now? She asked.

"No. She is on the road. You return it to the next stop."

They advanced into a wider gallery where the rock took on shades of amber. Light filaments ran under the wall, drawing irregular lines. Tazri walked near Veli and asked him why the plates were connected by a rope.

"Because the roads change, but the rope can be redone."

"What if we lose a plate?"

"We record it again, if anyone knows the place."

"So it's not the plate that keeps the way."

Veli gave him a surprised look. "No. It's the people who remember together."

The group stopped near an old toll station. A wooden barrier blocked the entrance, covered with inscriptions in several languages. Veli asked the travelers to stay behind him while he announced their presence.

A woman appeared on the stone balcony. She wore a leather jacket with reinforced shoulders and a register attached to her waist.

"You come from the refuge?"

"Yes. Mara sends you."

"She could have warned."

"She didn't know when we would arrive."

"Who accompanies you?"

Veli gave the number of people and named the wounded, without revealing the names of those who had chosen to stay behind. The woman went down, observed their weapons arranged and asked for their road license plate.

Zaelyra handed it to him. The caretaker compared her to her register, then frowned.

"This brand is fake."

"Veli gave it to us at the shelter," says Zaelyra.

"The symbol is good. The engraving is not."

Veli took the plate. Under the sign of the refuge, someone had added a tiny, almost invisible line that transformed the waiting mark into an authorization to pass.

"I didn't engrave that," he says.

"Someone must have taken it before you gave it to Zaelyra," said the caretaker.

"She was in my hand."

The woman turned to the group. "Three days ago, travelers entered with the same brand. They claimed that the shelter had given them free passage. They didn't return their plate."

"How many were they? Zaelyra asked.

"Five. Two drows, a dwarf, two humans. They paid the toll, then went west."

"Do you have a description?"

"No. They paid in advance for a road we didn't give them."

Veli observed the falsified sign. "Someone wants to pretend to be the refuge."

"Or wants us to think so," says Zaelyra.

The caretaker introduced herself as Maera Venn, head of the post. She didn't let the group in. They would wait in the outside gallery while she checked the registers. The fake plate would stay with her.

"Can't we continue?" asked the merchant.

"Not with a contested brand," replied Maera.

"It's absurd."

"It's less absurd than letting someone pass on a false order."

Zaelyra accepted the verification. Veli, on the other hand, sat on a box and fixed the empty rope to his wrist.

"Are you afraid that Mara thinks you gave her?" asked Tazri.

"I'm afraid she's right to think so."

"Did you give it?"

"No."

"So she's not right."

"People don't need reason to believe one thing. They need elements."

Zaelyra heard the echo of her own rules in the answer. She didn't tell him she believed him. She asked Maera if there was a way to check the passage of the plate from the shelter.

The caretaker returned her register. "Each plate has a number under the rope. It is not registered."

"She comes from the shelter."

"Maybe. Or someone copied his drawing."

Veli detached the rope from his wrist and placed it in front of Maera. The knots were irregular, marked by a red thread at specific intervals.

"This is Mara's rope," he said. "She never leaves the plates."

Maera examined the knots, then the false engraving. "This is not the plaque of the refuge. It's a copy."

Veli resumed the rope, but her face did not lighten. "Someone took the time to do it."

Maera let them enter the courtyard of the post, not further away. She served them a clear soup and explained that a second group had tried to cross the toll with a similar copy the day before. This one had not left for the west. He had been arrested by the guards after threatening a traveler who refused to pay.

"Where is he now? Zaelyra asked.

"In the waiting room."

"Can I talk to them?" "

"Why?"

"To know if they used the same sign and if they saw the other five."

"You are not an investigator."

"No. But we have the same mark on our notes. I may be able to recognize what was copied."

Maera hesitated. "You will talk behind a grid. You don't promise anything and you don't give the names of those who travel with you."

"Okay."

The waiting room smelled of iron and damp laundry. Three travelers were sitting there, a drow with light hair, an elderly human and a young dwarf with a bandaged wrist. They didn't wear the same fake plate.

"You copied the sign of the refuge? Zaelyra asked.

The drow man straightened up. "We bought a map."

"To whom?"

"A merchant. He told us that the toll was settled."

"Did he give you a plate?"

"Yes."

"Do you still have it?"

The man shook his head. "The guard took her."

Zaelyra didn't ask her name. He didn't give it. She only asked him if the plaque had a line added to the symbol of the refuge.

"Yes."

"And the people who sold it to you?"

"They said they had already crossed."

"Have you seen them?"

"No."

The elderly woman intervened. "He wanted to pay without asking any questions. We were tired. The dwarf had a fever."

"Did the merchant say where to find the road?"

"He gave us a direction, not a passage."

Maera ended the interview. The caretaker had no proof that these travelers were innocent, but she had no reason to keep them either. She released them under escort, giving them a detour map and canceling the passage fees.

Before they left, Zaelyra described to them the difference between the real sign and the copy, without giving the details of the road. The drow man listened to him, then looked at the house's mark on his loop.

"Do you think everyone should travel with a map?"

"I think everyone should know what they are asked to follow."

"What if the map lies?"

"So we look for who drew it, and when."

"It's a lot of work."

"Yes."

The traveler did not thank her. He left the post with his companions.

Maera kept the falsified copy. She authorized Veli to continue to the next stop, but demanded that he return with the plate intact. The road had ceased to be a simple matter of hospitality. Someone made fake passes, and travelers who bought them could become both victims and threats.

Zaelyra noted the added line, the number of groups concerned and the lack of a reliable description of the seller. She wrote in the margin: **do not attribute the falsification to a House without proof.**

Kethra read the sentence. "You think of Bregan D'aerthe."

"I think of all those who sell a road without having checked it."

"This includes a lot of people."

"Presely."

Veli took the road plate and put it back on his rope. "The next stop will decide if she still wants to receive us."

The merchant got up. "What if she refuses?"

"We will have the answer."

"This is not an itinerary."

"No," said Zaelyra. "It's a limit."

Chapter 45 — The added brand

Maera only opened the western door to them after receiving a message from the next post. She didn't give them the content. She only told them that the road was clear to the Bassin des Veilleurs and that they had to wait for an escort there.

Before they left, she handed Zaelyra a copy of the fake plate, this time without the added line.

"I don't want you to win," she says. "I want you to look at her."

Zaelyra compared the engraving to Mara's sign. The copy had been made in a softer material, then hardened in heat. The forger had reproduced the general form, but inverted two small marks on the reverse.

"Is it from a workshop? She asked.

"Probably."

"Which one?"

"I don't know."

Maera put his finger on a tiny symbol on the edge of the plate. "This sign appears on cargoes that pass through several roads. It is found in drows merchants, dwarves and humans. It does not designate a single organization."

Kethra leaned off. She knew the symbol. "It's a broker's brand. Some Bregan D'aerthe employees use it, but not only them."

"Have you ever seen them? Zaelyra asked.

"Yes."

"On goods sold by you?"

Kethra stared at the sign. "Yes."

The answer did not surprise anyone. She didn't try to apologize.

"Is it the same broker who asked you for the road to Veyr? Zaelyra asked.

"I don't know. Brands are shared. I have never seen his face."

"Can you recognize his way of writing?"

"Maybe. If I see her."

Zaelyra didn't ask him to promise. Maera took back the copy and put it in his register.

Veli led them through a narrower passage, where the air rushed at regular intervals. The Vigileurs basin was half a day's walk away. The road plate indicated a stop guarded by a family of guards, who watched the flow of a spring and lent lamps to travelers.

The walk was quieter than the previous ones. The road widened in places, and pale mushrooms illuminated the walls. The young drow with the chin notch said that she had chosen to leave not because she wanted to live on the surface, but because her family had already decided what she would do with her life.

"I don't know what I want instead," she says.

"You don't have to know before you leave," Zaelyra replied.

"What if I like what I discover here?"

"Then you can choose to stay."

"What if I want to go home one day?"

Zaelyra looked at the gallery behind them. "So the way back will also have to be a possibility."

The young drow nodded her head. She did not ask if Zaelyra would come back herself.

Halfway, Veli stopped in front of a smooth wall. He removed the plate from his rope and placed it against an invisible notch. Part of the rock opened onto a small alcove where ground lamps and a bottle of oil rested.

"A deposit? Nym asked.

"A common reserve. People take what they need and leave what they can."

"How do you know that no one empties everything?"

"Sometimes someone does it. So there is no more reserve."

The merchant frowned. "Is that your only protection?"

"No. There are also people who need the reserve to exist tomorrow."

They filled two lamps, then left a measure of oil and a roll of wick. Zaelyra noted the quantity. Veli reminded him that the depot belonged to the road, not to a single community.

"Does the map indicate the deposit? She asked.

"No."

"Why?"

"Because those who know it don't need to read it. Those who don't know him can ask."

"And those who have no one to ask?"

Veli did not respond immediately. "Then maybe it should be indicated. But not on a map that anyone can take."

They added a small sign on the plate, visible only when the light passed through a notch. The reserve would remain findable for those who knew how to look for it, but its location would not be written in clear.

The Veilleurs basin turned out to be a natural basin, fed by a hot spring. Wooden walkways bypassed the water. Several lanterns were lit above the platforms, much more numerous than in the Salines. The light gave the walls an amber hue.

A woman in light armor was waiting for them on the walkway. Next to him stood a young human with pale skin, his eyes blindfolded by a clean cloth.

"Veli? She called.

"I'm here."

"Did you bring back the plate?"

He handed it to her. The woman checked it, then looked at the travelers.

"I am Ressa, guardian of the pool. The road to the west is closed tonight."

"Why? Zaelyra asked.

"A group arrived before you. They demanded the passage with a brand that looks like the one you brought."

"Where are they?"

"Waiting."

The young human at his side tilted his head towards Zaelyra. "You are the cartographer?"

"There are several in the group."

"Did you see the plate?"

"Yes."

"Do you recognize the name engraved on the back?"

He handed her a piece of copper. A series of letters was struck upside down: **Venn**.

The guardian stiffens. "It's not my name."

"It's my father's," said the young man. "He disappeared with the five travelers Maera told you about."

Ressa took his arm. "Senn, you had to wait."

"I've been waiting for three days."

Zaelyra observed the fragment. The name could be a signature, an order or a piece marking. He did not prove that Senn's father had made the fake plates, nor that he was alive.

"Where did you find this piece? She asked.

"In the reserve of the old post."

"Did you go there alone?"

"No. With two guards."

"Did they see the plate?"

"Yes."

"Then we should hear their version before drawing a conclusion."

Senn removed the piece of copper from his hand. "You talk as if a name never belonged to anyone."

"I speak like someone who knows that you can engrave a name on what you want."

Ressa demanded that the group wait in the lower courtyard. She couldn't allow them to cross as long as she didn't know if the fake travelers were still nearby. Veli handed him the plate, but did not let the rope leave his hands.

"We will follow your rules," says Zaelyra. "But we will not be questioned as if it was already proven that we are involved in this case."

"I'm not accusing you," Ressa replied. "I tell you that the road is closed."

"It's different."

"Yes."

The group was taken to a room adjacent to the basin. They could see the walkways, but not the western entrance. No guard locked them up. Two svirfneblins remained outside, close enough to be heard.

Tazri approached Senn. "You want your father to be alive?"

"Of course."

"What if he didn't make the plate?"

"Then I will look differently."

"What if it's him?"

Senn looked at the copper. "Then I want to know why he disappeared."

"Do you know what you'll do if you find him?"

"No."

Tazri nodded, as if this answer was familiar to him. She returned to the lamps.

Zaelyra asked Kethra to describe the broker who had approached Veyr, without trying to get her to say what she didn't know. Kethra remembered a gray coat, a stoneless ring and a voice that never rose. None of this allowed to recognize a person.

"Did he give you a name?"

"Not his. He said he was called the Watchman."

"Was that his real name?"

"No."

"Why did you believe it?"

"I didn't believe it. I pretended I didn't need to know."

Zaelyra did not insist. That evening, there was no additional truth to obtain.

When Ressa returned, she had with her the two guards who had accompanied Senn to the old post. They confirmed that they had found the copper in an overturned box, next to tools and plate fragments. The object was old. They didn't know if he had been moved recently.

"My father worked in copper," says Senn. "It's his brand."

"There are other artisans who used this punch," replied one of the guards. "We saw the same brand on coins and tools."

"Then why keep it?"

"Because it's yours," says Ressa. "Not because it proves something."

Senn put the piece away.

The caretaker announced that they could get back on the road the next day, under escort, provided they did not continue beyond the next door. The five missing travelers would be the subject of a local search. Zaelyra could leave a copy of the road to the post, but no information about the Salines or Mara's refuge.

"It will slow us down," said the merchant.

"Yes," Zaelyra replied.

"And this will not necessarily bring us closer to the west."

"No."

"Do you accept anyway?"

She looked at the families, the injured, Senn who was waiting for an answer that no plate could give her. "We can refuse and look for another passage. But we cannot claim that this group does not exist."

The merchant remained silent. He did not raise his hand to approve; he did not oppose it either.

For that night, the basin gave them measured water and dry soil. The amber light made the faces less hard. No one confuses this heat with safety.

In the morning, a bell rang on the footbridge, not by the wind this time, but under the hand of Ressa. A single note announced the departure.

The western door opened.

Behind, the path descended to a network of galleries, none of which appeared on the Veli plate.

Zaelyra returned the road piece to the guide. He attached it to the rope. They only took their own maps, incomplete and dated.

Then they crossed the basin of the Watchmen.

Chapter 46 — The gallery of splinters

The road that opened behind the Veilleurs basin was not a gallery, but a succession of ducts cut from different times. Some walls were smooth; others still carried the traces of tools too small for Brakka's shoulders.

Ressa had entrusted them with two guardians. One knew the first branches; the other had never surpassed the second. They were ordered to lead them to an old shelter, then return to the pool with their report.

"We won't go beyond that?" Zaelyra asked.

"Not without a guide to the next stop," replied the caretaker, the one called Eri.

Veli was no longer with them. He had returned the plate and remained at the basin. Zaelyra had not had the opportunity to ask him if he hoped to return to his sister's shelter. She did not know if this absence was a choice or an obligation.

The path narrows under a row of stone spikes. One of them was broken at ground level. The break was fresh; splinters still rested on the dust.

"Someone came by recently," said the guard.

"Someone or something," Nym corrected.

They checked the ceiling before moving forward. No movement. The tips could have given way under the effect of humidity. Zaelyra drew the break and the risk of falling, but Eri asked her not to mark the exact location.

"If someone follows the map, they must look at the ceiling instead of running to the indicated point."

Zaelyra replaced the small sign with a general warning.

At the next elbow, they found a piece of rope tied to a piton. The knot was simple, but the end had been cut clean. Nym looked at the fiber. "This rope was cut with a blade, not broken by weight."

Rhylor examined the wall. Friction marks descended to the ground, where a charge would have been dragged.

"The five missing?" asked the guard.

Eri didn't answer. She first observed the gallery, then the piton. "There are a lot of people who travel. We don't know who came here."

Zaelyra noted this wording. Ressa's team had the right to look for the five, but not to make each trace a confirmation.

They reached the shelter before the end of the cycle. It was an alcove between two conduits, wide enough for six people. The water fell from the ceiling into a stone trough. The trough was clean, but a cup had been left near the wall.

It was split in two.

Kethra bent down to watch the break. "It broke while falling."

"Or someone hit him," said the guard.

"The brand starts from the inside. She showed the chipped glaze. "He was placed on the edge."

"Do you know how to read the cups now?" asked the merchant.

"I can read the items I sold. This one comes from a batch of low forges."

"Did you sell any? Zaelyra asked.

"Yes."

"To Saira?"

Kethra shook her head. "I don't know."

Eri retrieved the cup with leather gloves and put it in a separate pocket. She didn't let anyone keep him. The object would be brought back to the basin for comparison with the effects of the five travelers.

Nym took a measurement of the water. It was cold and slightly salty. The air current crossed the shelter from north to south, which could indicate an open duct further away.

"Can we go with the flow?" asked the guard.

"Until the next security point," says Eri. "Not after."

They consulted the shared map. The route showed a bend to the west, then an area without a survey. Orven had not been beyond this section. The map had been copied several times and the most recent line came from a merchant, with no specific date.

"We could go and see," said the merchant. "Just the elbow."

Eri shook his head. "We've reached our limit."

"But what if the travelers are there?"

"Then we need another guide."

Zaelyra understood his impatience. They had found three traces that could lead to the missing and stopped before they knew. But the presence of signs was not an authorization.

She had the last place observed drawn and organized the return. Going up, they heard a crumple behind a wall. The guards raised their lamps. Rhylor took the lead, but did not draw his gun.

"Is there anyone?" called Zaelyra.

A breath answered. Then a voice: "Water."

Eri signaled not to move forward. She asked who was talking, how many they were and if they could walk.

"Only one. I can walk."

"Your name?"

The silence lasted too long.

"Jorren."

"Do you have a gun?"

"No."

Eri made a sign to the guards, who moved away without lowering their lamps. A figure appeared between two stones, a thin human covered in red dust. He held an empty gourd and a hand pressed against his side.

"You are one of the five?" asked Eri.

"I don't know who you're talking about."

"Do you come from the basin?"

"No."

Kethra noticed the piece of canvas tied to her arm. The fabric had the same broker's sign as the fake plate, but the pattern had been half scratched.

"Who gave you that? Zaelyra asked.

The man stepped back. "Nobody."

"You're hurt. We can take you back to the pool."

"I'm not going back there."

"Why?"

"They will take the canvas."

Eri held out his hand, palm open. "If you were forced, you can say it without giving a name."

The man looked at the guards, then Kethra. "A caravan was hijacked. They said the road was open. We followed the marks, then we had to pay for each door. When some refused, they left them behind."

"How much?" asked Rhylor.

"I don't know. Five, maybe."

"Did you see them?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Hier."

Zaelyra exchanged a look with Eri. It was the first recent trace that linked the fake plates to a missing group, but the man could be wrong about the number.

Eri offered him to come back with them, without touching the canvas before having it examined by Ressa. The man hesitated.

"I can't go back to the pool."

"You won't be locked up there," says Zaelyra. "But they will ask you questions. You can also refuse."

"What if I refuse?"

"We will leave you here with water and a map to the shelter."

The man looked down at his empty gourd. "I'm coming. But the canvas remains mine."

"Okay," says Eri. "We won't take it without your consent."

His name was Jorren, a dealer of tool parts. He had traveled with a group of six; two had been separated in a passage, the others had been captured by those who had sold them the false itinerary. He didn't know where they were taken.

They helped him walk to the pool, stopping at every change of air. No one asked him the name of the merchant or tried to touch the canvas. Eri had already asked a healer to prepare a place away from other travelers.

Before crossing the threshold, Jorren stopped. "If you say I gave the sign, they will find me."

"Who is that? Zaelyra asked.

"The ones who wear the mark."

"We can keep your name out of the copy," she replied. "But I can't promise that no one will recognize you."

Jorren looked at her, then nodded. He entered by himself.

Chapter 47 — The witness of the road

Ressa had Jorren treated before questioning him. She didn't ask him to remove the fabric. She only asked two guards to stay in the room and had Senn called to check if the man knew his father.

Senn shook his head after observing him. "I've never seen him."

Jorren, on the other hand, recognized Venn's name. "The craftsman? He fixed a wheel for our caravan."

Senn leaned towards him. "When?"

"It was more than a year ago. Maybe two. I don't know anymore."

"Where?"

"At a post near a basalt gallery. It was called the Threshold of Barrels."

Ressa asked if Jorren could describe the man. He gave a waist, a short beard, a stiff left hand. Senn did not recognize the description. His father had lost two fingers in his right hand.

The silence that followed was not a new disappointment. It was the correction of a wait that had taken up too much space.

"It can be another Venn," says Zaelyra.

"Yes," Senn replied. "Or my father with a false hand."

"Do you want to go to the Threshold of Barrels?"

"Yes."

Ressa intervened. "This position is two days away and the road has not been checked since last season."

"Then it will have to be checked."

"Not by you alone."

Senn turned to Jorren. "Did the caravan continue west?"

"A part. The other was taken to a place called the Fosse aux Cloches. I didn't go."

Kethra reacts to the name. "The Fosse aux Cloches is not the Refuge des Cloches."

"How do you know? Zaelyra asked.

"I heard the name in the trade circuits. It was a storage place, not a refuge. We paid the guides to avoid this area."

Jorren had not heard of Saira. He had not seen a drow corresponding to Kethra's description. He only remembered that the group that had hijacked them was wearing gray plates and that one of them was limping.

"Where did they go?" asked Kethra.

"To the south."

"Can you describe the brand?"

"An open circle and an added line on it."

Zaelyra put the copy of the fake plaque in front of him, without touching it on his garment. Jorren recognized her as resembling the one that had been used to divert his caravan. He did not confirm that it was exactly the same.

Ressa noted each answer separately. Jorren's story agreed with some of the information received at the post, but not with everything. He spoke of six travelers, while the registers reported five missing. One could have been a local guide; it could also be two different groups.

"We will have to return to the old shelter," says Eri. "There may be other traces."

"With whom?" asked Ressa.

"A team of goalkeepers."

"And Zaelyra?"

"She saw the wire and the niche."

Ressa reflects. "She can come as an observer. She will not be responsible for deciding who is arrested or who is released."

Zaelyra accepted. She didn't want the map to make her an authority she wasn't.

Kethra stayed in the pool with Senn. He wanted to hear everything Jorren remembered about the Threshold of the Barrels. She asked him if he intended to abandon his father's search to follow the trail of the Pit of the Bells.

"I don't know," he said.

"So don't choose yet."

"You say that because you also don't know what to do with Saira."

Kethra did not answer.

"You've been looking for her for a long time?" asked Senn.

"Long enough to have confused a wish with a clue."

"And are you still going to continue?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because a wish is not proof, but it is not a reason to stop either."

Zaelyra heard the sentence as she left the room. She wondered if this distinction could apply to her too. Drizzt was not proof that a life elsewhere would be better. It was a contradictory story to which she had given the form of an opening. This did not cancel his desire to leave. It only reminded her that she had to find out what she wanted, beyond the name of another.

The team returned to the splinters gallery with a basin guide and two community guardians. Jorren remained at rest; he had not wanted to accompany them. They found the cut thread, the split cup and the niche. One of the guards spotted an additional trace, a metal friction against the wall, which led to a low opening.

This opening did not appear on any map. It was too narrow for a loaded person, but a thin individual could slip into it. The passage descended south, towards the Fosse aux Cloches.

Ressa had the edges examined. The dust had been moved recently, but the water had erased the footprints.

"Can we come by?" asked the guard.

"Yes," replied Nym. "If we agree to crawl and come out without guarantee of being able to come back."

"So we don't go in," says Eri.

One of the guards protested. "If the missing are there—"

"We have no proof that they went through this opening," Zaelyra replied. "And we don't know if she's joining the Pit."

"But someone used it."

"Yes."

Ressa asked his team to install a surveillance wire and come back with more equipment. She did not allow the exploration. The decision displeased the guard who wanted to enter, but he agreed to lay the thread.

On returning, Zaelyra noticed that Jorren had left the break room. He hadn't gone far. He stood in front of the basin map and followed the road to the Seil des Tonneaux.

"Are you looking for another way out? She asked.

"I'm looking for the place where I lost the others."

"You can't go now."

"I know."

He stepped back from the map. "But I want to be able to describe it when someone is ready to listen."

Zaelyra offered him to dictate his journey to Ithryl. Jorren accepted on condition that his name and that of his companions remained separate from the exact coordinates.

Ithryl noted the details, then made him reread the story. Jorren corrected two directions and added that he had left the caravan of his own free will to look for water. He didn't know if the others thought he had lost him or if they had abandoned him.

"Do you want us to write it?" Ithryl asked.

"Yes. I don't want people to think I was kidnapped if I chose to leave. But I also don't want them to say that the others have abandoned me."

"Then we will write exactly this: you left the caravan to look for water, and you do not know what happened next."

Jorren nodded. His part of the story did not explain that of the others. It could at least prevent it from being replaced by a guess.

In the evening, Ressa allowed travelers to resume the road to the next refuge, but not to continue towards the Threshold of Barrels. She sent a team to look for the missing and promised to send their descriptions to Nara.

Senn asked to accompany him. Ressa refused. He protested, then understood that he did not know the gallery and that his impatience would not make the team more competent.

"Will you let me know if you find proof?" He asked Ressa.

"Yes."

"Even if she says he's dead?"

"Yes."

He accepted this answer, without thanking her.

Zaelyra gathered the group and explained the authorized itinerary. Families could continue to a safe stop. Those who wanted to look for the missing should wait for Ressa's team or come back later with his agreement.

The merchant raised his hand. "We left for the west."

"Yes."

"We can't stop every time a stranger disappears."

"No."

"So why do we stop?"

"Because this disappearance is related to the road we are going to take, and we can help without sending the whole group into an unknown passage."

The merchant is thinking. "What if next time, we can't help without risking everyone?"

"We will decide with the information we have."

He lowered his hand. It was not an agreement; it was the acceptance of not deciding in advance.

They left on the first day before. Jorren remained at the pool, under the protection of Ressa. Senn gave him a small piece of copper with a notch on the edge.

"If you remember anything else, show it."

Jorren closed his hand on the room. "I will do it."

Zaelyra did not know if this promise would be kept. She didn't write it on the map.

Chapter 48 — The threshold market

The next stop had a name engraved on a bone plate: the Market of the Thresholds. Travelers entered through a sloping corridor, between two pillars covered with small copper rings. Each ring indicated the price of a service: water, lamp, guide, repair, shelter. Some were empty. Others carried wooden chips.

Veli had told them not to believe that a market was neutral because its prices were displayed. He hadn't explained to them what he meant.

A gray-skinned woman was waiting for them near a scale. She was wearing a wool jacket and a butcher's knife on her belt. Her name was Dorga, mayor of the market. She greeted Ressa's guide, then examined the group without dwelling on their weapons.

"Did you pay for the ticket?"

"So far, yes," Zaelyra replied.

"Then you are entitled to the common court, a ration of water per person and the examination of your maps by the council. Nothing beyond that."

"Can we buy a guide?" asked the merchant.

"You can ask for one. He doesn't have to accept."

"What if no one accepts?"

"You can wait or leave."

The merchant blew through his nose, but he did not insist.

Dorga made them fill the passing tokens. Each traveler had to indicate his name, or specify that he would not give one. Those who refused would receive a temporary sign, recognizable by the guardians but useless to trace their origin.

Kethra looked at the copper rings hanging above the scale. "Travelers can exchange their tokens?"

"No."

"Even if someone wants to give theirs?"

"He can do it, but we don't record the change. The service remains associated with the one who requested it."

"What if someone sells a token?"

"Then we get it back."

The rule limited abuses, but it did not prevent them. Zaelyra tells Dorga.

"No rule prevents them," replied the steward. "We only decide what we will do when they arrive."

The common courtyard was already full. A caravan was waiting in front of the south door; its carts were covered and its drivers were talking in a low voice. An old dwarf was repairing a wheel, while two drows were negotiating a place on a convoy that had to leave for the east.

The light came from green glass globes hanging from the ceiling. The room was more lively than the previous galleries. The children ran between the benches, but stopped every time a guard raised his hand. No one shouted at them; they knew the limits of the place.

Dorga explained to them that the market had no road. The guides sold their time, the communities lent passages, and the travelers could refuse the conditions offered. The tokens were used to prevent a single group from charging several times for the same service.

"Who decides when a road is closed? Zaelyra asked.

"Those who live there, if we know who it is. Otherwise, those who maintain it."

"What if the two disagree?"

"So we don't sell it."

"You're losing money."

"Yes."

"Why?"

Dorga pointed to the south door. "Because we have already paid too much for the roads that someone claimed to own."

A bell rings in the courtyard. The southern caravan had just received a passage plate. A man in a gray coat took it and turned it in his hand.

Kethra stiffens. "The Watchman."

Zaelyra followed his gaze. The man did not resemble the figure she had imagined. He was smaller, younger perhaps, the coat worn to the seams. A stoneless ring shone in his right hand.

Kethra took a step.

Zaelyra put her hand in front of her, without touching her. "Maybe it's not him."

"I know."

"Do you want to check?"

"Yes."

"Without accusing him."

"Yes."

Dorga had followed their exchange. "Do you know this man?"

"No," Kethra replied. "The ring and coat look like a description. It doesn't prove anything."

Dorga called the man. He came without resistance, the plate still in his hand.

"I was told that you were handing out maps," said the steward.

"I sell road information."

"Do you sell passages?"

"I don't have any passage."

"Do you use the brand of Mara's refuge?"

The man smiled. "I don't know what brand you're talking about."

Zaelyra asked to see the plate. He handed it to him without protesting. It was a plaque of the Market of the thresholds, authentic. There was no sign of the refuge. The gray coat and the stoneless ring were not enough to identify him.

Kethra observed his hand. "Have you ever seen this ring?"

"Probably. It sells at the market."

"And the name of the Watchman?"

"I was called that in the past."

"Where?"

"In the tunnels."

"Who called you that?"

"People whose faces I forgot."

Maybe the man wasn't lying. He had also learned to give answers that could not be verified.

Dorga asked him for his transaction record. He made a notebook with names, dates and sums. Several entrances concerned passages to the south. None mentioned Veyr or the Salines.

"Why did they call you the Watchman? Zaelyra asked.

"Because I kept a door during the exchanges."

"And you've never sold names?"

"I sell itineraries. Names are only useful to people who do not know how to follow a map."

This answer made Kethra shim. The man noticed it.

"Have you already met me?"

"Maybe."

"You accuse me?"

"I don't know who you are."

The man returned his notebook to Dorga. "She knows the price of roads. She knows that you can sell a passage without selling those who borrow it."

"Did you sell him something? Zaelyra asked.

"No."

Kethra gritted her teeth. "It's true."

"So you have nothing to blame him for?" asked the man.

"I have things to reproach myself for. That doesn't mean you're innocent."

Dorga cut short the exchange. She kept the plate and asked the man to stay at the market while she checked her records with the other stations. He accepted, but demanded that his name not be given to Menzoberranzan's guards.

"We have no reason to send it to them," Dorga replied. "Less you give us one."

The man returned to the courtyard. Kethra stood still.

"Was it him? Zaelyra asked.

"I don't know."

"You can wait for Dorga to check."

"Yes."

"And then?"

"I will decide with what I have learned."

The market offered them no guide for the evening. Two had left with the caravan, one refused to accompany such a large group, and the last one was waiting for a payment that they could not afford to provide.

Dorga granted them a night in the common courtyard. The next day, the council would examine the maps. They could leave without waiting, but would not receive a license plate for the road beyond the market.

Zaelyra accepted the wait. She didn't know if the Threshold Market would give them a route or just another series of questions.

This time, however, the rules were displayed above the door, and those who applied them had agreed to show their registers.

It wasn't trust.

That was enough to start.

Chapter 49 — The trademark register

Dorga gathers the market council in a windowless room. There were two guards, three merchants and a svirfneblin in charge of keeping records. The copy of the fake plate was placed in the center, next to the notebook of the man in the gray coat.

He had given a name: Othar Vell. Dorga didn't know if it was true. She had checked the old registers of the market and found three transactions signed with that name, spread over eight years. None concerned the roads of Veyr.

"He may have used several names," says Zaelyra.

"Or he really did these exchanges," replied the keeper of the registers.

"Both can be true."

Othar had stayed in the courtyard. He had agreed not to leave until the council had finished examining the plates, provided that he was not retained without cause. Dorga respected this condition. She did not want to prove her guilt by taking away a freedom that she herself said she protected.

The false mark had been struck with a coarse punch. On the edge, however, appeared a small angle identical to that of the fragment found in the Salines pipeline. Nym compared the two pieces. The angle could come from a tool from the same workshop, but the copper of the plate was of another composition.

"It's not the same punch," he says. "But the tools could be copied."

"Does this connect man to falsification?" asked Dorga.

"No."

The keeper of the registers opened her big book to a page marked by a strip of leather. Several plate orders had been made for travelers without a fixed community. The quantities remained modest. An order had been paid for in copper pieces from the low forges.

Kethra recognized the symbol on the edge of the invoice. "This one appears on transactions where Bregan D'aerthe serves as an intermediary."

"Can you prove that Bregan used it? Zaelyra asked.

"I can prove that affiliated brokers used it. Not that the organization gave the order."

Dorga leaned against the table. "Then we won't write it as an accusation."

"Write it as a clue," says Kethra. "With my name as the source."

The caretaker noted the exact sentence, then read it aloud. Kethra confirmed. She did not ask for the entry to be removed if it turned out to be false.

Othar was called. He examined the plate, then the pages of the register.

"I didn't sell this brand," he says.

"Did you sell road maps? Zaelyra asked.

"Yes."

"Passages?"

"No."

"Did you give the names of the travelers who bought them?"

"I wrote down the names they gave me."

"Why?"

"To find out who had paid."

"What if the name was wrong?"

"So I lost my money."

"Not them?"

Othar looked at her. "I was selling information. Not people's lives."

Kethra had a brief laugh, without amusement. "You said the same thing to Veyr."

The man turned to her. "I've never met you."

"You told me about a copper loop, repaired twice, and a woman who had to join me at the forges."

"A lot of people have curls."

"The second weld was crooked."

"It's a bad repair."

"It was made by Saira."

Othar did not answer. Zaelyra observed his face. He hadn't jumped, but his gaze had fixed on the loop that Kethra had just released.

"Did you know Saira? Zaelyra asked.

"I know several people by that name."

"Did you meet one in the Salines?"

"Maybe."

"Do you know where she is?"

"No."

"Did you have him looked for?"

"No."

"Why did you talk about the loop?"

Othar inhaled slowly. "Because I wanted to know if Kethra would recognize the description."

"Did you know she would travel with us?"

"No. I heard his name in Veyr."

"From whom?"

"Of a man who paid me to check if she was still wearing the buckle."

Kethra froze. "Who?"

"I don't have his name."

"The Watchman?"

"This is the name he gave."

"And you, did you accept it? Zaelyra asked.

"I didn't believe it. I accepted the money."

The council was silent. Othar had just repeated Kethra's words, almost identical. This did not prove that he was the man she was looking for, but the coincidence was too precise to be ignored.

"You sold the road to Veyr? Zaelyra asked.

"No. I sold an answer: Kethra always wore the buckle."

"And did you know it could put her in danger?"

"I knew we were looking for her. I didn't know why."

"You could have refused."

"Yes."

"You could have warned him."

"Yes."

"Why didn't you do it?"

"I needed the money."

The sentence did not make him less guilty. It only made it easier to understand.

Kethra remained standing, the buckle tight in her hand. "Did you tell the Watchman that I was leaving with Zaelyra?"

"No."

"You're sure?"

"Yes. I didn't know Zaelyra before Veyr."

"It doesn't prove that he didn't learn the rest differently."

"No."

Dorga ordered that Othar remain in the market as long as the other positions check his transactions. She did not put him in detention. He would temporarily lose his right to sell maps, not his right to travel.

"You let him go?" asked Kethra.

"We let him choose where to wait," Dorga replied. "If he leaves, we will note that he did not want to answer."

"What if he is guilty?"

"So his departure will not erase him from our records."

Kethra didn't like the answer. However, she could not ask that the market retain a man without additional evidence, not after demanding that the roads remain open to those who did not have a name.

Othar left the room. He stopped near Kethra.

"If I learn something about Saira, I will let you know."

"To whom?"

He had no answer.

"Then don't promise," she says.

He lowered his head. "Okay."

Dorga authorized the group to continue until the next relay, under the guidance of a guide named Ysil. The market would keep a partial copy of their map and transmit to Ressa the information on the falsified plate. Zaelyra asked that the report specify what remained unknown.

"It will take more pages to write what you don't know than to write what you know," remarked the caretaker.

"Maybe it's normal."

Dorga sealed the register. "This is especially the price of not lying."

Chapter 50 — Kethra's decision

They left the market with Ysil, a low-voiced guide who had crossed the northern galleries to the basalt steps. She was not responsible for taking them to a specific destination; she only knew the way to the first branch.

The group stopped at the outside door, where the travelers were waiting for their turn. Kethra asked Zaelyra to walk with her.

"Othar said that a man wanted to know if I was still wearing the buckle."

"Yes."

"It means that Saira may be alive. Or that someone uses his name."

"Yes."

"And the Fosse aux Cloches could be linked to missing travelers."

"Maybe."

"I want to go south."

Zaelyra looked at the families behind them. Some had already left the yard. Others were still waiting, the bags placed at their feet.

"Only?"

"I don't know. I want to ask Ysil if she knows the way."

"You can't take people without telling them why."

"I won't do it."

"And if you leave, the others will not be able to count on you to guide them to the west."

"I know."

Zaelyra was silent. She would have said that the group needed Kethra. It would be true. That wouldn't be a reason to forbid him to leave.

"I'm not going to ask you to choose now," she says. "But I want to know before we cross the next branch."

Kethra nodded. "It's fair."

Ysil confirmed that she knew the first part of the road to the south. La Fosse aux Cloches was beyond a former miners' relay, but she had not been there for several years. She wouldn't take them there without a local guide.

"If we separate, I could accompany you to the relay," she told Kethra. "Not further."

"I understand."

"And I won't let the others follow without telling them the risk."

Kethra accepted. She did not ask Zaelyra to replace her.

The group held council before the branch. Most wanted to continue west. Two travelers were considering returning to Les Salines after the first stop, where they could wait for news. The merchant wanted to follow the main road as long as it remained passable. Senn wanted to accompany Kethra, but he had no reason to believe that his father was in the south.

"I don't want you to come for me," Kethra told him.

"I don't know if I'm coming for you."

"Then choose for yourself."

"I want to find the Threshold of Barrels."

"He is to the west, not to the south."

Senn looked at the map. "So I continue with Zaelyra. If we hear something, I'll decide later."

"It's a choice," she says. "Not a promise."

He nodded his head.

Kethra stayed with the group. She did not give up on Saira; she postponed the search until she could continue it without leading families who had not chosen her.

Zaelyra did not congratulate her. She simply noted the choice and the time at which it had been made. No one was later to claim that Kethra had sworn to stay.

Ysil made them cross the first branch. A large basalt arch marked the separation between the southern and western roads. The travelers had engraved names, signs, dates and arrows in the stone. Some inscriptions were recent; others, gnawed by time.

In the center, a name had been almost completely erased. We still distinguished the letters: **Saira**.

Kethra stopped. Zaelyra did not hold her back.

"Do you want to watch? She asked.

"Yes."

They approached without touching the stone. A second name, inscribed under the first, had been scratched deeper. None of them could read it.

"Maybe it's not the same Saira," says Kethra.

"No."

"I could ask Ysil to drive us south."

"You can."

"But I won't do it today."

She stepped back. The decision cost her no less because she had chosen it.

Ysil gave them the plate of the western road. She wore a walking symbol, and on the reverse the marks of the stops where they had to ask for a guide. Zaelyra returned the previous plate to the guide. The two pieces did not come together; they had been designed to never form a complete map.

"Is the next stop safe?" asked the merchant.

"It is inhabited," replied Ysil. "I don't know if it will be safe for you."

"You don't have any simple answer?"

"Yes. No."

The group crosses the arch. Behind them, the path from the south descended towards the Fosse aux Cloches and the possible traces of Saira. In front, the road went up to the basalt steps.

Zaelyra looked at the map one last time. She could not register all the roads they would not take. She only noticed the branch, the name almost erased and the choice of Kethra.

Then she followed Ysil to the west.

Chapter 51 — The tablet of the House

The basalt steps rose in a spiral around a black column. As they gained height, the air became drier. The light filaments disappeared, replaced by a gray dust that stuck to the boots.

Ysil led them to a low door, barred by a bronze grille. Two guards stood on the other side. They recognized the guide and opened it without asking her name.

"The passage is closed to travelers," says one of them. "We are waiting for a delegation."

"From whom?" asked Ysil.

"A house drow."

The group froze. Zaelyra did not touch her gun. Rhylor put his hand on Tazri's shoulder and pushed her back with the others.

A messenger appeared at the top of the steps. He wore a tunic without a badge, but a black tablet hung from his neck. The seal engraved on it was that of the Xil'Nrae House.

He stopped in front of the gate. "Zaelyra Xil'Nrae?"

"Who asks?"

"An emissary of the Matron Zesstra. I carry a summons."

Ysil half closed the grid. "This position is not for the affairs of the Houses."

"The summons concerns a fugitive who travels under false names."

Zaelyra stepped forward. "I didn't use a false name."

"You didn't announce your rank either."

"I didn't ask to be treated according to him."

The messenger bowed his head, as if he recognized a formula he had already heard. He explained that the House had learned of Zaelyra's departure and demanded her return to answer for the loss of the maps and Veyr's incident. He had no order to stop him. He only asked that she follow him to the delegation.

"Where is the delegation?" asked Rhylor.

"Three days from here."

"What if we refuse?"

"I will pass on your answer."

Zaelyra looked at the seal. The black wax had a small oblique notch, an old defect of his mother's punch. She had seen it on dozens of messages. This proved that the tablet came from the House, not that its contents told the whole truth.

"Is my sister with the delegation? She asked.

"Vhaelyn returned to Menzoberranzan. She presented her report."

The word re-entry weighed more than the rest. Zaelyra did not know if her sister had chosen the House or simply joined the only city where she could still act.

"Did she ask me to come back?"

"She asked that you be heard before the Matron pronounces a sanction."

"This is not an answer."

"This is the answer I received."

The messenger took out a second, smaller tablet. It was not sealed by the House, but had a sign engraved at the tip: two parallel lines separated by a notch. Zaelyra recognized a code that Vhaelyn used to mark the maps of their lessons, when they wanted to signal a bifurcation that had not yet been verified.

She didn't take the tablet right away.

"Who gave it to you?"

"Your sister."

"When?"

"Before I left."

"Did you read it?"

"No."

"Do you know what the sign means?"

"No."

She took the tablet. The message was in a line, engraved in a tight writing:

Don't confuse my return with my choice.

Zaelyra rereads the words. They could come from Vhaelyn. They could also have been copied by someone who knew her.

"Do you believe her?" asked Kethra.

"I don't know what she chose."

"But you know what she wanted you to read."

"Yes."

The messenger was waiting. He hadn't asked for the tablet, and Zaelyra didn't return it to him.

"I will not return to the delegation," she said. "You can convey that I will respond to the accusations when I know what precisely I am accused of having done. I don't recognize the loss of maps as a crime. They did not all belong to the House."

"The Matron will ask for a clearer answer."

"It's mine."

"Your sister hoped you would be heard."

"So tell him that I don't confuse being heard with coming back."

The messenger bowed his head again. "I will transmit your words."

Ysil refused to keep the House's tablet in his post. The messenger took it back, but Vhaelyn's small note remained with Zaelyra. The gate did not open further.

"You have to leave," said the guard to the emissary. "And your group too. The council will decide if the road remains accessible to you."

"Doesn't the seal of the House give you authority here?" asked the messenger.

"No."

The emissary did not contest. He went up the steps and disappeared behind the black column.

The delegation had not prosecuted them. Not yet. The message could be a sincere offer, a way to slow them down or an attempt to separate Zaelyra from the group. None of these possibilities were proven.

Ysil made them enter the post, where they had to wait for the council. She did not blame them for attracting the House; she only told them that her community did not want to become the ground for a dispute between drows.

"I understand," says Zaelyra.

"No. You just heard it. You can't yet know what this means to us."

"It's true."

Ysil put the road plate on a table. "The council will have to decide if you can continue. The seal of your House does not change our rule. But it changes the risk."

Zaelyra put Vhaelyn's message away in her coat. She didn't show it to the others. It was not yet a proof, and his sister had not asked for the note to circulate.

The group waited without dispersing. Outside, the bronze door remained closed.

Chapter 52 — The fork of Vhaelyn

Ysil brought them the decision after several hours. The council would not send them back immediately, but it would suspend their passage until the departure of the House's emissary. They would remain in the waiting room, without access to the upper galleries.

"Are you keeping us here?" asked the merchant.

"No. The exit door is open. You can leave the way you came from."

"What if we want to continue?"

"You are waiting for the council to decide if your presence puts the guards in danger."

"So it's a detention with another name."

"No. No one is stopping you from leaving."

"But you're hindering the road."

"The road belongs to those who maintain it."

The merchant was not convinced. However, he did not leave the room. He knew he couldn't lead the wounded to a gallery he didn't know.

Zaelyra rereads her sister's message. The two lines, the notch, the sentence. Vhaelyn had always marked the dubious passages like this. But she had been able to pass on the code to someone else; their lessons had never been a secret as solid as Zaelyra had believed.

Rhylor sat next to her. "Do you want to believe her?"

"I want to know what she meant."

"You could ask him."

"Not by returning to the delegation."

"Then write to him."

"I don't know if my message will reach him."

"You can still do it."

Zaelyra took a sheet and wrote a single question: **Did you choose to come back?** She did not sign. If the messenger resumed the road to the east, he could carry the note; if he refused, it would keep it.

The Letter to Vhaelyn



Kethra watched her fold the paper. "Do you really want an answer?"

"Yes."

"Even if she says she chose the House?"

"Yes."

"What if she says she couldn't do otherwise?"

"I'll ask her what she wants to do now."

Kethra seemed to think about the difference. "It's easier with a sister than with a missing person."

"I know."

"No. You know it from afar."

Zaelyra accepted the remark. Kethra was right; she didn't know what it was like to wait for years for an answer that might never happen.

The council meets again with Ysil and two representatives of the post. They questioned Zaelyra about the origin of the note and Vhaelyn's role in Veyr. Zaelyra told what she had seen: her sister had helped evacuate the families, then stayed with the guards. She did not claim to know what she had done next.

"Why did you leave the city without her?" asked one of the representatives.

"Because she hadn't chosen to leave."

"You could have waited."

"Yes."

"Why didn't you do it?"

"I thought that if I stayed, I would never end up leaving. And I thought she wouldn't follow me as long as she thought she could change the House from the inside."

"You left her behind."

"Yes."

She did not add that she had done it for her good. She knew nothing about it.

The representatives discussed in a low voice. Then Ysil declared that the group could continue until the next refuge, provided that the messenger of the House had left and that no delegation followed them. The road would not be permanently open; travelers should report to each post and report any pursuit.

"What if the delegation comes back? Zaelyra asked.

"You can take shelter here if you don't put our inhabitants in danger," Ysil replied. "But we will not fight the House for you."

"I wouldn't ask you."

"You can't know until you're cornered."

Zaelyra did not protest. "Then I won't ask now."

The merchant raised his hand. "What if we decide to leave?"

"The road to the basin remains open for two days. After that, we don't know what will change."

The travelers voted out loud. Some wanted to return to the Salines. The majority wanted to continue, but not at any price. They decided to advance in smaller groups, with a meeting point at the next stop.

The messenger of the House reappeared before the light fell. He had received Zaelyra's words, and he agreed to take the question for Vhaelyn. He did not promise that his sister would read it.

"Do you know why she came back? Zaelyra asked.

"She said she had accounts to settle."

"With whom?"

"She did not specify."

"Did she say she wanted to protect you?" asked Kethra.

The messenger is thinking. "She said she didn't want us to decide for you."

It could be a faithful translation. It could be a way to prevent Zaelyra from asking more questions.

She handed him the ticket. "Give it to him if you can. Do not entrust it to another."

"I can't guarantee anything."

"Then don't guarantee anything."

He took the paper and left through the oriental gallery. Ysil waited for his steps to move away before opening the bronze door.

"You have a departure before the next change of air. After that, the climb becomes dangerous."

The group prepared the bags. Senn stayed close to Zaelyra.

"You let her go with a question."

"Yes."

"You don't know if she will receive it."

"No."

"You could send someone else."

"I could. But I don't know who I can send without exposing it."

Senn nodded. He now knew the weight of information that was not an answer.

They crossed the door before the passage closed. Behind them, the grid closed with a thud. Zaelyra didn't know if Vhaelyn had chosen to come back or if she had chosen to stay. She only knew that her sister had not asked to be saved.

This time, the bifurcation was not drawn on a map.

She was in the sentence she had sent to the east, and in the road she was taking to the west.

Chapter 53 — The path of the hot stones

The first day behind the bronze door was the slowest since Veyr. The tunnel rose and turned constantly, and the heat rising from the depths made the air thick. The post's guides had indicated three possible stops; two were marked with a crossed-out circle.

Ysil stopped in front of the first. "We can't sleep there. The ceiling has cracked since my last visit."

The merchant showed the map. "However, it indicates a stop."

"She says there was one."

"It should be written."

"It is, on the plate I returned to the post."

"And we don't have it."

Zaelyra noticed the difference between the plate and the copy. They had never received the last update, only an old map with Ysil's oral corrections. They could have blamed the guide for not knowing everything; it would not have repaired the map.

They bypassed the stop by a narrow conduit, wide enough for walkers but not for stretchers. The wearers had to remove the straps and pass the injured person sitting on a canvas. He didn't complain, but his face turned pale.

"We stop," says Zaelyra.

"We haven't passed the conduit yet," protested the merchant.

"He won't be able to continue if we push him."

The group chooses to waste an hour and build a support to transport it. The two carriers would not be enough; three other travelers joined them. The merchant ends up taking the last stretcher, without comment.

Beyond that, the gallery opened on a set of rooms where the floor was lukewarm. Amber crystals ran through the walls. The light seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere. Tazri, who had never seen such a clear glow, stopped in the middle of the passage.

"Is it the day?"

"No," replied Nym. "The light comes from the stones."

"So why does it look like it?"

"Because light looks like what it illuminates."

Tazri didn't seem satisfied, but continued.

They found an old stone terminal engraved with names. Most had been erased by moisture. Only one was still readable, accompanied by a date and a warning: **Erdren, scout; falling from the ceiling at the third elbow; not following the old marks.**

Nym checked the terminal, then the walls around. The old marks continued north, but the ceiling had moved. Ysil showed them a more recent trace, engraved at knee height, and chose a detour.

"Why is the new brand so low? Zaelyra asked.

"Because the previous one was too easy to cover. The miners placed it where the debris accumulates less."

Zaelyra added the date of correction, Ysil's name and Erdren's inscription to the statement. She asked the guide if she wanted the name of the dead man to remain on the map.

"It's already engraved on the terminal."

"The map will make him travel further."

"Then write it down with the warning. Not like a hero."

They followed the low mark to a natural staircase. The air was getting cooler. A smell of rotten leaves mixed with that of hot stone. At the top, a breach illuminated the ceiling with a yellow light, filtered by a thick layer of lichen.

"Maybe it's day now?" asked Tazri.

Nym observed the crack. "It's a light from above. That doesn't prove we can go out."

"But it comes from the surface?"

"Probably."

Zaelyra note: **probable natural light; no practicable opening observed.**

Behind the breach, they found an old watchtower, built with basalt blocks and blackened wood. The walls bore marks of carts and numbers drawn with chalk. The post had been used to measure the loads of the caravans, then to monitor the galleries after a series of landslides.

"Who built it?" asked the merchant.

"Miners from several communities," Ysil replied. "They shared the position because none of them could maintain the pipes alone."

"And why did they abandon him?"

"The sharing has stopped. Everyone wanted to keep the measures to himself. When a gallery collapsed, no one knew who had the most recent statement."

Zaelyra looked at the numbers left on the wall. The columns had been repainted several times. In some places, a new measure covered the old one; elsewhere, the two remained visible, even when they contradicted each other.

"They didn't agree on the weight of the burdens?"

"On the weight, yes. On responsibility, no."

A scratch resounded behind the post. The guards got into position. Ysil signaled not to move forward. The noise was repeated, followed by a rattling of metal.

A silhouette appeared in the upper opening. He was neither a soldier nor a traveler: a small wooden and copper machine, mounted on six legs, pulled a chain behind him. He stopped when he saw the lamps, then pivoted towards a hole in the wall.

Nym approached slowly. "An automaton?"

"A measuring device," says Ysil. "The post had one."

The machine climbed on a stone, the chain scraping the ground. He stopped under a mark, then dropped a small metal token.

Zaelyra picked up the token after Nym had examined it. One side bore the number four; the other, a stylized spider symbol. Not the seal of a House, but an old brand often associated with drow roads.

Ithryl was not with them to interpret the engraving. Nym could only describe the form.

"Does it look like the symbol that was attributed to Drizzt?" asked the guard.

"No," said Zaelyra. "The one attributed to Drizzt is a broken circle. This one represents a spider."

"Could it be a sign of the House?"

"Yes. Or an old road mark."

Ysil took the token, examined it and returned it. "This position was used by several drow groups before I was born. It doesn't belong to anyone today."

Drizzt's name had gone through the years with so many versions that it was sometimes pasted on any starting sign or refusal. Zaelyra noted the brand without giving it a legend. A resemblance was not an origin.

The automaton went back into the wall. The chain disappeared with him. Ysil advised them not to follow him: he could be connected to an unstable mechanism.

Instead, they inspected the other traces. The post had served as shelter for families at least twice. A recent inscription said: **Here, we waited.** No name followed.

Tazri put his hand near the words. "Why not write who?"

"Maybe they didn't want us to know where they had gone," Zaelyra replied.

"Maybe they didn't know if they would come back," says Rhylor.

The girl withdrew her hand. They did not complete the registration.

At night, the natural light weakens without disappearing completely. The group slept in turns, under the guard of Ysil. In the morning, she accepted that they continue to the first refuge, but not beyond. She had to return to the bronze post before the road was closed for inspection.

"You're not coming with us? Zaelyra asked.

"I have fulfilled my agreement."

"What if we need you?"

"You can ask for another guide."

"You don't want to know where the road leads?"

Ysil folded his coat. "I've known it for a long time. It's not because I stopped walking there that I stopped caring about it."

She gave them a small plate of basalt, which they should return to the shelter. The mark engraved on the back was that of the post, not of the House. Zaelyra put it away separately from the maps.

Ysil went south again. The group remained for a moment without speaking. Then the injured person asked how long it would take them to reach the stop.

"I don't know," Zaelyra replied. "But we'll walk slowly enough for you to tell us before we fall."

He accepted.

Chapter 54 — Measures erased

The refuge was on the edge of a large cave crossed by rusty rails. The rails were lost in a clear stone tunnel, then reappeared on the other side, twisted and broken. Low houses had been built in the old loading rooms. The doors were painted in different colors, and yellow glass lanterns hung above the entrances.

A woman with braided hair was waiting for them near a scale. Her name was Hara Denvin, guardian of the measures. She checked Ysil's plate, then asked the group to put down the long weapons at the entrance.

"The daggers stay on the belts," she added. "We know you have it. Don't pretend otherwise."

Brakka detached his axe and placed it on a rack. The others followed. Zaelyra put her knife back after asking if she could take it back to cut the food.

"Yes. We'll give it back to you at the exit."

"What if I have to take it before?"

"You ask."

There was nothing humiliating about the answer. Zaelyra accepted the rule.

Hara took them through the old weighing room. Stone scales still measured the loads, each marked with a different weight. The inhabitants had transformed the old docks into stalls. Salt, dried mushrooms, pieces of leather, lamps and maps engraved on thin plates were sold there.

"Are you cartographers?" " asked an old merchant when she saw the cases.

"Some," replied Zaelyra.

"So don't draw the rails. They don't lead anywhere anymore."

"We saw them."

"Everyone sees them. That's why they continue to attract people."

Hara led them to a room where the measurements of the old routes were kept on shelves. Several had been scratched. Some had two superimposed numbers, an old distance and a new one. Others had been broken in half.

"Who erased the statements? Zaelyra asked.

"People who thought they were protecting their community," says Hara. "Others have erased the names of the guides so that they cannot be held responsible for mistakes. Then each accused the next one."

"Why keep them like this?" asked Ithryl, who had just joined them after falling behind in helping an injured child.

"So that no one can claim that the measure has always been the same."

Hara showed them a plan of the Western network. He stopped at a gorge called the Tin Trench. Beyond that, the journeys had been copied from several sources without a reliable date.

"We are looking for a way to the Marches de Lune," says Zaelyra.

"Everyone is looking for her, at one time or another."

"Do you know if it exists?"

"Yes."

"Is it practicable?"

"In places."

"Is there an exit to the surface?"

"I've never seen one."

Hara didn't want to sell them a map. She agreed to show them the way to the Trench, provided that they leave a copy of their observations on the watchtower and that no refuge name appeared on the public version.

"Why help us?" asked the merchant.

"Because you brought a returned plaque, not a stolen plaque. Because you wrote what you didn't know. And because we were told that people sold fake passages with the brands of several communities."

"Do you know who made them? Zaelyra asked.

"No. But we received a copy. She wears a spider symbol."

Zaelyra thought about the token found in the post's automaton. She showed it to Hara.

The caretaker did not touch him. "This sign was used by a former road company. They haven't been there for generations."

"By whom?"

"Drows guides, dwarf miners and human merchants. The mark indicated that the load had been weighed and the passage had been inspected. It was not an emblem of the House."

"Why did she disappear?"

"Because a company wanted to own it. The others stopped using it."

"They destroyed their own brand?"

"They preferred to lose a symbol rather than let it become a seal of control."

Zaelyra noted the story with Hara's reserves. She did not write that the company had been linked to Drizzt. The name did not appear anywhere in the shelter documents.

In the evening, Hara showed them the rails. Part of it led to an old depot, where carts were still loaded with empty boxes. The mechanism had stopped working when the gallery had sunded. Residents had kept the wheels to repair doors.

Tazri found a tablet stuck under one of the axles. A list of travelers was engraved on it, with weights and passage marks. The last visible name was **Venn**.

Senn took the tablet, then put it on the table in front of Hara. "Do you know this name?"

"There were several Venn."

"A copper craftsman, two missing fingers in his left hand."

Hara looked at Zaelyra, as if to ask if the information was verified. She indicated that it was the description given by Senn, not a confirmed fact.

"I knew a Venn who worked the axles," says Hara. His hand was stiff, not amputated. He left the shelter four years ago. I don't know if he returned to the east."

Senn passed his finger over the name, without touching the engraving. "It's the closest I've had."

"Do you want to stay? Zaelyra asked.

"No."

"Do you want to go south?"

"No. I want to see the Tin Trench. If my father went through this, someone might know something."

"What if no one knows?"

Senn shrugged his shoulders. "Then I'll know that."

Hara authorized a copy of the list, provided that the names of the other travelers were removed. Senn accepted. He only kept Venn and the date, without saying that it was his father.

The old rail merchant joined them. "Are you going to the Trench?"

"Yes," says Zaelyra.

"So don't take the carts."

"We don't have one."

"So much the better. Those who wanted to get them back on have awakened a mechanism under the track. The stone is still moving."

Hara confirmed that the Trench was unstable since last season. They could reach it with a guide, but no one would promise them to cross it.

"How long before the road is closed?" asked the merchant.

"I don't know."

This time, the merchant did not sigh. He asked what reserves should be left at the shelter if they had to turn back.

Hara showed them the marks of the previous shipments. They prepared a list of what they would take and what they would return, and then divided the weight between the groups. Travelers who had chosen to leave for the Salines could collect part of the food at the next relay.

Zaelyra copied the rail plan and Venn's list on two separate sheets. She did not yet know if Senn's father had crossed the Trench. But the rails had kept the weight of the loads, even when the names had been erased.

Chapter 55 — The Tin Trench

Hara chooses two guides to lead them to the gorge. One, Rilsa, had grown up at the shelter; the other, Dorn, was repairing the rails. They would not cross with them. Their task would be to check the first slope and return before the cycle closes.

The Tin Trench was not an open gorge, but an underground fault a few tens of steps wide, crossed by metal bridges and wooden walkways. The rails plunged into darkness, then went up on the other side. The metal was covered with shiny dust that clung to the gloves.

Dorn explained to them that the fault had been dug by an underground river, then exploited by miners. When the water had turned away, the beams had dried and the ground had sagging in places. The carts no longer passed, but the walkers still used the high walkway.

"Is she sure? Zaelyra asked.

"She holds."

"Since when did you check it?"

"Six days ago."

Nym examined the bindings. Some were old, others were new. A recent rope reinforced the middle of the bridge, but it ended before the last pillar.

"Who laid the rope?"

"Me."

"Why does she stop there?"

"I had no more rope."

The answer was simple and verifiable. They couldn't fill the gap with a promise.

The group split. The lightest would cross first to install a second rope on the other side. The injured would wait with Brakka and Rilsa. Dorn would remain in the middle, to control the anchors. Zaelyra did not take the lead; she let the guard who knew the marks pass with Nym.

Halfway through, the bridge began to vibrate. A rumble crossed the fault. The tin dust rose into a cloud and covered the walkways.

"Don't run!" shouted Dorn. "Stay in the center!"

The guard squats. Nym grabbed the rope. The bridge vibrated again, then stopped. One of the pillars had moved a finger's width.

Zaelyra waited for the ground to stop shaking. "Shall we come back?"

Dorn observed the pillar. "We can continue, but the rope will not hold a second shake."

"Then we don't continue," says Rhylor.

"However, you have to pass," protested Senn. "The shelter is behind us."

"We can leave," says the merchant. "The bridge didn't collapse."

"If we leave, the access can close," Senn replied.

"If we continue, the bridge can fall."

Both voices rose. Zaelyra looked at the rope, the pillar, the people still on the first side. She asked Dorn what it would take to secure the passage.

"A second anchor on this side. And a fairly long rope."

"Do we have one?"

"Not long enough."

Nym observed the old railway that descended towards the fault. "A chain could replace the rope on this section."

Dorn refused at first. The chain would be heavy, difficult to fix and risked cutting the wood. Then he examined the metal rings that held the old rails. Some could be used as anchor points.

They spent an hour testing each ring. The first gave in under moderate traction; they marked it with a red line. The second ring. The third vibrated and dropped a rain of dust. They pushed him away.

The chain was installed between the second ring and the existing rope. Dorn checked the tension. Nym measured the oscillation of the bridge. The structure had not become safe; it could now support one group at a time, if no one stopped in the middle.

"One group at a time?" asked the merchant.

"A person at a time," Dorn corrected. "Two if they are attached to separate lines."

They changed the order of march. The first crossed, then fixed a return line. Each traveler waited his turn, without accelerating to catch up with the others.

Tazri crossed with Brakka. Half-term, the wire of his lantern clung to a bolt. She stopped, but didn't shoot. Brakka untied the thread and signaled him to continue. They reached the other side without further incident.

The last to cross was Dorn. He stopped near the displaced pillar and placed a mark on the stone, at hand height. "If you come back, don't take the middle. The outer edge is more stable."

"Were you coming with us? Zaelyra asked.

"No. My job is to repair the bridge, not to find out what's beyond."

He returned to the shelter through the low footbridge, where the rails were still solid.

The western slope was colder. Drops of water slid on the wall and disappeared into a crack. An old inscription had been engraved in the basalt: **No cart passes after the third landslide.** Under the sentence, someone had added: **The walkers, on the other hand, are not cargoes.**

Hara had told them about these inscriptions. They had been engraved by the workers after the merchants had demanded that the minors cross with the carts, despite the danger.

Zaelyra noted the two sentences and the approximate date of the landslide. She did not turn one into the motto of their group.

Beyond the fault, the gallery was divided into three. Rilsa had given them a mark to wait for the guide to the next refuge. A green light was to appear above the central passage.

They waited.

After an hour, the light did not come.

Ysil was no longer there to know the road. Neither does Veli. Hara had warned that the guide might be delayed. The provisions allowed to wait a night, but no more without water.

"We could take the left gallery," says the merchant. "The power comes out of there."

Nym measured the wires. "Yes, but there is a smell of mud. This can be a source or a drown chamber."

"And the one on the right?"

"The current enters. I don't know where he's going."

"The one in the middle?"

"There is no visible current."

Senn approached the wall. He had spotted a cut under the ceiling, similar to those he had seen near the post.

"There is a mark above the central passage."

Zaelyra raised her lamp. A line engraved in the basalt formed an arc, then interrupted. No code had been sent to them to interpret it.

They sent an agreed signal: a white light, then three blows spaced apart. Nothing answered.

"We did what the guide asked us," says the guard. "We can leave tomorrow."

"What if the guide is already on his way?" asked Tazri.

"Then he will find us."

"What if someone else finds us?"

No one answered immediately. The Tin Trench had separated them from the refuge, but they could still turn around. The left road offered water perhaps; the central road, a passage without current. The group did not have enough information to continue with the injured.

Zaelyra asked everyone to choose between returning and waiting until the next cycle. No one wanted to engage in the galleries without a guide. They therefore installed a watch, distributed between the three branches, and kept the lamps visible from the bridge.

Before the night tour began, a green light appeared above the central passage.

Only once.

Then she went out.

Nym got up and measured the current. This time, a light breath came out of the central tunnel.

"Someone is here," he said.

"Shall we move forward?" asked Rhylor.

"No. We answer."

Zaelyra flashed the white lamp once and waited.

The green light reappeared, then two figures advanced to the edge of the corridor. One held a lantern; the other kept a lowered crossbow.

The first spoke in common: "Who sent you?"

Zaelyra answered with the name of the refuge, then gave that of the guide and the road plate.

The figure lowered its lantern. "Ysil is back. She said you would come."

The second person kept the weapon in hand. "And the Drow House?"

"She sent a messenger. He left."

"Then why do you have his seal?"

Zaelyra did not look east. She took out Vhaelyn's note, but did not hold it out. "Because my sister wrote to me. That doesn't mean I'm going back home."

The two figures exchanged a few words in a language she did not understand. Then the first one advanced alone.

"We are the guardians of the Vault of the Forges. You can come to the first door. No further tonight."

The group took back the bags and entered the central passage.

The Tin Trench remained behind them, suspended above its own echo. In front, a new community was waiting for their story, with its rules and reasons not to believe them.

Chapter 56 — The Vault of the Forges

The guards led them to a dark metal door. Unlike the Salines doors, this one had neither a lock nor a window. A wheel in the center commanded several bars, and traces of recent oil marked the hinges.

"Before entering," says the first figure, "you must leave Ysil's plate and announce what you are carrying."

Zaelyra put the plate on a shelf, then named the weapons, food and maps. She didn't mention Vhaelyn's ticket. He was neither a weapon nor a map, but she kept him on her.

The guard asked her if she was wearing a House mark.

"Yes."

"You will show it to the council. Not to other travelers."

"Why?"

"Because some have debts to the Houses. Others flee them. We don't want one to discover the other's way by reading a loop."

The rule seemed reasonable to them. The guard did not require her to remove her badge; he offered her a cloth case to cover it in the common areas.

The door opened onto a set of rooms heated by a central forge. Chimneys led the smoke to a high crack. Hammers resounded on several levels, accompanied by conversations and laughter. The metal gave the cave a golden glow that softened the shadows.

Children carried small shugs, supervised by an apprentice forge. An old man was repairing lamps near a basin of water. Merchants slept on benches with their boots on their feet. Nothing looked like a refuge waiting for heroes. It was a busy community not to miss the next meal.

The guardian was called Orsa. She had the group installed in an outdoor room, separated from the workshop by a corridor. They were allowed to stay there for one night, then submit their application to the Council of the Vault.

"We received a notice about the Drow House," she says. "He comes from the basalt post."

"What was he saying? Zaelyra asked.

"That your group travels under a summons. He didn't ask to be arrested."

"The messenger wanted me back."

"Then he should have written this."

"He may have done it."

Orsa did not comment. She had the arrival of the group recorded and invited everyone to declare if they needed care. The injured man's sister examined his leg and recommended a day of rest. He wanted to refuse, but the porters did not object. He ends up accepting.

Hara Denvin joined them the next day. She had sent a message through a chain of plates and wanted to know if their crossing of the Trench had gone well.

"We had to reinforce a rope," says Zaelyra. "The pillar has moved."

Hara noticed the change. "I'll ask Dorn to go and see. He will not resume the repair until he has a second worker."

"Can't you ask him to go alone?"

"I can. I won't do it."

She examined Zaelyra's survey, corrected the height of a room and added a date to the passage of natural light. She refused to have the note on the spider mark copied into the public register.

"Why? Zaelyra asked.

"Because the symbol has been used by several groups and some associate it with stories that are not ours. If you want to record what you have seen, keep it in your notes with the origin."

"Do you think about Drizzt's story?"

"I think of people who come for a sign before they even know what it means."

Hara had never seen Drizzt. She had heard the story of her passage through a caravan that said she met a wandering drow, long after her departure from Menzoberranzan. The story gave no name or proof. Someone had then added Drizzt's name in the margin.

"Some claim that he crossed the Trench," she says. "Others that it was another drow. The map is older than the note."

Zaelyra opened her notebook to the page concerned. The mention was written with another hand, without a specific date. She drew a separation between the old statement and the recent addition.

"I won't erase the name," she says. "But I won't make it a fact."

"That's all I ask."

In the evening, travelers were invited to the common table. The seats were not assigned. The inhabitants ate first, then served those who were waiting. No one gave a speech on equality; newcomers were simply asked to leave a place for the person who would arrive later.

Tazri shared his bread with an apprentice who had lost two fingers. He asked her if she had seen the surface.

"No."

"My sister says she's blue."

"Sometimes," replied Zaelyra. And other times, it is gray or white."

"So how do we know we've arrived?"

"We know it when the day does not come from a stone."

The apprentice considered the question seriously. He says he wanted to see the sky, but not leave the Vault. Tazri did not answer him that he should leave one day. They talked instead about lamps and how to make them less heavy.

After the meal, Orsa called Zaelyra, Nym and Rhylor. The council agreed to hear them the next day. He had also learned that fake plates circulated even in their galleries.

"If someone uses our brands to make travelers pay, we want to know who," says Orsa. "But we don't intend to follow you on a hunt."

"We don't ask you," Zaelyra replied.

"You may ask if the hunter becomes the prey."

"Then you can refuse."

Orsa seemed to appreciate the answer, without trusting them.

At night, Zaelyra spread the maps and road newspapers. The light of the forge made the ink more readable than in the Salines. She compared the false signs, the inscriptions of the Trench and the measurements of the Vault. The marks had been copied by several hands. No punch made it possible to identify a single origin.

She didn't have a road.

She had testimonies, mistakes and communities who agreed to correct their own traces.

It was less than a complete map.

Maybe it was more than an order.

Chapter 57 — The return order

The council was held in the workshop, near the central forge. Four representatives surrounded a basalt table. Orsa presided. Hara had brought the track readings; another advisor, a gray-haired drow named Jhaer, held the House's tablet.

"The convocation is authentic," he says. "The Matron asks that Zaelyra return to Menzoberranzan to answer for the loss of House documents and the flight of several subjects."

The word "subjects" moved Rhylor. Zaelyra kept her hands on the table.

"The maps are not all the property of the House," she says. "And the people you're talking about don't belong to him."

"You can challenge the terms to the delegation."

"I will challenge the facts when they are presented to me. I will not go back to hear an accusation that is not written."

Jhaer put down the tablet. "The House can protect those who have returned."

"She can also punish those who are not."

"It depends on their conduct."

"Mine will depend on my choices."

Orsa raised a hand to interrupt the exchange. "We are not a Menzoberranzan court. This advice will only decide whether the group can stay and continue on its path."

She asked Zaelyra to tell Veyr what she had done. Zaelyra talked about the fake map, the flight of the families and the decisions made with Brakka. She didn't claim to have saved everyone. She named the people she knew had stayed and those whose fate she did not know.

Jhaer asked him about Vhaelyn. She replied that she did not know if her sister had returned by choice. She showed the note, but did not give it to the council. She explained the sign and read the sentence.

"This sign can be copied," says Jhaer.

"Yes."

"Then why believe her?"

"I don't believe her yet. I sent him a question."

"You left your sister behind, and you don't know if she wants you to come back."

"That's right."

The council exchanged glances. Orsa asked why Zaelyra did not request their protection against the House.

"Because I don't know what she would do if you accepted. I will not ask you to risk your community for a family you do not know."

"What if the House comes here?"

"You will decide according to your rules."

Orsa put a finger on the black seal. "You understand that the emissary could come back with soldiers."

"Yes."

"You understand that your refusal puts our roads under pressure."

"Yes."

"Then why stay?"

"Because we need to cross, and because we can help you check the wrong passages. But if you ask us to leave, we will leave."

Jhaer shook his head. "Do you think an honest map will be enough to prevent the House from finding you?"

"No."

"So what is it for?"

"Those who follow us know where they put their feet."

One of the representatives, a short-bearded dwarf named Velda, placed a broken plate in front of them. It came from an old rail. A forger's mark had been struck upside down.

"We found this near the north passage," she says. "The punch is from the same family as the fake plates, but not the same tool."

Nym examined the marks. "We made the plates in several workshops."

"Or someone circulated a model," says Hara.

"Can we connect them to Bregan D'aerthe?" asked Jhaer.

Kethra answered from the entrance. She had been allowed to attend the council, but not to speak before she was asked. "Some brokers affiliated with Bregan used a close sign. This does not prove that they made these plates."

"Did you work with them?"

"I dealt with people who claimed their network."

"And you betrayed the group in Veyr."

"Yes."

"Why should we listen to you?"

"You shouldn't. Check what I'm saying."

Velda observed Kethra. "She doesn't ask for our trust."

"She asks that we use her information."

"It's different."

The council does not conclude that Bregan D'aerthe was behind the false passages. He decided to send two observers to check the workshops where the plates had been struck, and to transmit the suspicious signs to the other shelters.

Zaelyra proposed to share the route measurements, but not the names of the travelers. The representatives accepted a copy without personal details. They refused to include the direction of the gallery where she had found the automaton.

"Why? She asked.

"Because we don't know if it still exists," says Orsa. "If you indicate it, someone could look for it."

"Okay."

The council allowed him to stay three days and continue to the next stop with a guide from the Vault. He did not give him the permanent passage. In exchange, the group would participate in the inspection of an old tunnel where several road signs had disappeared.

"Do you want us to look for the thieves?" asked the merchant.

"We want you to observe the tunnel," Velda replied. "The difference is that you will not make an accusation."

The merchant looked at Zaelyra. She nodded. The group could not repair the roads by never looking at what threatened them.

When the council dispersed, Jhaer held Zaelyra.

"Your mother didn't send you this summons to kill you," he says.

"Do you know her?"

"I know the Houses. A summons can be a way to regain control before the scandal grows."

"And Vhaelyn?"

"She asked that your name be removed from the list of people to be forcibly brought back."

Zaelyra felt her breath block. "When?"

"Before the emissary leaves."

"Why didn't he say that?"

"It wasn't in his order."

"Did you see him do it?"

"I read the register."

"Can I check it?"

"No."

"So it's not yet a proof that I can take away."

Jhaer had an almost approving expression. "You could learn to use uncertainty without hiding from it."

"Maybe."

He told him that another messenger would leave for the city in two days. Zaelyra could give him a second ticket, but would not know if Vhaelyn would receive it.

She returned to the group. Kethra asked him what Jhaer had said.

"He claims that Vhaelyn asked that I not be forced back."

"Do you believe it?"

"I think he read something in a register. I don't know what the register said exactly."

"You're going to write to him?"

"Yes."

This time, she did not write a question. She wrote that she continued west, that she would not return to the House upon convocation, and that she would not confuse Vhaelyn's silence with consent. She didn't ask her sister to follow her.

At the bottom of the letter, she drew the two parallel lines and the notch.

Then she closed the ticket and waited for the messenger to be confirmed.

Chapter 58 — The tunnel without signatures

Velda chooses a team of five people to inspect the northern tunnel: herself, Nym, Zaelyra, Rhylor and a guard named Delli. Kethra remained at the Vault. The council feared that an old acquaintance of his brokers would take advantage of his presence to make traces disappear.

"I don't blame them," she told Zaelyra. "They don't know me enough to know when I'm lying."

"You could come with us and answer the questions."

"They said no. I'm not going to prove to them that they're right to be suspicious."

The conversation ended there. Kethra did not sulk; she took care of the food list with the injured man's sister.

The northern tunnel was an old connection between the Vault and a storage station. The entrance had been condemned by dry-laid blocks, but an opening let the air through. Velda explained that road signs had been disappearing in this area for several months. These were not complete maps, only tokens that indicated which teams had checked the galleries.

"Someone takes them to prevent others from knowing who passed by? Zaelyra asked.

"Or to resell them."

"You don't know?"

"If we knew, we wouldn't need you."

They cleared the blocks just enough to get in. Delli passed the first, tied to a rope. The ground was covered with fine metallic dust. Cart marks were heading east, but were interrupted at the foot of a slope.

"Nothing comes back," says Nym.

"What does that mean?" asked Rhylor.

"The wheels are in. There is no trace of exit."

"They may have been raised."

"Yes. Or the cart is still in it."

The slope led to an old deposit. The roof had partially collapsed; empty boxes were stacked near a door. Velda recognized the symbols of several communities on the wood. Some boxes had been opened cleanly, others broken with tools.

"What did they contain? Zaelyra asked.

"Road plates, lamps and tools. It was a reserve post."

"Some food?"

"Never. Food attracts too many people."

They found step marks in the dust. Many went to the back door, but only one type of sole returned to the entrance. A trace stopped in front of a pillar, as if someone had sat down.

Delli discovered a metal wire stretched behind a box. Velda ordered him not to touch him. Nym followed the wire to a bell hidden in a cavity. The device was not dangerous; it warned someone of the arrival of visitors.

"Is there someone behind?" asked Rhylor.

"Maybe," Zaelyra replied. "We don't know how long he's been there."

Velda made the signal from the Vault: three strokes, a pause, then two. Nothing answered.

They advanced to the back door. It was locked, but the door had been forced and then closed. On the metal, a trace of copper had been crushed against the frame.

Nym collected a fragment. "Same alloy as the fake plate of the Market of the thresholds?"

"You have to compare," says Zaelyra.

They didn't open the door. Velda had not given them the right to enter the sealed depot, only to inspect the tunnel. She called the Vault by the signal wire, then waited.

After a few minutes, someone knocked on the other side of the door: three knocks, one pause, then two.

Delli stepped back. Rhylor pulled out his knife, but kept it along his thigh.

"We are from the Vault," announced Velda. "Who are you?"

A weak voice replied: "My name is Korr. I have a leg taken."

"How many are you?"

"One."

"Since when?"

"I don't know. Two days. Maybe three."

Velda looked at Zaelyra. "We are not allowed to open without knowing if the door is unstable."

Nym inspected the hinges. They were twisted, but the frame did not have a crack. He asked the person behind the door if she could take a few steps away.

"I can't."

"So tell us where you are, in relation to the door."

"On the left. The wall fell on my leg."

They removed the boxes that blocked the door, then opened slowly. Korr was a dwarf with a red beard, stuck under a beam. His face was gray with fatigue, but he kept a lamp on near him.

Delli and Rhylor stabilized the beam while Nym cleared the stones. Zaelyra spoke to Korr to keep him awake. He was not one of the five travelers; he worked at the depot as a temporary guard. Two people had come to get the plates and promised to pay him. When he refused, they pushed the boxes against the door and caused the landslide.

"Did you recognize them?" asked Velda.

"No. They had hoods."

"Did they wear marks?"

"One of the two had a spider badge. The other, nothing."

Zaelyra noted that the witness could see a symbol, without knowing which group it belonged to. Korr could not tell if it was a stylized spider or a simple loop.

They managed to free his leg. It wasn't broken, but he couldn't walk without help. Inside the depot, several plates had disappeared. A box remained open on a table; it contained fragments of black wax and a list of unnamed numbers.

Velda didn't touch anything before calling two other goalkeepers. When they arrived, she had the objects inventoried in the presence of Korr. The wax fragments came from messages from the Vault, but no complete seal remained.

"They took the passage plates and left the maps? Zaelyra asked.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"A map indicates where to go. A plaque indicates who has the right to pass."

"They can sell the two separately."

Velda nodded. "Or use them together."

Korr was brought back to the Vault. Before leaving, he asked that his name not appear on the public map.

"The people who locked me up know I was working here," he says. "They don't need a drawing to find it. But others don't need to read it."

Zaelyra registered the depot as a place of danger and the date of the incident, without attaching the name of the guard. She added that two intruders had been observed, with no certainty about their identity.

On their return, the council asked them if the tunnel was safe. Velda replied that it had not collapsed, but that the deposit had been forced. She did not recommend reopening until the doors were reinforced.

"Do the fake plates come from this depot?" asked Hara.

"We can't say that," says Nym. "The fragments look alike, but we don't have enough metal to compare."

"The guard saw a spider," Rhylor added.

"He saw a symbol that he believes to be a spider," Zaelyra corrected. "He did not identify it as the trademark of a House."

Jhaer took note of the precision. For the first time, he did not dispute Zaelyra's insistence.

The group had found a living person, a looted deposit and two unknown intruders. He had not found the five missing travelers or the manufacturer of the plates.

The report would be less satisfactory than an accusation.

It would be more difficult to use to condemn someone by mistake.

Chapter 59 — The Copy Chamber

Korr slept for a whole day. When he woke up, he asked to see the list of numbers found in the depot. The council hesitated; the numbers could designate plates, payments or people.

"I don't want to read it," says Korr. "I want to know if the number four appears twice."

"Why the four?" asked Hara.

"The plate I wore at the depot had this number. The thieves asked for the four, not the others."

Velda unfolded the list. The number four appeared three times, each occurrence followed by a different little sign. The last addition was recent.

"What does that mean? Zaelyra asked.

"I don't know," Korr replied. "But plate four did not come from the depot. She belonged to the position of basalt. Someone brought it here to copy it."

He had not seen the person who had dropped her off. He had only heard an exchange behind the door, before the landslide.

"Does this connect the basalt post to the deposit?" asked Jhaer.

"This means that a plaque of the position was discussed here," Zaelyra replied. "We don't know who brought it."

"What if he was the emissary of the House?"

"We have no reason to say that."

Jhaer looked at her for a moment, then nodded.

Korr remembered that the two visitors had talked about a room where copies were kept. The word had been pronounced in common, but he was not sure he had heard it correctly. They could have said "field", "room" or "charter".

"Where would this room be?" asked Velda.

"I don't know."

Delli thought of an old workshop under the rails. Passage plates were once made there. He was convicted after a press injured a worker.

"If someone produces fake brands there, we need to know," says Hara.

"The room is unstable," replied Delli. "And the press is still in it."

The council didn't want to send an entire team. He authorized an inspection with two guards, Nym and Zaelyra. Kethra would not be included; no one explained to him why. She didn't ask.

The workshop was behind the rail room, in a low gallery where the heat of the forge no longer reached. The door was blocked by a metal bar. A channel was added recently.

Delli recognized the lock. She had worked there when she was a child, under the direction of her uncle.

"Do you know how to open it? Zaelyra asked.

"Yes."

"Do you want to do it?"

"No."

They did not insist. One of the guards removed the chain. The door opened effortlessly, revealing a room covered with dust. The press occupied the center. His metal arms were blocked in a downward position. A pile of blank plates rested near the wall, protected by a canvas.

"Is it still usable? Nym asked.

"If we replace the axis and purge the rust," replied Delli. "But no one has maintained it for years."

Under the press, they found a broken mold. His drawing was that of a spiral road, surrounded by three points. The shape resembled the false sign of the refuge, but did not correspond to any official mark.

Zaelyra drew the mold, without moving it. A trace of black wax had dried on the edge. There was no finger or tool left to identify him.

In a drawer, Nym discovered a list of metals needed to make plates. The quantities were too small for a large production, but sufficient for several copies.

"It could be the copy chamber," he says.

"Or an old abandoned workshop," replied Delli. "Everything is old there."

The guard checked the fingerprints. Some of the dust had been moved near the drawer; the rest appeared intact. The mark could date from the last inspection.

"When did it take place? Zaelyra asked.

"I don't remember," says Delli. "Last year, maybe."

"So we can't call it recent."

She noted the two possibilities. They photographed the mold with the cameras from the station, then closed the workshop without touching it. The council would decide whether to destroy it or keep it as proof.

Delli stayed in front of the door. "My uncle made plates here. They were used to replace those that travelers lost."

"Did he know the mold existed?"

"Yes. He designed it."

"Did he sell copies?"

"No. He died before the workshop closed."

"I wouldn't have accused him."

"But did you write it in your notebook?"

"I wrote that the mold was old and that you recognized the drawing. I didn't write his name."

Delli seemed relieved, then upset to be. "You could add it. He made the mold. It's a fact."

Zaelyra added it, with the dates she knew. The history of the workshop should not be confused with that of the false passages.

Back at the Vault, the council decided to seal the press and keep the mold under surveillance. The depot would be reopened after repair, but no new plates would be produced without two witnesses from different communities.

"This will slow down the replacements," objected a merchant.

"Yes," says Hara.

"What if travelers lose their license plate?"

"They can still ask to pass."

"Do you trust their word?"

"No. We check it."

The merchant shook his head, but finally accepted. He himself had lost a plaque during a trip, and a former guard had to confirm his identity.

The council authorized Zaelyra to copy the Western stage map, but not the internal postcodes. He also authorized him to issue a warning about false passes, without naming a person responsible.

Kethra proposed to write the text. The council hesitated, then gave him this task on the condition that two inhabitants reread each line. She accepted.

The warning would be in four sentences: a plate alone does not open a road; a mark can be copied; each stop must confirm its own passage; no traveler should be forced to reveal the names of his companions.

Kethra reread the last sentence several times. She didn't change it.

When the text was validated, the Vault engraved it on clay plates intended for neighboring shelters. The copies would not bear any House symbol, no missing name and no indication to the Salines.

Zaelyra observed the first dry plate near the forge. She did not know if the warning would prevent a new fraud. It could at least make it more difficult to pretend that travelers had not been warned.

In the evening, Delli brought her a small piece of copper that she had found in the workshop. An angle was engraved on the reverse, identical to Ilda's fragment.

"It's the same brand," she says.

"The same hand?"

"Maybe."

"Or the same tool."

Delli smiles. "You learned not to conclude too quickly."

"I'm trying."

"Then write down the two possibilities."

Zaelyra did it. She had still not identified the Watchman, nor found the five travelers, nor received a response from Vhaelyn. But, for the first time, several communities were going to share a common warning without handing over their maps or names.

The road did not belong to them.

However, she was beginning to answer them.

Chapter 60 — The mail of the basin

The mail arrived the morning when the warning was engraved. It bore the mark of the pool of the Watchmen and a rope tied twice around the wrist. Ressa sent him with a news: the two guards who went to look for the five travelers had found three traces near the Fosse aux Cloches. They had also found Jorren's name in the registers of an old post, but no mention of his group.

The note did not say that the travelers were alive. She said that a witness had seen them enter a gallery with guards three days earlier.

"Is it enough to search?" asked Senn.

"That's enough to ask the question to people who know where this gallery leads," Zaelyra replied.

The Vault could not send guards without checking his own post. The mail would leave at the next change of air. It was necessary to decide quickly if someone would accompany him.

Senn proposed to go. Kethra too.

"I have no right to hold you," Zaelyra told Senn. "But you've never seen this road, you don't know the signs, and you don't know who could expect you."

"I can learn."

"Not in an hour."

Kethra asked that she be allowed to be part of the team. The Vault council did not want her to approach the old positions because of her links with brokers. She heard the decision without protesting.

"They think I could recognize someone and hide the information from them," she then said.

"Would you do it?"

"I don't know. If I recognize the Watchman, I might want to prevent him from leaving before I have learned what he knows about Saira."

"And the travelers?"

"I would help them too."

"The two can come into conflict."

"I know."

Kethra did not ask to be excused for what she might have done. She asked to participate in the preparation of the road. The council accepted that she compares the signs with the registers, but not that she accompanies the guards.

The courier offered a team of four: Zaelyra, Rhylor, Nym and goalkeeper Delli. The main group would remain at the Vault. Senn would choose to continue west with the families or wait for the team to return; he would not be dragged into the mission by his impatience.

"I'm staying," he says. "I want to help sort the signs."

"You don't help him by staying?" asked Kethra.

"I don't know. But I can learn here."

Delli chooses the way to the bronze post. Ressa had described a secondary road, but she had never taken it. The map of the Vault stopped at the first bend.

Before leaving, Zaelyra had the travelers reread the warning. They had to know that the team might not return for two days. No one would be forced to stay; those who would leave west would receive a copy of the verified roads to the Vault.

The wounded man's sister decided to stay with him. The merchant and two families wanted to continue as soon as the guide was found. They asked if Zaelyra would join them.

"If the road is passable and if we return on time."

"What if you don't come back?"

"You will leave with the guide that the council will choose."

She says this without knowing if the guide would be found, or if he would accept. The merchant seemed frustrated, but understood that she was not going to promise him to come back.

The courier led them to the basin, where Ressa completed his report. The three traces were those of a dragged rope, steps linked by the same rhythm and a flap lantern. A traveler had left a mark on the chalk, similar to the one on the fake plates.

"Was someone taken away?" asked Rhylor.

"We don't know. The witness only saw the queue."

"Where was she going?"

"Towards the Fosse aux Cloches."

The Pit was an old deposit dug near an underground river. The lower galleries had been abandoned after the warning bells started ringing without any guard operating them. The stories diverged: some spoke of a mechanism, others of a creature that imitated sound.

"Have you ever visited the place? Zaelyra asked Delli.

"No."

"And you? She asked Ressa.

"Once. I didn't spend the night there."

She gave them a map she had received from a former guard. The southern half was torn. The northern roads bore recent marks, but no date.

Kethra remained at the entrance of the post. She had not obtained permission to leave, but Ressa agreed that she examined the map remotely.

"This arrow is not a mark of the refuge," she says. "This is the code of a broker who sells directions without giving distances."

"You're sure? Zaelyra asked.

"I've already seen it. I don't know who engraved it here or if the code is still in use."

Ressa noted the information without writing Kethra's name as certainty. She gave the small group a red lantern and a two-day return period.

"If the lantern lights up twice, you come back. If it remains off, we wait until the end of the second day. Then we send another team."

Zaelyra repeated the protocol. She didn't ask what would happen if no one came back after the second team. Ressa didn't know.

They left with a single map, each of which knew the limits.

Chapter 61 — The Pit of the Bells

The Pit was in a low gallery, between a stream and a dry chimney. The bells were hanging from the ceiling, some split, others blackened. They were not connected to any visible wire.

Delli refused to enter before listening. The group remained at the threshold for an hour. The water flowed silently; no bell rang.

"Do you want to wait longer?" asked Rhylor.

"Yes."

"How much?"

"Until we know if the sound comes from a mechanism or a signal."

"How will we know?"

Delli stretched a copper wire in front of the first bell. The air current barely made him move. They installed a second wire near the river. The two movements did not match.

Nym inspected the walls. A crack ran through the vault and descended behind a group of bells. With each change in pressure, the rock could vibrate and produce a sound. That didn't explain all the bells, but it was a possibility.

They advanced slowly to the first branch. There, a small light flashed three times behind a pile of boxes.

Zaelyra responded with a unique burst. The light reappeared once.

"It's a signal," says Rhylor.

"Or someone tries to imitate ours," replied Delli.

They announced their presence out loud. A voice rose on the side of the cash registers: "Who are you?"

"Travelers sent by the Guardians basin. We are looking for people who have been driven here."

"How much?"

"Four."

"Armed?"

"Yes."

The voice fell silent. A young human appeared behind the boxes, hands visible. His name was Erven. He was not one of the five missing; he had fled the Pit two nights earlier, after the guards had left a door unattended.

"Is they still here? Zaelyra asked.

"Some. Others have left."

"How much?"

"I don't know."

"Did you see the five travelers?"

"I've seen four. A woman svirfneblin, two humans and a drow. They were locked in the cash register room. The fifth was not with them."

Erven described the guards: two wore gray capes, another a red leather armband. None of them wore a seal. The captives had been detained because they could not pay for the promised passage. The guards were waiting for a buyer.

"They sell travelers?" asked Rhylor.

"They sell the right to drive them elsewhere."

The distinction did not make it any less serious. Erven did not know where the captives would be taken.

The cash register room was beyond the bells. A narrow corridor led there, monitored from a walkway. Erven knew a secondary entrance through a water duct, but he had not returned since his escape.

The Pit of the Bells



"Do you want to drive us there?" Delli asked.

"I want to take the others out."

"You can stay here and describe the way to us."

He hesitated. "If I let you go, you could get lost."

"If you come, you risk being taken back."

Erven looked at the tunnel he had fled. "I'm coming."

They prepared a diversion. Nym and Delli would ring a bell from a distance by modifying the air current with a canvas. Rhylor and Zaelyra would follow Erven through the secondary duct. No one would attack the guards except in case of immediate danger. Their goal was to open the room and come out, not to capture a leader they didn't know.

The diversion worked too well. Three guards left the walkway to check the bell. The fourth remained at the door, but he bent down to listen to the noise. Rhylor reached the lock and opened it with a thin blade.

Inside, three people were sitting on boxes. The fourth, the svirfneblin, was lying down, her eyes closed. Zaelyra approached her without touching her.

"Can you walk?"

"Yes," she replied. "But I don't have any more shoes."

"We'll find some."

Her name was Leth, and she had been separated from her sister at the toll station. The two humans were market travelers. The drow, a guide who had refused to sell the names of his customers.

"And the fifth?" Zaelyra asked.

"He left with a buyer," says the guide. "His name was Varro. I don't know where they took him."

"Did you see him leave?"

"Yes. They said he had accepted. I don't know if it was true."

Zaelyra didn't ask the captives to run. She explained to them the way back and the entertainment. Leth refused to leave without looking for his shoes. Erven handed her hers, too big for her.

They reached the secondary conduit before the guards returned. A bell sounds behind them, then a second. Delli pulled the rope: the return signal.

The group stopped at the branch. The gallery towards the exit remained free, but the guards began to search the rooms.

"We can still take them," said Rhylor.

"No," said Zaelyra. "We have all four."

"The fifth is with a buyer."

"We don't know where."

They left with the captives. At the exit of the Pit, Leth collapsed, exhausted. The two humans supported her. Erven walked behind, ready to turn around if a noise followed them.

No one spoke to the basin of the Watchers.

Ressa was waiting for them with two healers. She counted the people, then asked where the fifth was. Zaelyra tells him the truth.

"We don't know where he is."

Leth lowered his head. "He may have chosen to leave."

"Did you hear him say it?" asked Ressa.

"No."

"So we won't write it as a choice."

The captives were installed in a rest room. Ressa did not question them until they had eaten and slept. The Vault council received a message: four people found, one still missing, an unknown buyer.

Senn came to help translate the names. He did not find his father's among the four. He didn't hope to find him, but he stayed near the list until Zaelyra took him back.

"Did you think he would be there? She asked.

"I thought that one day I would see his name."

"Did you see him?"

"No."

"Then we'll keep looking, if you want."

Senn took the time to answer. "Yes. But not by pretending that every trace leads to him."

Chapter 62 — The name of the fifth

The captive report confirmed part of Jorren's story. The five travelers had not all been taken together. One had been sold to a buyer who was looking for guides capable of reading the old roads. The other four had been detained because they could not pay for the ticket they were promised.

The drow guide was called Rilven. He had tried to negotiate their release by offering his own map, but the guards had refused. He did not know the Watchman and had not seen a House seal.

The svirfneblin, Leth, said that the buyer was wearing a red leather glove on his right hand. He had placed a stoneless ring on the table, then put it away before leaving. She couldn't tell if it was the same man Kethra had met in Veyr.

"The coat?" asked Kethra.

"Grey."

"The voice?"

"He was talking low."

"Is it him? Zaelyra asked.

Kethra sat down. "That corresponds. That's not enough to identify him."

"Do you want to pursue him?"

"Yes."

"You would go alone?"

"No. I don't know where he went, and I'm not going to invent a road to reach him."

The local council decided to send a team to the Pit to evacuate the other prisoners and collect the traces. Zaelyra was not allowed to accompany him. She had already participated in the rescue; the Vault wanted her own guards to lead the rest.

"You ask us to go back west," says Rhylor. "But we leave the fifth behind."

"We send a team to look for him," Ressa replied. "You don't know where the buyer took him."

"What if you can't find it?"

"We'll say we didn't find it."

Leth asked to participate in the research. Ressa refused. She needed to testify at the market post, so that other communities would know the method used to attract travelers.

"I can talk without naming others," she says.

"Yes. That's why you come with us," answered Ressa.

The Vault Council also received a response from the Market of the Thresholds. Othar Vell was no longer there. He had left by the southern road the day before the group arrived. Dorga had failed to confirm whether he had left the market before or after learning that he was being investigated.

Kethra listened to the report with no visible reaction.

"Do you think he was running away? Zaelyra asked.

"I don't know."

"Would you like to find him?"

"Yes. But not with an accusation that I cannot prove."

"What if he took Saira?"

"So we will have to learn it without destroying the tracks that we have not yet verified."

Zaelyra's group could not remain in the Vault indefinitely. The council offered him two roads to the west. The first followed the old railways, faster but unstable. The second went up to a gallery closer to the Marches de Lune, longer and better known to the inhabitants.

The families gathered in the courtyard. The merchant wanted to take the railway. The wounded preferred the detour. Senn chose the longer road, which passed by the post where his father could have worked. Kethra accepted one or the other, but refused to separate from the group before the next stop.

Zaelyra put the two maps on the ground and let each one examine the differences. She didn't give her opinion first. Those who knew the charges and injuries spoke first; Nym completed with the drafts; the local guides explained the risks they could confirm.

The majority choose the long road. The merchant opposed it, then decided to stay at the Vault to wait for a caravan. He didn't want to abandon the group, but he didn't want to delay those who traveled more slowly.

"You will come back to the west? Zaelyra asked.

"If a road opens."

"We can leave a copy of both routes."

"Not the names?"

"No."

He accepted. He didn't ask him to sign the map.

Before departure, Ressa entrusted Zaelyra with a blank plaque. It had no right of way, only the name of the basin and the date of its creation.

"Why give it to me?"

"So that you can put it back at the next stop. They will decide what to engrave there."

"What if no one accepts it?"

"Then you'll bring it back."

"What if I can't come back?"

"Then someone else will do it."

Zaelyra took the plate. She put it away from the maps.

The group left for the Marches de Lune. Behind them, Ressa organized the search for the fifth traveler. In front, the long road followed an old rail line, then went up to lesser-known territories.

Leaving the Vault



Kethra was walking near Zaelyra. "Do you think we'll find him?"

"I don't know."

"You say it without trying to console me."

"I don't want to give you an answer that takes away your right to continue searching."

Kethra tightened the repaired buckle in her pocket. "So let's continue."

They advanced until the light of the Forges disappeared behind the stones. For the first time, they took with them a plate that did not belong to them and a road that no one had promised them.

They had not found the Watchman.

They had found people who could now recognize each other.