

# PROLOGUE: THE THREADS UNRAVEL

## The Verdant Reach's Last Stand

The Verdant Reach burned.

The destruction manifested beyond mere fire, it consumed in the way of endings. Golden Threads of the Silkweave Trees, once shimmering with purpose, tore free, lashing the air before curling into ash. The hum of the Loom fractured into discord, a melody unraveling one note at a time, each vibration carrying memories of previous collapses, previous endings never quite forgotten.

Canopies collapsed in waves of shattering light. The scent of burned silk clung to the air, sharp, acrid, wrong. Thick enough to taste. With each breath, reality thinned. The world became less certain of itself.

At the glade's edge, Hargrum stood motionless, wreathed in smoke and shadow.

His iron gauntlet flexed, servos whining as cords of golden silkweave pulsed beneath the dark metal. His molten eyes, twin embers in a face half-consumed by steel, remained fixed ahead, seeing something beyond the obvious destruction.

Behind him, Furnace Walkers moved with brutal purpose, hulking golems of brass and fire, their forms a mockery of organic grace. Each step sent tremors through the earth, vibrations that dismantled pattern. Bramblehounds scattered and burned, their howls transmuting into fractured frequencies that reality struggled to contain.

The Loom fought back.

Threads of gold lashed into Harrowraiths, pulling them apart from the inside, unwriting their existence. Yet for every one that fell, two more rose, woven from twisted steel and hollowed memory, their forms echoing an architecture the Loom had never authorized.

Hargrum advanced through the ruin. His presence loomed, a hammer falling in slow motion, breaking time itself.

Ahead, awaiting him, Nephrys stood alone.

# A Keeper's Defiance

She remained unwavering.

Nephrys, Loomkeeper of the Reach, stood at the base of the last core Silkweave Tree, her amber eyes fixed on Hargrum's approach. Her robes, embedded with Threads of memory and intention, stirred in the ash-choked wind. Within their folds, patterns spiraled, ancient knowledge preserved through countless spans. The staff in her hands glowed with diminishing light, less conduit now, more final promise.

"You cannot claim this place, Hargrum." Her voice carried the weight of epochs. "The Loom weaves beyond your understanding. It persists through versions of reality you have never witnessed."

The forest groaned, its pain resonating through layers of existence.

Hargrum's molten gaze held hers. A flare behind his visor, containment struggling against purpose.

Then, existence paused.

Everything listened.

He spoke, and reality shuddered in recognition.

"The Loom is flawed."

No rage. No bluster. A truth, spoken like iron striking certainty.

"It weaves weakness into every Thread," he said. "It preserves imperfection, mistaking chaos for design. I will burn it clean. I will forge it stronger."

Nephrys lifted her staff.

The forest responded.

Golden Threads erupted from the earth, coiling around Hargrum's limbs like living equations. The ground trembled. The light intensified, condensing into pure intention.

Hargrum remained unmoved.

His gauntlet shifted. Unfolded into a scythe where heat met purpose.

One swing.

The bindings shattered in a cascade of molten light. Nephrys staggered as the glow dimmed from her staff, connection fraying.

"You cannot unmake me, Keeper."

Hargrum stepped forward, iron grinding against itself. "I am iron. I am eternal."

In his voice lived certainty. In his certainty lived blindness.

## **The Birth of a Wasteland**

The Silkweave Tree trembled as Hargrum reached it.

Its Threads pulsed. Flickered. Then shrank from his approach, recognition deeper than fear.

Nephrys spoke, her voice carrying despite its quietude.

"Threads persist. Patterns endure. The Weave remembers what the Forge forgets."

Hargrum paused.

A hesitation emerged, something beyond calculation. Recognition, perhaps. Memory stored within the iron, within the fragments of himself still woven with silkweave.

Then he placed his hand against the trunk.

The golden veins contracted. Strained. Snapped.

The Loom screamed.

The sound traversed dimensions. It carried grief beyond language, loss beyond quantification. The Reach collapsed inward, folding into geometries it was never meant to contain.

Light vanished, devoured by meaning undone. Flame consumed without illumination.

Bramblehounds unraveled mid-howl, their essence pulled into threads that led nowhere.

Furnace Walkers stood in the ruin, machinery humming with triumph.

Hargrum remained still.

For one suspended breath, the glow behind his visor dimmed.

Something stirred within, threadlight embedded in iron, a remnant of connection, a defiance against his own certainty.

Then he turned away.

"The weak burn away," he murmured. "The strong endure."

His words hung in the air, less conviction now, more justification.

Far across the newly forged Wastes, where no mortal perception reached, the Loom's song persisted.

Quiet. Patient. Wounded but undefeated.

Gathering itself for what would come.

## **The Factory's Fall**

Liora felt it first.

The tremor beneath the stone floors rushed through her awareness. The wrongness in the rhythm signaled catastrophe. The Factory, last outpost of pattern in a world increasingly dominated by rigid structure, was dying.

Malfunctioning. Sabotaged.

First, a loom misfired, Threads tangling into impossible knots. Then another. Then systemic collapse. The machinery turned against itself, precision reconfiguring into chaos.

The Factory wasn't shutting down.

It was being unmade.

The recognition came with visceral certainty. Hargrum's influence had found them, had corrupted the patterns that maintained stability. The very architecture of possibility began unweaving itself.

Liora moved without hesitation. Her steps traced patterns across the stone, counterpoints to the destruction surrounding her. In her mind, threads tangled and untangled. Calculations, possibilities, necessities.

She understood with perfect clarity:

This moment had been written long before it unfolded.

## **A Mother's Choice**

She found them in the eastern chamber. Kainen, Elen, Caio.

Their faces bore streaks of soot. Their eyes held questions without answers. The air around them shimmered with potential, with threads that hadn't yet chosen their course.

"Liora, what are you doing?" Kainen asked, voice raw with sudden understanding. The Factory's collapse wasn't just disaster. It was departure.

No time remained for explanation.

She pressed the locket into Caio's small hands, feeling the metal warm between them. The transfer completed a circuit older than memory.

"Keep this safe," she whispered, seeing recognition in his eyes though he couldn't possibly understand. "It will guide you when memory fails."

Kainen's disbelief struck her like physical force.

"You're leaving us."

She wanted to promise otherwise, to offer comfortable deception.

The walls buckled. Reality bent.

Her final glimpse was of Caio's fingers closing around the locket, instinctive, absolute.

Then the Thread pulled her elsewhere.

She fell through otherwhens

The Factory blurred around her, unraveling into strands of light and possibility. The Weave pulled her forward, her existence skipping between elsewheres like a stone across water.

She witnessed Hargrum's sabotage unfolding in reverse, saw the precise architectural weaknesses he had exploited, the calculated points where structure would cascade into ruin. She reached for her children, fingers stretching across otherwheres, but the Threads pulled her relentlessly onward.

The pattern had its requirements.

The Factory vanished.

Silence engulfed her.

Liora Threadstepped into darkness.

Caio never released the locket.

Even as walls crumbled. Even as Kainen pulled them from collapsing reality. Even as the world they knew dissolved into rubble and memory.

He held it.

His small fingers traced its contours, feeling the subtle patterns inscribed in metal. Within its closed shell, something pulsed with patient rhythm, a heartbeat that matched nothing in this world.

He waited.

Without understanding why, he recognized the locket for what it was, a Thread not yet severed, a Pattern awaiting completion, a Question still forming itself.

The Factory lay in ruins.

The Reach had become Wasteland.

The Loom's weaving continued.