

Tomebound
Book One of the Inksworn Saga

Read seekers, until daytime fades to candlelight,
For magic is found when ink breathes life into parchment,
When bookbindings break and cradled words take flight,
It's the safety you feel when cozying up to a warming hearth,
Or in the smile you share when turning the page in delight.

Chapter One: A Slip from Death

"Dreams are the mutiny of the common man."

~~Verse Ten of The First Binding

In Port Cardica, every streetwise unbound memorized three rules to survive:

First, no thieving on Sundays. The Sisters bring food, but if anyone steals, no one eats.

Second, don't cross the nobles. They need someone to blame for the city's unrest—it will be you.

Third, a fool's prayer always follows danger, so if you plan on doing something stupid, pray first.

Tonight, Callam Quill was breaking all three.

He dangled from a cliff wall, fingers straining to bear his weight. Stones cut into his skin. High above him stood his mark, a coastal manor with the gothic arches and spires popular among the port's elite. Wind whipped along the length of the shoreline below, buffeting him as he searched for better footing and found none.

Words could not describe how cold he was.

"Crow's foot," he swore, squinting to his left, then right. Nothing but rock, slick as seaglass. Freedom, and his best chance to fulfill the promise to his sister, lay atop this cliff, yet he could see no easier way up. Only one option remained: a notch the size of his thumb.

Just the look of it made his hands cramp. But what choice did he have?

Pebbles broke loose as he stretched out his right arm, trusting his left arm to anchor him to the wall. An intense moment of focus later and... *Made it*. All he had to do now was finish this climb and steal a spellbook before Binding Day. Doing so was imperative, as the upcoming ceremony would force all unbound seventeen-year-olds into a blind binding with terrible odds of success. Failure meant more than losing access to magic and literacy forever. It meant becoming a Ruddite. An indentured slave to the tomebound.

Jaw tightening, Callam reached for the next handhold. *That won't happ—*

A gust howled its approach.

He felt the bite of the wind first, followed by its pull. Tired as he was, he struggled to keep his purchase, and his grip flagged, then failed as he was pried from the cliff.

“It’s not written!” he shouted while he slid. “It’s not written!” The prayer was one of many shared by the chapel’s Sisters in lieu of lessons or love—repetition had gotten him fed, but memorization had gotten him seconds, so Callam had learned them all by heart.

Little good that did him now. For all their promised protections, the stanzas offered none here.

Instinct kicked in, and he threw his hands out. Something caught—all at once, fabric ripped, stone scraped against his abdomen, and the air was forced from his lungs. Calluses tore as he traded skin for friction on the rock face. Then he was left hanging like a rag doll, eyes shut tight against an avalanche of gravel now peppering him.

Only when the rock-shower passed did Callam manage a labored breath. Trembling, he unhooked his tunic from the rock spur it had snagged on, and clambered to a nearby perch. Debris and dust coated his brown hair.

“B-by the prophet,” he muttered. He was shivering, stunk of sea salt, and hurt everywhere. Yet somehow, he’d survived.

A quick flex proved he hadn’t broken any fingerbones, though a cough brought the sting every kicked street rat knew so well. Soft prods confirmed his fears: a bruised rib, maybe broken. Beggars were quick to ignore similar injuries from fights or beatings, only to end up plagued by the stitcher’s cough.

It was reason enough for him to consider giving up.

Not happening. Callam forced himself to his feet and reached for the wall. *I promised Siela.*

His late sister would have wanted him to see this through. “Stand tall when others falter,” she’d always said. And quitting now would only doom him to a lifetime of serving those blessed by scripture.

That wouldn’t do.

For years, he’d watched orphans queue up to receive their spellbooks, only to go from hopeful to horrified when the ink failed to take. Their shouts haunted his memories; the binding rite was supposed to be painless, yet shattered dreams rarely were. The dark lines that soon formed under their Ruddite eyes proved indentured orphans never lacked for work—there was always a steady business in selling them to the patrons of the port.

Focus.

Callam took a deep breath and shook his arms out one at a time. The edge was less than ten feet away now. It was rumored that the guards rotated at midnight; after that, the grounds would be secure, so he'd—

“...that which is written,” a gruff voice stated from above.

Callam flattened himself against the cliff, pulse racing. Was he so far behind schedule that the watch was changing now? Peeking upwards, he could just make out the silhouette of someone walking atop the cliff's edge.

“Is foretold and forbidden,” another voice responded, completing the greeting. “Alright, alright. Enough formalities. All quiet on the watch?”

“Quiet as it gets. Just sea, stone, and sand for miles. I've slept less during sermon.”

“Hah! Better than the warfront or that blasted Tower, though, right? Two years, and I can *still* taste the stench of those...”

Whatever the guards said next was swept up as they paced further down the perimeter.

Relief washed over Callam—the men hadn't seen him, that much was clear, yet he had to hurry. In two quick movements he neared the edge, his path ending just short of the rim. He could turn back around and search for a safer route, or...

Loose stones fell from where he'd kicked off the wall. For a second he was airborne, hands reaching for the headland. Then he cleared the cliff's lip and clawed his fingers into the dirt above. His palms burned as he began to slide backwards, before a foothold gave him the support he needed to haul himself up.

Pain lanced through his ribs at the exertion.

“Made it,” he wheezed once the burning sensation faded. *Thank the Poet.* He stood gingerly, wanting to check his wounds. Yet he couldn't; he needed to locate the markers he'd memorized in preparation for this heist.

A monument, tower, outdoor foyer, and staircase. Together, they'd lead him to the estate's collection of *scripted grimoires*. To freedom.

Keeping to the shadows, Callam wound his way through the grounds to an outdoor courtyard. A manor loomed in the distance, four stories of ivy-covered granite fading into the darkness. Windows glowed like watchful eyes. One flickered on, and he fought the urge to hide. Instead, he sped up, the grass squelching loudly underfoot.

He prayed the creaking of nearby tree branches would mute the sound.

Soon he'd reached an open pavilion. Peering around a hedge, Callam looked for any guards—to his relief, this area was empty except for a speaker's lectern. A marble copy of the sermon's book laid open upon it.

The first marker. Left to weather outside in a blatant display of power and wealth.

The second marker, a manned bartizan with sentries on lookout, protruded from above a large archway at the far end of the courtyard. He approached with caution; these men stood vigilant in their watch. One leaned out the tower's window, his lamp held high against the darkness. The other cupped a hand over his brow to better see the grounds. Both wore breastplates, and neither kept the long beards common among the city's constables.

Slouching against a topiary, Callam prepared to wait. He swallowed heavily. Sneaking past these two would be no easy task.

Seconds dragged to minutes as he watched for any sign that the sentries were distracted. Around him, it began to drizzle, then to rain.

Beads of water trickled down his neck.

Finally his chance came: one guard turned to the other, and both leaned in to light a pipe. Callam dashed into the passageway. After rounding the first turn, he crouched and listened. No guards came running.

The only sounds were the blowing of leaves and the pattering of rain. Lantern light danced on a wall to his left while, across the way, black lichen grew on columns that led to a manor-side garden. Something smelled damp and sweet near the pillars, and for a moment he wondered if a stocking boy had left a barrel of wine out overnight. A small fountain gurgled at his feet. Parched as he was, he leaned over for a drink.

Some of the tension slowly drained from his shoulders.

Then the wind held still. Silence fell, the type that all prey know. As if ice was pressed against his spine, every hair on Callam's neck rose. Something... no, *someone* was watching. Waiting. He was sure of it. Shadows filled the corners of his eyes; they stretched and wove and played tricks on his mind.

He needed to run. *Now.*

Shooting forward, he aimed for the plants that bordered the manor. His first step felt like moving through mud, but each subsequent one came easier.

He'd made it less than ten paces when the storm picked back up. Like it was responding to the storm, the the feeling of being watched passed as quickly as it had come.

Callam shivered and took cover amongst the foliage. There, he waited for his terror to fade. He'd spent years on the streets honing his instincts—it seemed those long nights had left him jumpy as well.

'Fear left to linger grows loud,' he reminded himself after a short while. That stanza carried more weight with the orphans than the Sisters could ever know.

Chapter Two: The Price of Dreams

"Take their wishes or their copper. They need neither.
But take their books? Rob them of their stories?
Then you'll rewrite their culture."

The Bettering of a Populace, Page 15.

As soon as Callam had regained his composure, he crawled through the manor's shrubbery. Plants, weighed down with water, dripped onto his clothes, and he was well and truly soaked by the time he'd trudged into the open-air nursery at the end of the undergrowth.

Coming to his feet, he advanced through a maze of wooden planters, a quick glance over his shoulder ensuring he wasn't being followed. Night flowers hung overhead. They shone like little lamps in the darkness, casting shadows on the far walls of the garden and illuminating nearby fruits ripe enough to make his mouth water.

All was quiet until a berry floated up and burst. Callam winced at the sound, then at the ensuing growl of his stomach. The aroma of something faintly similar to amberling plums lingered in the air. A long time favorite.

He ignored the craving.

Going thirty hours without a meal was never easy, but he wasn't about to risk everything by eating something unknown tonight and getting sick. Instead, he darted down the paving stones leading to the third marker—an outdoor foyer with carved benches and accompanying birdbath—slowing only when he approached the oak doors barring entry to the manor. Both gleamed in a lantern's glow and were guarded by twin statues: the first a figure of the Poet, her hands clasping a tome, the second a sculpture of a wolf, two cracked moons in its maw.

A silent curse escaped his lips as he stepped onto the stoop. Barely audible buzzing thrummed from both doors. A sure sign as any that they were spellwarded.

"Fire and folly," he swore again.

Weeks spent begging favors and eavesdropping at taverns, yet he'd never once thought to ask about this type of ward. They were useless trinkets in the face of magic, deterrents kept by poor tinkerers and merchants. Never by nobles.

With their grimoires, they don't need them.

Callam's mouth soured. The docks were strung heavy with the bodies of thieves who'd tried to steal from the gentry. Heavier still, with the remains of Ruddites who'd displeased their masters.

He had no intention of adding to either of their numbers, so he crept away from the doors, hoping to find another way in.

He'd only made it a few paces when a low growl reached his ears. Stopping dead in his tracks, he turned his head, a jumble of panicked thoughts crossing his mind. This manor didn't keep hounds—that, at least, he'd asked the taverngoers about.

Another growl followed the first, deeper this time, the sound of two slabs of granite scraping together. Tensing reflexively, Callam waited for something to happen. Anything... Yet nothing did. His quick scan of the foyer confirmed there were no dogs, just the one statue of a wolf, an errant beam of moonlight upon its snout.

A snout that wriggled alive as he watched.

Creases deepened around the canine's mouth and jets of steam escaped its nostrils. Callam instinctively took a step back, then another, his eyes locked on the statue. The wolf's whole body shook as more moonlight crept out from behind the storm clouds and further awoke it from its slumber.

With a snort, the stony muscles in its neck contracted.

Callam heard a scattering of broken marble hit the foyer's floor as the beast crunched down on the moons in its mouth. He had no doubt he would have seen it too, had he not already turned and run.

Sprinting back to the nursery, he searched for somewhere to hide. This was a moonheart construct—of this, he was certain. Everyone knew they mostly tracked by heat. They couldn't see well through the small rocks that passed for their eyes, and lacked any sense of smell. Evading one, therefore, required masking one's warmth.

A tree might work, if he climbed high enough.

No. I'll only strand myself. The nursery rooftop?

Couldn't reach it. Even if he could, it might not bear his weight. Sliding to a stop, he glanced around, and... "There!" he whispered, and sprinted toward a mound of dirt in the distance.

Only at the last moment did he realize what the mound really was: a waist-high flower bench. Mud smeared his clothes as he dove underneath it and began covering himself with mulch.

He hoped it would be enough.

The wolf he could evade; it was the guards he was more worried about—there was no way they'd missed the statue's ear-splitting howls.

One... two...

Callam counted each second in his head, the waiting killing him. He fought not to move. Something small and wriggly and had snuck inside his collar and was starting to squirm. Worse was the stench of the turned earth: it smelled like a graveyard. He hated graveyards.

They reminded him of her.

"What's it, girl?" Callam heard the sentry's words before the footsteps that accompanied them. Two short barks and a rumbling *woof* was the response. "Hush, hush. Something in the gardens?" the patient voice asked.

A blaze of red and yellow shone across the nursery. Callam guessed the guard was waving around a torch. All he could do was trust he would not be found.

Two more passes of the bright light. Two more stanzas mouthed by Callam for luck. Finally, he heard the guard say, "Hush, hush... must've been a squirrel." The man spoke to the statue as a boy would his dog.

The wolf whined. A thudding of steps, a branch snapping too close for comfort, and Callam's breath hitched.

"Anything there?" The guard walked closer, the silhouette of his boots now less than ten feet away.

Callam palms began to sweat.

"Come, now, come, now," the sentry said, with an air of resigned patience. "Nothing's here...best we get you back." The clip of boots on flagstone indicated the man was leaving the nursery. A scraping of the heavy paws followed shortly thereafter.

After a minute of silence where no one else shouted or peered about, Callam rolled out from under the flower bench. His plan had worked. Even better, the torchlight had illuminated a path for him into the manor. Dark ivy trailed up the nursery's wall, growing right next to a set of windows.

Windows he knew exactly how to open.

Each was made of shaded glass and constructed from three panes. He was familiar with their style, as it was common around the docks—for reasons that would forever elude him, the port's pennypawners insisted on mimicking the fashions of the gentry. These windows were sure to be cut with greater precision and built from thicker wood, but he expected the same tricks would get him through.

The secret is in the latches.

Pieces of root fell when he tugged on the vines. These were not the thick growths that blanketed deserted mansions; this plant had been pruned back and would struggle to keep him up.

Still, they would have to do.

Leaning over, he picked up a pebble, then tossed it at a window. It bounced off soundlessly. “No surprises there...” he muttered as he climbed up to the nearest window. Neverbreak glass *was* shatterproof, after all—it absorbed everything, even noise.

Now he just had to pop the pane open.

Positioning himself so that his feet balanced on a bottom sill while his hands gripped the thinner lip up top, Callam readied a kick. These windows would have been impenetrable, if not for a fatal flaw: they opened inwards to allow for a breeze on a hot day.

And, while the glass itself was unbreakable, the latches locking the windows shut were not.

His first kick sent a shock up his leg. Bracing himself, he struck again. He couldn't reach those internal latches, but didn't need to—with enough force, the window would do the work for him.

Or so he hoped.

When the pane held stubbornly firm, he tightened his grip on the top sill and pushed off the bottom one with both feet.

This better work, he thought mid-swing.

Feet met glass and the window gave.

It opened with a *pop* as the pane's magic tried to dissipate the incoming force in all directions, including into the poorly made latches. They broke under the strain, allowing him to push his way inside and drop to the floor.

Landing in a crouch, Callam found himself in a dark hallway decorated by antiques and paintings. He snuck his way down it, feeling more the intruder with every step. There was a quiet here that was different from that of the streets—a sense of safety that seeped from the walls. The lack of guards confirmed it: this manor’s owners did not believe this place could be breached.

Callam envied that feeling of security. Wished to share in it.

Finally, he spotted the fourth marker—a carpeted staircase with polished banisters—and took the steps two at a time. At the top of the landing, drawn-back curtains revealed the largest private library in Port Cardica.

His chest tightened.

A lifetime’s worth of stories towered upward from floor to domed ceiling, the shelved books sorted by size and color. Everbright candles bobbed in the air and circled slowly as if lifted by a draft. By their light, he spotted the geometric patterns of the stained glass overhead, more intricate than any he’d ever slept under. Purple hardcovers filled the highest reaches of the room, the volumes accessible only by rolling ladders. Even at a distance, these books were intimidating—regal, with thick, gilded bindings, as if announcing they were too good for his patronage.

I’ll steal one of those too, one day.

Making for the aisles in the heart of the room, he passed a line of green volumes, throat going dry. Carried by every lawman and constable at the Port, these were a codex of the city’s rules.

How many streetkids had died by those laws?

Stacked upon polished tables and within easy reach lay hundreds of red books with warm covers. They all but begged to be read. Almost unconsciously, Callam touched one of them—it was a reflexive action from years spent hoping and wanting. And it made no difference. Without a successful binding he’d forever stay illiterate, the words sliding right off the pages of any book he opened.

He *wanted* to read, though. Desperately.

Everyone did, but dockside orphans more than most. They’d huddle by the piers and pinch together halfpennies to pay travelers for tales of far-off places, brave heroes, and outrageous villains—coins better spent on food. But stories cut the cold a little. Made the day’s aches hurt less.

Over time, they’d learned that novels carried these adventures. Brought to life worlds the likes of which chapelward could only dream.

And those books aren't even grimoires. Novels do all that with just words.

Rustling drew Callam's attention upward in a panic, yet it was only paperfowl. They nestled among the rafters, cooing at each other. He'd seen a few in his life, when they'd gotten lost mid-flight and wandered into the city. Made of parchment, the constructs sang melodies into the nooks and crannies of grand libraries—helped make the spaces more warm and inviting.

At the back of the library, balusters fed into a spiral staircase that coiled upward. Careful steps ensured nothing creaked as he climbed.

Reaching its top, his eyes went wide.

Without stopping to think, he raced down the vaulted loft, passing two doors and an armchair, before coming to a stop in front of a massive wardrobe. Stored above it—about ten feet out of reach—were at least ten scripted grimoires, each a different color and each exuding a perceptible weight.

All shared in the telltale signs: 'Air that shimmers like vapor on a cool day. Stars and insignia embedded and bright.'

Turning around in a daze, Callam searched for a way to reach the tomes. If he could just touch one, he'd be able to try to bind here. No more fearing Binding Day. No more trials.

There wasn't a ladder in sight.

He'd just begun dragging the armchair over when his instincts screamed at him to hide. Ignoring the impulse, he slammed his makeshift step into position, so close to his prize. With one foot balanced on the cushion, he reached for the grimoires and...

Voices echoed through the library. Two of them. Coming closer. Getting louder.

There was no way he'd bind in time. Adrenaline surging, Callam rushed for the wardrobe's doors and tugged on the knobs. "C'mon," he whispered as his fingers fumbled on the smooth wood. "C'mon." Mages would flog unbound for the smallest offense and trespassing was no minor offense.

Wrenching the wardrobe open, he took shelter among some robes and coats. He feared the doors would squeak when he pulled them in—but well-oiled hinges proved a godsend.

Chapter Three: The Pauper's Pitfall

"Endure the hand that beats, for it's the one that feeds."

Preachings of the Son's Solace.

"Leave it alone!" shouted a young man as he slammed open the door to the study.

Pressed against a crack in the wardrobe's door, Callam could just make out a boy with green robes and a sharp face, pacing back and forth. They looked to be close to each other in age, the youth slightly older if his blond stubble was any indication.

"Poet's hand," Callam mouthed, fighting to keep in a cough—dust caked the floor and teased the back of his throat. *If I'm caught here, I'll get the noose.* The walls, stale air, and image of the hanging post made him feel suffocated. So too did the knowledge that any movement would be overheard.

"Master Writ," called out an older man. "Please understand, it's not up to me. Your father mandates it!" The voice's owner came into view a moment later: short, and chubby, he wore the black and whites of a scholar and labored to catch his breath.

"I may be in your charge," the youth responded, "but if you think to condemn me to peasant's work, then you, Father, and the Prophet himself can go to the Heathen's Haven!"

At the curse, Callam's chest tightened. True, orphans swore like beached sailors, but they learned quickly where not to step. *Nothing good comes from taking the Prophet's name in vain.* The Sisters had made sure to beat-in that rule.

"Do—don't speak such heresy, young master," the man stammered, his cheeks pinched. "If your father hears you..."

"He'll do what?" the boy spat. "I am his third son, yet he forced me into a traditional binding. He could have gifted me a scripted grimoire. Saved me from the Tower. Instead, he sent me to risk my life."

"Master Writ," the scholar said firmly, as if he'd finally found his legs. "You know well as I that your father wishes for you to write your own path. He is not alone in this; many believe the trite magic of a scripted grimoire comes at a cost. And, a man of his station ca—"

"Can speak for himself," a stern voice interjected.

If Callam's had thought his mouth dry earlier, now it tasted of brine. He knew men like this one—men who spoke with born authority. *Men who face no consequences, only inconveniences.* The wardrobe, once safe, now felt more like a coffin, and he had to fight to stay still and not bury himself among the coats. Surviving the streets meant avoiding callers like this man. Avoiding their sunken cellars and sickly smiles.

"Thank you, Mr. Orsal," the man said. "Sebastian, your petulance has gone on long enough. Your mother has turned a blind eye, yet you are clearly *stunted*. I shall not tolerate your cowardice any longer."

"I... Father, if you would just—"

The sound of a slap cut through the study. A long quiet followed, so tense Callam could hear it. *This man views his child as a prize, not a person.* The knowledge twisted his stomach.

"Fa..."

"Not. Another. Word," the man commanded. He walked past the wardrobe, stopping to straighten the cuffs of the velvet shirt hanging loose around his shoulders. Disgust wrinkled a hawkish face with a curved nose and furrowed brow.

"You will address me as Scriptor Writ." He took a measured breath. "Just as you will return to the Tower and earn your own way. Should you manage to progress your grimoire, you may return home."

Until then, you will earn our family's name with bone and blood." When no response came, the man turned away from the wardrobe. "Good. Now, let's deal with tonight's other nuisance.

"Enjoying the show, boy?" Callam felt his heart stop. "*Haelav Enil!*" the man incanted as he spun, his words reverberating with power. Hundreds of shadows erupted from a pouch at his waist, arcing through the air as they congregated in front of the wardrobe, where they wriggled together like a knot of ravenous eels.

Then, before Callam had the chance to fully process what was happening, the strands burst through the crack in the doors.

At once, he grabbed for the coats, felt the magic lasso his body, dug his heels in, failed to get a strong-enough grip, and was tossed into the air. A piece of red fabric tore as he flew. He'd barely managed to lock his arms underneath himself when he hit the study floor.

Hard.

Ringin filled his head. Wood pressed up against his face and a headache set in where his temple met his ear. Yet, even as he lay prostrate, his eyes darted to the corners of the room.

If I—

Magic crushed what thoughts he'd had of escape; at once it yanked him upwards, contorting and splaying his body until his arms resembled the wings of a broken bird.

"Thought I'd sensed someone trudging through our garden," the mage chided as he approached, his composure at odds with his son's bewildered expression. "To think my son stupid enough to befriend the rabble..." He glared at Sebastian. When the boy didn't react, the mage changed his course. "Not a thief of opportunity, then. You must have climbed the rocks..."

Callam knew better than to respond. He stared the man down—words carried power, and he would not give this man his.

"Yes." The mage's nose flared even as he kept up a thin smile. "That's it. *Unbound*. No magic signature at all. No wonder the guards couldn't sense you. Tell me, boy, which forbidden fruit have you set your sight on? Food? Or perhaps... our books?"

Callam hawked onto the man's shoes. Despite the defiance he felt, the act wasn't fully intentional—the man's spell had put pressure on Callam's stomach and his silence had earned more pressure still. Bile splattered on the floor.

Scriptor Writ recoiled in disgust.

“Come, Sebastian,” he said. “It seems the gods *do* favor you, after all. They’ve gifted us the opportunity for you to whet your tome.”

“I... what...?” This time, the boy flinched when his father turned his way.

“I do not sire fools. You know exactly *what* I mean. Prove to me the Prophet’s gift has not been wasted on you. Prove you deserve your place in this world and will labor to keep atop it. Do so and I shall allow you to skirt your responsibilities in the Tower.” Energy crackled around the mage’s hand and began to solidify into a weapon. “This tool should suffice.”

That’s a...

Fear threatened to freeze Callam as he fought to move. Throwing himself against his bindings, he searched for any weakness in the spell. He did not have to guess at this sword’s purpose—any thief could recognize a blade meant to cauter and cut. No good could come from such a weapon.

The magic’s hold was sure and stable as steel.

Nauseous, Callam glanced at his hands. *Ten fingers*. For sixteen years, he’d kept them all. Kept them *despite*. Oh, he’d failed as a cutpurse plenty of times, but had always gotten away in the end. Not today. He’d certainly lose at least one. All he could do now was hide in that inner sanctuary that kept all survivors sane: that warm, walled place he’d built deep within himself on long nights spent gorging water just to feel full.

He hated it there. Returning always made him feel so powerless. Yet he needed the distance from his emotions, for he’d only felt this small once before, when, as a boy, the Sisters had found his cot wet. Back then, he’d broken down.

Never again.

In front of him, the world unfolded as if viewed through a thick pane of glass. Callam watched Sebastian stride over to his father, the noble boy’s face betraying both fear and wonder as he reached for the blade. Skin met hilt, and the youth gasped, wide-eyed, and immediately tried to withdraw the outstretched hand.

Scriptor Writ didn’t allow it. In a smooth motion he grabbed his son’s wrist and pressed it down upon the weapon. Sebastian screamed. “Enough,” the mage demanded. “This pain you feel is the burden we

Scriptors carry. One that all those who wish to master magic must overcome. Embrace it. Understand what you are and what Ruddites will never be.”

It was a simple statement, yet one born from cruelty, and Callam winced when Sebastian’s skin began to boil—the weapon the boy banished was no soldier’s tool, but an executioner’s blade meant to punish criminals by burning through whatever it touched.

The Sister’s served twice seared meat that looked less blistered.

What father does that to their son? The question came to Callam slowly, quieting a fear he’d yet to confront: what if this mage demanded more than his hand?

Sebastian gave him no time to ponder. Anger marred the noble’s face as he firmed his resolve and lifted the blade. Anger, and something else. Pity, maybe? A quick step, then another, and the boy readied a cut.

Callam set his jaw. He refused to cower here. The promise he’d made to his sister, the laughs and cries of the younger orphans, and the tang of sea salt from the brine-covered dock he called home shot through his mind. These were his moorings. They gave him humanity, he knew. Made him more than some pauper.

Brought light to his eyes.

Uncertainty overtook the venom in Sebastian’s gaze, and Callam mouthed a prayer when the boy took a step back. Yet it was a short-lived hope, and a false one. As quickly as it had been lost, the noble regained his composure, reaching a hand into his green robe to pull out a thin grimoire.

“Reformenae Expir Reia,” he invoked. The sapphire tome he held bloomed to life, brackish water and dark algae streaming from its seams. Yes, Sebastian had spoken in the secret language of mages, but the words he’d said were infamous enough that Callam knew their meaning: the noble aimed to advance his spellbook by writing a chapter with the lifeblood of another.

“Solvyn,” Sebastian finished.

The algae grew and became wiry as the grimoire responded to the command. Vegetation shot outward and, finding Callam, began to constrict him, the frigid, oily vestiges drawing a stunned gasp from his lips as the plant sought its nourishment.

The blade lifted and swept down.

Not at Callam's hand, but at his neck. This was no act of mercy, and fear soon breached the walls he'd built to keep reality out. The stanzas claimed "a life of providence should be lived without pride," but that had never sat well with him. He'd always wished for more. Promised his Sister he'd be *more*.

More than a Ruddite. More than some thief. How he'd dreamed of being first among the orphans to become tomebound.

Yet his future, it seemed, had already been written.

Chapter Four: Solace in Shackles

"Fear not the flame of fortune, for the destined will stand and the forsaken will fall."

—Pastor Rashi at the burning of City Rebla.

Agony overwhelmed Callam. It spread through his body, reaching the deepest parts of him until he couldn't think, struggled to breathe—then, just like *that*, the pain was gone. It was a transition so abrupt that he feared he might be in his death throes. In that final second he'd shut his eyes, so he wasn't quite sure how he'd survived.

Opening them, he understood.

Sebastian stood in front of him, the boy's disfigured grip slack where once it held firm. The blade he'd wielded teetered on Callam's shoulder, having burned through the noble's swordarm midswing. It fell as they watched, clanging loudly on the floor. A fresh scar remained in its place, stretching from neck to collarbone, the cauterized skin seemingly responsible for Callam's abrupt lack of pain.

The accompanying stench could turn stomachs.

"To fail your first culling... as expected." Disappointment laced Scriptor Writ's words as he walked up and inspected his child's arm. "Your eldest brother finished without hesitation. Even Raele managed, in the end. Not you." The mage turned to Callam next, considering him for a long moment. His features were calculating. Practical. Cold enough to bring about a fresh type of numbness in Callam.

Will he finish what Sebastian started?

The mage had other plans, it seemed. To the scholar, he asked, "Binding Day is around the corner, is it not? Let the books decide this thief's fate. Lock him up until then." Making for the door, he flashed a nasty smile. "Food and water; we wouldn't want to deprive our port of its future *labor*."

With that, the man took his leave. The blade surged upwards to meet him, a flare sparking up as the weapon charred the study's floor.

Callam gasped and fell weakly to his knees. For the first time since he'd been hexed, he inhaled fully. Sweat had condensed on his forehead, so he lifted a hand to wipe the droplets away. His skin was hot to the touch. Way, way too hot, he realized, as a shiver passed through his body. Nothing could have convinced him he'd survive the night, but it seemed the Scriptor was too pragmatic to...

To...

His vision shifted and he fell onto his side.

The last thing Callam felt was the wood cooling his cheek; the last thing he saw was the scholar pull out a red spellbook and run to the noble boy's side. "*Recru Paale Malis Finile Meri!*" the man shouted, trying to tend the open wound. Sebastian repeatedly shook his head and violently pushed the scholar away. He pointed to Callam, and voiced the same phrase over and over again.

Callam didn't hear a single word.

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Callam's eyes flashed open as a cough rattled his chest. He shivered. Everything was dark, so dark that for a moment he feared he'd gone blind. Touching around himself in a panic, he found the ground to be hard and smooth, yet coarser than finished stone.

*A prison of some sort.*

Desperate for warmth, he pulled his knees to his chest. Something clanked with the motion, and the sound reverberating off a far wall. It took a while for his numb hands to find it: thick bands clasped his ankles, the iron so cold it had already stolen the warmth from his legs.

No keyholes met his fingertips. No chance of breaking out.

Poet's hand, but he had to try anyway. Rattling each chain in turn, he searched for weak points. Any lackwitt could see he'd not survive until Binding Day like this. And if he did somehow manage it, he'd be in no condition to pass the accompanying trials.

*I'll fail to bind for sure.* The thought drained his resolve even as he fought to stay awake. Exhaustion soon lured him back to sleep.

When he next awoke, Callam found himself in a much warmer environment. “What?” he blurted out, relief unknotting his stomach. He was sure he remembered being somewhere dark and freezing, yet found himself in a lit room with austere, white walls that seemed to press in from all sides. His confusion only heightened when he noticed the smell—vinegary almost—and the craftsmanship of the bedpan, sink, and stool fighting for space in the corner of the small room. All were nicer than anything kept by the Sisters.

“A dream...?” he murmured hopefully, and tried to sit up.

He was stopped short.

Manacles cuffed his wrists to the sides of a narrow cot and prevented him from doing much more than turn on his side. Even that proved a challenge as stained bandages ran from his shoulder to thigh, though the discoloration made clear he hadn’t been tended to in some time.

All of that, at least, he could understand—they were consistent with his memories of the night before.

The small bookshelf in the corner of his room was not.

Seeing it, his fingers began to itch, and a new set of emotions surged through him. Books were rare, far *too* rare to share with inmates. *That’s what I am, right?* Callam was no longer so sure. This room was unlike any cell he’d ever visited; instead, it looked more like one of the infirmaries scattered around Port Cardica’s Western Isle. Though... now that he thought about it, those places rarely carried cord or needle, let alone books.

A simple explanation remained: this was the Writs’ private ward, and the novels were concessions for political captives, civilities meant to keep the imprisoned mage sane.

Understanding only served to further sour Callam’s mood—while he counted himself lucky to be among the living, gratitude remained a hard sell when trapped and forced to stare at a bunch of books he *still* couldn’t read. Agitation, however? That came much more naturally.

Minutes inched by.

Callam spent them trying to distract himself from the upcoming ordeal that was the Binding Day. First, he tried to wiggle out of his cuffs. When that didn’t work, he rolled onto his back and settled for staring at the ceiling. Every position seemed to strain his injured ribs.

*Two days to go, give or take.*

That was only a best guess; he had no real way of discerning how much time had passed since he'd been captured. What he did know was that he should feel more afraid. Or confused. Yet he was too drained to feel anything so complex.

*Two days.*

Two days from seeing if he was strong enough for a traditional binding. Two days before all seventeen-year-old unbound capable of passing the triad trials were compelled to swear on a grimoire to try and unlock their magic.

Most would fail. It was a sobering reality that less than one in ten succeeded at Binding Day. The unlucky would be indentured as slaves for a span of ten years and a day.

*Or for life, if you're like me.*

Grimacing, Callam grabbed the thin pillow he'd been provided and tried to ball it into something vaguely more comfortable. Orphans had it worst; as a lower caste, they'd spend the majority of their lives slaving for those blessed by scripture.

It was incredibly unfair.

He'd never forget the first time he'd seen mages soar through the sky. They'd looked like birds, if birds could shoot fire from their feet or run on clouds. The moment Callam had spotted them, he'd raced to the chapel and begged the Sisters to let him learn magic too. They'd explained how spellbooks worked to him then. "A bound tome imparts its power twice. Once with every challenge earned, and again with every lesson turned." The Sisters had informed him that when a mage passed away, his tome became 'scripted' and could be bought or sold.

Callam's legs began to feel restless.

It hadn't taken him long to learn that powerful families hoarded these scripted grimoires for future heirs, as they were far easier to bind than regular spellbooks.

He'd kicked so many rocks the day the Sisters had explained spellbooks to him that he'd ended up breaking a toe. Even at six, he'd known scripted grimoires for what they were: a cheat for the wealthy. Only later did he learn their downside; users couldn't discover customized spells or chapters and instead would be stuck with whatever magic the first owner had mastered.

That was a sacrifice Callam was eager to make. He held no delusions about his chances of succeeding in the trials and subsequent Binding.

*If I'd just managed to bind one yesterday... I could magic my way out of here—*

A grating sound broke the silence. At once, his heart began to pound and the night's exhaustion wore off. It wasn't the receding, hidden door in the infirmary wall that set him on edge. Nor was it the antiseptic odor that filtered in from outside.

It was the terrible thought that had just crossed his mind.

Orphans had recently begun to go missing from the docks. Rumors had it that a surgeon-mage had been experimenting in his trade.

"What is written?" a woman's voice asked from behind the doorway... not exactly what Callam had expected. "What is written?" the woman repeated a few seconds later, but Callam kept his silence. He was still reluctant to greet anyone related to those who'd imprisoned him.

"Well aren't you a stubborn one," the woman said as she entered. She was heavysset, wore worker's overalls, and sported a healer's cap over red hair that she'd bound up tightly in a bun. Callam felt himself relax when he saw her eyes—they were warm and held the promise of fresh bread handed out on winter nights.

"I'm Helena, but you can call me 'ma'am.' Turn this way," she instructed, motioning to the side of the bed. "Good. As much as you can. That's perfect."

"Careful," Callam protested when Helena probed his shoulder. A few choice words, and the question of why he wasn't in a dungeon, came to his mind.

"Well," Helena said after a moment, "looks like you'll need stitches after all. The Writs won't get a bent copper in recompense if you arrive to Binding Day in this state." Sticking her hands into denim pockets, she pulled out a bright yellow grimoire. She also produced a thin needle, and where she moved it, thread followed. "It's a good thing Mrs. Writ moved you to the infirmary when she did. Sweeter than a plum, that woman. Now, hold still—this will hurt. *Sem*," Helena incanted, and the needle responded.

It zipped up Callam's shoulder, stitching the skin in a fluid motion. Back and forth it traveled until it reached the end of the laceration, then looped around to tie a knot. If Helena noticed how Callam tensed at the needle, or shied away from her touch, she said nothing. For that, he was grateful.

"Th—thank you!" he managed to get out, wanting to be polite. He'd been stitched enough times to recognize her skill.

“You are very welcome. Shouldn’t be more than a day or two before you’re back in tip-top shape.” Looking him up and down, she added, “We can’t have you looking like a skeleton, can we? Arthur!” she called out. “Plate some chicken, if you’d please!”

“Yes, ma’am!” a high-pitched voice responded. A moment later a young blonde boy peered in from the opening in the wall. “Water too, ma?”

“That’s my boy. Pull the big wooden lever like I taught you,” Helena responded, seeming every part the proud mother. To Callam, she whispered, “he just turned eight.” Then, she crossed the room with the sure steps of someone who knew where everything ought to be. Callam tensed when she shifted open a panel in the wall, but he had nothing to fear—she simply retrieved a tray brimming with chicken and piled laughably high with brown rice. A fork had been jabbed into the mound, and was slowly toppling over.

“Pure as the Prophet, that one. Well, at least he remembered cutlery this time.” Helena chortled. “Now, don’t try anything funny,” she warned, eyeing him cautiously. “I’ve raised three sons and a husband. I know firsthand the bad decisions men make.”

Callam chuckled, then hacked in pain. Coughing, he lifted his shackled arms, palms up. The global sign of peace.

“Hmmm.” Helena squinted at him, then smiled. “The food’s cold—not much we can do about that. Everything gets prepared up...well over there.” She motioned to the door. “The staff are mostly Ruddites, bless their souls. By the time anything arrives here it’s no longer warm.”

“It’s perfect,” Callam replied, and meant it. He was confused by his good treatment, and exhausted from his heist, but more than anything, he was starving. Arthur had provided a kingly portion, so Callam eagerly grabbed the fork. It wasn’t easy to eat manacled, but he’d learned early on not to waste a meal.

“Just like my eldest,” Helena said with a small smile. She brought over a jug of water that she’d just fetched from the wall panel. “Eats every meal like it’s his last too. Doesn’t matter how often I serve him seconds—food’s always gone before I can sit down.”

Before long, a chime rang and Helena took her leave. “I’ll be back tomorrow,” she said when she departed. “Get some rest. The Binding Day trials will take a lot out of you.”

## Chapter Five: A Pauper's Presents

"There is magic in words. No longer in yours."

Verse One, The First Binding

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Callam ate and drank in silence after Helena left, enjoying the rare meal that was neither stolen nor fought for. In particular, he savored the chicken; it was far more tender than the stringy oceanstrider meat vendors sold by the stick. The brown rice was more common fare, yet was still soft and delicious, without any of its usual crunch.

At some point Callam bit into something hard: a wishbone had snuck into his meal. Seeing it, he felt a smile tug at his lips. He knew many sailors who would have jumped at the chance to break it. “Furcula’s Fortune,” they’d called it—they were always eager to show off their big words when deep in their cups. It was a good omen, especially so among those who counted seagulls as a staple of their diet. More importantly, the bone made for an excellent tool. Callam moved to jiggle it into the keyhole of his shackles, when he found that the manacles were affixed with an unpickable spellwork.

*No surprises there*, Callam thought, and tucked back into his meal.

Once he’d cleaned his plate, he tried to doze off. Sleep evaded him, the minutes turning to hours as he tossed and turned. For the first time in years he’d gone to bed full; it was a surprisingly uncomfortable sensation, and he couldn’t help but feel like a pig fattened for slaughter. Eventually, Callam resigned himself to staring at the bookshelf next to the corner of his cot. What he wouldn’t give to hold one of those books. Honestly, he would have settled for watching a fly.

Anything to beat the boredom and keep his mounting anxiety at bay.

*I’ve failed*, Callam admitted to himself some time later, resisting the urge to clench his fists. He’d called in every favor he could pull, and several he owed still, to prepare for his heist, yet had failed. Worse, he’d let his sister’s memory down. Before she’d passed, Siela had pulled him close and made him swear to “stand tall where others falter.”

*It’s just like her to leave me with a stanza*, Callam thought, his throat constricting slightly. Tears formed in the corners of his eyes, but he held them back. Siela had loved the verses, and had always claimed that faith carried a power of its own. Callam didn’t know much about that, but he remembered his promise. He’d lived by it.

*My future is not yet written*, he told himself, and took a deep breath. In the five years since his sister’s passing, Callam had trained his fingers and sharpened his wit every day. His rigorous practice had paid off more than once—now, he had to trust that it would be enough. The only thing left for him to do was to complete a few small acts of preparation, and find strength in owning what parts of the process he could control.

To that end, he grabbed the fork from his meal and clutched it between his manacled hands. Turning on his side, he poked a hole through the sheets, tore the material into thin strips, and then fastened the first strip around the wishbone's clavicle, effectively creating a small pendant. With no reason to wear it just yet, he hid it underneath his pillow. Time alone would tell if the bone was lucky or not.

Callam tied the remaining strips together into one long string that vaguely resembled a sling. This too went under his pillow. Lastly, Callam draped the blankets over the hole in his sheets and lay on top of it. Better to be chilly than to have Helena question him on why he'd torn apart the linen.

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Callam was sound asleep when breakfast came and went. Restless thoughts had kept him up late into the night, so he slept right through lunch as well. Helena finally woke him for dinner. She carried a big basket in her hands and was dressed in a blue smock that favored function over form—it looked as simple as it was durable and was covered by a long white apron with more than a few stains.

“Blanket alright? Or do you just prefer not to use one?” Helena asked, her eyebrows raised.

Callam yawned a “yes,” in response.

“Fair enough. Some people run hot,” Helena said. “Here, I’ve brought you a change of clothes, since yours look destroyed.” She set the basket she was carrying down on the side of the bed, then placed a pair of thin leather sandals on top of it. “Ironed the shirt myself, so don’t go getting it dirty. Now, arms out. I’ll remove your cuffs so you can change. Behave, and I won’t have to put them back on.”

Callam nodded, then complied after a moment of hesitation. He was unsure of what to make of these gifts. Helena appeared earnest, and she’d been nothing but kind—yet he still felt wary. He’d learned long ago that favors traded hands like a pack of worn cards and kindness was rarely dealt for free.

“*Alorha*,” Helena incanted once Callam had fully extended his arms. She tapped his manacles with her needle and wisps of light spiraled down the iron until they reached the crowns on each clasp and released the internal mechanisms with a *pop*.

The cuffs loosened and Callam sighed in relief. He stayed quiet for a moment, itching his chafed skin as he gathered his thoughts. “So... what do I owe you for those?” he asked with a gesture to the basket of clothes. In his experience, it was best to air out any debts upfront. “I’m not exactly flush with coin.”

Helena paused her ministrations, her hands in the middle of applying a fresh bandage. “Owe me?” she probed, with a tinge of amusement in her voice. “You’re healing better than I expected,” she noted a moment later, having clearly chosen to ignore his question. “There’s bread and cheese inside the

basket, next to your new clothes. I wrapped the food up, as I wasn't certain if you'd be awake. Since you are, it's best you rinse up; you won't have time in the morning—the guards will be down early to take you to Binding Day. Be extra respectful to them. Their friends were dismissed for letting you in.”

“Can't wait,” Callam replied sarcastically—he was no stranger to angry guards. He was also unsure why Helena had avoided his question, but he decided not to press the issue. “Thanks, Hele—uh. Ma'am. For everything.”

“You're very welcome,” Helena said. She looked him over once more, then offered him a sad smile. “It's easy to think they are all rotten. The nobles, I mean. Reality is, most treat the Ruddite well—even Mr. Writ does, once he forgives and forgets. So don't lose hope. Even if you don't bind, you might still find a home in a noble's house.”

Helena's words lingered as she collected the previous day's plates onto a tray, lifted it, and turned to cross the small room. When she reached the doorway, she hesitated and motioned to the bookshelf with her chin. “Just because you can't read them doesn't mean they don't have stories to share.”

With that, Helena stepped through the opening in the wall. It sealed behind her, but not before little Arthur could stick his head out and shout, “Good luck, mister! May the Prophet prosper within you!”

The minute she'd left, Callam darted from his cot to the bookshelf. He didn't need to be told twice; he wanted to try and read—even though everyone knew that unbound couldn't. Wiping his hands clean, he sat on the ground cross-legged. He'd touched books before, of course, but only when the Sisters had taught him a new prayer. And those holy books had remained closed during the entire lesson; all Callam had been allowed to do was take two fingers to his forehead, to his heart, then gently to the cover.

Not today, though. Today, he was going to open a book and see what secrets lay within.

Nimble fingers reached for a green hardcover and pulled it from its snug place between two other volumes on the shelf. The leather was weathered with age, supple and grooved where countless hands had loved and cradled it. It smelled of fired oak and cellar musk; all of it promised grand stories—the type that sent Callam back to better days. Cradling the novel, he undid the blue ribbon tying it shut. Only then did he notice a red bookmark nestled between the pages, as if someone had put the book down mid-adventure.

He flipped to the marker. It seemed as good a starting point as any.

Callam's eyes widened as letters unfolded before him for the first time. He'd seen writing previously, on street signs and the like, but never much of it and never for long—the words had always slipped away before he'd gotten a proper look. Nothing had prepared him for the flowing calligraphy that now filled the page in front of him. Each stroke of ink was perfectly aligned and entirely illegible, the text interrupted occasionally by dots, hooks, and spaces.

Callam's heart froze when the words stayed still longer than he'd expected. Longer than they should. The basic laws of magic dictated that unbound couldn't make rhyme or reason of written language—that the ink should slide right off the pages.

Apparently, those laws were wrong.

That's...impossible, he thought, his mouth slightly open, eyes fixed on the paper. *Can I...where do I start?* he wondered, trying to parse the letters for their meaning. Before he'd managed any progress, however, reality caught up; Callam watched as the words blurred, then fell from the page. Without thinking, he tore to another section of the book. He knew unbound couldn't read, yet felt certain he would have been able to, if given enough time. Choosing a fresh page, he tried again.

And again.

With each new attempt Callam grew more cross-eyed. Soon, a mounting pressure prickled the back of his head. He wanted to stop, but like a sailor bailing a waterlogged boat, he could not. He finished the first book and grabbed another; two more he skimmed through in this fashion, and still the garbled letters repeated their infernal pattern—they held steady long enough to taunt him with the hope of understanding, only to unravel and fall away. By the end of the third volume, Callam's head was truly pounding. He felt ready to throw the book at a wall. Instead, he wearily watched as the words on that final page fled.

"What in the Poet's name...?" he whispered. Callam rubbed his tired eyes. When that didn't do anything, he rubbed the paper between his fingers.

Then, he gaped at the page: he could see and feel four little dots on the paper's surface. Each one was no bigger than an ink drop, and together they formed the outline of a square.

Common sense told Callam that he shouldn't be able to see these marks. Yet he could—and his instincts told him that these dots were *only* visible to the illiterate, hidden by text as they normally were. Anyone able to read would see writing on the page, and not the markings beneath.

What have I stumbled onto? Callam thought with a pang of nervousness. He felt a growing urge to look over his shoulder. It was as if someone had intentionally marred the book's page to hide a message from those with magic.

But why would anyone do that?

Chapter Six: Of Cyphers and Seedlings

"Swords, sacrifice, and the valor of a righteous heart.

With these we've written you the hero.

But should you find us a survivor of your crusade?

Well, then you'll have your monster, too."

The Making of Kings, Volume One.

Heresy. Callam wracked his mind, but he couldn't think of another reason for the markings he'd found inside the book. He knew of heretics. Or rather, he'd heard stories about them—of Rebelrousers that fought for Ruddite liberation, or of the Broken Covenant and their consort of freemen—but those were wishtales shared by orphans in hushed voices. They weren't real things any more than miracles were. At least, that's what Callam had believed. Now, he wasn't so sure. If secret messages could be shared, it stood to reason that secret organizations could exist too.

Callam exhaled a long breath. His legs were starting to cramp, so he stood up from his place on the floor to stretch them out. He knew there was a chance he was making broth without bone: the square could be a square and not a coded message at all.

Yet the raised hairs on Callam's neck told him otherwise. Without truly realizing it, he began to pace his narrow room, all the while fighting a growing urge to put the book away and pretend he'd never seen it—he knew the consequences of heresy. At the same time, Callam *needed* to find out if the other books held secret diagrams too, in the same way a gambler needed another toss of the dice.

More pressing than either impulse, though, was the unanswered question of why he'd found the book in the first place? It seemed too great a coincidence that he would accidentally stumble onto something like this in the Writ's infirmary. Had the book been left behind by a patient or prisoner, in the hope that it would one day be found?

Or, even more daunting: had Helena or Mrs. Writ placed him here intentionally so that *he* might find it?

Minutes passed, yet Callam found himself no closer to any answers. Worse, his pacing had only rattled his nerves. He eventually resigned himself to the truth: he simply didn't have enough information to understand what he'd discovered. That alone might have spurred him on to search through the rest of the books, if he'd not been driven by a more personal reason as well. He'd remembered Siela's favorite stanza. She'd always told him that "those who leave riches unread become starving men."

Feeling an ache deep within his chest, Callam plopped down on the corner of his cot. Then, he tried to steady himself. His sister had loved those words—she'd repeated them for courage when she'd tried new things, and for comfort when she'd failed.

If he knew her at all, she'd whispered that stanza to herself when she'd stepped up to Bind, her fingers fidgeting nervously as they'd so often done. It was only fitting, Callam decided, that he heed the stanza's advice.

He walked over to the shelf, pulled free a stack of books, strewed them all across the bed, and began to pore over their pages. The first hardcover imparted no secrets; yet, on its last page, the second one did! Callam's pulse quickened when he discovered that it hid four dots, just like the first book, though these were set out in the form of a rectangle, not a square.

He scoured through the rest of his stack, then the remaining books on the shelf.

Five volumes bore fruit in the end. Of them, the third book had six dots that formed a shape that looked like a honeycomb, and the fourth hid three dots in the outline of a triangle. The last book was unique in that it held only a single mark, right in the center of the final page. It was this book Callam picked up and inspected more closely, thinking it the key to the mystery. Part of the reason why was that of all the shapes, this was the only one that couldn't be divided into a triangle. The other part of it was his gut—he'd always been innately good at solving riddles. Siela had often teased that his mind was one step outside the box and constantly trying to find its way back in.

Unfortunately, the book Callam was holding looked plenty ordinary. Perhaps it was a little thicker than the rest, or a tad duller in hue, but nothing significant enough to stand out. Still, Callam was not discouraged; over his years of thieving, he'd learned that valuables were best hidden in plain sight. After clearing some space on his now crowded bed, he laid the book flat and flipped it open to a page. Eagerly, he tried to read.

Words formed. Then, they slid right off the paper. Again.

With a small shake of his head, Callam turned the page. He was about to turn another when he noticed that the paper kept trying to curl back to where it had just been. Skipping ahead to a later section of the book, he watched as those pages did the same—they gradually flipped back until they settled in that very spot. It seemed to Callam that the book's spine was acting as some sort of hinge, causing the pages to repeatedly fall open upon the same well-thumbed passage.

Convinced he was onto something, Callam flipped the hardcover over. He ran his fingers across the rugged spine—it felt completely normal to his untrained hands. When he closed the book, however, he did notice an unusual gap where the binding met the paper.

Enough to hide a message? Callam wondered, trying to wedge his pinky into the space. Something slightly sharp and cold pushed back. *A weapon, maybe?* That wouldn't be unexpected. Rebels and heretics should know to hide the tools of their trade, after all.

No amount of jiggering could shake loose whatever hid in the book's spine, so Callam was forced to do the one thing he'd been dreading. He cracked open the book, gripped a few of the middle pages, and tugged. Paper tore in his hands. Pages scattered when he grabbed more. He couldn't help but feel a bit nauseous when he realized that Helena would think him a savage—there was no way to explain this desecration to her. Several torn pages later, Callam could at last see something silver peeking out from behind the pages. He ripped out the few remaining sheets that obscured his prize.

A split-second later, he dropped the book. His heart raced.

“By the Prophet...” The words escaped Callam's mouth before he had a chance to hold them in. He cupped his mouth instinctively. Around him, the walls felt like they had eyes. His hands shook as he reached for what had been hidden in the book's binding.

It can't be...is that really a scripture Seedling? Callam wondered.

He'd recognized what it was at once: a thin piece of steel with a small tree inscribed onto it. The metal had grown at the slightest touch, and now formed a square plate slightly larger than a saucer. Ornaments of all shapes and sizes hung from the etching's branches.

Every street kid—no, *everyone*—dreamed of finding a Seedling. They were challenges planted throughout the continent, each in the shape of a tree. The superstitious believed that Seedlings chose their keepers: that they tested mages with riddles until they found a perfect fit. Others swore that Seedlings appeared at random, fickle as a leaf in the wind.

Callam really only knew two things about them for certain. First, they heralded grand mages. The type stories were written about; the type every dockside orphan wished they could be. In fact, Callam couldn't name a single hero that *hadn't* nurtured a Seedling. Secondly, Seedlings awarded treasures to those who solved them. Treasures so valuable that the city threw a parade whenever a Seedling was found—real parades, the ones that orphans frequented because the food was free.

What should I do? he wondered, still unable to believe his eyes. As much as he hated the idea, the sensible thing to do would be to inform the Writs, and take whatever compensation they saw fit. After all, Seedlings were solved by mages, not by unbound.

Callam quickly shook that thought away. Before he could second guess himself, he touched the uppermost ornament—a small, glimmering oval etched into the steel's surface.

Nothing happened.

He moved to touch the oval again. Then, just as mold rots its host, so too did the ornament wither and blacken the branch from which it hung. The Seedling grew hot in Callam's hands as the branch began to smolder, and he almost let go of it in surprise. It grew hotter still.

"Poet's hand!" Callam swore aloud, fighting the urge to cough. An acrid smell filled the room—all of the Seedling's edges had started to melt and curl. Carefully, Callam shifted the steel between his palms until he'd placed it gently on the floor. *What did I do wrong?* he wondered, frantically searching the metal for any hints.

He found one immediately—while the ornaments appeared random, they were not. Callam noticed that several matched the shapes found in the back of the books: a square, rectangle, and triangle all dangled from the branches.

Can it be that simple? Callam thought. With no time to lose, he touched the small triangle.

The Seedling began to shake violently. The burning spread across the metal, closing in on the tree.

"No, *no!*" Callam whispered, urging himself to think faster. He felt his panic rising. There had to be a solution—and Poet willing, one that didn't require magic. He knew it would include the shapes he'd found in the backs of the books.

Triangle, square, rectangle, a weird honeycomb pattern...and a dot. Each was made of at least three marks, except for that final one. It was the odd one out, and it had been the starting point to him finding the Seedling in the first place.

Inspiration struck. Callam tried to ignore the steel's red glow as he hunted for anything that might pass for a small dot. *There*, he thought and pushed a spot on the metal's surface, right below the tree—and exactly where he would expect a seed to be.

The steel sizzled against Callam's skin. Focused as he was, he barely noticed the pain. Moments later, he released a held breath as the metal began to cool. A smile broke across his lips when golden lights emerged from the dot. They spiraled up the tree's trunk, shimmering softly, looking every bit like the spellworked garlands that joyful children draped across the city come solstice.

Callam soaked in the sight, relieved his guess had been correct. Some of the tension eased from his neck.

Acting on a hunch, he touched the triangle shape next. The ornament's surface rippled when pressed, emitting a soft, green light that danced along the Seedling's branches. More importantly, this confirmed Callam's theory: one dot, three dots, four dots, four dots, then six dots. An ascending pattern.

Callam paused when considering the rectangle and square. Both shapes were made of four dots, so he had no way of knowing which he should press first. He'd resigned himself to guessing, but then a solution came to mind. The Sisters taught that all squares were rectangles, but not all rectangles were squares. It stood to reason, then, that while the square ornament would count for both shapes, the rectangle would not.

Logically, it makes sense, Callam thought. *But is it right?* He felt more indecision than he cared to admit; he already thought of the Seedling as his and didn't want to break it. Hesitantly, he touched the square ornament.

Silver swirls formed around the tree's leaves. That just left the honeycomb. Callam pressed it with bated breath.

He heard the Seedling first—it sounded like a breeze stirring a windchime. That breeze built into a gust, and soon the books on his bed rustled and tore as a whirlwind formed within his room. Pages flew through the air and Callam's hair was pushed flat against his brow. Seconds later, the Seedling began to sprout. Its steel trunk erupted upwards until it stretched from floor to ceiling, delicate strands of gold spreading from its roots to the very tips of its branches. Then, just as quickly as it had started, the storm settled. A canopy of crystals budded along the Seedling's branches, bathing the room in a tapestry of warm light. Callam's heart pounded as ornaments in the shapes of fruits emerged from the leaves, each shining with the brilliance of freshly polished silver.

He stood up, and eagerly grabbed one.

Chapter Seven: A Thief's Transportation

"Once he let them read for pleasure. Once he let them burn."

–Apostle Piot

The Seedling broke like overblown glass. At once, its trunk caved in, its branches snapped violently as if trodden upon, leaves wilted, and ornaments crashed. The whole of the tree appeared to melt into sand before his eyes.

Callam staggered backwards in shock. The back of his legs hit the edge of his cot and he sat down heavily, his shoulders slumping under the weight of a deep exhaustion. *I killed it*, he realized. *It needed magic. Or something.* For a long while, he simply stared at the Seedling's remains, his mind in a daze.

After a long while, he stood. His room was a mess; if left in this state, he'd be flogged for sure. He began to brush what sand he could under his cot, then went to gather up the books. *Small acts of preparation*, he thought bitterly. Pages hung loose everywhere. He stacked a few of the hardcovers, picked them up, and walked over to the shelf.

Something clattered to the floor: a small ring had tumbled out of a book's spine. The stone set within it was no bigger than a pebble, yet it shone with the deep, wild green of a forest.

Callam's heart soared. He'd held onto some small hope that he hadn't failed the Seedling's test—a hope that had dwindled with each passing moment. Kneeling down, he marveled at the silver tree penciled into the gold band. Two nesting birds adorned the branches, and all the etchings seemed surprisingly detailed, despite the ring's apparent age.

Tentatively, Callam lifted the ring. For a long moment, he held it close, overcome by a feeling that only those with nothing know: a yearning to own something that hadn't been stolen but earned. After slipping it on, he watched in wonder as it began to glow. Mildly at first, like an ember from a cooled forge, then so bright that Callam had to squint to see it. All at once, it melted into a streak of silver that circled his finger. Around and around it went, until Callam felt dizzy. His skin began to absorb the liquid, and he was vaguely aware that the ring was staining his finger white.

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"Look at this mess—a rat's nest. I'm telling you, that's just how they live," one male guard said to another, then prodded Callam's unconscious form with a steel-toed boot. Squatting down, he shoved Callam onto his side. "Well?" the guard demanded. "You forget how to sleep in a cot? Or too stupid to learn?"

"...s going on," Callam mumbled as he blinked awake. His head was pounding something fierce, so he shut his eyes and tried to remember what had happened the night before.

"*Up*, you louse," the guard demanded, his voice loud enough that Callam groaned and covered his ears.

The guard prodded him again.

"A'right, all right." Callam's words came out slurred. *Where... am I?* he thought groggily, and tried to push himself up onto his elbows. His stomach churned, so he flopped back down a second later. He'd only felt this way once before, when the orphans had first learned of moonshine. They'd left a gallon's worth of grain alcohol out overnight, then had downed it the next morning. The Sisters had found them face down in the pews hours later—a full day's worth of mucking, shoveling, and heaving guaranteed Callam never wanted to drink again.

Why, then, did his tongue feel heavy?

A kick brought Callam back to the present. Curling up against the abuse, knees to nose, he tried to get his bearings.

“I said *Up*,” the guard barked. “You’re sure this is the right room?” he added a moment later, his ire now clearly directed at someone else. *Another guard?* Callam wondered. “There’s no way Pell and Kent got sacked for *this*,” the gruff man insisted, and Callam got the distinct feeling that the guard had just gestured at his prone form.

“It’s the right one, sir!” another voice chimed in, a touch too enthusiastically. “I checked twice. But, uh. Careful touching him, sir. The pastor warned of feral folk, remember?”

“Feral?” Callam groaned, turning over to face his tormentors. His hand cupped his eyes. “Just because I’ve fallen asleep—”

His sentence cut short as the two men above him finally registered. Both were leering; the first was tall, with broad shoulders and a jaw as square as a cinder block; the second was thin and young, with the round cheeks of a man who’d never quite lost his baby fat. Each was armored in glinting mail, adorned by a fine blue surcoat, and carried a polished book-bag docking a grimoire.

Neither was dressed in the dirty drab of the city watch.

And, looking around, Callam found that he was *not* asleep on the streets, but on the floor of an infirmary of sorts, wearing nothing but a pair of briefs. His confusion rose as he took in the sterile smell of the room, the scattered books and pages, and even the looming white walls. All felt strangely...familiar.

Callam screamed as a stomp flattened his hand into the floor. He withdrew it immediately, cupping it to his chest. Thankfully, the pain brought with it his memories; he sorted through them as he looked for words to mollify the men.

The older guard lifted his boot a second time.

“Don’t! This isn’t...” Callam shouted. Helena had warned him that these guards were unlikely to be kind, but he hadn’t expected them to treat him like a prisoner. *I am one, though*, Callam remembered with a start.

The guards ignored his pleas. The larger of the two swung his leg out, this time directing his foot at Callam’s chest.

Having finally gathered his wits, Callam shifted his weight down and to the left. He raised his forearms and deflected the boot, the movement earning him the time needed to dodge a lazy follow-up kick; once he had, he scrambled backwards until stone pressed up against his spine. Though now trapped, Callam had gained a better vantage point. Better yet, he’d found his voice.

“I’ll need bandages,” he stated as matter of factly as he could. Sitting up a little straighter, he glanced down at the imprint of the boot on his hand and tried not to shudder. A thread of pale skin circled his pointer finger: all that was left of the ring he’d donned the night before.

“And why is that, then?” the lead guard asked with a small chuckle. He lumbered forward. “You only need one good hand to Bind.”

“Because, I’m a ward of the Writs,” Callam replied in a practiced, sincere tone. “They get a fee, should I fail my binding and go to auction. I imagine being crippled will affect the bids,” he added, then raised his injured hand for good measure.

Of course, Callam had no way of knowing the validity of his words, but the truth mattered little in games of confidence, and Callam would have lied through his teeth to save himself a beating.

“Sir, is that true?” the younger guard spoke up, a pained look on his face.

“Go fetch Helena,” the older man snapped back at him. Whirling on Callam, he whispered, “Boy, you’d do well to wrap that hand up before she—”

“Will do,” Callam interrupted. Placatingly, he added: “There is no need for Helena; I’ll be fine.”

The senior guard gave Callam a measured look. “Hold it, Tawn,” he instructed after a moment. “Best we don’t bother the family with this.” To Callam, he added, “Dress. Yourself and the wound. Before I change my mind.”

Callam quietly let out a sigh of relief. Inwardly, he worried about meeting the caregiver. She’d been the one to suggest that he read the books on the shelf, and he still didn’t know if that had been deliberate guidance or simple coincidence; it felt too great a risk to take. What if she recognized the white band on his finger? Or if she mentioned it in passing to someone who did?

Rushing to the bed, Callum slipped one hand under the pillow. He grabbed the pendant and string he’d hidden there, fastening the first behind his neck and the second loosely around his damaged hand. Then he leaned down and flipped over the basket that had fallen to the ground. The long-sleeved tan tunic he found inside felt too soft to be truly secondhand, as if its owner had worn it a single time before tossing it aside. The pants were equally fine, and Callam almost tore them in his haste to pull them on. He shoved the bread and cheese Helena had given him into his mouth, rind and all, and chewed quickly.

Slipping on the pair of sandals last, Callam looked every bit a merchant’s son—his shirt even bore the Writ’s emblem.

The guards either didn't notice, or they didn't care.

They were busy talking among themselves, so Callam turned his attention to his hand. His palm was scraped up, and his fingers were all tender to the touch, but he could make a fist without much effort. His thumb, however, was worse off and ached terribly. For a second he feared he might have sprained it, until a knuckle popped and most of the pain subsided.

Confident his hand still functioned, Callam focused on the stain on his finger. His heart sped up at the sight of it—the night before still felt like a fever dream. Yet it had been *real*; he'd somehow found and solved a Seedling. The blemish's existence proved that.

What it meant for him, he had no idea.

Touching the band of white skin, Callam noticed how it was both smooth and slightly raised, like a scar. With a jolt, he realized that it was the only part of his finger that hadn't started to bruise—the stained skin seemed impervious to damage, in the same way that a scar seemed impervious to hair. Unfortunately, that was the only abnormal thing about it.

On a whim, Callam brought his hand close to his face and whispered to it, all the while glancing around to make sure the guards weren't listening in. He'd heard stories of mages who'd named their Seedlings and spoken to them, so he figured he'd give it a try.

No luck—no ring appeared on Callam's finger. Not that he'd really expected it to. Walking over to the side of his cot, he sat down, unsure of what to try next. He began to feel a bit crestfallen; he'd really hoped the Seedling would give him an edge in the trials, but it seemed he'd need to bind successfully for it to do anything magical at all.

Callam was not given much time to fret, however, as the older guard suddenly barked, "Tawn, cuff the kid. Magic him too. Should help with the pain." Looking Callam dead in the eyes, the man said, "try something stupid, and the Writs won't mind what I do."

He needn't have worried. Callam had no intention of giving the guards any grief. He watched as Tawn approached, then stood still as the man secured a pair of manacles behind his back.

"*Sangud*," Tawn recited.

Magic traveled down Callam's arm, its warmth tickling him as it mitigated the pressure behind his blackened fingernails. The spell subsided after a moment, leaving Callam's right hand mostly numb and slightly cold.

“Prisoner ready for passage,” Tawn announced.

### Chapter Eight: A Pauper’s Reflection

“They claim the mark of a man is in his actions.

But I have killed in a second,  
and spent a year finding the words to tell you why.”

–The Hanging of Zaled

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Callam did *not* take well to the emptiness of space, he decided.

The guards had hoisted him over a shoulder, loaded him onto the haybed of a wagon, unloaded him thirty minutes later, and then walked him through one of the port's various transport portals. Callam's disorientation only worsened when they'd arrived—thousands of deafening noises had immediately rushed in to fill the void. Shouts of “Out of my way,” and “Over here!” had been drowned out by the cries of shopkeepers peddling everything from “Fae Fritters, puffed or popped,” to “Eversight Monocles—Port's best.”

“Welcome to Binding Day,” the older guard jeered. His voice was barely audible over the cacophony. “Try not to soil the Master's clothes when you fail,” he added, shoving Callam forward.

At the push, Callam stumbled, managing a single stride before his sandals caught on the terraced steps. He almost lost his footing, and had to fall awkwardly to his knees to stop his momentum. He'd started to shift his position so that he could get his legs in front of himself, when Tawn hollered, “Catch!”

Callam watched as a little, glimmering piece of metal flew through the air. He groaned, certain that this was the key that would unlock the handcuffs. Part of him wanted to stand up and chase it, but he suppressed the urge. The world was full of people who loved to humiliate others, and he would not let them see him scramble like a dog. Instead, he kept his eyes fixed on the key.

It landed soundlessly fifteen or sixteen rows away, any *clink* it might have made lost in the excitement and fear filling the massive amphitheater. And it was massive—at a half mile wide, it was the largest structure in the city. Thousands of aisles had been dug deep into the ground, tiering downwards, and were now filled by hundreds of thousands of teens and their families. Vendors worked the in-between spaces, somehow navigating their wares through the throngs of people. Some sold food, carrying everything from local delicacies like mutton cake and pureed pumpkin, to holiday staples like elf cider and roasted peanuts. Others peddled charms and trinkets, preying on the gullible and desperate alike.

Above, kites filled the sky, crafted in homage to the Tower's beasts. Paper dragons whizzed back and forth on gusts of wind, while the occasional griffin dove down and then soared, perforated paper wings seeming to flap in the breeze.

Far down in the middle of the coliseum, Callam could just make out the entrance to the triad trials. Lines of hopefuls already congregated there; they meandered like ants in the sand, their nervous energy coursing through the amphitheater. Nearby, spectators bartered over spellworked glasses, eagerly buying anything that might help them better see the upcoming competition.

None of it could distract Callam from the weight of Binding Day.

He shifted uncomfortably; his legs felt tender, a sure sign bruises had already formed on his shins. Honestly, he expected that the only reason he wasn't in more pain was because of Tawn's magic—magic, Callam realized with a start, that might also be numbing some of his emotions.

"That explains it," Callam murmured to himself. He stared out over the crowds. Today was the most important day of his life, so he should be full of butterflies, or have a stomachache. Feel afraid. Or even eager, like he'd been when he'd inspected his hand earlier that morning. Instead, he was overwhelmed, his head full of questions about the unknown. What would happen if he failed to bind?

Would the Seedling die on his finger, leaving him with only an ugly stain?

*Nothing is worse than having no answers*, Callam thought, and slumped a bit on the steps. It didn't help that he could hardly think with so much going on.

Everywhere he looked, there was a blur of activity, from parents chatting among themselves, to children chasing each other up and down the coliseum's tiered walkways. Twelve summers now Callam had been coming here, and was convinced he'd never understand everyone's excitement. To him, the whole thing seemed like a charade. It always had, the sentiment having taken root the first time the Sisters had dragged him to the ceremony. They'd treated Binding Day as a grand spectacle. Twice a year, they'd dress all the orphans up in new hand-me-downs, then herd them to the amphitheater as if they were off to watch a play or celebrate a holiday.

Sudden, sharp pain drew Callam's attention to his fingers; without realizing it, he'd been clenching his manacled hands to the point of cutting off circulation. He'd never forget the fervor with which the Sisters had urged him to celebrate each failed binding. They'd insisted that the ceremony was the Prophet's way of selecting his "Fated Few" and that unbound should be grateful to participate, *even* if they became Ruddites.

Even when carted from ritual to auction block.

Even when subjected to the haggling of guilds and nobles, all desperate to secure new indentures.

He'd retched the first time he'd seen it. not toretch. He'd done so quietly, having rushed to the privy to hide his reaction as if it were a fault.

"Unbound, report to the trial grounds," rang a monotone voice, echoing through the grounds. "This is your thirty-minute warning. I repeat, all unbound, make your way to the trial grounds. Tardiness will not be tolerated."

Thousands of teens stood in unison at the speakers' words. Callam moved to join them, edging his way down the rows to where he'd seen the key fall. A sour taste had filled his mouth that had nothing to do with space-sickness.

Swallowing heavily, he grimaced; it seemed his emotions were not as muted as he'd thought.

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Navigating the rafters proved harder than Callam had expected.

He was jostled back and forth, unable to push his way through the crowd with his hands manacled behind his back. At one point, a little boy darted in front of him, nearly sending him flying. A little later, he was forced to weave around a group of clamoring unbound, only to find himself stuck behind a sullen family of seafarers, dressed in salt-bleached whites. The older woman fussed over her daughter's hair, ensuring each blonde strand was perfectly placed, before kissing the girl on the forehead.

Three times the girl promised to stay safe: once in Reldar, the language of common folk; once in Feldic, used only during sermons and taught by the church; and once in words Callam didn't understand but could discern from the tender expression on the girl's face.

It was a small thing, but watching the two gave Callam pause. It helped him to realize that it wasn't the festivities he hated. He understood why a parent might want to celebrate their child's opportunity to earn magic.

More than that, he could understand why a child might want to make their parents proud.

"No, it's how they treat the poor..." he muttered to himself, checking the fifteenth row for the key. He despised how only those with nothing were forced into blind bindings. Sure, wealthy families would often send their first and secondborn off to Binding Day, but that was a matter of choice and pride—they owned scripted grimoires, after all, and could ensure a successful binding if they wished. And it didn't really matter if their children failed—wealthy Ruddites *always* found positions among their own, or with similarly highborn families.

That never happens to us, Callam thought. *We are sent to the mines or the front lines.*

Still, his complaining would change nothing. The only thing Callam could do now was hope to bind successfully. Unfortunately, he was running out of time. He sped up his search for the key and finally spotted it midway down the sixteenth row. It glittered in the sunlight, visible only because so many unbound had already vacated the stands for the trial grounds.

Callam settled himself down on the steps near the key, and fished for it clumsily. His numb, manacled hands fumbled behind his back as he tried to pin the metal implement against the step. All he managed to do was scratch his knuckles. Then, he accidentally knocked the key down a few rows.

It landed at the feet of a cluster of students who chatted away as though they didn't have a worry in the world. Each was dressed in robes bearing the insignias of powerful families. A few even carried Seeker's pouches, a sure sign of their literacy. None seemed to notice the key, or Callam, when he approached.

An ember flared in Callam's chest when he heard how they laughed. The ease with which these teens joked made it clear that they neither feared the ceremony, nor understood why others might.

Clearly they were the type to treat Binding Day as a holiday.

Resignation crept into Callam's shoulders as he called out, "Excuse me?" Receiving no response, he raised his voice. "Excuse me!"

A young woman glanced over, and met Callam's gaze. Chestnut hair fell to her waist and framed her oval face, while little freckles danced on a button nose. She wore fitted blue robes that matched the hue of her eyes and a small bracelet on her wrist.

"Yes?" she said, then smiled.

Chapter Nine: The Folly of First Impressions

"You write me as you would a flower,
All delicate prose and soft words.
When you write me as you would a hawk,
Then I'll know you see me as I am."
~~The rejection of suitor Xlan

"Hi. Everything okay? You're staring," the young woman asked, arching her eyebrows. Ocean-blue eyes danced in the sunlight.

Callam hadn't been, actually; he was sure of it. And if he was staring, it wasn't his fault. There was simply no easy way to explain the situation he was in—short of telling the truth—and he definitely wasn't about to do that.

"I..." he started. "Can you? That key. By the steps?" He shrugged his shoulders and wiggled the cuffs on his hands for good measure.

"Oh—OH," the girl mumbled, appearing a little alarmed. Callam's heart sank at her tone, fearing she might refuse to help, or ask him some prying questions. To his surprise, however, she laughed, then poked a massive teen to her left. "Moose. By your shoe! Can you grab that?"

"*What?* Speak up! Crow's foot, but it's miserable in here," the giant belched. At two heads taller than the rest of the crowd, the boy towered over his small group. He cradled a stack of sandwiches in his hands that he consumed two at a time, and was already balding, as if his hair feared the altitude. "Need enhanced hearing or some—"

"Seriously! Moose, eat with your mouth closed!" the girl chided. "Look... pass him that key, alright?" She pointed to the floor, then grinned at Callam and lowered her voice to say, "Don't mind him. He's just a little *deaf*. And very dense. But sweet. Like chocolate, you know?"

"Dense?! I can readt rlips!" the mountain of a boy said with a scowl, mid bite. Whether that was true or not, Callam had no idea, but he was relieved to see the giant lean over and grab the key.

"Was topt of our clath too," Moose added, still chewing. Eyeing the handcuffs, he smirked. "Long night?"

“Gods! Who asks that?” The girl glowered at Moose. “Sometimes, I wish –”

“That you were bound too?” Moose interrupted with a laugh. Ignoring the girl’s stammering, he suddenly froze. “Wait...we’re not aiding and abetting, right? Heard they need to cart cowards here sometimes. Worse than desertion, dodging Binding Day.”

The atmosphere grew tense, but Callam was spared a response by the announcer’s lifeless voice. “Attention, unbound, this is your ten-minute warning,” it blared out. “Ten minutes remain until grading begins.”

“*Grading* makes it sound so creepy,” the girl said, her smile slipping. Her eyes lost a little of their light, and she wrapped her arms around herself. “What are we? Chattel?”

The young woman’s words hung in the air for a long moment.

She wore a distant expression that Callam couldn’t place. Shrugging his shoulders, he tried to formulate a response, yet none came easily. He was unsure if these teens understood the irony or truth behind what had just been said.

In the end, he decided to stay quiet. After waiting awkwardly for Moose to unlock the manacles, he voiced a hurried “thanks,” and scurried down the steps, glad to have found a way out of the uncomfortable silence.

More than that, he was glad to have some distance from the teens. An ache had built within him as he’d listened to the two friends banter back and forth—they’d reminded him of what he’d lost in Siela’s passing.

And of what he desperately wanted again.

His new clothes, once comfortable, now felt a size too big.

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Callam descended from the rafters into a horde of teens standing shoulder to shoulder as far as the eye could see. Most of the unbound were dressed practically; tunics and breeches for the boys, smocks or kirtles for the girls—clothing good for running, fighting, and whatever else the trials might throw at them. A few had broken convention by wearing their Sunday best to the ceremony, and Callam briefly wondered how they’d fare. All were sweating in the overhead sun, and none paid him any attention.

“Unbound approach! One at a time!” a registrar shouted over the din; Callam watched as she funneled those at the front into curved holds for check-in. Scriptors and mages marched by on his left, watchdogs with dark robes and lit grimoires. They laughed, joked, and otherwise maintained the illusion of festivity, but Callam knew their purpose: to make sure everyone toed the line.

Anxiety began to eat at him as he looked around, and the waiting only made it worse. Intent on finding something to settle his nerves, he shoved his way to the sidelines. His progress was slow, the masses indignant that he moved against the flow of people.

“—careful! Watch it, prince,” a stocky boy barked, sizing Callam up before his friends dragged him away.

Those words were still registering when a girl tripped into him, as if to give him a firm hug. Lithe hands searched him for a purse, only to come away empty.

*What?* A split-second later, Callam understood: he was wearing the Writ’s clothing and insignia, so he’d been mistaken for a noble. Everything about his outfit spoke of wealth, from the cut of his shirt to the sew of his pants. To his surprise, they were still clean, having repelled the dirt from when he’d fallen to his knees earlier.

*That’s why Moose and that girl treated me well,* he realized with a start. They likely hadn’t expected that anything was amiss even with the handcuffs.

Finally, the crowds in front of Callam opened up, revealing a ring of stalls where shopkeepers had wheeled their carts into place. Smaller operations served food from hand-drawn trolleys, while larger ones vended from wagons packed with delicacies. Together, they fed the gathered unbound and their families.

Callam’s stomach growled; the air was thick with the scent of broth and spiced meat.

“Breads and *pastre*, fresh or day-old!” one eager woman with red hair shouted at him, clearly thinking that he could afford either.

“Crown’s cobbler and mapleberry mead,” another called out, just as enthusiastically.

Callam frowned, then walked away from both merchants. Had he showed any interest, real or feigned, they would have hounded him further. Better to pretend he didn’t care.

He passed by the remaining vendors in a similar fashion, acting all the while like he was growing more off-put. Only once he'd done a full sweep did he visit the first stall again. This time he tapped his fingers on his linen pants in feigned annoyance.

Anything to appear even more like a spoiled noble peeved by slim pickings.

Hoping to win his business, the baker didn't press Callam as he browsed—nor noticed when he slipped a hand into her pastry tray. She even offered him a complimentary drink of water when he appeared to change his mind with a shake of his head.

Stepping away from the vendors, Callam bit into the flaky dough. The stolen treat was covered in honey and a tad too sweet.

It still tasted better than most things he'd eaten that week.

The line of unbound thinned before him as he watched. One by one, they were collected by a mage with sunken eyes and the whiskery beard of a goat.

Soon it was his turn, so Callam migrated with the remaining teens toward the registrar. While he walked, he scratched the stain on his finger, the behavior quickly becoming a habit. A glance downwards confirmed his suspicions: the scar had not changed at all.

The Seedling was still stubbornly dormant.

"Next!" a voice commanded, and Callam stepped up to the white dais. It looked remarkably like a pastor's pulpit, and was manned by a stern woman in a drab cassock who checked each conscript off a flowing list.

"Name and birthdate?" the lady snapped, clearly in no mood for delays.

"Callam Quill, June 1st," Callam said.

"Height and weight?"

"I...couldn't say? Been a while since I was last measured," Callam replied sheepishly. Years had passed since the last time he'd marked his height against the orphanage's walls, and he wasn't sure he'd *ever* been weighed.

"Well. Step up, then." The registrar gestured impatiently. She reached a hand into a brown bag that was lying by her side and pulled out a dull grimoire and a small reading stone.

“Let me see here. *Endane goli maclae fe ni malease*,” she chanted. Strains of white light condensed in the air, spinning together in what looked surprisingly like a ball of yarn before settling in the center of the lens.

“Quill... Callam Quill... Ah. Here we are. Five feet, seven inches. One-hundred and forty-two pounds,” the registrar announced loudly. Then her demeanor suddenly darkened. “Ward of the state. A thief too, by the look of your stolen clothes. No matter,” Her mouth shifted into a thin line. “The books bind all and judge accordingly. You will get the comeuppance you deserve. Next!”

With that, Callam was ushered over to the fenced proving ground.

He trudged forward, trying to hide his flushed face. He knew shame and had thought he’d mastered it. As a child, his cheeks had burned whenever he’d been forced to beg, and his stomach had knotted with every bite of stolen bread.

This was different.

Being dismissed on the streets was one thing; strangers would see his tangled hair and dirty knees and shun him silently. They would not out him publicly, as the registrar had just done.

It was humiliating, how a few words could rob him of what little dignity he’d had left.

Dejected, he walked the perimeter of the trial grounds, his mind a whirlwind of bad memories. His pacing soon carried him past the dozens of palisades littering the arena and the hundreds of unbound seeking respite from the sun in the structures’ shadows. Every step kicked up dust, and he scowled when he noticed how dirty the arena floor was.

“As downtrodden as a Ruddite’s spirit,” his sister would have said. She’d always been clever with sayings like that.

Callam was still sorting through his feelings when several people around him pointed to the sky—it darkened at once, as if night had fallen early. Then the arena was in uproar. Hundreds of thousands of spectators surged to their feet, cheering, “The Blessed Few! They’re here!”

Seven Scriptorors descended from the heavens as he watched. Dressed in black and red vestments, they all held a tome in one hand and a scepter in the other.

Granite columns rushed up to meet them, each taller in turn than the last, until the middle Scriptor found her place on the highest pillar. Green and orange banners unfurled down the monoliths, glyphs and runes drawn across them.

Two dark eyes were painted along each \_\_\_\_.

“Welcome, unbound, to your coming of age,” the lead Scriptor proclaimed, her words echoing throughout the coliseum. She was smaller than the other six, with a crackly voice that spoke to her age. “Twice a year we gather in this ceremony, a communion between people and Prophet. Today, the Fated Few find their place by his side, while the rest of you fall from his grace. By his whim, may you touch magic. For his gift, you shall toil. Do not disappoint.”

The old Scriptor paused for a moment. The entire auditorium stood silent.

“I see that I am heard. Good. *Re cra veuo cel marla phile nis saema*, she chanted and the six other Scriptors echoed her call. Each of their tomes burned crimson, then tendrils spewed forth from the spellbooks, biting and snapping as they eroded the coliseum floor.

Unbound scrambled in an effort to avoid the magic—it carved through the grounds and ripped it anew. The earth broke in one corner of the arena, stone cisterns erupting upwards and outwards, their basins filling with silver liquid that glimmered in the sunlight. In another corner, obstacle courses appeared, each with structures that wound up dozens of feet in the air. Circles formed in the last zone, resembling showman’s rings. Callam knew that area well; it housed the head-to-head grappling matches that was a favorite among spectators and watching tomes alike.

Once the magic had finished its work, the old woman declared, “You will each partake in three games before you attempt to bind. One to measure magic. One to test wit. And one to prove your brawn. Those who perform best will be allowed first pickings from the grimoires.”

Another voice spoke up, this one male and gravelly, “The top five contestants will be allowed to bind twice, should their first attempt fail. I’m sure none of you need telling how rare a privilege this is. But remember—a second failure always results in death. We value life over carrion, so only the best among you will earn this opportunity.”

In unison, the Scriptors closed their grimoires and each uttered a phrase Callam could not understand. Magic spiraled upwards and the skies came ablaze with moving images of armies at war. The legions spanned for leagues as they battled tides of beasts. Then, the scene shifted to nighttime, portraying a man who climbed a tower that reached the stars.

Suddenly, the shadow of two wings blotted out one of the moons. A maw with teeth the size of horses shone through the darkness.

“We, the Fated Few, fight against the Winged One and her reign of darkness,” seven voices shouted out. “Our Prophet, blessed is he, sacrificed to ignite the first of the twin lighthouses. By his grace, we have become a beacon of hope for this world.”

The crowds exploded at the words. Cheering resonated throughout the trial grounds, so enthusiastic that even Callam was caught in it.

“Each year, we lose more of our number. Yet, through this rite, we replenish. Let the trials begin!”