

OONA 13

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SAMPLE

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To Eden, Asher, Rachel, and the rest of the Candlemakers—keeping the story alive.



In a time that may already be
too late,
as the Android Wars faded into
memory and technology is
outlawed--

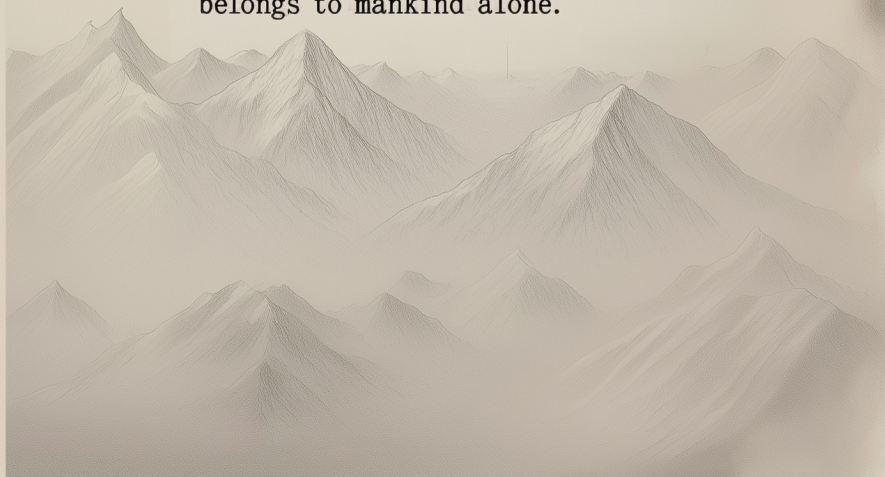


the Crown still rules with an iron
fist.

Fear of the android faith lingers
in the northern seat, Threadneedle.

The purges continue.

The future, they say,
belongs to mankind alone.



OONA 13

THE CAST IN THREADNEEDLE

Inner Circle

Kael Darron, a Crown investigator.

Oona, a healer of uncommon grace and mystery.

Sarah, a girl burdened by destiny.

Elena Thorn, daughter and heir of the late Lord Edric.

Marcus Thorn, her brother, a rebel.

Soldiers of the Crown

Garrick, a loyal man-at-arms, and **Merina**, his wife.

Ward, a cynic among soldiers.

Tavern and Its Kin

Ryn, custodian of the Broken Needle, and a few hearts.

Jory, a bold and freedom-loving youth.

Keepers of the Flame

Martha, an elder, practicing a forbidden faith,
and the **Candlemakers**, an outlawed sect.

Shadowed Powers

Nexus, the accuser, harbinger of hidden power.

Riven, a peddler of riddles and secrets.

Specters of the Past & Present

Lord Edric Thorn, once master of Threadneedle.

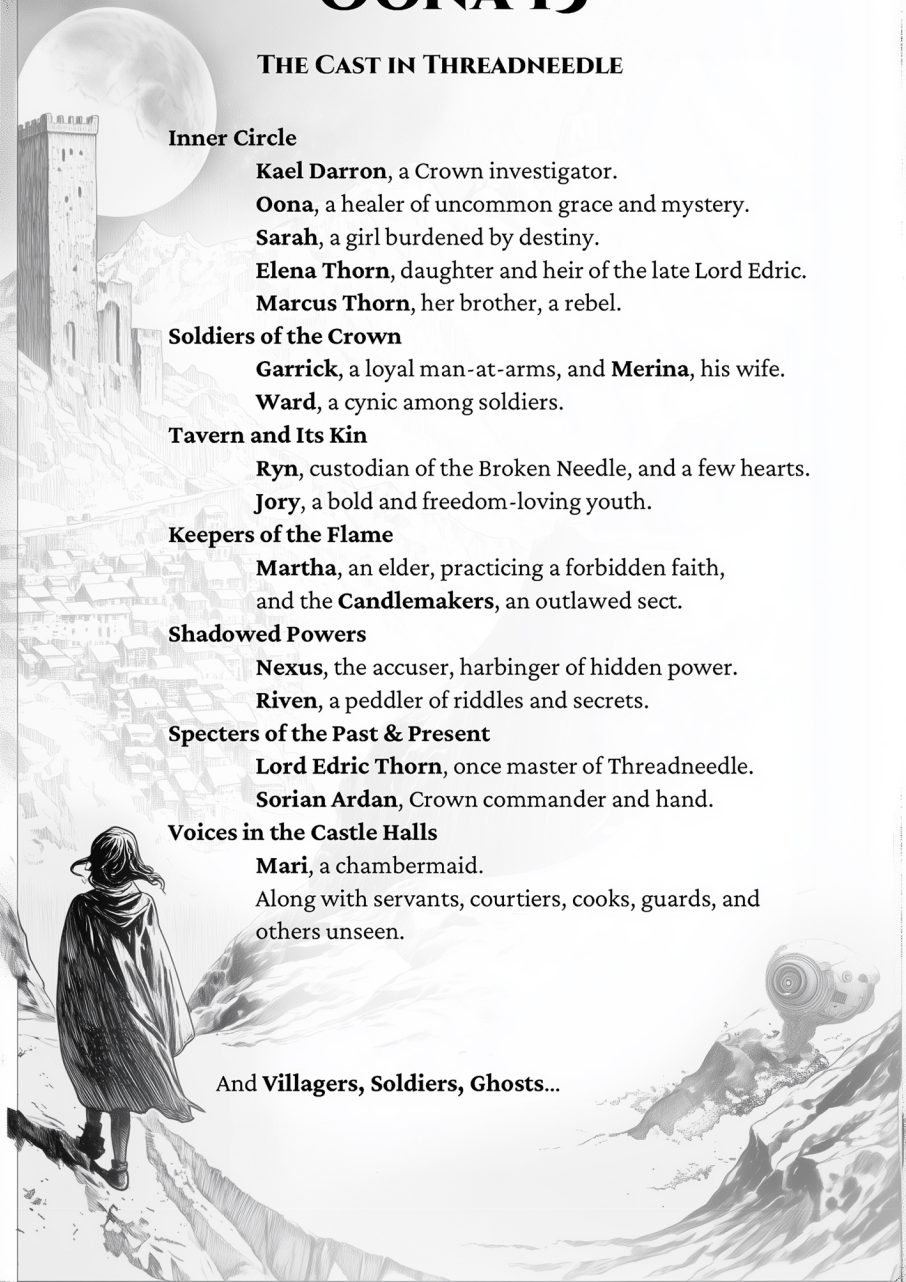
Sorian Ardan, Crown commander and hand.

Voices in the Castle Halls

Mari, a chambermaid.

Along with servants, courtiers, cooks, guards, and
others unseen.

And Villagers, Soldiers, Ghosts...



ONE

*Power is a game of shadows. To stand in the light is to
invite the arrow.*

—Edric of Threadneedle, Collected Writings

KAEL BROKE THE WAX seal, unfolding the parchment. The letter was short—three sentences in Sorian’s elegant hand.

To Lord Kael Darron,

**By order of the Crown, you are herewith reassigned to
Castle Threadneedle.**

Report within the week.

Further instructions to follow.

—*Sorian Ardan*, First Blade

Threadneedle.

The word sank into his mind like a stone. Threadneedle, a frozen wasteland in the North, where the Crown sent those it wished to forget. Where careers withered and died beneath endless frost.

Across the garden, Lord Sorian Ardan raised a glass in Kael's direction, his familiar not-quite-smile laced with gloating satisfaction.

The gilt chain hanging over Sorian's brocade glinted in the afternoon sun filtering through the canopies. Long tables, draped in white linens trimmed with gold, stretched across the castle gardens. Nobility drifted between trays piled high with crystal goblets, jeweled fruits, and steaming meats.

Kael folded the letter, slipping it into his cloak. His steel-blue eyes remained calm, though his anger churned beneath the surface.

Let them.

Let them send him North. Let them think they could bury him in ice and snow.

Kael Darron would not crumble!

Freedom was not only about breaking chains: it was about mastering the hand that held them. Whatever Sorian had planned, whatever the Crown hoped to prove, Kael would outlast it. Sometimes, there was no greater revenge than doing what they expected of you—better than anyone could ever think.

But involuntarily, his hand drifted to the silver pendant hidden in his tunic, the one Sorian had just pinned the medal over. He felt its quiet pull to the past, a tether to his humble birth and to a nagging doubt: he could never truly belong here.

Then he raised his silver goblet in return, nodding to Sorian, as the taste of the sweet wine lingered on his tongue.

TWO

We are all haunted houses.

—H.D. (attributed)

THE CANDLE FLAMES WAVERED when Oona entered Elena's chamber. The silver goblet she held, etched with delicate patterns dulled with time, shimmered faintly in the firelight.

Here in the North, outside Castle Threadneedle's walls, a gale lifted curtains of snow up and over the ramparts, rattling the shutters where Oona stood.

Elena didn't take her eyes off Oona. Three days of fever had stripped away the child's softness, leaving her suspicious.

"You were gone a long time," Elena said finally.

"The kitchen is far away, my lady." Oona turned, holding the goblet carefully in both hands. The glow of the fire lit her face, casting shadows that made her look timeless.

The room was surprisingly austere for a lady, practicality having won out over comfort. A sturdy wooden wardrobe with light scratches stood against the wall. A fire crackled weakly in the hearth, but the draft lingered, gently stirring the heavy maroon drapes. Dominating the room, a bed with intricately carved posts framed the figure of Lady Elena Thorn of Threadneedle.

Elena's skin, flushed and slick with fever, seemed out of place against the bleached white linen sheets. Resting on a pillow, she looked as though a careless touch just might shatter her. Her piercing brown eyes, her father's gaze, held an intensity that illness could not erase.

But unlike Lord Edric's severe and empty paranoia, Elena's eyes reflected a different kind of doubt: fear, certainly, but also intuition.

She now redirected that sharp suspicion on the healer, Oona, and the contents of the goblet she was just handed, which was wine laced with yarrow and willow bark, balanced with a touch of honey.

Oona was taller than most women in Threadneedle, and unnaturally still when she wasn't moving—an unsettling quality that only those who watched her closely would even notice. Though her hands were chapped from work, she gracefully measured herbs from her satchel into a ceramic bowl and turned to the fire for warm water.

Even in the dim light, her skin seemed sun-kissed. She wore her dark hair loosely gathered at the back of her head. Her face, though plain to some, held a quiet symmetry that drew the eye for a moment too long, daring you to notice her without truly understanding why.

"This will help break the fever," she added, stirring the ingredients with practiced accuracy—but there was something else, an unsettling, mechanical precision that sped up when no one was looking.

Before Oona could finish the potion, it came. Suddenly.

The scream.

Raw and high-pitched, the sound scraped against stone, then vanished without a trace. The steaming bowl trembled in Oona's hands as she swiveled toward the source of the sudden noise. Lord Edric's study.

Elena bolted upright, wide-eyed and fever-bright. "Father?"

"Stay in bed," Oona said quickly, her calm fraying. She set the bowl down on the bedside table, but Elena was already pushing back the covers.

"Help me up," the girl demanded, swinging her legs over the side of the bed.

Oona hesitated.

She could already hear the castle guards' heavy footsteps, their shouts smothered by the stone walls. But beneath it all, Oona knew. Threadneedle was very different now.

THREE

This time is out of joint.

—Shakespeare, Hamlet

“THE COLD ALWAYS COMES first,” Castle Guard Garrick said, watching his breath cloud in the torchlight. He took a swig from a silver flask and pushed it toward his partner, Ward.

Snow fell steadily, gathering on their shoulders and helmets, flake upon endless flake, the blanket of the north. In the distance, the heavy beat of Threadneedle’s bells marked the hour.

The castle walls, towering and ancient, stretched to meet the snow-draped earth below. Large flakes softened the rough edges of the battlements, torchlight glinting off their frost-bound stone.

Above the ramparts, mountain peaks caught the last of the light of the day on their faces, sharp as drawn blades. The village spread out beneath them—stone houses with slate roofs that bowed under the

weight of years and frost, and narrow lanes choked with snow and black with soot.

Garrick's large frame braced against the wind that swept down the ramparts. His face, weathered with scars, carried an enduring strength, as if hewn from the ancient stones of Threadneedle's walls.

Where Garrick was stone, Ward was shadow: razor-edged and restless, his wiry frame at odds with the stiff, well-kept uniform he wore.

Though no one had seen anything but snow here for years, Threadneedle's Lord insisted the tower remain under constant watch.

Ward chuckled and tipped the flask as he spoke. "Two guards to a shift. Ol' Lord Edric wouldn't want us losing our minds staring at the snow all night."

"Someone has to keep you from drinking through your shift," Garrick grunted, then shook his head. "It's too heavy tonight. Coming down fast."

A smirk tugged at his mouth as he sipped; for Ward, every moment hid a joke. *Gallows humor for a gallows town*, he thought, and resolved to put some words to his musings with another swig of the flask.

"You worry too much, old man," Ward said, his words slurring pleasantly. He rolled his eyes and tipped back the flask again as he leaned lazily against the battlement, snow catching in his untidy hair.

"No, that snow's looking awful heavy up there," Garrick responded, nodding toward the peaks. "See those cracks in the snowfield? I've *never* seen them stretch that far."

Ward followed his line of sight, blinking at the glacier's fractured surface. He let out a slow breath and rocked on his heels.

"Ah, well," he said, waving his flask vaguely at the peaks. "Maybe it's just the mountain trying to smile."

Garrick did not blink. “An avalanche would take out half the village.”

Ward huffed. “Look, all I’m saying is, *well*, maybe it ain’t a sign. Maybe the snow’s just stretching its legs.”

“You’re full of shit,” Garrick muttered.

“And yet I don’t collapse under my own weight.” Ward grinned. “Unlike that snowfield.”

Garrick slowly turned his head. It was the look of a man weighing murder.

Ward clapped him on the back, mostly to check if he was still warm. “Listen, if the mountain does bury us, you can say ‘I told you so’ when we die.”

This time, Garrick shook his head and swung around toward the jagged row of peaks. But Ward’s gaze drifted below.

Something was wrong. At first, it was a prickling awareness worming its way up his spine, the kind of feeling that made a man reach for steel before he even knew why.

Then, a patch of darkness close to the outer wall, where flakes should have been drifting, swallowed them whole.

Ward was not a man to get goosebumps lightly. But he blinked and squinted against the swirling snow. Like breath fogging in a mirror, a shape began to form at the edge of the ruins below.

His throat was dry as he tried to speak. “Garrick.” No response. He tried again, louder this time. “What—what’s that?”

Garrick barely moved his head, but his posture shifted uneasily. Because the shape in the snow... it wasn’t just standing there anymore.

It stared back.

Ward's flask dropped, forgotten. His expression lost the grin, morphing into something closer to... to dread.

Then, like a fast-moving cloud, the shapes broke apart, dissolving into nothing but the snow below.

As if only imagined.

Kicking the flask, Garrick snorted. "You've had too much of that, brother."

Below them, Threadneedle was ever the same. Sleeping buildings hunched under layers of snow. Wisps of smoke curled from chimneys. A window here glowed orange with candlelight, a window there was black with frost.

And yet, both men turned toward the signal tower.

Black and angular against the bruised horizon, it loomed over the village like a scar in the sky. Garrick shuddered, hearing—or imagining—a *scream*.

This time, the terror was all too real.

The siren's voice tore through the night, echoing along the stone walls of Threadneedle. Like a dying breath, the unnatural *scream* sailed through the falling snow, fading into the darkness.

From a tower above, an icicle cracked loose and fell, shattering on stone. Both men drew their swords, the cold steel whispering from their scabbards.

FOUR

Burying it don't make it disappear.

—Jory

K AEL FIRST NOTICED THE icicles hanging from the corpse's outstretched fingers and nose, sparkling in the faint moonlight like crystal scepters. The body was frozen solid, head bowed forward, arms stretched high in a grotesque mimicry of prayer.

He swore he could smell it, an acrid rot that clung to the air. But the cold had sealed any scent away, leaving only the sight behind.

A stone's throw ahead, the bent sign of The Broken Needle, the village tavern, swung faintly in the wind. The narrow street was choked in snow, a few fat flakes hanging in the air.

A handful of villagers passed by, heads down, boots crunching softly with every footfall. No one looked at the stake. No one looked at him.

This wasn't the first casualty of Edric's private war, and it wouldn't be the last. Lord Edric's power came from the Crown, yes, but here in Threadneedle he might as well have been king. The village was too remote for any real challenge. Perhaps that was why the Crown had sent Kael here—too much zeal, and a deepening madness, in Edric.

'A tool,' one noble had told Kael, 'is only useful until it breaks.' Kael's orders had been clear. *Help him with the purges. But watch him.*

Kael blended into the shadows of Threadneedle easily, his travel-worn cloak wrapped tightly around broad shoulders, the deep hood casting half his face in darkness. Beneath it, his lean, muscular frame moved with a soldier's efficiency. A thin scar ran along his cheekbone, pale against the rough stubble on his jaw.

The wind picked up, catching the edge of his cloak as he approached the weathered plaque at the base of the stake. He knelt, brushing away the snow with a gloved hand to read the inscription: *Candlemaker.*

His hand wavered as something else glinted beneath the hazy light. A ragged scrap of circuitry stuck out from the dead man's pocket, tangled in stiff, frozen fabric.

It seemed old, older than the purge, older than the Crown, older than anything that should still exist. A relic that belonged in forgotten ruins, not clutched in the pocket of a dead heretic.

His gloved fingers reached for it. Reach... stretch... he jumped up to grab the circuit, locked in an icy embrace with the pocket, tugging it just enough that... CRACK.

Kael barely had time to curse before it collapsed onto him, stiff limbs catching against his shoulders, the dead weight knocking him backward into the snow. A billow of white swirled around him.

His breath tore from his chest as he hit the ground, pinned beneath a frozen corpse. He twisted beneath the body, shoving against its heft.

“A little help?” he called out to the few villagers still within earshot.

No one stopped. No one so much as turned.

Kael dug in, shoving harder. The corpse slid sluggishly in the snow, finally rolling off him with a dull, brittle thud.

For a moment, he sat there, catching his breath, his gloved hands braced in the snow.

Then he glanced down at what he was still holding. The digitalia. Lifeless, old, useless, and rusted at the edges, its jangled wires spilled like veins across his palm. What did it mean?

As he brushed the snow from his cloak, his hand caught on the thin leather cord around his neck. The charm lay hidden under layers of fabric, but his fingers found the silver bird easily, its shape worn smooth from years of absent touch, a habit older than the scar on his cheek.

He exhaled, pushing himself up with one hand. Then, gripping the scrap of circuitry with the other, he hurled it toward the nearest abandoned building.

Glass shattered; the brittle remains of a forgotten window caved inward as the silicon disappeared into the dark.

Then he made for the tavern.

A BEER GLASS SHATTERED on the wooden floor of The Broken Needle as the door slammed open. A gust of wind carried in snow and the metallic squeal of wheels.

Behind the bar, Ryn knelt low, sweeping up the shards of broken glass. Her movements were quick and precise, a time-worn habit worried into a groove. She gathered the splintered pieces into her apron, the candlelight catching faint glimmers of gold in her dark hair, right where it escaped her braid.

The rattling of a cart drowned out the hush of voices as a man shuffled inside.

A peddler.

He was a mess of wiry limbs, ragged furs, frantic hands, twitching eyes, and hollow cheeks flushed red from the cold.

The cart shuddered to a halt in the middle of the Broken Needle, its contents a grotesque museum of the dead age: fractured hardware, blackened processor cores, twisted fragments of neural interfaces. The electronika caught the firelight like ancient jewelry or magical instruments.

“Treasures from the past!”

Riven’s shout cut through the tavern’s murmur. He spread his arms wide. “Stories in every piece! Antiquities for sale!”

Ryn didn’t look up from wiping glasses. “Not again, Riven.” Her tone was flat. “We don’t deal in your contraband. Take your trash and go.”

“It’s not trash!” He reached into the cart, gripping a rusted scrap of machinery. Wires, like entrails, spilled from its seams.

“See here! A neural lattice. Pure quantum-age craft—”

“I said out.” Ryn’s hand slipped beneath the bar. A warning.

Riven’s shoulders slumped. His fingers whitened around the cart handles as he swiveled around, making for the door.

Then...

A flicker. One of the ancient quantum chips, buried under years of dust, pulsed. Faint at first, then stronger, in a slow and rhythmic glow like bioluminescence. Like breathing.

The Peddler's wild eyes widened. He lifted the chip, turning it in his gnarled fingers. It shouldn't, no it couldn't, be doing that. His gaze moved chaotically around the tavern, finally landing on her. Sarah.

She sat in the corner beside her grandmother. Her tan skin drank in the dim light. A few unruly curls veiled her face, but her chest rose and fell in perfect time with the chip's mystic pulse.

Riven stared. Sarah's amber eyes met his. For less than a moment, the room was still. Then the light died, snuffed out like a candle.

Sarah rotated to the frost-clouded window beside her. With one finger, she traced a shape in the fog on the glass.

A cross.

The door burst open. Winter and wind stormed in, carrying snow and the heavy tread of boots—and Kael, his cloak dusted white, the deep hood casting his face in shadow.

Riven's hands flew to his cart. "No contraband here, Crownsman," he muttered. "Just a peddler's wares."

Without waiting for a response, the Peddler turned, gripping the cart's handles. The wheels shrieked as he dragged it toward the door and was gone, leaving the tavern as he had come in, thick with smoke, stale beer, and dust. And leaving Kael lingering near the bar, snow melting on his cloak as he took in the room: the crackling fire, the motley crowd, the warped beams overhead, and the blackened walls where fading names were carved deep into the wood.

The tavern's noise swelled again, and Kael watched the scene unfold like clockwork. Stew steamed, mugs clattered, and boots stomped the

grime of Threadneedle onto the floor. Most of the time, the Broken Needle felt more like a stage than a refuge—hosting a drama interspersed with quick scene changes, and a cast that knew their roles.

Except for one.

Kael's gaze lingered on Ryn, a moment too long. She might have been mistaken for another cog, but there was a difference about her, a kind of freedom in the way she moved. For Ryn, every action was a choice she owned.

She walked deliberately toward Sarah and her grandmother, wiping the window with her apron as she gathered mugs, tidying up while quietly erasing the Candlemakers' symbol from prying eyes.

As she wiped her palms absently on her apron, her gaze, for a wink, shot across the room and found Kael at the bar. In the moment before her mask slipped back into place, she stared right through him. Then she glanced away as though nothing at all had happened.

Edric didn't need to be present to command the room. His shadow fell over Threadneedle. Kael knew (or thought he knew) why the Crown hated the gods; the Crown didn't share power, even with myths, and especially not machines. But what did Edric care if the villagers nurtured a few ancient superstitions, now that the androids were gone?

As Kael turned it over again, he searched for the right tool to pry apart its meaning. A pitchfork, he decided, would be most appropriate for the job.

Kael took his drink to a low table by the window, left by villagers who cleared a wide path for the Crownsman. At least he was getting some respect here, or fear.

Somewhere outside, the Peddler's cart rattled away into the snow. And Kael, watcher of men, wondered what would happen when Edric, Lord of Threadneedle, finally snapped.

As Kael cleared a porthole in the frost, two castle guards rushed past, their boots leaving fresh tracks in the growing drifts. Snow, caught in the torchlight outside, swirled violently around the guards as they disappeared into the gloom.

Then came more, a whole squadron, followed by villagers with torches. With his focus on the window, Kael adjusted his posture. The wind carried faint echoes of shouted commands. Ryn's methodical polishing slowed as her posture leaned slightly toward the door. Listening.

And for a moment, The Broken Needle held its breath.

"Something's happened," someone suddenly said.

The sound came from the far corner. A boy, too young to be drinking but old enough to loiter, leaned against the wall, his boots kicked up on the edge of the table. His dark hair was unruly, damp from melted snow, and his smirk made it clear he enjoyed the attention. Jory.

The others, three boys of varying heights, waited for their cue. Their breath fogged over the frost as they pressed their faces against the glass.

"Up at the Castle!" one of them said excitedly. "They heard a scream in Lord Edric's tower. Bet the old man's finally gone mad—"

"Quiet," Ryn's voice parried their chatter. She stood motionless behind the bar with a look that made the boys freeze.

The boys shrank back from the window, but the words were already out. The tavern came to life. In the shadows of the room, a small figure,

Sarah, stirred. Her hands wrapped tightly around a chipped mug of cider, her wide amber eyes glancing between Jory and Ryn.

As Jory focused on her, his grin eased, and he claimed, rather than crossed, the distance between them. His friends shifted in their seats, whispering and giggling.

Sarah felt Martha stiffen beside her as Jory sauntered toward them, his hands shoved into his coat pockets, a grin hanging lazily on his face. He stopped a few feet from the table, close enough to catch Sarah's eye but far enough to stay out of Martha's reach.

"What do you think, Sarah?" he asked pointedly, slicing through the hum of the tavern. "You've been up there, haven't you?"

Dropping her gaze down to the chipped tabletop, her vision swam with the rapid beat of her heart. She didn't answer.

"She hasn't," Martha said, unyielding. Her hand clamped down on Sarah's arm, grounding her. "And she's got nothing to say to you."

Jory's grin widened, his eyes darting to Martha before settling back on Sarah. "Didn't ask you, old woman."

Martha leaned forward, her tone dropping low, hard. "And I'm telling you. Leave."

Her words carried weight, enough to make the nearest tables go quiet as their conversations faded into wary glances. But Jory didn't flinch. Staying put, he studied her with an expression Sarah couldn't quite name.

"Alright," Jory said finally, falling back with a shrug. "But one day, Sarah, you'll have something to say."

The way he said her name, like he'd always known it, made her stomach twist.

Martha's strict rules, the stifling walls, how she wasn't allowed to have a life of her own. This was her Threadneedle, and it felt smaller every day. Sarah sighed. "I hate it here."

The wind pressed faintly against the shutters, and more villagers moved past the window, shouting.

Kael set his glass down carefully, its faint clink impossibly loud. He pulled his cloak tight before rising, pausing on the old woman and Sarah by the window. The cross, though wiped away, reappeared, the fog retreating from the invisible oil her fingers left, as if remembering her touch.

Pushing through the door into the night, he followed the wind along Threadneedle's narrow streets. The guards' tracks, shadowed cavities already filling with snow, led straight toward the castle.

In the darkness of the Broken Needle, Ryn searched her pockets for matches. Extinguished by the sudden burst of cold air, the candle flames sent up lazy tendrils of smoke.

And as Kael marched stiffly toward the dark tower, the last lights in the little northern village of Threadneedle seemed to have gone out.

FIVE

Chaos is merely order waiting to be deciphered.

—José Saramago, *The Double*

“YOU,” KAEL SAID IN a measured tone as he crossed the threshold into Edric’s study.

Behind him, Garrick shut the door with a heavy thud, gripping his spear as Ward took position at the entrance.

“Me?” Oona replied.

Oona stood near Lord Edric, examining the letter clutched in his right hand, the fingers already stiff with rigor mortis.

Lord Edric’s lifeless body draped across the large oak desk that dominated the center of the room. His figure was a stillness that unnerved.

Kael remained steady. “You’ll forgive me if I ask why you are standing in the middle of a murder scene, with only the family allowed in.”

Edric's head lolled to the side, his cheek pressed against a sheet of parchment, stained red. His half-lidded and glossy eyes stared at a point beyond; the hollow lines beneath etched deeply, as though the man had been decomposing for years.

A slow smile curved Oona's lips, with no amusement in it.

"I could ask you the same, soldier."

Marcus fumbled with the buckle of his sword belt. "So glad you're here, Crownsman. Somebody needs to take charge of this investigation. Our father was just killed."

He gestured at the obvious corpse in the room, then nodded toward Elena, his sister, teetering off to the side, who was hot with fever.

At nineteen, Marcus moved with the unrefined strength of a boy still growing. His lean frame was topped with loose, dark curls clinging to his damp forehead. His face, like Elena's, held a youthful softness.

A shattered glass lay among scattered papers, the tannin-colored stain bleeding across the brittle surface of ancient texts. The hearth fire had burned low; its embers cast a faint orange glow.

Blood pooled slowly, drip by drip by drip, onto the flagstone floor.

Kael's hand hovered near his sword, gaze locked on Oona.

He watched, startled, as she brazenly snatched the stained note from Edric's lifeless hand and held it up. The movement seemed to jostle the corpse, causing it to slump further.

Before he could draw his blade, Oona tilted her head.

"Before you reach for that sword, Crownsman, you might want to know what your guards missed."

His fingers stopped a hair's breadth shy of the hilt.

"Most people, and especially not servants," he said carefully, "don't reach for evidence at a crime scene."

“Most people,” she countered, “whether servant or high-born, don’t notice when a victim’s right hand clutches papers, especially if they were left-handed.”

She extended the letter to him. “Or did you think I was here to steal love letters?”

Kael’s expression shifted—surprise, appreciation... suspicion.

Marcus stiffened. “She’s the village healer, my lord, attending to Elena. And I don’t think she has been cleared to be here.”

A moment of recognition passed between Marcus and Oona. Oona’s gaze narrowed, meeting his, holding his secrets as tightly as her own.

Before either could speak, the color drained from Lady Elena’s face. She swayed, reaching for something, anything, to steady herself. Finding nothing, she collapsed in a faint.

Kael and Oona moved at the same time, lunging forward from opposite sides. Their arms locked awkwardly around her, faces suddenly too close. For a breath, Kael found himself staring into Oona’s amber-flecked eyes.

She looked away first, but the moment lingered... a little too long.

Then, as if remembering themselves, they shifted Elena from one to the other, their hands brushing in the exchange. Elena, semi-conscious, became an unspoken buffer between them.

Their voices dropped to whispers.

“Astute observation about the letter,” Kael murmured.

“Not bad investigating yourself,” Oona replied, starting to lead the Lady out. “But we should get her to her chambers.”

As Garrick pulled open the study’s heavy doors, Oona paused.

She shifted her balance just slightly, but it was enough to make Kael stutter forward. Then, a low rumble, distant and deep, vibrated through the stone beneath their feet.

For a second or two, Oona looked toward the frosted window. But the sound faded quickly into the howling storm.

Kael spoke evenly, but with a hint of curiosity. "Something wrong?"

Oona blinked. Twice. Then, softly: "No." And then, cryptically: "I mean... not yet."

Kael watched her closely as they stepped into the corridor. For him, she was a puzzle he meant to solve.