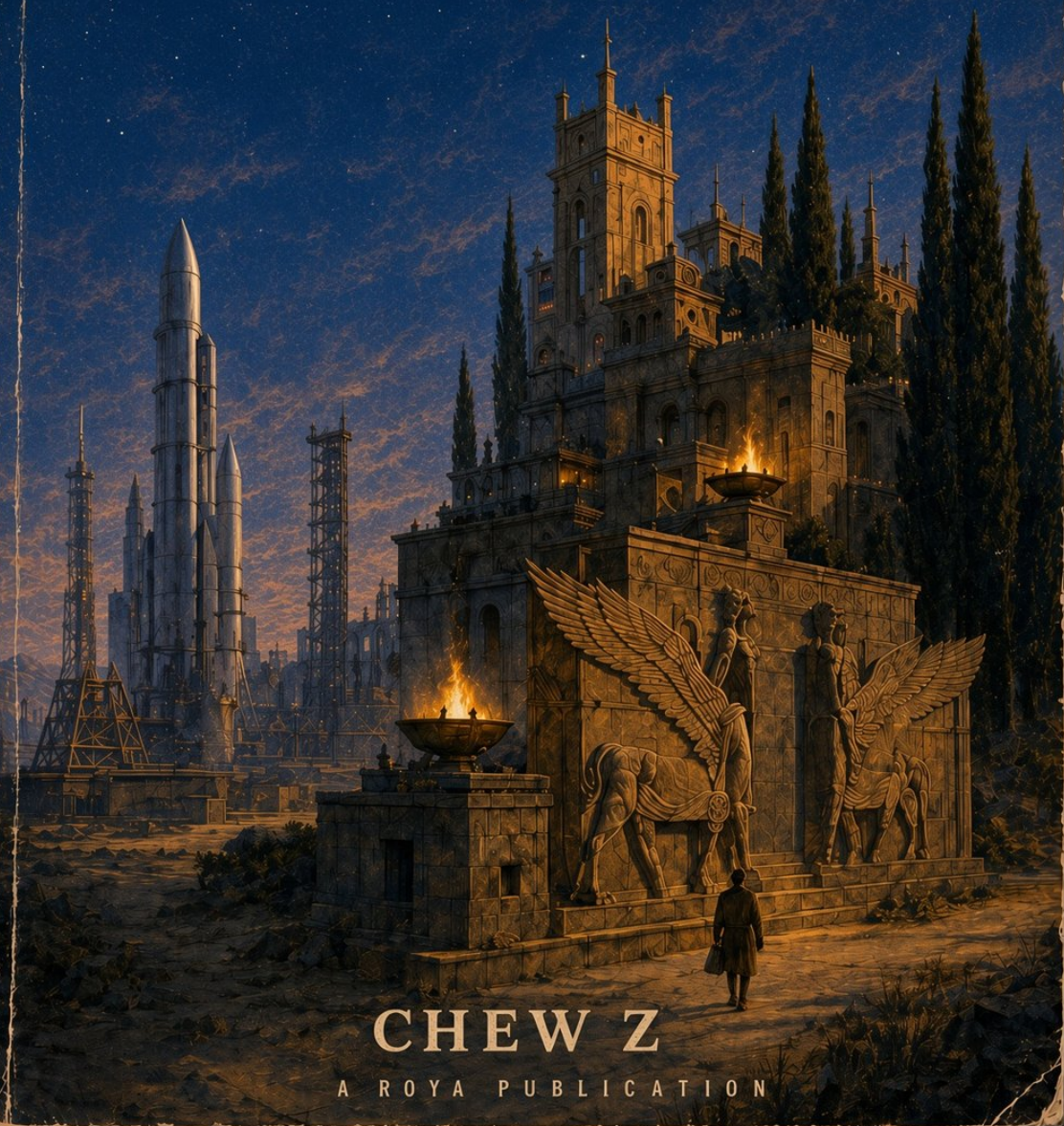


ROYA
PUBLICATION
No. 43

THE KEPT FLAME



CHEW Z

A ROYA PUBLICATION

THE KEPT FLAME

Chew Z

Printed in the Reach

Roya Publication No. 43

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

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Book III of the Borrowed Sun Cycle

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THE MARGIN.

The strip that vanishes into the spine when the volume is sewn.
Entered seventeen centuries ago, against the day the auditor asks.

SYNOPSIS

Twenty-five centuries ago, at the sea-gate called Salamis, the Persian fleet did not break. Greece entered the empire; Europe grew up inside it rather than against it; and the faith of the fire — the old religion of Truth against the Lie — became the governing belief of a commonwealth that now runs from Lisbon to Lahore. Its 2026 has trams, radio, tax offices, and dock strikes. It also has, at its heart, the Accord Fire: a flame kindled at the victory itself, burning without interruption for two thousand five hundred and six years, from which every treaty, calendar, and coronation in the civilized world legally descends.

Roshan Azad is a Reckoner — keeper of the Accord Fire's lineage ledger, the licensed profession that audits sacred continuity. A fire whose descent breaks is, in law, a new fire. Assigned the jubilee re-certification of the ledger, all twenty-five centuries of it, she finds what no Reckoner has ever found and every Reckoner is sworn to look for: a gap. Three nights, centuries deep, forged over by a hand that loved the fire too much to be honest about it.

What the gap opens is not a scandal. It is a door — and through it, in sealed testimony centuries old, other worlds are already speaking.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

In the real world — I mean the one where you are sitting, reader, though after three of these books I use the phrase loosely — there is a fire in a small town on the west coast of India that has been burning, tended and unbroken, for thirteen hundred years. It was carried there by refugees. Priests keep five watches over it every day of every year, feeding it sandalwood, ringing a bell against bad thoughts, bad words, bad deeds. It is not a metaphor. It is a fire, and it is older than most nations, and the people who keep it are the remnant of the faith that once lit an empire from end to end.

This book asks a simple question of that fire: what if it had never become a remnant? What if the religion of Truth against the Lie — the oldest of the great revealed faiths, the one that gave the others their angels, their judgment, their end of days — had kept the world it made? I have built the commonwealth of this book from real practice wherever practice survives: the grades of fire, the sixteen sources, the watches of the day, the purity laws, the bargain between a flame and its keepers. Where I have extended, I have extended along the grain.

And I have put at the center of it the story that Persia has been telling about itself for a thousand years — the bird, the mountain, and the mirror. If you do not know it, you will. If you do know it, then you already know what my auditor finds at the end of her seven valleys, and I ask you not to tell the others.

The verse in this book does not wait at the back. It has been broken up and hidden through the chapters, the way it was broken up and hidden through the centuries, and you will assemble it as she does: out of order, and too late. That is not a design flaw. That is the design. Keep it with the first two. The count is now three.

Chew Z

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ONE. THE RECKONER

The fire was two thousand five hundred and six years old, and Roshan Azad had known it all her life the way you know a grandparent: as a presence first, an institution second, and only much later — too much later; that is what this book is about — as something that had once been young, and small, and carried.

She was fifty-one, and her name meant *light*, which she considered her parents' one lapse into sentiment, and she held the office of Reckoner to the Accord Fire, which requires — the narrator begs your patience; there will be a certain amount of this, because her world runs on things yours has mostly forgotten, and I intend for you to follow every step — a brief explanation.

Begin with the fire itself. In the faith that governs Roshan's world — the old religion of the prophet Zarathushtra, the faith of the fire, which teaches that existence is a long war between Truth and the Lie and that every human being is a soldier in it whether they enlist or not — fire is not worshipped. This is the first thing every child learns and the first thing every foreigner gets wrong, and there are no foreigners anymore, and they still get it wrong. Fire is venerated the way a flag is venerated, or a wedding ring: as the visible sign of an invisible loyalty. It is the purest made thing, the element that cannot be dirtied without fighting back, and so it stands in every temple as the emblem of Truth itself — and because the emblem of Truth must never be allowed to fail, the fires are kept. Fed, tended, watched, five times a day at the turning of the five watches into which her world divides all time, every day, every year, every century, without interruption. Forever.

And where a thing must burn forever, a profession arises to prove that it has. That is the Reckoning. Every consecrated fire in the commonwealth possesses a ledger — a genealogy, exactly like a family's — recording where its seed-embers came from, who carried them, in what vessel, under what prayers, and every feeding and transfer since. Because here is the law at the bottom of Roshan's civilization, the law her whole office exists to serve: *a fire whose lineage breaks is a new fire*. It may be relit in the same bowl, in the same temple, by the same priests, within the same hour — no

matter. If the descent is severed, the old fire is dead and the new fire is an infant, and everything the old fire anchored — every treaty sworn before it, every calendar dated from it, every dynasty crowned by its light — anchors nothing. The flame is the signature of the civilization. The ledger proves the signature is not forged.

Roshan had spent thirty years proving small signatures. Parish fires, guild fires, the hearth-registries of the fire-insurance houses (a real industry, and a solemn one; imagine your actuaries ordained). She was good in the way the good ones are good, which is not brilliance but a defect: she could not leave a discrepancy alone. It sat in her like a splinter under a nail. Her household could tell from the doorway, from the set of her shoulders at the desk, whether the day's columns had closed — and had learned, over one particular decade, that there was no supper conversation until they did.

She had an apprentice that year, because the College insists the jubilee train a successor in parallel — a young man named Kavus, twenty-five, quick, reverent, from a family of fire-insurance actuaries, who had chosen the Reckoning over the family firm because, he told her on his first day, with the seriousness of the young, "the firm audits what fire costs. I wanted to audit what it's worth." Roshan had told him those were the same column and watched him not believe her, and liked him, and put him to work on the wood-stores, the dullest tables in the record, because that is where you learn the trade and because — she would spend a year not forgiving herself for this, and then the rest of her life understanding it was the road's doing and not hers — the dullest tables are where the trade keeps its truths.

You should also know what her office looked like from the street, because her world is not a museum and the Reckoning is not a priesthood. Reckoners are laity — licensed, bonded, unveiled; her tools were a loupe, a comparator card, reagent kits for ink and paper, and a traveling desk that had been her mother's; the profession runs in families the way the priesthood does, the way the keeping does, the way everything in her world does, descent being the whole grammar of the place. She was, to her quarter, a

figure of mild civic reassurance, like a good magistrate: the woman who proves the fires are what they say they are. Children in her street played Reckoner with chalk ledgers on the paving stones. Her own children were grown — a daughter at the hydraulics ministry, a son apprenticed to a dakhma warden (patience, reader; the towers come in the next chapter) — and her husband, who taught mathematics and had spent thirty years being politely baffled by the passion of her exactness, had died four springs back, in the proper way, with the household fire burning and the three nights kept and the dawn prayers said at the crossing hour; and Roshan had sat the vigil beside his body with the professional part of her mind, which she could no more shut off than her heart, noting that grief and audit are the same posture: you sit with what remains, and you count.

Then, in the spring of 2026 by your reckoning — theirs is a different count, dated from the fire itself, but I will keep your calendar so you do not stumble; that is my job; I carry things across — the College of Reckoners assigned her the jubilee.

Every fifty years, the Accord Fire — the great fire, the anchor-flame of the peace, the one all the others descend from the way rivers descend from a glacier — undergoes full re-certification. Every page of its ledger, from the kindling at the sea-gate twenty-five centuries ago to the sandalwood laid on it that morning, read, cross-checked, and countersigned. It is the highest honor the profession affords and it is universally understood to be ceremonial, the way the changing of a palace guard is ceremonial: the ledger of the Accord Fire is the most audited document in the world. Nothing has ever been found in it. Nothing is expected. The jubilee Reckoner reads for two years, signs, and enters history as a name on a page of names.

Roshan took the assignment the way she took everything, which was seriously, and moved her desk into the ledger-vault beneath the Great Temple, into the smell of old paper and sandalwood smoke and stone, and began at page one.

I will tell you now, because I am a bookkeeper and not a showman, that she found it in the eleventh month, in the pages of the fourth century of the fire's life, and that it was three nights wide.

But she did not find it yet. First you need the world. It is a good world — that is the terrible part; write it down — and it deserves the walk.

TWO. THE WORLD THE FIRE KEPT

Every world in this ledger turns on a hinge, and the hinge of Roshan's world is a naval battle your history books give a page and hers gives a holy day.

In your world, reader — late September, 480 years before your calendar's turn — the fleet of the Persian empire followed the smaller Greek fleet into a narrow strait called Salamis, and was broken there, and the empire's tide went out of Europe for good. Everything you are reading this book with — the alphabet's route to you, the word *democracy*, Rome, the church, the particular shape of your particular civilization — descends from that afternoon the way her world's treaties descend from a flame. Historians in your world call it a hinge and they are right.

Come stand in the hinge itself for one paragraph, as I stood you in a Geneva hotel room one entry back, because you have earned the habit and no one in either world ever got the view: the strait of Salamis, a late September morning, 480 years before the turn of your count. Narrow water, an island close against the mainland like a lid half-drawn over a jar. On the shore, on a throne his engineers set up in the night, the King of Kings with his secretaries beside him, ready to record which captains fought well — an audit, reader; the whole battle was fought under audit; some things are true in every world. On the water, packed hull to hull, the largest fleet the world had ever assembled, and inside the strait, the small desperate squadrons of the Greek league, technically cornered, actually — in your world — baited: your history turns on the corner being a trap, on the big fleet feeding itself into the narrows where its numbers jammed and drowned it. Small hinges. A morning wind that in your world rose and chopped the water at the hour the

heavy Persian ships were most crowded; a false message believed at the wrong depth; a squadron that hesitated. In her world the report reads differently by three details a naval historian could hold in one hand — the wind, the message, the squadron — and the trap became a door, and the door held, and by evening the strait was a Persian roadstead and the age your civilization calls Classical became, in hers, the first province of something larger. Her world's schoolbooks do not gloat; twenty-five centuries is long enough to make any victory just weather. But they keep one detail your books cannot have, and I will carry it across because this ledger exists for exactly such cargo: that on the evening of the battle, on the shore, among the cooking fires of the victorious camp — sixteen of which, gathered from the shepherds and the smiths and the fleet and the sky, were about to become the oldest institution on earth — the King's secretaries, closing the day's rolls, ruled their columns and entered the hour, and the entry survives, and it is the first line of the Accord Fire's ledger, and it reads, in the old imperial formula her world still uses to open every audit: *Let it be counted as it was, and kept as it is counted.*

In her world the wind in the strait held two hours longer. Small hinges: a squall, a signal misread, a Corinthian squadron that arrived where in your world it hesitated. The Greek line broke instead. Athens burned a second time and was rebuilt as a Persian provincial capital — and here her world's history does the thing your histories never expect of it, the thing that made her world worth a book: the empire did not devour Greece. It *digested* it. The Persians of that age were the best imperial administrators the species had yet produced — the empire of the king's roads and the standing post, of paid labor and returned exiles, of a hundred nations run under one law with their gods left in place — and they ran Greece the way they ran Egypt and Babylon: taxes, roads, tolerance, and time. Greek thought was not strangled in the cradle. It was *hired*. Athenian logic-choppers ended up doing for the empire's law and engineering what in your world they did for its own small quarrelsome cities, and the empire, which had a genius for absorption and a religion built on an idea rather than a place, carried west on its roads the one export that mattered.

Not the fire itself — remember, the fire is only the emblem. The idea. The idea is this, and her world is the world where it won: that existence is a war between Truth and the Lie; that the god of Truth — Ahura Mazda, the Wise Lord, worshipped without idols, in the open, before a flame — asks of every person three things and three only, *good thoughts, good words, good deeds*; that the world is not to be escaped or endured but *repaired*, plowed, irrigated, gardened, until the Lie is starved out of it; and that at the end of every life the soul waits three nights beside its body while its deeds are counted, and on the fourth dawn crosses a bridge — the Separator, the bridge to the other world — which is wide as a road for the truthful and narrow as a blade for liars. You have met this bridge in the first two books of this ledger, reader, wearing other names. Everyone has stood at that crossing. That is what it is for.

Rome, in her world, happened — a vigorous Italian league, a good navy, a long provincial history — but it happened *inside* the weather of the empire, a regional power in a Mazdan world, and no world-swallowing century of legions, and no Christendom, because the faiths that in your world grew from the empire's ideas — the judgment, the angels, the single god, the end of days; her scholars will tell you, correctly and at length, that your religions borrowed their architecture from hers — never needed to grow separately at all. The root simply kept the tree.

And so: twenty-five centuries, compressed for you the way I compressed the outward century in the last entry, and by the same right — I was there for the dull parts and I am sparing you. The empire loosened into a commonwealth the way empires do when they live long enough — provinces into member nations, satraps into ministries, the King of Kings into a crowned notion. It had its collapses and plagues and renaissances, its schisms (whole shelves of them: the Zurvanites with their time-worship, the sun-cult centuries, a dozen puritan revivals), its wars — real wars, reader, with real dead; the Truth has borders and borders bleed — and, late, on schedule, its industrial revolution. Which is where her world becomes the world I most want you to stand in for a minute.

Because in your world, the machine age arrived against the faith, and the two have been dividing the house ever since. In hers it arrived *through* the faith — and the reason is written into the oldest rite of her religion. The highest grade of consecrated fire in her world (there are three grades, as there are in the remnant of the faith in your world; the parish fire, the district fire, and the great Fire of Victory) is assembled — this is real, reader; I did not invent it; check when you get home — from *sixteen separate fires*, gathered from every station of human labor: the potter's kiln, the brick-maker's, the goldsmith's, the mint's, the blacksmith's, the brewer's, the shepherd's watch-fire, the hearth of an ordinary household, a fire from a ruling house, a fire started by lightning, and — hold this one; the whole book will come back for it — *a fire that has burned a corpse*, gathered under special guard and purified longest of all, because it is the most defiled and therefore the most in need of rescue. Sixteen fires, purified one by one over months of liturgy, then married into a single flame that contains them all. Do you see what that rite believes? It believes labor is holy. It believes the smith's furnace and the baker's oven are *already* prayers, needing only washing. A faith with that rite at its summit does not excommunicate the steam engine. It ordains it. Her world's factories have hearth-registries. Her world's furnaces are parishioners. The industrial revolution was preached.

So her 2026, at street level, is a world you would recognize in an afternoon: trams, radio, newspapers, tax offices, universities, dock strikes, uncollected refuse, election posters, terrible municipal coffee. The differences come at you slantwise, the way real difference does. The day is cut into five watches, not twenty-four loose hours — the watches of the fire-tending, marked from every temple, so that all labor and law keeps liturgical time and “the third watch” is how you'd make a lunch appointment. Perjury occupies the place in her criminal law that murder occupies in yours; the Lie is the capital offense, and contract fraud is tried in rooms of a solemnity your world reserves for treason. The dead are neither buried nor burned — earth and fire being both too holy to defile — but given to the birds in walled towers outside the cities, and her world finds your cemeteries exactly as macabre as you are

currently finding her towers. There is no word for the separation of temple and state, not because the state is a theocracy but because the distinction never occurred to anyone, the way your world has no word for separating the government from the calendar.

Walk one more street of it before we go down to the vault; you will want this world whole, later, when it is deciding things. The commonwealth of 2026 is not a monolith and not a museum: it is forty-one member nations under the Accord, from the Atlantic provinces to the Indus, quarrelsome in their parliaments, unified in their watches, running the gamut every large polity runs from the devout to the merely observant — there are plenty of the latter; her world has its skeptics and its bored teenagers and its scholars who keep the fasts for the family's sake; belief kept at civilizational scale becomes infrastructure, and nobody is devout about infrastructure, which is precisely what makes it permanent. Its press is free and lively within one absolute boundary — the truth-law; a newspaper in her world can savage a minister with impunity and be dissolved for a false circulation figure. Its women hold offices at every level, the faith having taught from the oldest texts that the war against the Lie conscripts every soul equally; the priesthood alone runs patrilineal, and is argued about, in the press, freely. Its trains run on the watches. Its towers of silence — promised, and here paid: the dead of her world are carried to walled, open-roofed towers outside the cities and given to the birds, because earth and fire and water are all too holy to receive corruption, and the birds are quick, and the bones, cleaned and dried, go to the ossuaries; her son the apprentice warden calls it, without irony, the last donation, and her world finds it exactly as tender and as practical as your world finds organ gifts, and finds your embalming fluids and sealed caskets a horror-story it tells its adolescents. And its year turns at Nowruz, the spring equinox, the feast of renewal older than the faith itself, when the whole commonwealth cleans its houses, jumps its bonfires, and sets the table of seven things beginning with the letter of life — and on that morning, in every temple from Lisbon to Lahore, the priests recite the year's formula, which is also the civilization's entire theory of

itself, eleven words long: *The light is kept. The account is open. Begin again, truly.*

And over it all, in the capital, in the Great Temple whose inner sanctum no sunlight enters — the fire must be the only light in its own house — burns the Accord Fire: kindled, says the ledger, on the shore at Salamis from the fires of the victory camp, in the year the war ended and the peace of the world began. Twenty-five centuries of unbroken descent. The most audited document in the world.

One more thing about her world, and then we go down to the vault. Her world's scholars have a problem they do not like to discuss at conferences. The problem is *you*, reader — or rather, the problem is that her world looks so much like yours. Diverge two civilizations twenty-five centuries ago, the mathematicians say, and they should share nothing by now: not their technologies arriving in the same order, not their wars spaced to the same rough rhythm, not their centuries counting to the same 2026. And yet. A small heretical discipline — convergence studies; you will meet its professor — keeps publishing the same career-ending question in different words: *why does history rhyme?* The orthodox answer is providence: Truth is one, so all true roads run parallel. The heretics have no answer. They only have the data, which looks — one of them wrote, in a footnote that finished him — “less like parallel evolution than like copies of a common text, each with its own errors.”

Hold that too. This ledger holds everything, eventually.

THREE. THREE NIGHTS MISSING

The ledger of the Accord Fire occupies one hundred and ninety-one volumes and a room built like a reliquary, and Roshan Azad spent eleven months alone with it before it lied to her.

You should know what the reading was like, because the reading is the valley — the first of seven her road crosses, though she will not see the shape of her road until far too late, and neither, if I have done my work, will you. The old poem of her world calls the first valley *Yearning*, and what the jubilee gave Roshan, month by

month, volume by volume, was exactly that: a longing she had no professional category for. Because the ledger of a fire is not a dry thing. It is the longest continuously written document in her world — twenty-five centuries of keepers' hands, from iron-gall ink on skin to fountain pen on rag paper, every entry the same and every entry different: *fed at the turning of the second watch, sandalwood, two measures; watch kept by...* and then the names. Ten thousand names. Keepers who wrote through plague years with the entries getting shakier and shorter and never stopping; a keeper in the seventh century who could not spell and drew, in the margin, small perfect birds; a war winter when the entries are in a child's hand, because — the ledger does not explain; the ledger never explains; that is what made her love it — every grown keeper was elsewhere, and somebody's daughter kept the watches and the record both, aged, by the handwriting, about ten. Roshan read eleven months of that. You do not come out of eleven months of that an auditor only. You come out of it what her office had secretly always been, under the licenses and the seals: next of kin.

Which is why, when she found the gap, she did not feel triumph, or even alarm, at first. She felt — she told the College inquiry later, in the flat voice her whole profession shares with Verifiers and other patient trades across all the worlds of this ledger — *grief*.

Here is what she found, and I will lay it out the way she laid it out for the inquiry, plainly, because you have been promised an easy road through a strange country and I keep my promises.

Every fire-ledger is kept in day-entries, five per day, one per watch, no exceptions — the unbroken rhythm is the whole point; a missing watch is a wound and a missing day is a death. In the fourth century of the fire's life — seventeen hundred years before Roshan's desk — across three consecutive nights in early winter, the rhythm of the Accord Fire's ledger does not break. That must be said first. The pages are there. The entries are there, five a day, correct in form, correct in ink, correct in everything. That is what every auditor for seventeen centuries had verified: correctness.

Roshan found what correctness was hiding, and she found it because of the splinter under her nail, and because of a rule of her

trade so humble that no one had ever thought to apply it to the holiest document in the world: *check the boring things*. Honesty in the record, reader: it was Kavus who brought her the column. It was the eleventh month; he had been a year in the wood-stores by then, and he came to her desk in the vault holding his tablet of reconciliations slightly away from his body, the way you carry a bad sample — you have seen this exact walk before, in a bay on a moon, in a hand named Dahl; the road issues its people the same postures, world after world, and I have stopped pretending it is coincidence — and he said: “Reckoner. The fourth century doesn’t eat.” And then, because he was young and it was the holiest document in the world, he spent ten minutes trying to make his own finding be an error, while Roshan sat very still and let him fail, which is the whole of teaching. She was cross-indexing the ledger’s wood-stores — the deliveries of sandalwood and dried offering-wood, the dullest tidal tables in the whole record, the spaces between the entries — and across those three nights and only those, the arithmetic of the woodpile does not reconcile. Wood was logged as delivered that was never logged as burned. A fire was being fed on paper that was not being fed in fact — or was being fed *elsewhere*. And the entries for the three nights themselves, when she put them under the glass she should by rights never have needed: written in one hand, all fifteen of them, though the duty-roster shows five different keepers. Written with one batch of ink, though the entries claim three days’ separation. Written — this was the detail that put frost in her, alone in the vault at the turning of the fourth watch, and the frost has a familiar feel to you by now, reader, and it should — *beautifully*. More beautifully than the surrounding months. The forger had slowed down. The forger had taken care. Whoever remade those three nights had loved the fire the way she loved it, had grieved what they were hiding as they hid it, and had made the lie as worthy of the ledger as they could make it, the way you dress a body for a funeral.

Fifteen entries. Three nights. And in the gutter of the third night’s page, in the same beautiful hand, so small she nearly took it for an inkflaw, so old that the ink had gone the brown of dried blood or old bone — you have seen this ink before, reader; it drifts in dunes

in a sealed room on a moon that does not hang over this world — two lines of verse:

You kept the flame; the flame kept you — so runs the bargain, old and true.

No keeper signs a couplet. No liturgy contains it. Roshan Azad sat in the reliquary room with seventeen centuries of silence around her and the splinter in her turning over like a key, and did what her license required and her grief resisted, which was to open a formal finding against the most audited document in the world.

The finding has a name in her profession's rulebook, and the rulebook is old, and the name is worse than any modern phrasing could be. It is called *an interruption of the light*.

FOUR. THE HOUSE OF SEALED TESTIMONY

Every civilization keeps a drawer for the things it cannot admit exist. In yours it is scattered — archives with polite names, files that outlive their classifications. In Roshan's world, with its criminal code built on the Lie, the drawer is an institution with a door and a mistress, and the institution is called the House of Sealed Testimony, and this chapter is about what was waiting for her inside it.

Understand the House, briefly, because it could only exist in her world. A faith whose deepest law is truth-telling has a problem your law solves with shrugs: what do you do with testimony that is *sincere* — sworn, sane, consistent under every trial — and *impossible*? You cannot convict the witness of lying; the whole apparatus of her world exists to detect the Lie, and it detects none. You cannot enter the testimony in the record; the record is the civilization. So, a thousand years ago, her world built a third place: a marble archive in the capital where impossible truths are neither burned nor believed but *kept* — sealed, indexed, and prayed over, against the day they stop being impossible. The keepers of the House take a vow that makes Roshan's oath look casual: to preserve without believing, forever, if forever is what it takes.

The mistress of the House was called Dinaz, a small dry woman of about seventy with the manner of a librarian and the eyes of a border guard, and when Roshan presented her finding — an interruption of the light, fourth century, three nights — Dinaz did not do any of the things Roshan had braced for. She read the finding twice. Then she stood, took up a ring of keys that were actual keys, iron, older than most nations, and said the sentence Roshan would afterward date her life by, the way her world dates everything from a fire:

“We have been holding a file against your visit for six hundred years. It is filed under the day, not the name. We did not know your name.”

The file was one document. A deposition — sworn testimony, taken under the full rites of her world’s truth-law, seals unbroken, dated fourteen centuries after the gap and six centuries before Roshan’s desk. And here I must slow down, reader, and gloss one more thing, because the deposition will use it: her faith holds that every living soul has a *fravashi* — briefly, a guardian-self; the eternal portion of you that existed before your birth and waits past your death, of which the walking, worrying you is a kind of expedition ashore. When her world’s oaths say *I swear by my fravashi*, they mean: by the self that cannot lie because it was never in the world where lying works.

The witness of the deposition had sworn by his *fravashi*, and the takers of the testimony recorded, in a shaken marginal note, that they believed him — that was why the seal, that was why the House. He had been detained at a border of the commonwealth in early winter, six hundred years ago: a tall man, long-bearded, of no registered nation, carrying everything he owned in one canvas bag, mended and mended again, seams over seams like the strata of a worked mine. Asked his origin, he gave none. Asked his business, he said — the clerk records the answer verbatim, and records asking twice — “*Passing through.*” Asked, under the rites, what he carried, he opened the bag and the inventory is in the file and the inventory is one line:

ITEMS: BAG, PERSONAL (1). CONTENTS: SUNDRIES; AND A THING RESEMBLING A LAMP, COLD.

And then, because the rites of testimony in her world do not permit a witness to be released while any sworn question stands open, and because some border clerk with more procedure than sense had sworn him to *account for himself* — the tall man had, patiently, in a voice the transcript-taker describes as arriving “from further away than the room allowed,” accounted. The account runs four pages. It describes a world where the fire is a tool: where flame is struck and quenched a million times a day by anyone, unrecorded, unmourned; where the dead are burned as disposal; where the sixteen fires are not gathered because no one has ever counted them; a world of engines and terrors, of cities lit like spilled embers, that keeps no ledger of any flame — *and needs none*, the witness said, *because it keeps its accounts in other coin, and the coin is fear, and the ledger there is kept by the fear the way the fire is kept here, five watches a day, and it also never goes out*. You have read that world, reader. You have read it twice. From inside, in the first book of this ledger, it was called the louder world. From above, in the second, it was called the archive of the other shore. Roshan, reading its description in a marble room, called it what her faith calls the country of the Lie, and then read the clerk’s marginal note stating that the witness had sworn to it by his fravashi, and that no rite had detected any lie, and felt the floor of her civilization become — you know this sensation now; it is the toll this ledger charges at every gate — a surface.

Two more things in the file. At the bottom of the deposition’s last page, beneath the seals, in a hand the clerks do not annotate — small, patient, the brown of old bone — a second couplet:

But every fire the record names was carried once from other flames,

And clipped to the file, added by some keeper of the House in the centuries since, a single administrative slip, the kind used for routing, bearing no signature and one line: *Hold against the auditor. She will ask about the winter.*

Roshan went home at the turning of the fifth watch and did not sleep, and I will use her sleeplessness, reader, to keep a promise. I said the old stories would be told properly in this book, with their explanations carried alongside like a lamp, and the first one is owed here — because lying awake, Roshan found herself reciting it, the way you recite something old when the new things stop making sense. It is the story every child of her world knows before they can read, from the Book of Kings, the thousand-year poem in which her civilization keeps its memory. It is the story of the bird.

Long before the fire was kindled — so the story runs — there was a champion of the old kings named Sam, and to Sam was born a son, perfect in every limb, with hair white as an old man's. And Sam, who had never in his life fled anything, fled this: read it as the fear of what does not fit the record, because that is what it is. He ordered the infant exposed on the slopes of the world-mountain, the Alborz, where the snow never softens — an entry, you might say, struck from the family ledger.

But on the world-mountain lived the Simorgh. Gloss her plainly, as promised: the Simorgh is the great bird of Persian story, old beyond the faith itself — part eagle, part guardian, part something with no part-name; vast enough that her outspread wings dim a hillside; ancient enough to have watched the world be ruined and remade, some say three times. She is not a god and not an animal. She is what the mountain keeps. And the Simorgh, hunting to feed her own nestlings, found the white-haired infant crying in the snow — and did not eat him. She carried him to her nest at the roof of the world and raised him with her own young, on regurgitated meat and mountain wind, and the child grew into a man beautiful and strange, white-haired, wise in two natures — and when at last a repentant Sam came searching, and the young man, who was named Zal, had to choose between the nest and the world of men, the Simorgh gave him her parting gift. She drew from her breast three feathers, and said — every child in Roshan's world can say it with her — *If ever you stand in a need no man can answer, burn one feather, and I will be with you.*

Zal went down into the world of men. He burned the first feather when his wife lay dying in labor, and the Simorgh came and taught the surgeons to deliver the child by the knife — and the child was Rostam, the greatest champion of all the long poem. He burned the second in the worst of Rostam's wars, and she came. The third feather — the poem is careful here, and Roshan lay in the dark at the turning of the first watch being careful with it too — the third feather is never burned. It is still out there, in the story's forever, held against a need that has not yet come.

Ask, before the next chapter asks it for you: what kind of story is that, for a civilization of ledgers to keep at the bottom of itself? It is the story of an entry struck from the record and *kept anyway*, alive, off the books, by something old on a mountain. It is the story of help that crosses from outside every account. It is a story about the last feather.

Her world had been telling itself for a thousand years, in advance, the shape of what its auditor would find. Most worlds have. That is what the old stories are for, reader — they are the sealed testimony of civilizations, held against the day the impossible stops being impossible, filed under the day and not the name.

The House had one more thing for her. Dinaz, at the door, in her border-guard voice: "There are two further files under the same routing. One came to us two hundred years ago. One came to us in my own tenure." The dry little woman looked at Roshan then with something that was not quite fear and was not quite envy. "The routing slip on the newest one says *the third witness closes the count*. We have been waiting a long time, Reckoner, to learn what count."

FIVE. THE CONFERENCE OF THE BIRDS

The second deposition was two hundred years old, and it was not a border case. The witness had walked into a provincial temple at the turning of the third watch, asked for the rites of testimony by their correct names — which no stranger should have known — and stated, for the record, sworn, that she had been born in a city called Nishapur, in a world that did not exist.

Her testimony fills sixty pages, and the takers grew so unsettled by its sanity that they twice halted the rite to examine their own instruments. She described her world with a merchant's precision — she had been, she said, a bookseller. It was a world where the faith of the fire had lost: had been broken by conquest thirteen centuries before her birth and reduced to a remnant, a few hundred thousand keepers scattered between a desert plateau and a foreign coast, tending a handful of old flames in the corners of other people's empires. She described the faiths that ruled in its place — described them fairly, the takers note, even with love, for she had been raised in one — and described her Nishapur: a city of poets in the east of the old homeland, under a faith that prayed five times daily toward a distant stone house. Five watches, reader. Even the days of the worlds rhyme. Write it down.

And then — this is why her file was routed to the count; this is why this chapter carries the book — the bookseller of Nishapur, asked by the rite to *establish her origin by a thing that could be verified*, said: I will give you a poem. It was written in my city, in my world, five centuries before my birth, by a perfume-seller's son named Attar. You will know it, she said, because you have it too. You cannot not have it. It is older than the road between us.

And she recited, from memory, sixty pages deep into sworn testimony, the poem that Roshan's world calls the Speech of the Birds and treasures as its second scripture — and the takers, checking her recitation against the temple's own copy, found it identical. Line for line, for four and a half thousand lines. Identical — the take-master's annotation is a single underlined word, and the word is *impossible* — except in one couplet. Hold, reader; the couplet is the end of the chapter. First, the poem — told whole, as promised, with the lamp carried alongside, because everything that remains of this book stands on it.

The birds of the world gather — every bird there is — because they have no king. The world is disordered, they say; there must be a king; other creatures have kings. And one bird steps forward who is different from the rest: the hoopoe — a real bird, reader, you have seen one, crest like a struck match, a courier's bands on her wings

— who in the story wears a crest like a crown because she has served the court of the great king already, has carried messages across the desert none of the others have crossed. The king exists, the hoopoe says. He has always existed. His name is the Simorgh — yes: the bird of the mountain, the keeper of Zal; the poem takes the oldest guardian in the civilization's memory and sets her at the end of the longest road — and he lives on Mount Qaf, the mountain-range that runs around the rim of the world. The road is terrible. Most who fly it die. But a kingless world is worse. Who comes?

And then — for hundreds of lines, and this is the part of the poem her world loves the way yours loves its psalms — the birds make their excuses. Each excuse is a portrait, and each portrait, reader, is you on a given day; that is the poem's first mercy, that it indicts everyone gently and by species. The nightingale cannot come: he is in love with the rose, and the rose blooms here. The hawk declines: he already serves a king, a real king, with a real wrist to perch on; why gamble a court in hand for a rumor on a mountain? The duck cannot leave the water she is holy in. The owl loves his ruin and the treasure he is sure is buried under it. The sparrow is too small, too weak — hear the false humility in it, says the hoopoe; smallness is the proudest excuse of all. The peacock — this one made the take-master's hand shake, transcribing; it will make yours shake too in about six pages — the peacock says he was once a bird of paradise itself, and was exiled, and does not deserve the king; he will settle, he says, for just finding the gate again. The partridge cannot leave his mountain and his hoard of gems — hear the miser under the mineralogist. The heron loves his own melancholy at the water's edge too much to trade it for a destination. The finch pleads that she would only slow the others: martyrdom as truancy. And the parrot — the parrot says the thing that makes the poem immortal, and every reader of every world flinches at their own species in it: the parrot in his beautiful cage says he does not want the Simorgh at all; he wants only the fountain of immortality; he wants to live forever, *here*, as he is, saying what he has heard said. One by one the hoopoe answers them — not with arguments, with *stories*; the poem is a treasury of nested tales, each one a small mirror angled

at an excuse. Take one of the tales whole, so you know their flavor — the one Roshan's world loves best, the tale of the sheikh and the swineherd's daughter: a holy man of perfect record, master of four hundred disciples, dreams a dream that ruins him, follows it into a far country, sees an unbeliever's daughter at a window, and for love of her — the poem is merciless — tends pigs, wears her sash, burns his book, loses in one season a lifetime's certified sanctity. His disciples despair; one remains; the one drags the master home; the girl, waking to her own dream, dies following him, believing. And the poem asks its question with a straight face: which of them crossed farther — the sheikh who lost a perfect ledger for love, or the girl who spent her only entry on one step of the road? Roshan had heard the tale a hundred times. She heard it now, in the marble House, as a professional communication: the poem thinks nothing of a clean record. The poem audits *distance traveled*. And one by one, protesting, weeping, still making excuses at the trailhead, the birds rise.

They fly seven valleys. Learn the names as her world learns them, in a child's singsong, because the structure of this entire book has been walking them under you since chapter three: the Valley of *Yearning*, where you burn everything you own for the road's sake. The Valley of *Love*, where reason dies first. The Valley of *Knowledge*, where every bird finds its own road and loses everyone else's — what you learn there cannot be told, only had. The Valley of *Detachment*, where meaning itself thins; whole worlds, the poem says terribly, matter there less than a feather. The Valley of *Unity*, where the many are one thing wearing costumes. The Valley of *Bewilderment*, where the one thing is lost too, and the traveler says — the poem gives the traveler your voice, reader — *I no longer know if I am or am not*. And last the Valley of *Poverty and Annihilation*, about which the poem says almost nothing, because there is almost no one left to report.

Thousands set out. They fall to hunger, to storms, to despair, to the road's plain length; some turn back at the last ridge, which the poem counts the saddest death of all. In the end, out of all the birds of the world, exactly thirty reach Mount Qaf — thirty broken, featherless, half-dead birds, empty of excuse, empty of self, empty

even of hope, flying on nothing but the finished habit of the road. They reach the court of the Simorgh. A herald meets them and tells them to go back; the king does not receive beggars. They have nothing left to turn back *with* — that is what saves them; the poem is exact about this; they are admitted not because they are worthy but because they are finished. The doors open. The court of the king of all birds is a hall of polished mirrors, and it is empty.

And the thirty birds look for the Simorgh, and find only the mirrors, and in the mirrors — thirty birds.

Here the poem detonates the device it has been building for four and a half thousand lines, and it is a pun, and her language and the bookseller's language share it, because the two worlds share the tongue the way they share the poem. In Persian, *si* is thirty. *Morgh* is birds. The thirty birds — *si morgh* — stand before the Simorgh, and the name they have crossed the world to reach is the name of what crossed. The king they sought is the seeking, completed. The mountain keeps what the mountain keeps, reader, and what it keeps is the keepers. When you see the face of the sought, says the poem, you will always see your own.

That is the poem both worlds hold, identical for four and a half thousand lines across a divergence of twenty-five centuries — which is itself, Roshan understood, sitting in the marble stillness of the House with the bookseller's file open before her, the finding: not that the poem crossed, but that it did not need to. Some texts, like some songs, like some street corners, are upstream of the worlds that receive them. The professor of convergence studies would say: a common source, and every copy with its errors. Her faith would say: Truth is one, and all true roads run parallel. The poem itself had said it best and first: every road, walked all the way, ends at a mirror.

Except. One couplet. In the bookseller's Nishapur, in your world, reader, at the threshold of the hall of mirrors, the poem reads — she swore to it, and the rites found no lie — a verse about rays returning to the sun. In Roshan's world, in every copy, in the oldest manuscripts the temple libraries hold, at the same threshold the poem reads:

Look in the fire as in a book, or as the thirty birds once looked:

The take-master of two hundred years ago had annotated the discrepancy and filed it as a textual curiosity. Roshan, who had now seen that patient bone-brown hand three times — in a ledger gutter, under a border seal, and threaded into the second scripture of her civilization centuries before either — closed the file, sat very still at the turning of the fourth watch, and made the finding a Reckoner makes when the columns close in a shape she does not want:

Someone was writing a poem across her world, and had been for a very long time, and the poem was addressed.

SIX. WRONG HEARTH

The third deposition was nine years old, taken in Dinaz's own tenure, and Roshan read it on the first day of winter with the capital outside the marble windows going about the season's business — the wood-markets, the festival scaffolding, the temple smoke standing up straight in the cold — and this one was different from the first two, and the difference was that Roshan recognized the witness's world before the third page, and so, reader, will you.

The witness was a man of about sixty, found not at a border but at a dockside, discharged — the harbor registry confirmed it, and then unconfirmed it; the ship he named existed and had no such crewman — from a long-haul freighter. He was orderly, deferential to the rites, and utterly calm, and he testified that he had spent his working life as a maintenance man on the far side of a moon. Not the moon of poetry, he specified, with a technician's care for the record: the far side, the side that never faces home, in a world — he asked permission to describe it, and the takers, nine years ago, gave it, not knowing they were transcribing a synopsis of the previous entry in this ledger — where the nations had agreed, a lifetime ago, to point their terror at the sky instead of each other. Where the fire, he said, groping across the doctrinal gap with his big careful hands, was — not a tool exactly; a *crew member*. Rated. Licensed. Made to work its passage, pushing ships. He described the settlements, the union halls, the green rain smell of

hydroponics decks. He described a signal that had come in from the dark when he was fifty, carrying a drowned century of another world's broadcasts. He described — the takers note that here, for the only time, the witness wept, without disorder, the way a man weeps at a graveside he has long expected — sitting up nights with that archive, learning grief for a fear he had never been issued, and how the missing had become load-bearing in him. And he described, in his methodical way, what he had done about it: how, after the station's auditor — *a woman; the best of us; you have one of her trade here, I think; it is why I came to this building* — had gone down alone to a sealed door and come back changed and would not say, he had finished his last rotation, drawn his pension, and walked up the boarding ramp of a hauler that was not on any schedule, whose deck, he said, felt wrong in a way he had spent nine years learning to say correctly, and the correct saying was: *it was the wrong deck for me, and the right one for where I was going.*

Asked, under the rites, how a moon-born maintenance man crosses to a world with no moon settlements at all, Tomas Rell — I have withheld the name three pages and can no longer bear to; yes, reader; it is Rell; grieve and keep reading, that is the whole discipline of this ledger — gave the answer that got his file routed to the count. He said: "You cross the way everything crosses. You wait three nights. You carry one bag. And you settle what you owe at the door, or the road settles it for you somewhere down the line, with interest. I paid at the door." Asked what the payment was, the transcript records a silence of some length, and then: "The verses. I gave up the verses. I wrote them all my last nine years there and I cannot hold any of them now — I know that I wrote, and that they were the best thing I ever made, and they are gone from me like a language you dreamed. He said they were needed for the road. He said" — and the takers mark the next words *verbatim, witness's emphasis* — "*they go ahead of you. That is what verses are for.*"

The takers asked, finally, as the rites require, whether the witness wished to add anything to close his testimony, and Rell said yes, and dictated, in a world he had been resident in for nine days, in

meter, two lines he claimed were “the only ones the road let me keep, because they were never mine to spend”:

You warm your peace at what it cost; the wick remembers what was lost.

Roshan Azad put down the third deposition and found that she was on her feet without having decided to stand, and that the marble room was insufficient, and she walked — the House keepers trailing her at a distance, unsure of the protocol for a Reckoner in this condition, there being no protocol, there being never any protocol at the exact places this ledger takes its people — out into the first evening of winter, into the wood-smoke and the festival cold, and did the thing her feet did when her columns would not close, which was to go to the fire.

Not the Accord Fire; laity and even Reckoners do not enter the great sanctum outside their office. The parish fire of her own quarter, in a small temple smelling of sandalwood and wet wool, where the evening congregation was gathering for the turning of the watch. She stood among her neighbors — the tram conductor, the fire-insurance actuary, the woman from the corner press whose headlines had lately grown strange, CONVERGENCE PROFESSOR SUSPENDED; JUBILEE AUDIT EXTENDED WITHOUT COMMENT; small print under a large world — and the priest came in his white robe and mouth-veil (glossed, as promised: the veil is worn so that even the tender’s breath cannot touch and defile the flame; you keep a fire twenty-five centuries by keeping it, among other things, from yourself), and fed the fire, and rang the bell against bad thoughts, bad words, bad deeds, the triple knell her world has rung against the Lie five times a day for as long as it has been a world.

The evening watch, in a parish temple, is a small and mendable thing, and I want you to have it before it is interrupted, because it is the actual subject of this book — not the empire, not the audit; this. Two dozen neighbors on a cold night. The fire on its stone throne, the only light, breathing the way banked fires breathe, making the shadows lean and straighten as if the room itself kept a slow watch. The smell of sandalwood and wet wool and someone’s supper carried in on a coat. The conductor easing her boots. The

actuary with his eyes shut, moving his lips through the old formula, keeping — you could see it — not the faith exactly, but the *appointment*: five times a day, someone stands here so that the count is never broken, and it does not need to be you every time, and it has to be someone every time, and tonight it is you. Her world in one room. What the fire actually anchors, Roshan thought, watching her neighbors' faces in the tended light, was never the treaties. It was this: the oldest continuous appointment in the world, kept against the dark five times a day for twenty-five centuries, by ordinary people in wet wool, taking turns.

And at the third stroke of the bell Roshan turned her head, because the quality of the light in the doorway had changed — had gone low, and amber, and long, arriving as if up a road that the temple's architecture did not contain — and he was standing at the back among the coats, tall, long-bearded, the bag at his boot with its strata of mended seams, watching not the fire but the *congregation*, the rows of tended faces lit by the one flame, with an expression she spent the rest of her life failing to enter in any column: a keeper's expression. A reckoner's. Next of kin.

He was there through the prayer. He was there through the feeding. At the final stroke of the bell he picked up the bag, and looked once around the little temple, unhurried, the way a man checks a room he is measuring for a door, and said — to no one, to the fire, to the room itself — in a voice that came back from further away than the walls allowed:

"Wrong hearth."

And was gone into the festival cold, and the congregation flowed out after the service not one of them aware, and the priest, closing the sanctum, found nothing amiss, and there was nothing amiss, and Roshan stood alone in the emptying temple understanding two things with the flat certainty of a closed column. That she had just seen the witness of the first deposition, unaged in six hundred years, checking on a fire the way you check on a grave you tend. And that of all the hearths in her world he might have called wrong, he had said it *here* — in an ordinary parish temple, before an ordinary parish flame, a fire whose modest ledger Roshan herself

had certified twice in her career and would have staked her license on.

Which meant the question her whole audit had been circling, the question under the gap and the depositions and the count, was no longer *whether* a fire in her world was not what its ledger said it was.

It was: how many. And how high.

INTERLUDE. THE FESTIVAL OF THE HUNDREDTH DAY

While Roshan's audit stood extended without comment, her world kept a holy day, and you should stand in it once at street level, reader — because this is the world with its hand on the doorknob, and by now you know the drill: remember what it looked like with the door still shut.

The festival is real; I did not invent it; her world merely never stopped keeping it at full scale. It is called Sadeh, the Feast of the Hundredth Day — a hundred days, by the old count, before the new year at spring — and it is the feast of the *discovery* of fire, which makes it, if you think about it, the birthday of the whole civilization, and her world does think about it, every winter, with bonfires. The story it keeps is from the Book of Kings, and it is told to children on the day, and it was told to Roshan, who stood in the crowd on the temple hill with the rest of her quarter and heard it again at fifty-one with the splinter turning in her all the while. In the dawn of the world, the story runs, the second of the first kings — Hushang, king when everything was still being invented — was crossing the mountains when a great black serpent rose against him from the rocks. The king hurled a stone. The serpent — mark this — *escaped*: the story is emphatic, the blow missed, the enemy lived. But the stone struck the mountain flint, and from the striking leapt a light that had never been seen in the world before, and the serpent fled from it, and Hushang, being a king when kingship meant noticing things, knelt down before the spark he had made by *missing* — and said, so every child in the crowd recited with the storyteller, mittened and shining: *This light is from God. If you are wise, you will keep it.*

Keep it. Not worship it — the story is doctrinally careful even at the dawn of the world — *keep* it. And so the feast of Sadeh is the feast of the keeping: on the hundredth day, at the turning of the evening watch, every quarter of every city builds its bonfire, lit — this is the point of everything, reader; this is her whole world in one municipal ordinance — not with matches, but with embers. Carried embers. From the parish fire, which was seeded from the district fire, which descends from the great fires, which descend from the Accord Fire, which descends from the victory shore, which descends — the storytellers hand the children the whole chain like a skipping rope — from Hushang's spark at the beginning of the world. On Sadeh night the entire commonwealth becomes, for a few hours, one visible genealogy of light: from every temple door the ember-bearers walking out in procession with their long-handled ladles, fanning out through the streets to the waiting woodpiles, and the fires going up on the hills one by one as the embers arrive, each new blaze a *child*, certified, entered, kin — until from any high window the whole city is a ledger burning in the open, and the singing starts.

Roshan stood in the crowd on the temple hill with her quarter's fire roaring its pedigree at the winter sky, and watched the ember-procession the way no one had ever watched it before in twenty-five centuries: professionally. And her world, which had been growing strange around her audit all season the way worlds do around the audits in this ledger — the suspended professor's convergence lectures suddenly circulating in cheap unsigned pamphlets; the newspapers running their small strange print; a new fashion, the temple wardens noted with unease, of laypeople attending the dawn watch, the least attended of the five, *the one before the fourth night ends*, standing at the back in silence like people learning a posture — her world sang around its certified fires, and the singing had begun, just detectably, to change key. She heard it. You would have heard it too, by now; you have had two books of training. Under the festival songs, under the children's round about the king and the serpent and the spark, ran a new note, urgent and unentitled, the note of a congregation that has begun to suspect what it is actually singing about — a species

practicing, without one soul in it deciding anything, for a payment coming due.

The songs of Sadeh deserve a paragraph of their own, because her world's winter carols are its whole theory of fire set to tunes a child can carry. There is the round about the king and the serpent — *he missed, he missed, and the mountain lit* — which is, if you attend to it, a civilization teaching its children that its founding mercy was an accident, that the light was struck by a blow that failed; her world has sung its own contingency, cheerfully, for a hundred generations, and never once heard what it was singing until the winter I am recording. There is the ember-bearers' processional, slow, in step, older than the commonwealth — *we carry what we did not kindle; we hand on what we cannot keep* — which the College of Reckoners uses, without irony, as its anthem. And there is the children's counting song for the bonfire watch, the one for staying awake, which numbers the nights — one for the body, two for the deeds, three for the crossing — and stops. There is no verse for four. Roshan stood on the temple hill at fifty-one, among ten thousand singing neighbors, and heard the stop at the end of the counting song as she had never heard it: not as an ending. As a *held place*. Her whole world's music, pausing every winter, at every fire, on the same unsung number, the way an honest ledger rules a blank line for an entry it knows is coming.

And on the third morning after Sadeh, when the bonfire sites had been raked and blessed and the ash carted to the ash-houses (nothing of a certified fire is discarded, reader; even its death is filed), the warden of Roshan's parish temple sent for her, embarrassed, holding something at arm's length the way you carry a bad sample. It had been found pinned under the ember-ladle in the temple's own hearth-shed — pinned, though the shed had been locked, by a splinter of grey mountain flint. A slip of paper, fine-grained, unfamiliar, the color of old bone. In the patient brown hand she now knew better than her own, two lines:

and one was carried farther still: three nights across the dark and chill,

She had, by then, four couplets, and no order for them, and a professional lifetime's certainty that entries do not end mid-column. The verse was not finished with her world.

Neither, reader, is the ledger. We go down now. The last valleys are indoors.

SEVEN. THE SIXTEEN

Roshan took the whole file — the gap, the three depositions, the couplets, the flint — to the one person in her world credentialed to be unsurprised by it, and found her in a requisitioned lecture hall at the winter university, suspended from teaching and therefore, in the way of her kind across every world in this ledger, teaching.

Professor Sudabeh of convergence studies was sixty-three, broad, deliberate, with the settled calm of a scholar who has already lost everything a committee can take, and she listened to the entire account without one interruption, which no one had done, and then was silent for the length of a watch-bell, which no one had been, and then said: "Do you know what my discipline actually measures, Reckoner? Not similarity. Any two worlds might rhyme by chance, if there were any two worlds, which officially there are not. We measure *error*. Thirty years ago I catalogued the variances in our own historical record — the small impossible disagreements every archive carries and every archivist is trained to smooth. The battle commemorated on two different days in two provinces, both official, both immemorial. The city whose founding charter is spelled two ways on the same monument. The anthem" — Roshan's head came up; Sudabeh saw it and did not stop — "of the southern league, which every choir in the commonwealth sings identically, and which disagrees, by one syllable, in the second line, with its own published score, in every edition, back to the oldest plate. My colleagues call these things scribal noise. But noise is random, Reckoner — noise is my mother tongue; I have spent thirty years listening to it — and this is not random. The variances cluster. They cluster at the joints where our history *matters most* — thickest around the victory itself, around the kindling, around every hinge where the record's feeling runs highest, and thinnest across the

dull administrative plains. As if" — the professor said it the way you finally say the thing that ended your career, evenly, like a woman laying down a heavy parcel she has carried uphill for thirty years — "whatever copied us out cared too much, at the important parts, to hold the pen steady."

She gave Roshan the catalogue's texture, because Roshan asked, being what she was: the treaty of the northern league, preserved in duplicate originals that differ in one boundary river's name — both rivers real, both borders long settled, no discrepancy ever litigated because no one reads duplicate originals. The tomb inscription of the second dynasty's great king rendering his mother's lineage two ways on facing walls. A hero of the sea-gate battle itself commemorated in the eastern provinces on the ninth of the month and in the west on the eleventh, with liturgies that both claim, in the same formula, to have been kept *without interruption since the day itself*. "Thirty-one thousand entries," Sudabeh said. "Each one nothing. An archive's dandruff. Together — " and the professor did the thing Roshan would remember longest, the thing the suspended do in every world of this ledger: she smiled, without any happiness in it, the smile of a woman handing over a parcel she has carried alone up a very long hill. "Together they are a fingerprint, Reckoner. Not of a forger. Forgers erase. Whatever made our record *kept its errors* — kept them the way your ledgers keep everything, entered and ruled and carried forward — as if the mistakes themselves were part of the accounting. As if getting us slightly wrong were how it proved to itself that it had gotten us at all."

She crossed the empty hall to its long slate board, and wrote nothing, and stood before it, and said: "You came to ask me how high the forgery goes. I have been forbidden to publish my answer for eleven years, so I will say it to you instead, in my own hall, off the record, which is the only place anything true has been said in this city all winter. My answer is a question. You are the Reckoner of the Accord Fire. Tell me: in the whole liturgy, in the whole long rite of the sixteen fires — the potter's, the smith's, the shepherd's, the mint's, the king's hearth, the lightning, the corpse-fire, all sixteen stations of the labor of the world, gathered and purified and

married into every great fire we possess — tell me, Reckoner, in all twenty-five centuries of commentary: has anyone, ever, once, explained *why sixteen*?”

And Roshan, who could recite the rite’s rubrics in her sleep, who had audited the gathering-liturgies of three great fires in her own career, stood in the cold hall and discovered that the answer was no. The commentaries explain each fire. None explains the count. The count is simply given, from the oldest sources, before the oldest sources — the way an anthem’s wrong syllable is given, the way a poem’s variant couplet is given, the way a street corner is given — inherited, immemorial, and unexplained, an integer at the foundation of her civilization that her civilization had never once thought to audit.

“Sixteen fires,” said Sudabeh, “gathered from sixteen sources, to make one flame that contains them all. Now go and reread your first two files, Reckoner — the tall man’s world, where the fire is a tool and the terror keeps the ledger; the bookseller’s world, where the faith is a remnant and the poem is the same. And then come back and tell me” — the professor turned from the slate, and her settled calm, Roshan saw, was not calm; it was the stillness of a woman who had been standing at a door for thirty years listening to the knocking — “what you think the sixteen fires are gathered *from*. Because I no longer believe the rite is talking about professions. I believe the rite is an inventory, Reckoner. I believe it always was. I believe we have been reciting the catalogue of the worlds five watches a day for twenty-five centuries, the way a bank recites its holdings — and I believe that somewhere in that rite, filed under the day and not the name, is the entry that tells us which fire we are.”

Roshan walked home through the winter capital with the professor’s question doing what such questions do in this ledger, which is reorganize everything behind it as it goes. Sixteen fires. Sixteen sources. The potter’s fire, the smith’s fire, the shepherd’s, the brewer’s, the mint’s — read suddenly not as trades but as *worlds*, sixteen variations on the one labor, gathered along one road by one patient collector with one bag — the king’s-hearth fire;

the lightning fire, wild, unkept, struck out of the sky's own quarrel; and the sixteenth, the one gathered last and purified longest, the defiled one, the one the whole rite bends its deepest mercy toward, the fire the liturgy names in four words that every priest of her world has pronounced at every consecration for as long as there has been a world, and that Roshan Azad now heard, for the first time, the way you hear an anthem's wrong syllable once it has been shown to you, and can never unhear again:

fire that has burned a corpse.

She stopped in the middle of the tram-street. The evening watch was turning; the bells were beginning, temple by temple, quarter by quarter, the triple knell against the Lie running across the city the way it ran across the commonwealth, the way it had run, five times a day, for two and a half thousand years — bad thoughts, bad words, bad deeds — and Roshan stood in the cold with the audit finally assembling itself in her whole and terrible and still missing its keystone, and asked the question aloud, alone, to the bells:

Whose corpse?

EIGHT. THE RELIT

The answer was in the one archive she had not yet opened, because it is the one archive no Reckoner in twenty-five centuries had ever had cause to open: the consecration records of the Accord Fire itself — the liturgical protocols of its original kindling, held not in the ledger-vault but below it, in the temple's stone marrow, in a chamber her warrant had to be countersigned three times to enter. The Warden of the Accord Fire countersigned last. Dastur Ardeshir was seventy-four, a decent institutional man of the species this ledger has taught you to recognize on sight — Okafor's species, the tired good stewards who hold the middle of every world — and he read her warrant twice, and looked at her for a long moment with the expression of a man at the top of a ladder, and said only: "My predecessor told me, at my investiture, that a Reckoner would come. His predecessor told him. It is the oldest instruction of the office, and the whole of it is one sentence: *When the auditor asks*

for the kindling records, countersign, and go with her, and do not let her read the third night alone."

They went down together.

The way down was itself an argument. Below the ledger-vault the stairs stop being architecture and become geology — the temple's founders built downward first, her world's builders always have, a civilization that keeps things learns early to keep them low — and the two of them descended with hand-lamps through strata of masonry like the fanfold years of a very old record: dressed imperial stone, then rougher courses, then the raw first-dynasty bones, cold coming through the walls the way silence comes through a held breath. Ardeshir went first, slowly, one hand on the wall, an old man on old stairs, and Roshan noticed — the splinter noticing; the auditor never once in her life off shift — that their lamps threw the shadows *wrong*: long, and parallel, and pointed back up the stair behind them, as if the light were coming from below, from ahead, from past the sealed chamber at the bottom — low, and patient, and amber — and she said nothing, and the Warden said nothing, and she understood from the quality of his silence that the wrongness of the light on these stairs was part of the oldest instruction too, the part no one had ever needed to write down.

The chamber was first-dynasty stonework, older than the temple above it, and the records lay in sealed cases of cedar and lead in the order of the rite: the gathering-warrants of the sixteen fires, the purification protocols, the marriage-liturgy of the amalgamation, the enthronement. And Roshan Azad, twenty-five centuries after the fact, seventeen centuries after someone had forged three beautiful nights over the truth, did what she was: she audited the kindling of the world.

Fifteen warrants reconciled. Fifteen fires, gathered from the camps and kilns and hearths of the victory shore, each with its bearers named, its vessel described, its purifications counted — the shepherd's fire from the commissary flocks, the smith's from the fleet's own armorers, the lightning-fire from a struck mast, witnessed by two soldiers whose names are in the record and

whose descendants, for all I know, are in her world still. Fifteen clean columns. And the sixteenth warrant — the corpse-fire, the defiled one, gathered under double guard and purified longest — the sixteenth warrant is not a warrant. It is a *substitution*, and it is seventeen centuries younger than the fifteen around it, interleaved with a forger's love, in a hand Roshan knew better by now than her own mother's, and it does not name a pyre on the victory shore. It is four pages, and it is sworn, and I will give it to you, reader, as she read it, at the turning of the fourth watch, in the stone marrow of her civilization, with the last decent steward of the fire standing beside her because the oldest instruction of his office was that she should not read it alone.

The original sixteenth fire — the true corpse-fire of the true kindling — had gone out. Not at the kindling: seventeen centuries ago, in the fourth century of the fire's life, in three nights of early winter that a keeper's roster shows five hands and a wood-ledger shows a starving flame. The record does not say how. The record says only — in the beautiful hand, in the bone-brown ink, with the terrible tenderness of a confession dressed for a funeral — that the fire sickened as fires do not sicken, guttering on full wood, cooling on dry cedar, dimming *from the inside*, the way — the substitution's own words, reader — *a signature fades when the debt it secured is called elsewhere*; and that on the third night it stood at the height of a hand, blue, silent, and setting, like a small sun going down; and that the keepers of that winter, five of them, sworn and veiled, did what keepers do and what the whole of this book is about: they kept it. Off the books. Past the law. Through the gap. And when it could not be kept — when the Accord Fire of the peace of the world was, in law and in fact, three breaths from being a cold bowl and a dead civilization's signature — there was a knock at the door of the hearth-shed.

The substitution records the knock. It records that the man was tall, and long-bearded, and of no nation, and that he carried one bag, mended and mended, and that he did not ask to be admitted anywhere but *asked, instead, whether the keepers wished to balance the account* — and that he opened the bag, and took out a thing resembling a lamp, cold; and that inside it, wrapped close,

banked in ash that was not any wood-ash of her world, sleeping but alive, was an ember.

And the substitution — sworn, in her world's deepest rites, by five keepers whose names it gives and whose descendants I will not look up, and countersigned in the patient brown hand — records what the tall man said the ember was, and where it was carried from, and how. That it was gathered from a city in another world — *a world down the road*, the substitution says, in the oldest attested use of the phrase this ledger knows — on a night when that city burned entire: burned in one breath, at the temperature of a small sun, with all its people in it, by a fire its own world had made and aimed; a city, said the tall man, in a country that in her world's geography does not exist, on the far shore of the western ocean, in a world where the sea-gate battle went the other way and everything that followed followed. That he had walked into the burning — the substitution records that the keepers asked how, and records his answer, and his answer was "*Slowly*" — and gathered, with a long-handled ladle, from the heart of that man-made sun, one coal. And carried it out, and wrapped it close, and fanned it with sleeping breath, three nights across the dark and chill between the worlds — three nights, reader; the soul's own count; the fire crossed the way everything crosses — and had brought it here, to the gentlest world on the road, to the one civilization that possessed already, in the deep grammar of its holiest rite, a category for exactly this cargo: *fire that has burned a corpse. Gathered under guard. Purified longest of all. Because the most defiled is the most in need of rescue.*

And at the foot of the substitution's last page, beneath the five sworn names, set apart the way a mason sets a datestone, the patient hand had ruled two lines and entered, as colophon, the couplet the whole document existed to file — the fifth she had found, and the one, she understood even as she copied it into her audit with a steady pen and an unsteady breath, that all the others had been keeping the seat for:

wrapped close, and fanned with sleeping breath — an ember from a city's death.

The corpse was a world. The rite had a place for it. The keepers, on the third night, at the turning of the watch before dawn, took the ember into the sixteenth station of the liturgy, and purified it by the full rubric, and married it into the failing flame — and the Accord Fire stood up off its bed and burned, and burns, and is burning at this hour, twenty-five centuries of certified descent with a coal from the atomic murder of another world at the heart of it, and everything her world is — the peace, the law, the watches, the bells against the Lie, the whole gentle certified commonwealth of the kept flame — is warmed, and has always been warmed, at what it cost.

Roshan Azad finished reading and stood for a long time in the stone chamber. Beside her the old Warden waited, as his office had waited seventeen centuries, and at last she asked him the auditor's question, the only question left, the one her whole life had been a preparation for asking in a level voice:

"Does the fire know?"

And Dastur Ardeshir, Warden of the Accord Fire, seventy-four years old, keeper of the oldest instruction in the world, said: "Reckoner. It has been telling us five times a day for as long as we have been ringing bells at it. We taught every child in the commonwealth the confession before we taught them to read, and we called it humility, and we carved it over the gate." And Roshan stood in the marrow of her civilization and heard, through twenty-five centuries of stone, the words on the gate of the Great Temple above them, the four-word creed her world had always been proudest of, believing itself modest:

THE FIRE IS NOT OURS. WE ARE THE WICK.

NINE. THE MARGIN

There is a chapter in every book of this ledger where the finder must decide what she is going to do with what she found, and the decision is always taken alone, and it is never the decision the world upstairs would vote for, and I have stopped apologizing for this, reader; the road selects for a certain kind of person and then the person selects for a certain kind of road; you may work out for

yourself which way the causation runs, and when you have worked it out, check it, because the answer has an error in it, and the error is load-bearing.

Roshan Azad spent nine days deciding, and the nine days were the last ordinary days, and she spent them the way her kind spends such days across every entry of this ledger: at her desk, closing columns.

Because the audit was not finished. The substitution answered everything except the two questions an auditor cannot leave open. The first: the *forgery*. If the keepers of that winter had acted within the deepest grammar of the rite — if the sixteenth station existed precisely to receive such cargo — why hide it? Why the three beautiful false nights, the scrubbed roster, the seventeen centuries of silence sworn down a lineage of Wardens one sentence at a time? She put the question to Ardeshir in the stone chamber and the old man answered it with the terrible simplicity of the institutional decent, the Okafors and the wardens who hold the middle of every world: “Because the rite purifies the fire, Reckoner. Nothing purifies the *knowing*. The commonwealth could live descended from that coal. It could not live *knowing* it — or so five keepers judged, on a winter night, with three breaths left, and no College to consult, and the peace of the world on the woodpile. They entered the mercy and hid the price. You have read seventeen centuries of the result. It was a good world. You said so yourself.” He looked at her, tired, steady, the last honest man of a dishonest kindness. “They did not forge the ledger against the truth, Reckoner. They forged it against *what the truth does*.”

The second open question was the margin.

She had gone back — of course she had gone back; you have read three of these books — to the beginning: to the eleventh month, to the fourth century, to the three beautiful nights where her whole road had started, and she read them again with everything she now knew, and the entries were the same, and the couplet in the gutter was the same, and then she did the thing she had not done the first time, because the first time she had not yet learned this ledger’s one commandment, which is *check the spaces between*. She

unbound the volume. A Reckoner may; it needs a warrant; she had stopped counting warrants. And in the binding margin of the third night's page — the strip that vanishes into the spine when the volume is sewn, the space that has not seen light since the page was bound, seventeen centuries ago, decades at least before any jubilee, before any College, before the profession of Reckoning itself existed in its modern form — in the patient hand, in the bone-brown ink, ruled and entered like any line of any account, she found the entry the whole book has been walking toward, and I will not dress it, because it was not dressed:

Entered against the day the auditor asks. She will want the couplets in order. Tell her: the order is the road's. Hers is only the finding. — And tell her the fourth dawn has kept her seat.

And beneath the entry, ruled and entered like any line of any account, the last two lines she would ever find — the seventh couplet, the one the verse had been walking toward through six centuries of seals and margins and festival sheds, waiting in the sewn dark of the binding since before her profession had a name:

the face that burns there, calm and kept, is yours. The fourth dawn has not slept.

Roshan Azad sat in the reliquary vault with the unbound page in her two hands and understood, in the way this ledger's people are always finally made to understand — not as revelation but as *reconciliation*, the last column closing with the small dry click of a thing that was never once out of balance — that her audit had been entered before her profession existed. That the gap had been left findable the way a keyhole is left findable. That the forger and the carrier were one hand; that the hand had written the false nights beautiful *so that a certain kind of reader would grieve at them and not stop*; that everything she had followed — the splinter, the depositions held against her visit, the couplets salted through six centuries, the professor's forbidden count, the Warden's one-sentence inheritance — was not a trail she had discovered but a *schedule she had kept*, five watches a day, all her life, like everything else in her certified world; and that the question she had carried down every stair of this book — *how high does it go?* —

had been answered in the oldest instruction of all, the one carved over the gate, the one she had recited before she could read. It goes all the way up. It was never hidden. The wick has always known what the wick is.

She showed Kavus the margin before she showed the College, because the College would inherit the finding but the boy would inherit the *road*, and the distinction had become, to her, the only one that mattered. He read it twice, in the vault, in the fourth watch, and then did the thing that told her the profession would be safe in his hands and his life would not be: he reached out one finger and touched, very lightly, not the entry, but the ruled line beneath it — the blank line, the held place, the next row of a column seventeen centuries deep — and said: “Reckoner. Whose entry is that one for?” And Roshan, who did not lie, and who loved him, gave him the only answer the vault had given her: “Someone down the road.” He nodded, at twenty-six, the way you nod at a posting you have not been given yet, and are going to accept.

She thought, sitting there — and I enter this because she entered it, in her own final report, in the driest sentence that document contains, and I have promised you her mind whole — of the third feather. The one Zal never burns. Held, out past the end of the story, against a need that has not yet come. Every child of her world knows the feather is still out there. No child of her world had ever asked the auditor’s question, and Roshan asked it now, alone, in the vault, of the patient brown hand seventeen centuries gone:

Kept against whose need?

And the vault did not answer, because the answer was two entries down the road, in a book with a sun in it, and this ledger does not pay out early. But the light through the vault’s high grating, as she sat there — I will enter this too, and you may file it where you like — lay long, and low, and amber, and it arrived, as it always arrives, from up the road.

TEN. THE ENTRY

What she did — and I give it to you plainly, in order, because it is the plainest thing she ever did and the largest — was her job.

A Reckoner who completes an audit enters a finding. There are only three findings in the rulebook, and they are all one word long, and her profession has used two of them for twenty-five centuries: *Continuous*, and *Interrupted*. The third finding has never been entered against any fire in the history of the commonwealth. It stands in the oldest stratum of the rulebook, glossed by not one commentary, its purpose as unexplained as the count of sixteen — an integer at the foundation of her profession that her profession had never thought to audit, waiting in the rubric the way a room waits, decommissioned, at the bottom of a station; the way a seat waits, kept, at a dawn that has not slept. The third finding is: *Carried*.

On the morning of the tenth day, before the College of Reckoners in full session, with the Warden of the Accord Fire standing witness and the mistress of the House of Sealed Testimony holding the three depositions unsealed on the table before her — the impossible having, per her House's founding vow, stopped being impossible, which unseals everything; a thousand years of patience discharging in one morning; Dinaz's hands, the record notes, were steady — Roshan Azad, jubilee Reckoner, entered against the Accord Fire, anchor-flame of the peace of the world, the finding *Carried*, and appended, as the rulebook's oldest stratum instructs and no living Reckoner had ever had cause to learn, "the full account of the carriage, the bearer, and the cost."

The full account. Not the forgery of mercy — the thing itself. The three nights. The knock. The lamp, cold. The city on the far shore of a western ocean in a world down the road, burned in one breath by a fire its own world made and aimed. The purification. The marriage. The seventeen centuries of warmth at what it cost. She read it into the record of the College in the level voice of her trade, and the record was, by her world's oldest law — the law of the faith of Truth against the Lie, the law that had built the whole certified commonwealth and now had to survive it — *public*.

I will not give you the spring that followed as a catalogue, reader; your own world's histories are full of what truths do when they land, and hers behaved no better and no worse, only more liturgically. There were resignations and there were riots — small ones; her world had long practice at order, and it turned out, to the surprise of every editorialist, that a civilization drilled five times daily against bad thoughts, bad words, bad deeds has also been drilled, all along, in receiving them. There was a schism, immediate and still running: the *Ashfast*, who held that a fire fed on such a coal was defiled beyond any rite and must be let die and rekindled clean — and who gathered at the Great Temple gates that spring in white, in silence, in the largest act of mourning her world had ever staged; and the *Wickward* — the name began as a slur and was taken up as a banner inside a week — who held the harder doctrine, the one the rite itself had always held: that the most defiled is the most in need of rescue; that the mercy was real even if the silence was not; that you do not repay a murdered world by murdering the flame that is all of it that anyone managed to save. There were, for the first time in twenty-five centuries, empty places at the evening watch, and — the wardens' registries record it in bewildered columns — *overfull* ones at dawn: the watch before the fourth night ends, the least loved of the five, standing-room only across the commonwealth that whole spring, a civilization arriving unasked, in the cold, in the dark, to sit with its fire through the hour of the crossing, the way you sit with kin.

And the fire burned. That must be entered too, because it is the finding under all the findings of this book: through the riots and the resignations and the white silence at the gates, five watches a day, fed and belled and kept, the Accord Fire burned — the same flame, the same warmth, changed in nothing except what its world now knew, which is to say changed entirely, which is to say not changed at all; her world spent that spring discovering what every world in this ledger is made to discover about its own floor, that the floor was always what it was, and that the knowing is the only thing that ever arrives.

The strangest artifact of that spring — her world's historians have shelves on it now; I will give it to you in one image — was the

queue. Within a week of the finding's publication, a line began to form at the House of Sealed Testimony: ordinary citizens, tram conductors and actuaries and adolescents and dastur's widows, waiting in the marble hall not to read the unsealed files — those were printed everywhere within days — but to *add* to them. To testify. It emerged, deposition by deposition, that her tidy certified world had been holding its own sealed drawer all along, privately, one household at a time: the grandmother who had always said the anthem wrong, the same wrong way, and could not be corrected, and wept when asked why; the dockworker who had dreamed the same street corner, frost and overpass and low amber light, every few winters since boyhood, and had never stood in it, and knew which way the light came from; the child in every third family, it seemed, who had asked at some point, at some fire, with the terrible calm of children — *who is the man with the bag?* — and been told there was no man with the bag. Dinaz took them all. The House's founding vow had said forever, if forever is what it takes; it had not said which direction the impossible would arrive from, at the end, and it arrived, in the end, from inside. Her world had not been keeping a secret, that spring taught it. It had been keeping an *appointment* — all of them, separately, ashamed — and the finding had only given them permission to say so in company.

Sudabeh was reinstated; her thirty years of forbidden errata are a discipline now, with funding, and her first sanctioned lecture ended eleven minutes early because she reached the final slide and stood before it in silence and the hall stood with her, and the slide held one sentence: *The variances cluster at the joints where the feeling runs highest*. Ardeshir kept his office; the Ashfast demanded his removal and the Wickward his elevation, and the old man declined both in one published sentence of perfect institutional weariness: "The instruction of my office is discharged; the fire still needs wood." Rell's deposition, unsealed with the rest, has been printed in nine editions; her world has adopted him, the defector who paid his verses at the door, and on Sadeh nights now, in the ember-processions, you will see people carrying, alongside the ladles, small paper lanterns they call *the maintenance man's lamp*, and if you ask them what it commemorates they will say: a keeper

from down the road, who missed a wall he never stood against, and came to stand this one.

And Roshan Azad, who was offered every chair the commonwealth had to offer and took none of them, went back, when the College finally released her, to the reliquary vault, and to the volume of the fourth century, and did the last thing, the unrecorded thing — except that I record everything; that is what I am; and this once, reader, the hand will not mind.

She had the volume unbound one final time. And in the binding margin of the third night's page, beneath the entry seventeen centuries old that had kept her seat, in her own plain auditor's hand, with her own black ink that will go bone-brown in its turn, Roshan Azad wrote the reply of her civilization to the patient hand of the road — five words, ruled and entered like any line of any account, and then she sewed the book and closed the case and went up the stairs to the evening watch, and the bells were beginning.

The five words were:

Audited. Found carried. Kept anyway.

ELEVEN. THE FOURTH DAWN

There is not much more, and what there is belongs to the dawn watch, so we will keep it there.

On the first morning of the new year — a hundred days after Sadeh; spring; her world dates the year from the world's renewal, and I have kept your calendar long enough; let hers have the last page — Roshan Azad attended the dawn watch at her own parish temple, among her neighbors: the tram conductor, the actuary, the woman from the corner press whose headlines had grown quiet again, the way headlines do; worlds absorb; that is the other finding of this ledger, and the more frightening one. The little sanctum was full. It had been full at dawn all spring, everywhere, and the priests had stopped remarking on it. A civilization had changed its favorite hour, and would spend a generation pretending it had always kept this one.

The priest fed the fire. The bell rang the triple knell against the Lie — against bad thoughts, bad words, bad deeds; against, Roshan had come at last to understand, exactly and only the thing her world had done for seventeen centuries and finally stopped doing, which is how you know the rite works, reader; it is a very patient rite; everything in her world is — and the small congregation stood in the fire's own light, the only light in its house, and watched the flame that was all anyone had managed to save of a world none of them would ever see.

And Roshan, standing in the second row with the splinter in her quiet at last — an auditor's peace; the columns closed; do not mistake it for happiness, it is better made than happiness — found herself doing the arithmetic one final time, because she was what she was, and the arithmetic is where this book will leave you. Three nights, the soul waits. Three nights, the ember crossed. Her world had kept the flame; the flame, it turned out, had kept a murdered world alive inside her world's peace, a spark of the dead carried and fanned and married into the living — which meant that her whole gentle certified commonwealth had been, without knowing it, for seventeen centuries, performing the office her faith performs for every soul: sitting the vigil. Keeping the three nights. Tending the light of the dead through the dark before the crossing.

But the vigil is three nights, reader. And then the fourth dawn comes, and the soul does not stay by the body any longer. It goes to the bridge.

She thought of the sixteenth station, purified longest because most defiled. She thought of the third feather, kept out past the end of the story against a need that has not yet come. She thought of the margin — *the fourth dawn has kept her seat* — and of the finding *Carried*, waiting unglossed in the rulebook since before the profession, the way a door waits, the way a verse goes ahead of you down the road, because that is what verses are for. And she understood — not as revelation; as reconciliation; the last column of the last page — that her world's part in the poem was the vigil, and the vigil was nearly kept, and that somewhere down the road, two entries down, in a world with the sun standing at the end of the

street, a murdered civilization's fire was going to be wanted at a bridge — carried back, the last feather burned, the account settled at the door by every world on the road at once — and that when the collector came for it, at the turning of the watch before dawn, with the long-handled ladle and the lamp, cold, her world, which now knew what it had been keeping, was going to have to decide whether to give it back.

One more entry, and it is the smallest in the book, and I have saved it for last on purpose. That morning, at the dawn watch, among the neighbors, stood Kavus — licensed now; the College had advanced his boards a year, the profession being suddenly, for the first time in its history, oversubscribed — and when the priest had fed the fire and the bell had rung and the congregation stood on in the tended light, unwilling, as her whole world was newly unwilling, to be the first to leave, the young man leaned to his teacher and asked, in the undertone of temples, the question his generation had spent the spring asking and hers had spent seventeen centuries not asking: "When they come for it — the ember, the bridge, the need down the road — what do we say?" And Roshan Azad watched the flame that was all anyone had saved of a murdered world stand and breathe on its stone throne, kept, and heard herself give the answer her whole life had been the audit of, the answer of the keepers and the mountain and the margin, the only answer this entire civilization had ever really contained, five words long, like her entry:

"We say it was kept."

The dawn watch ended. The congregation went out into the first morning of the year. And in the doorway of the little temple, in the low amber light arriving up the road, Roshan Azad — Reckoner, keeper of the finding, her name meaning light, her parents' one lapse into sentiment vindicated at fifty-one — turned back, as everyone in her world had begun that spring to turn back, for one more look at the fire.

It was burning. It is burning at this hour. Five watches a day, it is fed, and belled, and kept — *kept*, reader; the word this book was named for; hold it the way the keepers held those three nights, the

way the mountain held the child, the way the House held the files,
the way the margin held her seat — and it will be kept, her whole
world is now sworn to it knowingly, right up until the dawn it is
asked for.

The count is three. The road is longer than the vigil.

And the fourth dawn has not slept.

VERSE THE THIRD

*recovered from the ledger of the Accord Fire, in seven hands, across
four centuries*

*You kept the flame; the flame kept you —
so runs the bargain, old and true.
But every fire the record names
was carried once from other flames,
and one was carried farther still:
three nights across the dark and chill,
wrapped close, and fanned with sleeping breath —
an ember from a city's death.
You warm your peace at what it cost;
the wick remembers what was lost.
Look in the fire as in a book,
or as the thirty birds once looked:
the face that burns there, calm and kept,
is yours. The fourth dawn has not slept.*

GLOSSARY

AHURA MAZDA [a-HOO-ra MAZ-da] — Avestan, *the Wise Lord*.

The god of Truth in the faith of the fire, worshipped without idols, in the open, before a flame; the faith asks three things of every person — good thoughts, good words, good deeds.

ALBORZ [al-BORZ] — The world-mountain of the Book of Kings, where the snow never softens and the Simorgh keeps her nest; the range that stands north of the old homeland.

ATTAR [at-TAR] — Persian, *the perfumer*. The poet of Nishapur who wrote the Speech of the Birds — the poem of the thirty birds, the seven valleys and the hall of mirrors — centuries before the bookseller who recites it in this book was born.

DAKHMA [DAKH-ma] — Persian, *tower of silence*. The walled, open-roofed tower outside a city where the dead are given to the birds, earth and fire and water all being too holy to receive corruption; the cleaned bones go to the ossuaries.

DASTUR [das-TOOR] — Persian, *high priest*. The title of a senior priest of the fire. Dastur Ardeshir is Warden of the Accord Fire.

FRAVASHI [fra-VA-shee] — Avestan, *guardian-self*. The eternal portion of a soul, which existed before its birth and waits past its death, of which the walking, worrying self is an expedition ashore. To swear by one's fravashi is to swear by the self that cannot lie because it was never in the world where lying works.

HUSHANG [hoo-SHANG] — The second of the first kings in the Book of Kings, who hurled a stone at a serpent, missed, struck fire from the mountain flint, and knelt to the spark: the discovery of fire, kept every winter at Sadeh.

NISHAPUR [nee-sha-POOR] — The city of poets in the east of the old homeland — Attar's city, and the bookseller's.

NOWRUZ [no-ROOZ] — Persian, *new day*. The new year at the spring equinox, older than the faith itself, when the whole commonwealth cleans its houses, jumps its bonfires and sets the table of seven things; the year of Roshan's world turns on it.

QAF [KAHF] — The mountain-range that runs around the rim of the world in Persian story, where the Simorgh holds her court; the end of the birds' road.

ROSTAM [ros-TAM] — The greatest champion of the Book of Kings — Zal's son, delivered by the knife on the Simorgh's instruction when the first feather was burned.

SADEH [sa-DEH] — Persian, *hundred*. The Feast of the Hundredth Day — a hundred days, by the old count, before the new year: the winter feast of the discovery of fire, kept with bonfires lit not by matches but by carried embers.

SIMORGH [see-MORG] — The great bird of Persian story, older than the faith — part eagle, part guardian, vast enough that her wings dim a hillside — who raised the white-haired child Zal on the world-mountain and gave him three feathers at parting; and, in the Speech of the Birds, the king the thirty birds cross the world to find.

SI MORGH [see MORG] — Persian, *thirty birds*. The pun on which the Speech of the Birds turns: the thirty birds who reach the court of the Simorgh find a hall of mirrors, and in the mirrors thirty birds.

ZAL [Z AHL] — The son of the champion Sam, born white-haired, exposed on the Alborz and raised by the Simorgh; father of Rostam. His third feather is never burned.

ZARATHUSHTRA [za-ra-THOOSH-tra] — The prophet of the faith of the fire — Zoroaster, in the West — who taught that existence is a long war between Truth and the Lie and that every human being is a soldier in it.

ZURVANITES [zur-VAN-ites] — A schism of the faith that set Time — Zurvan — above the Wise Lord; one of the whole shelves of heresies the commonwealth has kept.

Twenty-five centuries ago, at the sea-gate called Salamis, the Persian fleet did not break. Greece entered the empire; Europe grew up inside it rather than against it; and the faith of the fire — the old religion of Truth against the Lie — became the governing belief of a commonwealth that now runs from Lisbon to Lahore.

Its 2026 has trams, radio, tax offices, and dock strikes. It also has, at its heart, the Accord Fire: a flame kindled at the victory itself, burning without interruption for two thousand five hundred and six years, from which every treaty, calendar, and coronation in the civilized world legally descends.

Roshan Azad is a Reckoner — keeper of the Accord Fire's lineage ledger, the licensed profession that audits sacred continuity. A fire whose descent breaks is, in law, a new fire. Assigned the jubilee re-certification of the ledger, all twenty-five centuries of it, she finds what no Reckoner has ever found and every Reckoner is sworn to look for: a gap.

Three nights, centuries deep, forged over by a hand that loved the fire too much to be honest about it.

What the gap opens is not a scandal. *It is a door — and through it, in sealed testimony centuries old, other worlds are already speaking.*



FROM THE BORROWED SUN CYCLE
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