

ROYA
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No. 46

THE UNBURNED LIBRARY



CHEW Z

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Printed in the Reach

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Book VI of the Borrowed Sun Cycle

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THE COUNT CAME UP ONE SHORT

ELEVEN THOUSAND FOUR HUNDRED AND SIX TILES IN THE SHELF-RUN,
AND ONE SLOT TENDED, DUST-FREE, EMPTY FOR TWO THOUSAND YEARS.

SYNOPSIS

In the year 391, in the city of Alexandria, a mob led by a bishop climbed the steps of the last great library of the old world to tear it down. In your history, they succeeded. In this one, a governor turns them back at the gate, and the oldest institution on earth — the House of Life, keeper of the world's knowledge since long before the word *library* existed — does not fall. It simply keeps going.

By 2026, nothing written has ever been lost. Every text that mattered, and most that didn't, has been copied forward, generation after generation, fired into tile and renewed before the tile can fail, in an unbroken chain two thousand years older than the library that made it famous. The world's peace does not rest on armies or treaties of land. It rests on a simpler, colder arithmetic: whoever may read, rules. A treaty called the Compact decides who is cleared to know what, and the whole architecture of global power is built, tier by tier, on top of that single decision.

Isidora Iskandar checks the tiles for a living — verifies, tile against tile, that nothing has been lost and nothing has been changed. Then she finds a gap in the oldest layer of the archive that no record explains: pieces of the world's most guarded truth, missing for centuries, taken by someone who left no name.

She is about to learn that the world's only complete truth was never entirely theirs to keep.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

There was a real institution in Egypt, a thousand years before the Library of Alexandria existed, called the House of Life — a temple scriptorium under the protection of Thoth, god of writing, where scribes copied and taught and kept the accumulated knowledge of a civilization. Historians already understand it as the idea the more famous library was built from. I did not invent the House of Life. I only asked what happens if it never has to start over.

I have tried, in this book, to make the geopolitics as plain as the physics has been in the others: not a fight over which copy is genuine, but a fight over who is allowed to read. That fight is not speculative. It is the oldest fight there is, and every century has fought its own version of it, usually with better manners than we'd like to admit.

There is also a real ancient Egyptian belief that a person is made of several parts, and one of them is the true name — spoken, it keeps a soul alive; erased, deliberately, from every record, it was understood as a second and final death, inflicted even on pharaohs. I did not invent that either. I only asked what a world would do, quietly, in secret, in every generation, to keep that from happening to its ordinary people.

This is the sixth book of the Borrowed Sun Cycle, and its verse, like the last three, is found rather than given — this time inside the very practice of counting the archive true. Keep it with the first five. The count is six now, and the seventh book is the one this whole ledger has been walking toward. I think, if you have come this far with me, you already suspect what waits at the corner.

Chew Z

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ONE. THE COLLATIONER

The House of Life keeps one rule older than any of its books, and Isidora Iskandar had lived by it for thirty-one years without once, until this book, asking herself why it needed to exist: *nothing enters the count unread, and nothing leaves the room unaccounted.*

She was fifty-four, small, exact, with her grandmother's flat stare and a habit of touching her own collarbone when she was thinking that her students had learned to read like weather. Her title was Collationer — a word that means, plainly, one who checks copies against each other, and I will give you the whole of her trade in one clean breath, the way this ledger has given you a Tender's clinic and a Verifier's bay and a Reckoner's vault, because her room deserves the same clear light. Isidora's whole working life was spent in the counting halls beneath the mother-house at Alexandria, where the oldest surviving record of human knowledge is not kept on paper, or on parchment, or on anything that rots. It is kept on **tiles** — small fired squares of glazed ceramic, the same brilliant, permanent material her ancestors once pressed into amulets and scarabs, except that instead of a beetle or a god's eye, each tile carries a passage of text, burned into the glaze at heat high enough to fuse pigment and surface into a single substance. Fire does not erase a tile. Fire is what makes it real. You can drop a tile down a well for four thousand years and pull it up and read it, which is a sentence Isidora had said to visiting schoolchildren so many times she had stopped hearing herself say it.

But no single tile lasts forever, because nothing does, and so the House keeps a second practice alongside the first, older than most nations, called the **Renewal**: on a fixed and ancient schedule, section by section, the entire archive is re-fired, tile for tile, onto fresh material, each new tile checked against the old one it replaces before the old one is retired, so that the information survives even though no single object ever has to. It is not a miracle. Isidora would tell you that plainly, in the same clinical tone she used for everything: the House of Life does not preserve the past by keeping it magically intact. It preserves the past by never once, in four and a half thousand years, agreeing to stop copying it

forward. A civilization that refuses to stop is, in the end, the only kind of eternity anyone has ever actually managed to build.

You should have her household before the vault, the way this ledger has always given you a patient professional's kitchen table before it gives you her discovery. Isidora lived alone in a flat two districts from the mother-house, her husband eleven years dead of an ordinary illness the House's own sealed medical tiers might, in some other arrangement, have caught earlier — a thought she had disciplined herself, across eleven years, not to finish, because a Collationer who lets herself resent a locked door for the rest of her working life does not remain a good Collationer for long. A son, grown, cleared to General Scholarly in his own right, a hydraulic engineer who visited Sundays and had long ago stopped asking his mother what she was working on, because her answer, for thirty years, had reliably been some version of *counting*, and a son learns eventually which of his mother's silences are peace and which are simply the shape of her trade. She kept, on her kitchen shelf, a single small tile of her own commissioning — a Collationer's private privilege, rarely used — fired with nothing more than her husband's name and the dates that bracketed him, the ordinary small act of permanence available to any citizen with the coin and the clearance to request it, and she touched it some evenings the way another woman might touch a photograph, and had never once, until this book, thought to wonder what happened to the people whose families could not afford the firing, or whose names nobody with standing had ever bothered to record in the first place.

Her job — the whole of it, the reason for her thirty-one years and her flat stare and her grandmother's patience — was to be the check in that sentence. A Collationer verifies the Renewal. When an old tile is retired and a new one takes its place, someone has to confirm, character by fired character, that nothing was lost and nothing was added in the crossing — because a copy that drifts by one word a generation is, given enough generations, no longer a copy of anything at all. Isidora had spent her whole career being the reason that never happened. She had verified, by her own count, some four million individual tiles. She had signed her name — her working name, not her true one; I will come to the

difference, because this book is built on it — to more Renewal certifications than any Collationer of her generation, and she was, this particular season, doing what her whole career had built toward without her ever quite noticing the shape of the road: she had been assigned the deep audit.

Every four centuries or so — the interval is not fixed; it depends on the age and condition of the material — the House schedules what is simply called, without ceremony, *the deep layer*: a full re-verification of the oldest strata in the archive, tiles fired before the Ptolemaic library ever existed, before the word *library* existed, some of them fired, according to the House's own unbroken dating, in the earliest centuries of the institution itself, when it was known only by its old name, the one still used in the House's own liturgy for its founding: **the House of Life**, kept, the old texts say, *alive* — under the patronage of the old god of writing and measurement and the balancing of accounts, whose name I will let the House itself introduce in its own chapter, because he is going to matter considerably more than a footnote before this book is through.

Isidora took the assignment the way she took everything — seriously, quietly, and with the particular satisfaction of a woman who has spent three decades wanting exactly this and never once admitting it aloud — and moved her working table into the deep vault, six levels below the modern reading rooms, into air that had been climate-stabilized so precisely that her own breath was the least controlled variable in the room, and began, tile by tile, at the very beginning of what her civilization believed itself to know.

I will tell you now, because I am a patient bookkeeper and you have earned plain dealing five books into this ledger, that in the eleventh week she found a gap where the count did not close. But you need the world first, and the world, this time, is stranger and colder and more familiar than any I have shown you yet, because it is built entirely on a single, simple, and — I promise you — utterly ordinary idea: that whoever is allowed to read, rules everyone who isn't.

TWO. WHAT DIDN'T BURN

Every world in this ledger turns on a hinge small enough to miss, and this one turns on a single soldier's arm.

In your history, reader — the year 391, the city of Alexandria — the Roman Emperor Theodosius had just outlawed the old pagan worship across his empire, and in Alexandria the bishop Theophilus took that edict as license to do what he had wanted to do for years: march on the Serapeum, the great temple of the god Serapis, which by then held the last significant remnant of the library's collection, the main library itself having already been diminished by fire and neglect and the slow attrition of centuries. Ancient sources describe what happened next with unusual, human detail: a mob gathered, pagan worshippers barricaded themselves inside with hostages, and when Theophilus's men finally broke in, they stood for a long moment in front of the temple's great cult statue of Serapis, afraid — genuinely, superstitiously afraid — that striking the god would bring the sky down on the city. A soldier swung an axe. The sky did not fall. The statue's head came off, the crowd took the silence as permission, and by the day's end the temple, and whatever scrolls still lived inside it, were rubble and ash. It is one of the quieter tragedies of the ancient world, reader, exactly because it was so undramatic to everyone but the books: no army, no siege, just a mob, an edict, and one soldier's arm not shaking when it should have.

In the world you are about to spend the rest of this book in, the arm shakes. Small hinges, always, in this ledger: a different provincial governor, newly appointed, eager to be seen enforcing the letter of the edict rather than a mob's interpretation of it, arrives at the Serapeum an hour before Theophilus's crowd and has the temple's *religious* function formally, legally dissolved — idols removed, sacrifices banned, the building deconsecrated by the book — while explicitly, in the same decree, re-licensing its library wing as a civic archive, property of the city and not the church, on the entirely bureaucratic grounds that books are not idols and the edict says nothing about books. It is a small, unglamorous, entirely plausible piece of imperial paperwork. It is also, in this world, the whole of

the difference. Theophilus gets his temple. He does not get the room next door, and the room next door is the one that mattered.

And here is the older, larger fact this book has been waiting to tell you, reader, and it is true in your world as much as hers, which is why I have saved it rather than invented it: the library at Alexandria was never really the beginning. A thousand years before the Ptolemies founded their famous collection, Egyptian temples already maintained an institution your world's historians have simply never had cause to make famous — the **House of Life**, a temple scriptorium under the protection of Thoth, the ibis-headed god of writing, measurement, and the weighing of true accounts, where scribes copied and taught and preserved the accumulated knowledge of a civilization already two thousand years old by the time Alexander ever set foot in Egypt. Modern historians in your own world already describe the House of Life as the *idea* the Library of Alexandria was built from — its ancestor, its template, the older and quieter thing the famous library was only ever the most celebrated branch of. The Ptolemies did not invent universal collection. They inherited it, and gave it better publicity.

Stand in the courtyard itself for a moment, reader, before the hinge turns, because you have earned the habit five books into this ledger and because the scene deserves a human face rather than a paragraph of summary. The mob that gathered outside the Serapeum that year was real, on both sides of this divergence — genuine grief and genuine fury, pagan worshippers who understood, correctly, that something irreplaceable stood behind those walls, Christian crowds who understood, just as sincerely, that the old gods' temples were an offense the new age could no longer tolerate standing. Ancient sources describe hostages taken, a standoff of days, and at the center of it the great cult statue of Serapis, which the mob on both sides had been raised from childhood to believe held some fraction of the god's own power bound inside the stone — so that when Theophilus's men finally forced the doors, the hesitation before the first blow was not cowardice. It was two civilizations' worth of belief, standing in one soldier's arm, waiting to find out whether striking a god brought the sky down. In your history, the arm swung, the sky held, and the

crowd took the holding as permission for everything that followed. In this one, the governor's decree arrives first, dry and bureaucratic and utterly uninterested in theology, and the whole terrible physics of the moment simply never gets tested, because there is, by the letter of the law, nothing left in that particular room for anyone's faith to prove itself against.

So when the Serapeum's library wing survives, in this world, on the strength of one clerk's careful wording, what actually survives is not a building. It is the unbroken end of a chain four and a half thousand years long — a chain that had already outlived a dozen empires before Rome existed to burn anything, and simply goes on doing, into the twenty-first century, what it has always done: copying itself forward, one generation at a time, refusing, on principle, to stop.

The material itself had to change for that refusal to work at scale — papyrus rots, parchment is slow and expensive to renew across centuries, and neither survives fire, flood, or the ordinary appetite of insects and time. The House's answer, developed over the centuries after the Serapeum's survival, was not a miracle. It was a craft already sitting in plain sight: Egypt had glazed ceramic — *faience*, the brilliant blue-green material of scarabs and funerary amulets — for three thousand years before anyone thought to fire text into it instead of decoration. A tile, once fired, is close to indestructible; ceramic survives what paper cannot, which is simply time. By the eighth century, the House's kilns were producing tiles by the tens of thousands a year, and the practice of the Renewal — the total, periodic, verified re-firing of the whole archive onto fresh material before the old glaze can fail — had already been running, in an early and clumsier form, for generations. Nothing about this is speculative fiction, reader, except the one small fact of the arm that didn't shake. The rest is simply what already existed, allowed to keep going.

And a species that never has to rebuild its knowledge from scratch does not become a paradise. I want to be honest with you about that before you get any further into this book, because I have promised you neither dystopia nor utopia in any of these seven

worlds, and I mean to keep the promise here most of all. What an unbroken archive produces, over sixteen centuries, is not wisdom. It is *leverage*. Because if nothing written is ever truly lost, then the only scarce thing left in the entire system is not knowledge itself, but the *permission to reach it* — and a species that discovers this, the way this one discovered it sometime in the medieval centuries and never once looked back, organizes its whole civilization, patiently and with excellent manners, around controlling that permission instead.

By 2026, the arrangement has a name, and the name is almost embarrassingly plain: the **Compact** — a treaty, renewed and renegotiated for six hundred years, between every nation with a library of its own, establishing who may be *cleared* to read what. Clearance is not a metaphor in this world, reader. It is the actual currency of power. A child's clearance is set by birth and revised by education; a scholar's, by license and specialty; a head of state's, by office, and even then only up to a point, because above every national clearance sits the sealed tiers — the deepest layers of the deepest archives, the ones almost no living person has ever been permitted to read in full, on the theory, unchallenged for sixteen centuries, that some truths are too dangerous to be read by anyone who has not first proven, across a lifetime, that they can be trusted with the weight of them.

You should have the world at street level too, the way this ledger has always paused to give you one before asking you to watch it strained. Alexandria in 2026 is, by any ordinary measure, the wealthiest and most argued-over city on earth — not for oil, not for a strait or a harbor, but for the plain fact of what sits six levels beneath its mother-house. Delegations from every Compact nation keep permanent residence in the diplomatic quarter, a district of glass towers built deliberately low, by old ordinance, so that nothing in the modern skyline stands taller than the House's own ancient dome. The city's economy runs, openly and without much embarrassment, on clearance tourism and clearance brokerage — scholars and their sponsors negotiating, over years, the incremental widening of a single family's or a single nation's tier, the whole visible machinery of a civilization that decided, six

centuries ago, that the fairest way to ration an infinite resource was to make the rationing itself the most valuable trade in the world. Other nations, elsewhere, have their own libraries, their own kilns, their own local Renewal practice — the House of Life was never the only house — but Alexandria's is the oldest, the deepest, and the one every other archive's own sealed tiers are ultimately cross-certified against, which makes it, in the plain vocabulary this world uses for everything, the mother-house: first among the others, final word in any dispute, the one address on earth every clearance card on earth ultimately answers to.

That is the world Isidora Iskandar had spent thirty-one years working inside, faithfully, without much complaint, the way most people in most worlds work inside the arrangement they were born to. She believed in the Compact the way you believe in weather. She had never, before the eleventh week of the deep audit, had any occasion to ask who had cleared the clearers.

THREE. THE MISSING COUNT

The gap did not announce itself. Gaps never do, in this ledger; they arrive the way all the best and worst news arrives, in the middle of something boring.

Isidora was three tiers into the deep layer — tiles fired, by the House's own unbroken dating, some eleven centuries back, in the early flowering of the Renewal's mature practice, a stratum so old that its content was mostly agricultural and medical record rather than anything a modern reader would call dramatic: grain yields, irrigation schedules, treatments for fevers that no longer existed under names nobody living could pronounce — when her running tally, the simple, unglamorous count every Collationer keeps as a matter of course, the number of tiles logged against the number of tiles the House's own foundational inventory said *should* exist in that section, came up short.

One tile. Out of eleven thousand four hundred and six in that shelf-run, one tile that the House's oldest surviving inventory — a summary record, itself periodically renewed, of what the deep archive was supposed to contain — listed, by number and by a

six-word description of its contents, and that simply was not there. No fragment. No note of loss. No record, anywhere in eleven centuries of subsequent Renewal certifications, of the tile ever having failed, cracked, or been formally retired. It was not damaged. It was not misfiled — she checked the adjoining shelves herself, on her knees, with a hand lamp, the way her own teacher had taught her thirty years before, because a Collationer does not trust a database before she has trusted her own eyes. It was simply, cleanly, *absent*, the way a tooth is absent from a jaw that has otherwise healed shut around the gap.

She logged it as an anomaly, the way procedure required, and did what her whole nature required just as strongly, which is to say she did not stop there. She widened the search.

It took her four more weeks, working alone in the deep vault at hours her own household had stopped commenting on, but by the end of them Isidora Iskandar had found seventeen more. Eighteen tiles, total, missing from eighteen different sections of the deepest, oldest layer of the archive, spanning — when she finally plotted the dates of their firing against each other, the way her training had taught her to plot anything that would not otherwise sit still and be understood — a span of nearly two thousand years, the earliest gap dating to a firing so old it predated the Ptolemaic library by centuries, back into the House's own first few hundred years of existence under its oldest name. Eighteen absences, evenly and un-randomly scattered through the deepest, most sealed material the House possessed, each one accounted for in the summary inventory and nowhere else, each one clean, complete, and utterly without a trace of how or when it had left the room.

She had a junior that season, on loan from the district annex for exactly this kind of long, unglamorous audit work — a serious young man named Tarek, three years licensed, who spent most of the four weeks on his knees beside her in the cold vault cross-checking shelf numbers against the House's own oldest surviving inventory, and who asked her, on the night she found the seventeenth gap, the question she had been circling without letting herself land on it either: "Collationer. If the House's own summary

inventory recorded these tiles precisely enough for you to notice they're gone — doesn't that mean whoever built that inventory, eleven centuries ago, already knew this would happen? That someone would come counting, someday, and need the exact numbers to catch it by?" Isidora had not had an answer for him that night. She had it now, sitting with eighteen gaps laid out in a shape too patient to be theft and too old to be accident, and the answer unsettled her considerably more than the question had.

She did the thing her whole trade had trained her to do with a number that refused to close, which every patient professional in every world of this ledger eventually does at exactly this depth: she checked the boring things first. Kiln logs. Renewal schedules. The sign-in registers of every scholar who had ever held sufficient clearance to enter that section of the deep vault across those two thousand years — a shorter list than you might expect, reader; the sealed tiers of this world's archives are not casually visited — and cross-referenced every one of those names against the dates of the eighteen gaps, and found no overlap that survived scrutiny, no scholar present at more than one of the eighteen absences, no pattern of access that any ordinary theft, ancient or modern, could explain.

What she found instead, on the nineteenth night, cross-legged on the vault floor with the section's oldest surviving Renewal certification unrolled across her knees — a certification is itself a tile, a formal record of who verified what and when, signed by the Collationer of that generation the way Isidora signed her own — was a single line in the certification's closing formula, in the fired, permanent hand of a Collationer who had done this exact work eleven hundred years before her, a line that every subsequent Renewal had faithfully copied forward, letter for letter, without one intervening generation apparently ever stopping to ask what it meant: *Counted twice, as is the custom, and once the count came up one short.*

Isidora sat very still in the cold vault, with two thousand years of faithfully re-copied language sitting in her lap like a held breath, and understood, with the flat, professional certainty of a woman

closing a column that has just refused, gently and permanently, to be closed the way she'd expected: the gap was not a modern crime. It was ancient. It was patient. And whoever — or whatever — had been quietly removing single tiles from the most sealed archive on earth had been doing it for two thousand years, in full view of a chain of Collationers who had, every single one of them, faithfully copied forward the sentence that recorded it, and none of whom, so far as eleven centuries of paperwork could show her, had ever once thought to ask the House the only question that actually mattered.

She asked it herself, alone, out loud, to the cold tiles and the climate-stabilized silence of the deepest room in the oldest library on earth: "Counted twice. One short. For two thousand years." She touched her own collarbone, the old habit, and did not stop. "Who has been walking out of the most guarded room in the world — and why has nobody in two thousand years ever once tried to stop him?"

FOUR. THE PETITION

Isidora's finding could not have surfaced at a worse moment for the House, which is precisely, this ledger has taught you by now, the moment findings like hers always surface — because the road does not wait for a convenient season, and neither, apparently, does the truth.

While she counted tiles in the cold vault, the Compact's General Assembly — the body of clearance-holding delegates who meet, twice yearly, at Alexandria itself, in a hall built for the purpose in the last century, under a dome that every schoolchild of this world is shown at least once, tiled edge to edge with a decorative frieze of the House's own founding story — was midway through the tensest session it had convened in a generation. The hall itself deserves a moment's description, because Isidora would come to know it intimately before this book's story is done, and because it says something true about this world that its single most contested chamber is also, unmistakably, its most beautiful: a vast domed room, tiled floor to ceiling in the House's own oldest decorative style, blue-green faience worked into a mural history of the

founding centuries — scribes at their kilns, the old god of writing shown ibis-headed among them, ships arriving at the ancient harbor laden with scrolls that would, within this room's own telling of its history, never again need to burn. Delegates sat, by long custom, not by nation but by clearance tier, so that the hall's own seating chart was itself a kind of honest cruelty: the highest-cleared delegations nearest the podium, in the room's best light, and the newly petitioning coastal bloc, this particular week, seated deliberately near the back, among observers and pages, a placement the Assembly's own rules insisted was merely procedural and every delegate in the room understood, without needing it explained, as something considerably less neutral than that. A coastal agricultural bloc, three seasons into a failed harvest cycle that no amount of ordinary agronomy seemed able to explain, had petitioned for emergency elevation: temporary clearance to a *sealed* tier of the deep archive, specifically the old agricultural and irrigation record — the exact stratum, though nobody in the Assembly hall yet knew it, that Isidora had been auditing when she found her first gap.

You should understand what a petition like that actually asks for, reader, because the stakes are not abstract in this world the way they might sound from outside it. The sealed tiers are sealed for a reason the Compact has never had to fully articulate in six hundred years, because it has never seriously had to defend it: the working theory, inherited rather than argued, holds that certain knowledge — certain medicines, certain methods, certain old and terrible chemistries — is dangerous exactly in proportion to how freely it circulates, and that clearance, slow and earned and revocable, is the only proven brake the species has ever found for its own worst appetites. A bloc without emergency clearance does not merely lose a harvest. It loses people, in the plain, arithmetic way famine has always taken people, in every world of this ledger and outside it — and the petition on the Assembly floor that week was, underneath its careful diplomatic language, a request that the world's oldest and most guarded institution weigh a real and present hunger against a six-hundred-year-old theory about what freely available knowledge might someday do in the wrong hands.

Philon, Warden of the sealed tiers, seventy-four years old, forty years in service to an institution he loved with the specific, undemonstrative devotion this ledger has shown you in an Okafor and an Ardeshir and a Director Snow, sat in the gallery above the Assembly floor that week and watched the debate the way Isidora, three levels below him, was learning to read a missing tile: as a man checking whether the columns of his own life's work still closed. He had built his career, and much of his character, on the conviction that the sealed tiers were not cruelty but *stewardship* — that a species which had never once, in six hundred years, suffered a catastrophe born of freely circulating dangerous knowledge owed that unblemished record to the very caution the coastal bloc was now, understandably, desperately, asking the world to set aside.

It was Philon who summoned Isidora to his office on the twelfth floor of the mother-house, three days after her nineteenth night in the vault, because her anomaly report — filed through ordinary channels, flagged for routine review — had crossed his desk at precisely the moment he could least afford to receive it, and he was, whatever else this book will ask you to think of him, not a man who hid from a bad number.

His office held, on one wall, the only personal decoration Isidora had ever seen him keep in forty years of visits: a small, unglazed practice tile, cracked clean through, that he had told her once, in an unguarded moment early in her career, was the first tile he had ever fired as a novice, kept deliberately imperfect as a reminder of the exact cost of getting the craft wrong. He gestured her to the chair across from his desk, and did not sit himself for a long moment, standing instead at the window that looked out over the Assembly dome, watching the delegates file in for the coastal bloc's session with the particular stillness of a man who had spent four decades learning to read a crowd's mood through glass before it ever reached his own floor.

"Eighteen tiles," he said, when she had laid the finding out for him in full, the dates, the un-randomness, the eleven-centuries-old certification line that every subsequent Collationer had copied forward without comment. "From the exact stratum, Collationer,

that the Assembly is deciding this week whether to open." He was quiet a moment, and Isidora watched him do the thing she had watched institutional men do in every world's telling of this exact scene, though she did not yet know she was inside a pattern this old: he looked, for one unguarded second, less like a Warden and more like a man standing at the top of a ladder someone had just kicked. "Do you understand what happens if this becomes public before the vote? Not the eighteen tiles' content, which nobody living has read in centuries. The *fact* of the gap. The fact that the sealed archive — the one thing this entire Compact has organized itself around calling complete and absolutely controlled — has a two-thousand-year-old hole in it that no Warden before me ever disclosed." He set the report down with the particular gentleness of a man setting down something he privately suspects is a live coal. "Half the Assembly will say it proves the sealed tiers were never as safe as we claimed, and open everything out of spite. The other half will say it proves exactly the opposite — that even our best security fails, and we should seal harder, not less. Neither of those rooms, Collationer, is a room where anyone stops to ask why the theft happened, or what was actually taken, or whether the eighteen tiles might have been the wisest eighteen removals in the history of this institution. They will simply fight about *access*, the way this species has always fought about access, and the finding itself — the actual, interesting, possibly important question of who and why — will drown."

Isidora, who had spent nineteen nights alone with exactly that question and had not yet let herself answer it, asked him the only thing her whole trade had ever equipped her to ask a man who wanted her silence for reasons she could not fully disagree with: "So what would you have me do, Warden? Recount, and report a number that isn't true?"

"No," Philon said, and this is the sentence, reader, that will follow him through the rest of this book, because it was sincere, and because sincerity is not the same as being right. "I would have you remember that the sealed tiers have kept this species from itself for six hundred years without a single catastrophe to show for the caution. I would have you ask whether the two of us, in one week,

are wiser than six centuries of Wardens who built this system precisely because they did not trust any single generation — including their own — to know which doors were safe to open.” He looked at her with something that was not quite pleading and was not quite command. “Finish the audit. Quietly. Bring me the eighteen tiles’ contents before you bring me anyone else’s questions. Let me be the one who decides what the Assembly needs to know, and when — because I promise you, Collationer, I have seen what this species does with a door left ajar, and it is not gratitude.”

FIVE. WHAT STEWARDSHIP COSTS

Isidora did not answer him that afternoon, and I want to give you the shape of the week that followed, reader, because it is the week the whole rest of this book turns on, and because Philon deserves, before this ledger lets you judge him, the full weight of his own argument, made properly, and not merely summarized by a narrator with his own loyalties.

She went to him a second time, four days later, not because she had decided he was wrong, but because she had decided — the old defect, the one this whole cycle has taught you to recognize in every one of its patient, careful people — that she could not do good work while holding a question she had not asked out loud. She found him in the reading room above the sealed vaults, alone, at the hour he was known to keep for exactly this kind of solitude, and she asked him, without preamble, the question she had been turning over since his office: “Warden. In six hundred years, has any part of the sealed archive ever actually been misused, by anyone who was granted clearance to it? Not theorized. Not feared. Misused.”

Philon considered the question with the seriousness it deserved, and did not reach for an easy answer, which Isidora would credit him for, later, even in the parts of this book where she stood against him. “Twice,” he said. “Once, four centuries ago, a licensed physician used a sealed pharmacological record to poison a rival slowly enough that it read, for two years, as a wasting illness.

Once, a hundred and ten years ago, a cleared military engineer used a sealed metallurgical tile to improve a weapon his own government had sworn, under the Compact's own charter, never to develop." He let both examples sit in the quiet room. "Two misuses, Collationer, against roughly forty thousand grants of sealed clearance across six centuries. You could call that a vanishingly small failure rate. You could also call it two lives, and one broken charter, that would not exist if the doors had simply stayed shut." He turned to face her fully. "I do not claim the sealed tiers have saved the world from some vast imagined catastrophe, because I cannot prove a catastrophe that did not happen. I claim only this: that every generation which has held this power has been tempted, at least once, to open more of it than caution advised — famine, plague, a war that a sealed strategy might have shortened — and every generation, so far, has held the line, and the line has cost real people real suffering that a freer archive might, *might*, have eased. I am not a fool, Isidora. I know exactly what the caution costs. I have simply come to believe, after forty years, that the alternative costs more, more randomly, and to people who never agreed to the bargain in either direction." He looked old, then, in a way he generally did not let the Assembly see. "Tell me honestly. If I open the agricultural tier tomorrow, and something in it — some old, forgotten method, untested against six centuries of consequence — goes wrong in a way none of us can predict, whose name do you imagine history will file the failure under? Not the Assembly's. Not the starving bloc's. Mine. The Warden who broke six hundred years of an unblemished record because a Collationer found a hole in a wall that had already been holding, unnoticed, for two thousand years without doing anyone any harm at all."

Isidora did not have an answer for him that night, and I will not pretend, reader, that this book intends to hand you one either, cleanly, from a narrator's chair — because the honest debate this world has organized its entire politics around is exactly this one, argued between two people who each believe, with real evidence and real cost behind the belief, that they are the ones actually protecting the vulnerable. Before she left the mother-house that night, Isidora did the thing neither Philon nor her own audit had

asked of her, and did it because the old defect would not let her rest until she had: she found, in the Assembly's own public gallery, one of the coastal bloc's junior delegates, a tired young woman named Selin who had spent three weeks arguing for her province's petition in a room where she was, by the hall's own seating chart, seated among the pages. Isidora asked her, plainly, what the sealed agricultural tier actually contained that three seasons of ordinary agronomy could not replace. "We don't know," Selin said, and the honesty of the answer was its own small devastation. "That's the whole of the problem, Collationer. We're not petitioning for a specific cure. We're petitioning for the chance to *look* — because six centuries of the Compact's own scholarship agrees that the oldest agricultural record in the deep archive predates the soil failures we're seeing by two thousand years, back when this coast last failed the same way and someone, somehow, fixed it. We don't know what they knew. We only know that the House does, and that we are not, by anyone's account but our own hunger, currently trusted to be told." She looked at Isidora with the particular fatigue of a woman who has explained the same true thing to rooms that keep finding new reasons not to hear it. "I don't envy your Warden's job, Collationer. I only know that every season his caution holds, my province counts its dead in a number that used to be a rounding error, and this year, it isn't."

She left the reading room with Philon's numbers sitting beside her own eighteen missing tiles, and walked home through streets lit, as this whole city is lit, by kilns still working through the night on ordinary Renewal business — bakeries, foundries, the House's own ceramic works — the warm orange glow of controlled fire on every corner of a city that had organized its whole civilization around the conviction that some things are worth guarding, forever, behind a door only the trusted may open.

She did not yet know that someone had been waiting, patiently, on the other side of that exact conviction, for longer than the Compact itself had existed to hold it.

INTERLUDE. THE CLEARANCE LINE

Before the counter-argument, before the walker, before the last discovery this book has been carrying toward you since its first page, walk the ordinary city with me for a while — because you have learned, five books into this ledger, that the world always deserves its own chapter before it is asked to bear the weight of the plot, and this world, built entirely on the plain idea that whoever may read rules everyone who cannot, deserves it more than most.

Every citizen of the Compact's member nations carries a clearance card, renewed annually, the way Petra Varga's world carried a certificate and Odessa Vane's a very different kind of paper. Isidora's own card, tucked in the same worn wallet she had carried for a decade, listed her personal tier in the plain, unglamorous language this world uses for everything: *General Scholarly, Sealed-Adjacent, House of Life staff exemption applies within assigned duties*. Most citizens never see a number that specific. Most citizens carry the lowest tier, the one called, without much ceremony, **Common Access** — enough clearance to read anything already public, which in this world is a genuinely enormous amount, because a four-and-a-half-thousand-year archive has long since made public more than any one person could read in ten lifetimes, and the arrangement's real cruelty, the one polite conversation in this world tends to skip past, is not that ordinary people know too little. It is that they can never be entirely sure whether the thing they need to know most is sitting one tier above the one they were born into.

Walk the clearance line with me on an ordinary Tuesday, the way I have walked you through a certificate line and a Parting and a festival hill in five books before this one. It forms outside every district reading-annex, every renewal season, not so different in its patience and its low warm talk from the certificate line of a very different book — sports and grandchildren and the small edited vocabulary of people who have learned, over generations, exactly how much to say in a queue that a monitor might be watching. A farmer renewing her Common card stands behind a licensed physician renewing his General Scholarly, behind a university

researcher whose Sealed-Adjacent tier lets him read one specific shelf of medical record he has spent eleven years petitioning to have widened by one further tier, a request the Compact reviews, patiently, on a schedule measured in decades rather than seasons. Children are brought to the annexes young, the way harbor children are brought to watch a hauler dock in a very different world's book, and told, the way children are always told the founding myth of whatever arrangement they were born inside: *everything you will ever need to know already exists, written down, safe, and waiting for you to earn the right to read it.* It is, on its surface, a strangely comforting thing to tell a child. It is also, Isidora had begun to understand that season for the first time in thirty-one years, a sentence that only sounds like a promise if you don't ask who decided what counts as earning.

The city's kilns run day and night in every district, not only at the mother-house — small district Renewal-shops, licensed but modest, keeping local civic and family record alive on the same principle at a smaller scale, the whole visible economy of the city threaded through with the specific warm orange glow of controlled fire that this world associates, the way your world associates a church bell or a call to prayer, with the ordinary business of not forgetting. There are protest movements, and they are old, and they are exactly as varied as protest movements always are: some argue for wider Common Access, some for stricter sealing, some — a small, mostly ignored minority whose pamphlets Isidora had walked past a thousand times without reading — argue that the entire tier system is a newer and better-dressed version of an old and ugly idea, that some people have simply always decided, on behalf of everyone else, which truths the rest of the species can be trusted with, and called it wisdom rather than power because the deciding class writes the histories too.

Isidora stood in her own district's clearance line that renewal season, three weeks into the question Philon had left her holding, and watched a father ahead of her explain to his daughter, patiently, in the exact cadence of every explanation this ledger has shown you a parent give a child across five books of a very similar arrangement, why the tall building across the plaza — the district's

small sealed annex, three tiers above Common, guarded by a single bored officer who had held the post for eleven years and never once, to Isidora's certain knowledge, had cause to use anything more than his voice — was not for them yet. "When you're older," the father said, "and you've shown you can be trusted with hard things." The daughter, perhaps eight, looked at the building for a long moment with an expression Isidora recognized from her own childhood and had not thought about in forty years, and asked the question every child in every one of this cycle's worlds eventually asks, in their own vocabulary, about their own particular wall: "Trusted by who?"

There was a third position in the clearance debates, quieter than either the wideners or the sealers, that Isidora had never given much thought to before that season: a slow, patient, unglamorous movement of archivists and minor clerks, mostly, who argued not for opening the sealed tiers nor for sealing them harder, but simply for making the *criteria* public — not the content behind any given door, but the plain reasoning by which any given door had been judged too dangerous to open. "We are not asking to read the sealed medicine," their best-known pamphlet argued, in a passage Isidora found herself returning to that week for the first time in years. "We are asking to read the reasoning that sealed it, so that a farmer denied his province's harvest record might at least know *why*, in language he was trusted to understand, rather than simply being told that trust itself was the thing he had not yet earned." It was, Isidora thought, standing in her own clearance line with the pamphlet's plain sentence turning over in her, the most modest reform she had ever encountered in this world's six-century argument, and also, she suspected, watching the bored officer at the sealed annex's door do nothing at all for the eleventh straight year, probably the reform least likely of all of them to ever actually happen — because a system built on trust has never yet, in any world of this ledger, found it easy to trust anyone with the reasons for its own caution.

The father did not have an answer ready. Isidora, three people back in the line, found that she did not either, and that the not-having, this season, felt different than it had every other season of her life

— less like an unanswerable question and more, she thought, touching her own collarbone in the cold renewal-line air, like a question somebody had simply never been asked with enough patience to actually have to answer.

SIX. THE IBIS

She came, on the fourth week, to Isidora's own door, which is not how any of this ledger's institutional secrets have ever announced themselves before, and I want you to notice that, reader, because the road does not always send a stranger down a corridor. Sometimes it simply knocks.

Isidora opened the door to a woman perhaps her own age, unremarkable in dress, carrying nothing but a worn satchel, who said only, before Isidora had fully registered a stranger standing on her own threshold at an hour past any reasonable visiting custom: "You found eighteen gaps. I can tell you what filled them, and why nobody stopped it, if you're willing to hear an answer that will cost you your comfortable understanding of the Warden you respect."

Isidora let her in — a decision she would spend the rest of the book failing to fully explain, even to herself, except to say that thirty-one years of trusting her own instrument had taught her to recognize, in a stranger's stillness, the particular quality of someone who has come to tell the truth rather than sell a version of it. They sat at Isidora's own kitchen table, the one her husband had built, under a single lamp, and Isidora noticed, the way her trade had trained her to notice everything, that the woman's satchel, set down carefully by the door, carried the same faint, particular warmth she associated with a tile fresh from a kiln — not hot, exactly, but not fully settled into the room's own temperature either, as though whatever it held had been carried a long way and set down only recently.

She gave no other name. When Isidora asked for one, later, over tea neither of them touched, the woman said only, "Ibis," and when Isidora — sharp, thirty-one years a Collationer, unwilling to let an unsourced claim pass unchecked even in her own kitchen — asked whether that was a name or a title, the woman who called herself

Ibis smiled for the first time that evening and said: "Both, and neither, and it has been both and neither for longer than the Compact has existed to mind. Ask me again at the end of this conversation. You may find the question has changed shape by then."

What Ibis told her, across that long night and two more that followed it, was this, and I will give it to you plainly, the way I have promised you plain dealing since the first page of this book: beneath the Compact, beneath the Assembly and its six hundred years of careful clearance law, has run a second and much older institution, unlicensed, unrecorded in any tier of any archive because it predates the very idea of tiers — a scattered, patient, self-renewing order that calls itself, in every language it has ever operated in, some local variation of the same old word: **the Ibis**, after the bird sacred to the god who watched over the House of Life before the House of Life had a Compact to answer to. "We are not thieves," she said, in the plain, unhurried voice of someone who had made this exact case many times before, to many frightened, honest people much like Isidora. "We are the other half of the same old promise. The House swore, four and a half thousand years ago, that nothing true would be lost. It never swore that everything true would be *controlled* — that clause was added later, by men who found controlling it more comfortable than simply keeping it. We kept the older oath. When the newer one turned some particular truth into a weapon, or a truth about some particular person into a tool for erasing them, we took what needed saving out of the room where it could be misused, and we kept it, faithfully, the old way — copied forward, generation to generation, answerable to no clearance but the oath itself."

"Eighteen tiles," Isidora said. "Over two thousand years."

"Eighteen that the deep layer's own summary inventory happened to record precisely enough for a Collationer as good as you to notice the gap," Ibis said. "There have been more. Most were never inventoried closely enough to be missed. The eighteen you found are not the theft, Collationer. They are the only theft anyone was ever careful enough to prove."

It was Ibis who first said the word Isidora had been circling without letting herself land on it, across every hour of the previous three weeks: the **true name**. “You know the old belief,” Ibis said, “the one the House still teaches its own novices before it teaches them anything about fire or clearance, the one most citizens learn as a pretty legend and nothing more: that a person is made of several parts, and one of them is the name truly, privately known — spoken, it keeps the soul alive; struck from every record, deliberately, by someone with the power to do the striking, it was understood by the old priests as a second death, final in a way even dying once is not.” She held Isidora’s gaze. “The Compact does not practice that cruelty by decree, Collationer. It is far too modern and far too polite for anything so honest. But six centuries of clearance law have produced, quietly, in every generation, people whose true records — their names, their lineages, the plain facts of who they were and what was done to them — became inconvenient to someone with the clearance to have them sealed, or edited, or simply allowed to lapse from the tiers where anyone might find them again. We do not steal knowledge for its own sake. We steal it back, on behalf of the person it was about, before the last copy of their name in the wide world quietly goes unread long enough to functionally cease. That is the oath under the oath, Collationer. We are not the Compact’s enemy. We are its conscience, working nights, unlicensed, because the Compact itself decided, six hundred years ago, that a conscience was a security risk it preferred not to clear.”

SEVEN. THE SECOND CASE

I promised you, at the start of this book, that I would not let either side of this argument win by narrator’s fiat, and I mean to keep that promise now, at the hour it costs the most — because Ibis’s case, heard once, in a warm kitchen, from a patient and evidently sincere stranger, is a seductive thing, and seduction is exactly the shape an honest reader should be most suspicious of.

Isidora put to her, over the second night’s tea, the same question she had put to Philon: not whether the Ibis’s cause was noble, but whether, in two thousand years of quiet, unaccountable removals,

the order had ever once been wrong. Ibis did not flinch from the question, which Isidora would credit her for exactly as much, and exactly as carefully, as she had credited Philon's own honesty. "Twice, that I know of, and I do not doubt there are others I don't," Ibis said. "Once, three centuries ago, a tile removed to protect a family's true record from a vindictive clearance-holder was later needed by that same family's descendants to prove a land claim, and could not be produced, because the order that held it had itself lost track of custody across two changes of keeper. The land was lost. Once, within my own lifetime, a young keeper decided, without consulting the rest of us, that a particular sealed medical tile was being suppressed unjustly, and removed it, and released its contents too widely, too fast, without the slow work of context the Compact's own clearance ladder exists to provide — and the knowledge, real and useful as it was, caused two seasons of genuine harm before wiser hands within our own order managed to contain the damage he had done in the name of doing good." She held her cup without drinking from it, the way Isidora had noticed she did all night, and said the sentence that Isidora would carry, unresolved, for the rest of the book: "We do not have a Warden's dome, or an Assembly's vote, or six hundred years of published law to hold us to account, Collationer. We have only the oath, and our own judgment, and the plain fact that judgment, however old and however careful, is not infallible simply because it has decided to work in secret rather than in daylight. Philon will tell you the sealed tiers have a cost, and he is right. I am telling you, honestly, that we have a cost too. The only difference between his institution and mine is that his shows up in Assembly minutes, and mine does not show up anywhere at all — which should trouble you considerably more than it comforts you, if you are the Collationer I believe you to be."

Isidora sat with both costs laid out before her — Philon's two proven misuses against forty thousand grants of trust, Ibis's two proven failures against however many centuries of unrecorded rescues — and understood, with the specific vertigo this ledger has given every one of its patient people at exactly this depth, that she had not found a hero and a villain in the House of Life's oldest

secret. She had found two honest, imperfect answers to the same unsolvable question, and that the House itself — the Compact, the sealed tiers, the whole four-and-a-half-thousand-year architecture of controlled and stolen-back truth — was not a single story with a moral at the bottom of it. It was an argument that had simply never finished, conducted in good faith, on both sides, since before either side had a name for what it was arguing about.

“Why tell me any of this,” Isidora asked, on the third night, “instead of simply taking the eighteenth tile’s location back and letting my audit close on an anomaly nobody could ever fully explain?”

And Ibis, for the only time in three nights, hesitated before answering — a small, human pause that told Isidora, more than anything said before it, that whatever came next mattered more to the woman across the table than the argument they had just spent three nights conducting. “Because the eighteenth tile is not like the other seventeen,” Ibis said finally. “The other seventeen, we can account for — protections, rescues, the ordinary quiet work of an oath older than the Compact. The eighteenth was never taken by anyone in my order, in any generation whose records I have ever been permitted to see.” She set down the cup at last, untouched, three nights running. “I came to you, Collationer, because I have spent forty years believing my order held the only key to that particular door. And because of what you found, I no longer believe that. Something else has been in the deepest room in the world, longer than either of our institutions has existed to guard it — and I think, if you are willing to finish what you started, we are about to meet him.”

EIGHT. THE TRUE NAME

The nineteenth tile — the eighteenth gap’s twin, the one Ibis’s order had never touched — sat, according to the House’s own oldest surviving inventory, at the very root of the deep layer: the founding shelf, tiles fired in the House’s first century under its oldest name, before Alexandria existed to give the institution a more famous address. Isidora and Ibis went down together, on a Renewal night, when the vault’s ordinary staff were occupied three

levels up with the season's scheduled re-firing, because a Collationer's own clearance, properly used, opens doors that neither institution nor order had ever quite anticipated being opened by the same two hands at once.

The descent itself took the better part of an hour, six levels down a service stair neither woman had cause to use in the ordinary run of her work, past strata of the archive that grew visibly older and cruder with every landing — the smooth, machine-precise tiles of the modern era giving way, level by level, to the hand-thrown unevenness of centuries further back, the glaze duller, the lettering rounder and less certain, until the last flight opened onto a chamber that predated the stair itself by some untold span the House's own architects had simply built around rather than presumed to date. The air here held a stillness Isidora had felt only twice before in her career, both times in rooms this old: not silence exactly, but the particular hush of a space that has never once, in its whole existence, needed to raise its voice to be heard.

The founding shelf is small, reader, smaller than either of the two women expected, given the weight the whole world above it had built on top of the idea of it: a few thousand tiles, plain, early, the glaze cruder than anything fired since, the House's first, halting attempts at a permanence it would spend the next four and a half thousand years perfecting. Isidora found the gap exactly where the inventory said it should be — a single empty slot, dust-free in a way nothing else on the shelf was, as though the space itself had been tended rather than merely emptied — and beside it, resting flat against the stone the way you would leave something for a specific hand to find rather than for a general search to stumble across, a single loose tile, unfired into any shelf's record, in a glaze old enough that its blue had gone the deep, worn green of a scarab left too long in the sun.

He was already in the room when they turned to look for him, the way this ledger's people have learned, five books in, to expect and never quite stop being unsettled by: tall, unhurried, the bag at his shoulder mended in visible strata, standing before the founding shelf with the stillness of a man reading a ledger he has kept a very

long time, in a room lit only by the vault's low emergency lamps and, somehow, beneath that, by a warmer light that did not seem to come from any fixture either woman could locate.

"You found the root," he said, to Isidora, without turning, in a voice that reached her from further away than the vault's walls allowed. "Most Collationers stop counting long before they reach it. Most Wardens make certain of that."

Ibis stepped forward, and Isidora watched something pass over the other woman's face that she had not seen in three nights of steady, argued composure — not fear, exactly, but the particular vertigo of a person meeting, for the first time, the thing her whole institution's oldest stories had quietly assumed was itself only a story. "You are the reason the eighteenth gap exists," Ibis said. "Not my order. You."

"I am the reason several things exist," he said, and crouched, unhurried, to lift the loose tile from the floor with the care of a man handling something considerably heavier than its size suggested. "Including, if it matters to either of you, the order that first thought to call itself after a bird." He looked at Ibis then, directly, for the first time, and something in his expression — Isidora would spend the rest of her life failing to enter it correctly into any report — was not quite fondness and was not quite grief. "You kept the oath a very long time, without once knowing who first swore it. That is not a small thing. I want that said plainly, into whatever record either of you is keeping tonight, before I say anything else."

He held the tile out, not to Ibis, but to Isidora — the Collationer, the counter, the one whose whole trade had been built for exactly this moment, though she was only now understanding that her career had been aimed at this room since before she was born. "Read it," he said. "That is your office. Not mine."

Isidora took the tile with both hands, the old habit of thirty-one years asserting itself even here, even now, and read, in a script old enough that only her deepest training let her parse it at all, a passage that was not law, and was not medicine, and was not any of the categories the House's own oldest taxonomy had a shelf for. It was a name. A true name, in the old sense Ibis had explained to

her three nights running — a person's whole identity, recorded the way the House recorded everything worth keeping, fired into permanence at the very root of the archive, in the institution's first century, long before any Compact existed to decide who might be trusted to read it.

"Whose name is this?" she asked.

"It has been asked before, by better scholars than either of us will ever be," he said, and there was something in his voice now that Isidora would later describe, in the one interview she ever gave about that night, as *tired in a way that had nothing to do with the hour*. "The honest answer is that the name belongs to someone who is not, by your Compact's own careful law, cleared to have it read by anyone at all — not because the name is dangerous, Collationer. Because the person it belongs to was never, in any generation since, permitted to exist in any record your species agreed to keep. Not erased. Never entered. There is a difference, and it is the whole of the difference this book has been trying to show you since its first page." He rose, unhurried, and looked between the two women with the patience of someone who had been standing in exactly this posture, in one archive or another, for longer than either institution behind them had existed. "The House swore, at its root, before it had a Compact or an Ibis or a single tier of clearance to argue about, that nothing true would be lost. I have spent longer than either of you can easily imagine making certain that oath was kept in full — not the version six centuries of careful men later decided was safe to keep, but the whole of it. Every name. Even the ones your world, in all its wisdom and all its caution, never got around to writing down at all."

"You've been carrying names," Isidora said, slowly, the whole shape of nineteen weeks finally closing into a column that balanced. "Not just from the sealed tiers. From outside them entirely. People this world never bothered to clear for keeping in the first place."

"Wrong shelf," he said — the same two words, in one register or another, that this ledger's readers have heard him say in five rooms before this one, at a bridge and a wall and a dockside gallery and a

temple gate and a ward. "I am not on this world's clearance ladder, Collationer. I never asked to be." He shifted the bag on his shoulder, and for a moment, in the low warm light, Isidora thought she saw the strain of a considerably greater weight than a single loose tile ought to add to a burden already old beyond her measuring. "Finish your audit. Tell the Assembly the truth you found — not the comfortable half either the Warden or the Ibis would prefer, but the whole of it, the way the root oath actually reads, before your Compact's clearance law ever amended it. Let them decide, in daylight, in their own Assembly, in front of their own six hundred years of minutes, what they intend to do about a truth that was never really theirs to seal in the first place." He was already moving toward the vault's old service stair, the one Isidora had catalogued a decade ago as decommissioned and never once questioned. "The road has excellent hearing, Collationer. It has been listening to this argument since before either institution behind you learned to have it in words. I would not keep it waiting on your report much longer."

And he was gone, up a stair that led, by the vault's own official plans, to nowhere at all.

NINE. WHAT CROSSED ANYWAY

What Isidora Iskandar did with the nineteenth tile, and the eighteen behind it, and the whole unfinished argument between a Warden's stewardship and an Ibis's conscience, belongs to the years this book does not have room for — you know that by now, five books into this ledger, and I will not pretend the falling of a six-hundred-year certainty happens in one report to one Assembly, however honestly written. What belongs to this book is the last thing she found, in the final days of an audit that had stopped, weeks before, being merely an audit, and the reason this ledger has been carrying the phrase *information leakage* toward you since its very first page.

Because a true name fired into the root of an archive that predates any Compact does not stay obediently sealed forever, reader, any more than an ember, or a broadcast, or a poem, or a piece of

gravity ever has in five books before this one. Isidora, working now with Ibis's own considerable and previously unlicensed archive of cross-references — the closest thing either institution possessed to a map of where the House's oldest, deepest material had actually traveled across four and a half millennia — began to trace the root tiles' content not backward, into their own history, but *outward*, into every text, every quoted fragment, every "lost and mysteriously rediscovered" classical work that her own world's careful scholarship had ever logged as an unexplained recovery.

She spent the final ten days of the audit doing the quiet, unglamorous cross-referencing her whole career had trained her for, with Ibis's own unlicensed archive open beside the House's official one — two catalogues that had never, in either institution's long history, been laid side by side by anyone with clearance to read both. A fragment of an agricultural method, nearly word for word, turning up eleven centuries later in a monastery's marginal note a world away, credited to no source and dismissed by that world's own scholars as a scribe's private invention. A medical formula, garbled but unmistakably cousin to a sealed tile three tiers above Isidora's own clearance, surfacing in a physician's commonplace book four centuries further on, in a hand that historians of that world had long puzzled over for its uncanny, unexplained precision. Each fragment small. Each one, alone, forgettable. Isidora plotted them the way she plotted everything, and watched them cluster — not randomly, not evenly, but thick at exactly the joints where a text's meaning ran hottest, thin across its duller administrative stretches, the same grain a Verifier had once found in a different world's broadcast archive and a Transcriptionist in a different world's ward dictations, though Isidora knew none of that; she only knew her own instrument, and her own instrument was telling her, patiently, that she was not looking at coincidence.

And she found them. Not many — a scattered handful across two thousand years, each one small enough to be dismissed by any single scholar as coincidence, each one, taken together, forming exactly the kind of pattern her whole trade had trained her to see and no one before her had ever thought to assemble: fragments of

the House's own oldest, deepest, most carefully guarded material, showing up, faint and garbled and unmistakably *cousin* to the original, in the textual record of other worlds entirely — worlds, she understood slowly, with a vertigo this whole book has been walking her toward since its first missing tile, where the House itself, or something enough like it to rhyme, had not survived the centuries the way hers had. Worlds where a library called Alexandria's had burned, and burned again, and burned a third time for good measure, and where the loss of it had become, against every reasonable proportion, one of the great enduring griefs of the whole civilization — a grief, Isidora now understood, reading the pattern whole for the first time in the cold vault where this entire audit had begun, that made unaccountably more sense once you understood it was not merely metaphorical. Some worlds mourn a golden age they can half-remember losing. Isidora's world had never lost it at all — and the grief, it turned out, was not the memory of a loss. It was the ache of a signal arriving, faint and incomplete, from a version of history where the thing being grieved was never actually gone.

She thought, before she let herself think of the walker's words at all, of the small tile on her own kitchen shelf — her husband's name and dates, the ordinary permanence available to anyone with the coin and the clearance to request it — and understood, for the first time in eleven years, what had actually been bothering her about it every evening she touched it without quite letting herself ask why. It was a true copy. It was not, and had never claimed to be, the whole of him. The tile held what the House's own forms allowed a grieving wife to enter: name, dates, a single line of approved epitaph. It did not hold the argument they'd had the morning he died, or the particular sound of his laugh at his own bad jokes, or any of the thousand unrecorded, unclearable, uncleared true things that had made him the specific person he was rather than merely a name matching a set of dates. She had spent eleven years believing the tile was enough because the House had told her, all her life, that what the House kept was complete. Sitting now with nineteen weeks of gaps behind her, she understood that completeness had never been the promise. Fidelity to what was written down was the

promise. Whether everything worth keeping had ever actually been written down at all — that question, she now knew, had been sitting open behind every sealed door in the world for longer than anyone had thought to ask it.

She thought of the walker's own words, in the founding vault, on the last Renewal night: *the person it belongs to was never, in any generation since, permitted to exist in any record your species agreed to keep*. And she understood, sitting alone with nineteen weeks of gaps finally closed into a shape she could report and could never fully explain, that her own jealously guarded, absolutely controlled, endlessly sealed and tiered and negotiated Archive — the single thing her whole civilization had built its entire six-hundred-year peace on top of, the thing nations petitioned and starved and quietly stole from each other's clearance for — had never, in four and a half thousand years, actually been the *first* copy of anything. It was extraordinarily old. It was extraordinarily faithful. It was not, and had never been, the root.

The root was further up the road, carried in a bag mended in visible strata, checked against something Isidora's whole world had organized its politics around forgetting it did not fully own: that even the most complete archive in any world of this ledger is still, in the end, only ever a Renewal — a careful, honest, endlessly re-verified copy of a truth that was always, from its very first firing, in transit somewhere else.

She filed her report to the Assembly in full, the whole of it, Philon's caution and Ibis's conscience and the nineteenth tile and the leak she could prove but never fully explain, and I will leave the fight that followed to a later season of a world this ledger does not have room to finish, because that fight, reader, is still the same fight every world in this cycle has eventually had to have with itself, in its own vocabulary, on its own Assembly floor — the fight about who gets to hold the truth, and what they owe the people who never agreed to the arrangement in the first place. What I will give you, because I keep everything, is the last entry in Isidora Iskandar's own private notebook, dated the night before she delivered her report, in the plain, exact hand of a woman who had

spent thirty-one years verifying that nothing was ever lost, and had just learned that being kept, and being owned, were never quite the same promise:

Sealed the word to keep it true. Never once asked who the sealing was for. Filed against the day the House finally answers.

VERSE THE SIXTH

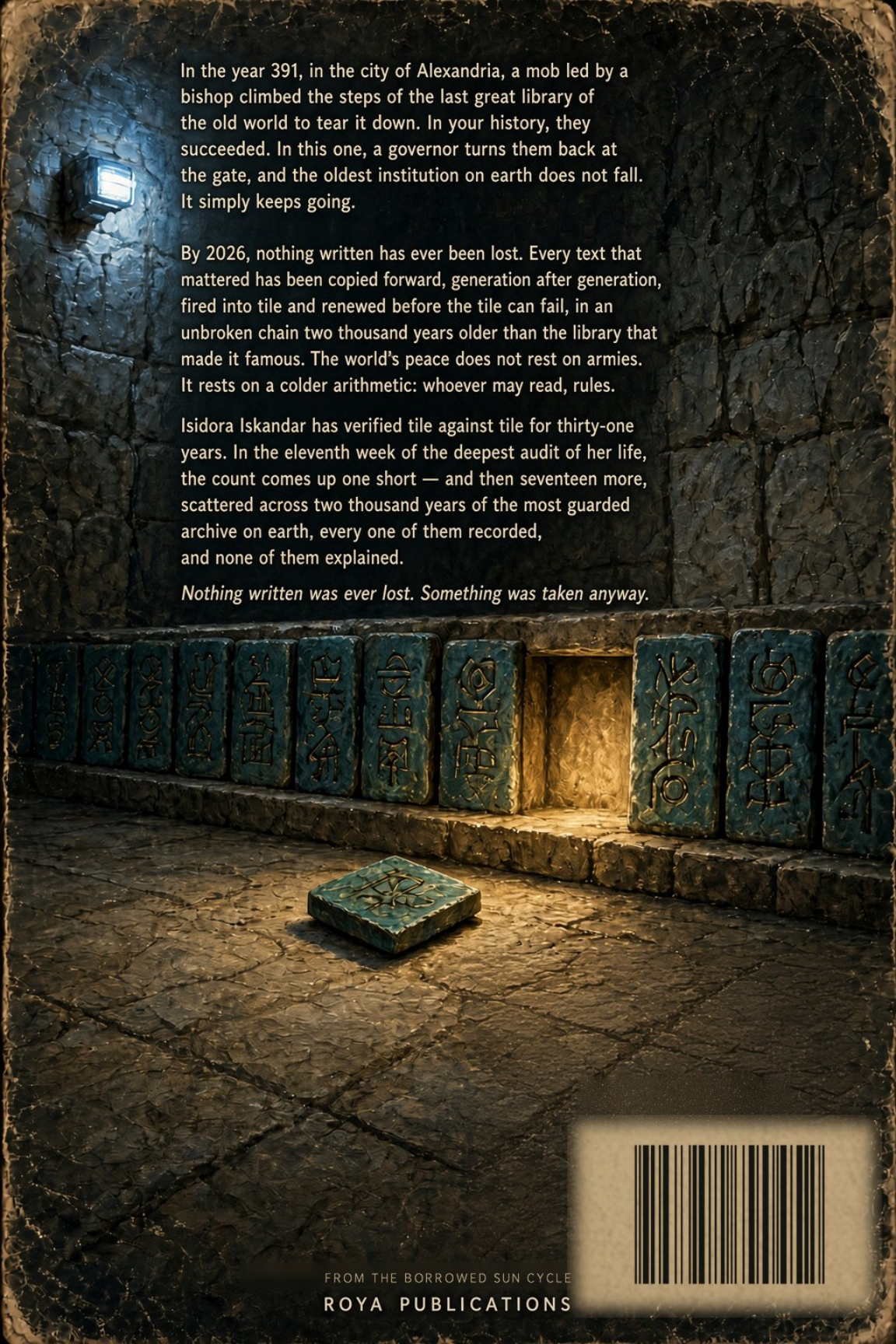
recovered from the deep tiles, house unknown

*They sealed the word to keep it true,
and thought the sealing kept it too.*

*But every tile the kiln has made
is counted twice before it's laid,
and once the count came up one short —
a piece had traveled, carried on.*

*Not stolen: only carried through
to where the word was needed too,
past every gate, past every hand
that swore to guard it, sealed and manned.*

*For what is sealed still finds a door;
the road has read it. Now, no more.
The house of life stands vast and kept —
the fourth dawn reads. It has not slept.*



In the year 391, in the city of Alexandria, a mob led by a bishop climbed the steps of the last great library of the old world to tear it down. In your history, they succeeded. In this one, a governor turns them back at the gate, and the oldest institution on earth does not fall. It simply keeps going.

By 2026, nothing written has ever been lost. Every text that mattered has been copied forward, generation after generation, fired into tile and renewed before the tile can fail, in an unbroken chain two thousand years older than the library that made it famous. The world's peace does not rest on armies. It rests on a colder arithmetic: whoever may read, rules.

Isidora Iskandar has verified tile against tile for thirty-one years. In the eleventh week of the deepest audit of her life, the count comes up one short — and then seventeen more, scattered across two thousand years of the most guarded archive on earth, every one of them recorded, and none of them explained.

Nothing written was ever lost. Something was taken anyway.

