Necrocracy

Forsaken Guardian



Joe Sarkic

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ISBN: 978-1-0695280-2-5

Cover design © 2026 Joe Sarkic and Mariann Kremer
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Printed in the United States of America / Canada

First Edition



Chapter 1 - Hunters Loop

Morning failed to break. A bruised light bled along the eastern horizon, flowing through the narrow gaps between trunks that stood like ribs against the dark. This light carried the sour edge of rot—the forest exhaling its own decay beneath a faint, dying sweetness of pine—until the boughs above ceased their murmuring and folded into a stillness so complete the woods held their breath.

Upon Theron, silence settled heavy. The cold earth pressed against his knees, the bow a dead weight in his hand. A slick, chilling second layer of mist beaded along his exposed skin.

The air shifted.

Not a footfall. No twigs snapped, nor did dry leaves shatter under heavy hooves. Instead, a soft, rhythmic displacement pushed through the fog, resembling a cold winter draft sliding under a door.

Muscle and tendon gathered in one smooth motion. Rising from the cold earth, he shifted his weight onto the balls of his feet. His lungs forced a measured rhythm, yet the expected sound never came. Only a heavy quiet pressed back against his eardrums.

A boar? A deer? The telltale breaks—the crunch of weight, the drag of a hoof—refused to manifest.

The forest floor held a dead stillness. Only that unnatural, gliding approach drew closer, defying the density of the undergrowth. A thumb worried the bowstring. Once. Twice. A habit he hated.

A needle-sharp chill locked Theron's spine, the air turning heavy with the scent of bruised petals and static. The presence cut out, clean and absolute.

She emerged.

She didn't step from the shadow; her spectral form coalesced from the fog. Half doe, half something Ancient. Her hooves hovered a span above the moss, leaving no trace. Crowned by tall, river-smooth horns of

silver-grey, she stood as an impossibility—a quiet rupture in the natural order.

Nyxantera, the Forest-Ward.

Theron stayed low. Through his memory, the hushed, careful voices of old hunters bled, whispering of horns in moonlight and a creature that slipped between trees through gaps no trail owned. He'd always smiled into the darkness, letting them have their fright.

You do not hunt her, the old men had whispered. *She hunts you.*

Theron tightened his grip on the bow. His jaw set until his teeth ached. The pressure echoed a weight he had carried since his first breath—a phantom ache that always tasted of his mother's voice.

Aella's whispers still echoed in the dark, recounting the night he was wrenched into the world under a fractured, Ancient sky. A Full Blue Harvest Moon, an event that occurs only one night every ten cycles, had hung in a throat of blackened cloud. A single, weeping doorway of light split the sky, pouring through the open window of the hut to rain a cold, bruised silver upon them. Covered in that chill, Aella had been locked in the final, brutal candle-marks of her labour. She screamed. A raw, rhythmic agony tore at the rafters.

Fighting the dark, she struggled to drag him into a world that already rejected his weight. Her blood spilled as the heavens bled with her. The clouds curdled into a sickly crimson. Thunder roared, not as a sound but as a vibration in the marrow. Lightning ripped across the firmament.

The midwife recognized the scent of the omen: the sharp, metallic tang of wrongness. She cursed. Her fingers trembled as she tied a strip of pale cloth around his wrist. A shroud for the living. She would not meet his mother's eyes.

Outside, an elder traced a jagged mark upon the lintel with ash and salt while Theron's father watched. Grit ground against the wood like teeth. "He is barred from the longhouse," the old man had rasped to Theron's father. "Keep him in the cold until the sky forgets."

But the sky never forgot. Neither did the village.

Twenty cycles, twenty hard winters he had watched the longhouse from the dark. The scent of roasting meat and woodsmoke taunted the back of the throat. At twelve cycles, a single attempt to enter, reaching for the golden light of the interior, ended with the Burgomaster's hand planted fast against bone. A flat, unyielding weight. It barred the warmth while winter bit at exposed ears with needle-teeth.

"Come back when you've earned it," the Burgomaster spat.

Theron took a slow, shallow breath now. His lungs burned with the damp rot of the forest. He stared at a ghost—a campfire fable made flesh and bone. If he brought her back, if he laid her silver horns upon the longhouse floor, would the sky finally close its eyes and forget?

His breath locked.

He rose. A heavy shaft slid from the leather, the nock easing onto the string by touch alone. The bow was a mute witness. No groan of wood. No rasp of hide. Fingers found the familiar, cold tension as the string pulled back. A clean, heavy ache blossomed across the shoulders. The arrowhead hovered beneath her throat. Steady as a heartbeat. A cool thread of air brushed the back of his neck, sliding between the trunks behind him without stirring a single leaf.

Cloven hooves remained silent upon the moss. Then her gaze found his and held. Not the stare of prey. A weight that pinned him to the earth.

Frost settled deep in the bone as the draw weight grew heavier, trembling against a hardened grip. Strength leeched from his arm while the wood gave an impatient creak. Nudging a cheek closer to the string, he turned his head a fraction to bring the arrow into a truer line. Breath snagged. Will forced it down.

A heavy *thwack* snapped from the bramble behind him. Instantly, a tearing heat sheared the tip of his ear, narrowing the world to a sudden blur of pain. His fingers spasmed open as a foreign shaft sliced past his vision.

In a pulse, the first arrow struck Nyxantera in the shoulder. It dimmed where it struck. The fog bruised around the impact. His own

arrow trailed after, a useless shadow sailing past the doe, biting with a distant, hollow thud into a trunk somewhere in the mist.

Nyxantera was gone.

The absence struck like a blunt weight against the ribs. One pulse she was there; the next, only wind and mist.

A hand reached up. The rim of the ear was wet, screaming at the touch. A thin line of blood slicked the fingers.

"What in the Light's name, Falric?" Theron's voice went flat as he stared at the red on his fingertips. "You nearly took my ear."

Branches snapped. Falric stepped out of the bramble wearing the forest like a second skin. Moss-scent clung to his clothes; mud stiffened his tunic. His boots showed long leagues and little mercy. The bow in his hand rested with the ease of a limb grown alongside him.

"You hesitated," Falric said, not blinking as he adjusted the grip on his riser. "Held too long."

Theron's scowl faltered, his gaze flicking to the empty clearing before returning to the veteran. "I had her."

Falric stepped to where the doe had stood, bending to pluck a blood-stained leaf and turning the surface toward Theron. "I didn't miss. And your ear? You moved. You should have been a ghost." Shifting his bow, he tilted the leaf into the thinning light. "Spirits shouldn't bleed," he murmured, the words tight between his teeth. As Theron approached, the older hunter pressed the cold, damp leaf into his palm. The resin-dark bead felt heavy as lead against the skin. "Hold this. Stay silent."

Frustration coiled hot against the back of Theron's ribs. He sucked in a sharp breath to argue, but Falric was already moving, slipping through a snarl of bramble that parted around him without complaint. A few strides later, the hunter vanished, the green closing behind the movement to swallow him whole.

A horse screamed.

The sound arrived bruised and distant, choked by the dense fog before it could truly rise. A terrified whinny followed—a thin thread of noise. Against Theron's boots, the ground trembled faintly as hooves struck the earth. A frantic, muted thudding bolted away into the gloom.

Theron spun toward the sound, stomach dropping out.

Then came a different sound—a low, wet thrum vibrating against the soles of his boots. A heavy, dragging displacement tore through the undergrowth, as if the forest floor itself were being exhaled. Something large turned in the dark beyond the pines, its weight groaning against the timber. They were leaving, and whatever had chased them remained.

A single step pursued the hoofbeats before instinct checked the momentum. His draw hand twitched, aching for the silver horns meant to buy passage into the longhouse. But Falric was a ghost in the trees. To run now was to break the only bond keeping the forest from closing in. A hard stare dropped to the bead of blood on the leaf, then shifted toward the fleeing horses. Mist thickened. Trees turned into grey, skeletal fingers.

Breath tore past the knot in Theron's throat. He dropped the leaf and pushed after Falric, each step making the air turn sweet with decay. Branches arched overhead, ribbed and looming. Fingers brushed the ear again to check the sting.

He drove himself forward until Falric's silhouette flickered ahead. A crow called once from somewhere high; it called again in the same cadence. Too neat to be chance. Theron ran harder.

The treetops grew dense, strangling the dawn until the light turned the colour of an old bruise. Catching up, Theron dragged himself to a halt, chest heaving, and locked his fingers onto the veteran's shoulder to spin him around.

"The horses," his breath tore. "They ran."

Falric's eyes stayed on the dark path ahead. "They won't go far. They'll wait. The forest is too thick for panicked beasts in harness."

"They won't wait for us," Theron snapped. "Not if something spooked them."

Falric's jaw tightened. He pointed at the earth, where one dark bead of blood clung stubbornly to a fern. "It's bleeding. That's what matters."

"It matters that we're walking, Falric. And we're alone." Theron searched the older man's eyes. "Those two things don't live well together."

Damp mist curled beneath Ancient pines as the earth exhaled in slow pulses. Ahead, a troubled glow broke the gloom, fracturing through the trunks to paint the undergrowth in uneasy gold.

"And when she's down?" Theron rasped. "Do we haul her back on our shoulders?"

A hard line cut across the veteran's jaw. "We'll manage."

"This place," Theron said, shaking his head. "It doesn't feel right."

Wet moss whispered a soft reply beneath the older hunter's boots. He did not look back, though a new tension had crept into the set of his shoulders, betraying his careless confidence. "We have seen worse."

Heavy pressure seized Theron's breath. There was something in that phrase—a confidence rooted in a memory tasting of old, grim things. He wanted to ask where, but the forest met the question first, cinching cold bands around his ribs.

The gloom swallowed their next steps.

A heavy snap of timber echoed from the slope above. Falric halted instantly, dropping into a low crouch as cold slid along Theron's spine. Ahead, ferns lay flattened, their fronds pressed to the earth where dew had been scattered wide. The strange ember light slid along the veteran's cheek.

"Tracks." Falric pointed, and Theron followed his gaze. Pressed fronds marked the ground, tips bent and slick with shaken dew. Deeper furrows ran beside them where heavier bodies had passed. Not the dragging ghosts he'd heard before—these were feet. Large. Heavy. The fresh impressions spoke of weight and direction: iron-shod boots.

Falric lowered himself almost to the ground, and Theron mirrored him without thinking—shoulders rounding, neck tucking, breath held tight behind his teeth. His fingers flexed against the grip of his bow.

A murmur drifted through the trees—voices low, rough, carrying the sound of stone grinding on stone. They crept toward the noise as the forest tightened, slipping behind a wall of bramble that offered cover.

Halfway up the slope, bramble screened their faces. A clearing sat no more than a stone's throw away. Theron shifted his knee; the wet moss

sucked at him with a quiet, obscene sound. He held his breath, his jaw tight.

Through narrow gaps, the scene gathered itself. Theron froze.

A heavy, animal heat made the back of his throat itch, carrying the stench of wet iron. The scent hit him before the sight. Four monoliths of muscle stood where the dawn failed to reach. Their hides looked less like skin and more like the weathered face of a cliff he'd climbed as a boy. Tusks pushed up from lower lips, stained the brown of old bone.

The leader stood tallest. Old wounds had risen into ridges over his ribs, one long scar running from ear to collarbone. Theron didn't see a monster; he saw a map of every fight the creature had ever won. A warhammer hung in the Orc's grip, an extension of the arm, heavy and patient. When he drew breath, the sound reminded Theron of rock sliding somewhere deep underground.

The others set their feet by him, holding two paces behind and to the sides.

"Grey Orcs," Falric whispered, the words barely audible. "Too far south."

Theron's muscles locked when the leader's gaze swept their hiding place—intelligent, patient, and hollow.

Falric went still, tension coiling through his frame. The Orc's eyes narrowed, fixing on the bramble. He listened to the very air, weighing the breath and the twitch of a leaf.

Theron's heart hammered. Each beat was loud enough to give them away.

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"Hush."

The Orc leader took a step closer to the bramble, the word cutting the murmur. He drew a slow breath. The air tasted of rot and wet iron, but beneath it lay something sweeter. That warmth settled in his chest.

"The wind carries their scent," he rumbled, the heavy thrum of his voice sinking into the soil.

Beside him, a wiry Orc shifted, beady eyes gleaming with hunger. "Ghaz'dur, we've skulked in shadows too long. Hunger gnaws at me belly. Maybe a small feast waits."

Ghaz'dur turned. Two paces carried him forward before his fingers clamped around the smaller Orc's throat, lifting him effortlessly as his boots scraped at open air.

"Bleed another whisper into my woods when I command silence," Ghaz'dur rumbled, tightening his grip. "I will seal your throat with your own tongue. Do you understand?"

He held the wiry Orc's gaze, breath hot against his face. When the subordinate managed a desperate nod, Ghaz'dur spoke lower, a dangerous vibration in the air. "We find them first, else the door refuses us. Dranura demands them alive."

At the name, the surrounding Orcs instantly touched thumb to tusk, eyes darting to the canopy.

He held him a heartbeat longer, letting the sheer weight of his gaze finish the job. Fingers splayed open. The figure collapsed at his feet in a wet thud. Ghaz'dur felt the shift in his pack—the restless shuffle of boots, the collective, sidelong glance toward the lower slope. They were looking for the Stonemanes. He smelled the lack of confidence in their sweat. "Let them roam," he rumbled, the low vibration pinning them in place. "Never know what they may find in the deep-black."

The forest offered no answer. The quiet thickened until it pressed against the drums of his ears. Somewhere in the gloom, the great beasts were moving.

Ghaz'dur turned his eyes back to the bramble. From somewhere far downslope came a faint whisper of movement—muffled, careful, and wrong for a deer or boar.

He swept a heavy stare across his pack. The scent was stronger now—warm breath and fear-sweat—yet beneath it ran another note: thin, moss-sweet. The tang of damp rot and old blood flared in his nostrils. He moved without haste, warhammer riding easy in his grip. Haft steady. Head angled.

Closing the last span, he brought the hammer down in a sweeping, low arc. It tore through the undergrowth in a brutal snap of force. Wood splintered. Leaves burst into a wild spin. Crows erupted overhead.

Boots crushed the splintered wood. The weapon rose. He expected warm flesh. A flash of steel.

Only scattered bark and fractured light answered him. Below the gentle roll of the hill, where the ground dipped into a fern-choked runnel, a Mosshart stared back. Its scent drifted up—fear-sweat, warm breath, crushed green. Deer-sized, pared for speed, hide mottled the colour of wet lichen. Most hunters ignored them for the bitter taste and the waste of a chase. It froze a pulse, then fled as a streak snapping between trunks.

A heavy gaze dropped to the shattered bramble. The blow had opened pale wounds in the stems, sap running copper-bright where the warhammer had struck. The wood was bleeding out of season. A low growl curled in his chest. He spat into the torn soil.

The air still tasted of them, but the wind had turned. A thin draft slid across the slope and came back at his face, carrying only the dull musk of ferns and wet bark. The tracks of his own Stonemanes churned the deep mud nearby, their heavy, unseen pacing a constant thrum in the gloom, yet between those massive strides, the forest offered no breath of the prey. The direct scent-trail was gone.

Empty. Only the scrape of wind against stone.

A keen scan of the ground revealed no trespass. No broken stem. No bruised leaf. Nothing answered.

Behind him, the warriors stiffened. Ghaz'dur slammed the haft of his hammer into his palm. The sound was sharp as breaking bone.

"Steel out."

Blades slid free in clipped clicks. His pack fanned out through the brush.

"Capture them. Unharmed, if they yield. Broken, if they resist. But they must be breathing when they reach the door, or your souls are forfeit to the deep-black. That is Dranura's command."

At the decree, the warriors touched thumb to tusk, movements rigid and synchronized. At their ankles, the mist drew tighter.

"Now. Move."

They slipped into the forest's folds, dissolving into shadow. Behind them, the hush of the waiting trees deepened. The hunt required no further sound.

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Wood-dust drifted down from the high branches. It settled across their shoulders. Ten paces below the shattered bramble, Falric and Theron pressed their spines against the rough bark. They did not breathe. Above them, the last shadows of the Orcs bled into the wilderness.

Theron's breath stalled, shallow and sharp. He leaned forward, straining for the faintest rustle. Sunlight slashed through the branches, scattering frail gold across the damp earth.

Somewhere above, a crow's cry threaded through the treetops, entwining question and warning.

Theron risked a glance at Falric. A tight ache bound the older hunter's jaw, sweat carving a narrow line down his temple. At the edge of Theron's vision, the roots of the nearby pine writhed, thick and pale like the cloth tied around his infant wrist.

Then the pressure broke. A single breath's worth of surrender. Falric's dark eyes met his, snapping with a silent command: Move.

Falric moved first. Muscles uncoiled as he slid along the slope in small, precise shifts. Twice his gaze returned to the bramble the Orc had shattered. Twice he looked away. Theron pressed after him, keeping to the damp shade between roots. A sudden instinct to freeze clawed at his chest, but he fought it down.

His throat locked. He risked a glance upslope. The bramble thicket was a ruin. Canes lay splayed against the sky. From twenty paces down, the violence of the strike looked absolute—a force meant to turn bone to powder.

"We were lucky," he wheezed.

Falric pushed off the bark. He set a brutal pace, his eyes scouring the treeline ahead.

"Luck had nothing to do with it. Keep moving before the wind shifts."

Theron scrambled to keep close. The crushed earth behind them pressed against his spine like a physical weight—a cold certainty that something followed. Falric offered no comfort. He moved like smoke over the moss.

They stepped clear of the shattered bramble, angling away from the copper sap. The trees knitted branches overhead to block the sky. Shadows pooled at their feet. The vibrant moss turned to a dull, iron-grey. A cloying sweetness thickened the air, drowning the ambient noise until nothing remained but a rhythmic, wet thud of water striking the forest floor.

Falric scoured the treeline until his gaze locked on the canopy. High above, the wind tore at the branches.

"The wind shifted." He turned his shoulder against the incoming chill. "It's coming from the South. We keep North. Away from where we found them."

"Orcs are North-born." Theron's thumb dug into the wood of his riser, the friction burning his skin. "We're walking into the teeth."

"We're moving away from the ones at our backs." Falric tugged his collar high against the draft. A steady tilt in the terrain pushed against their strides. "The land is rising. If I am correct, we are close to the mountain we saw on the way in. The stone there is hard—it won't take a footprint like this mud. It also gives us the high ground."

They kept North, though Theron remained unconvinced. The ground itself felt wrong beneath his boots. Spider silk spanned the ferns, clinging to his shins. Roots lifted like gnarled knuckles to snag their toes. Thick moss rose against their soles, holding each foot a pulse too long before letting go. The air pressed against Theron's eardrums in slow, heavy pulses.

A sharp tang of old ozone lingered in the hollow ahead. They passed a lightning-scarred pine, its trunk split and silvered down one side. Beyond it lay a fallen birch, the bark peeling back in papery curls.

Between the two sat a cleft boulder, lichen painting one face dark and the other the palest green.

Theron's eyes swept the formation out of habit. The scar, the birch, the split stone. A distinct trio in a forest of endless grey.

They pressed on as the forest deepened, the terrain fighting them with every step. Breaths stretched and snapped back on themselves. The slope refused to stay familiar, the ground growing punishing underfoot. Falric set a brutal march, and Theron matched it, his lungs burning with the damp air.

The land shifted, dipping into boggy hollows where the mist pooled knee-deep before rising over granite spines that offered brief, grey views of nothing but more trees. They covered hard, undeniable distance. At least a league.

The mist thinned ahead, revealing a clearing.

A cold, sickening weight dropped in his gut. A lightning-scarred pine rose ahead of them. The same split trunk. Silvered along the same wound. Beyond it lay the fallen birch, its curls of bark unchanged. The cleft boulder waited between them.

"We didn't turn," Theron said, the words tasting of ash. Falric frowned, eyes scanning the grey canopy. "The mist plays tricks. Keep moving."

"No," Theron said, stepping to the birch to bypass the older hunter entirely. He bent a single strip of bark until it cracked, clean and white, letting the curl hang. A marker no wind could fake. "Now we'll know."

Falric looked at the broken wood, then back to the young hunter, his jaw tightening as the forest closed like a physical trap.

Abandoning the northern bearing, he pivoted to strike out hard to the east. He forced a path through a dense tangle of briars that tore at their tunics. They marched until their boots felt heavy as lead, driven by a desperate need to prove the forest wrong. The light dimmed. The air grew colder, biting at their exposed skin.

The trees thinned. The smell of old stone and static found them first, then the markers. Scarred pine. The fallen birch. Cleft stone. And the birch curl Theron had broken, its fresh fibres bright as bone.

Theron's mouth went dry.

The splintered wood mocked them in the dimming light. A suffocating weight crushed Theron's chest, tasting distinctly of the Burgomaster's unyielding, iron-grey palm.

The forest was closing its grip.

Falric stared at the three markers, then at the ground between them. He hunted for the scar in the earth where the path folded back on itself. He found nothing. "It's a turning ward. It turns you back until it decides you've paid." He looked up. His eyes caught the bruised light of the canopy. "Someone, or something, doesn't want us to leave."



Chapter 2 - Nyxantera

A sound rose out of the hush. It was too loud for a small life and too intent for chance, close enough to lift the skin and far enough to refuse shape. It moved through the trees, passing from one hidden throat to another. The air quivered. Dust lifted and hung, glittering in the dim light.

Falric went still.

Theron's hand found his shoulder before he knew he had moved.

"Was that…" Theron stopped the word in his teeth. Another sound followed, briefer, reed-thin.

Something called from a distance and something answered, but then nothing followed, and the forest smoothed itself again as though it could seal its own wounds.

They moved toward it with hands on their hilts. Branches dipped across their backs, snagging against wool before the slope gathered heavily under their boots. Iron rose on Theron's tongue, old and thin. He shouldered through larch needles that clung to his sleeves with a prickling bite, and the ground shifted underfoot, the feel of it wrong, as though the trees had already decided where his weight should fall. To the left, a low, constant rush worried the air, the river's breath threading the trunks, steady and close, and that sound drew them on until the mist thinned.

And then she was there.

A shape waited in the grey, half doe and half something else. Nyxantera. Alone against the dark and framed in thin light that fell through the boughs, her outline shimmered, gold gathering along the fine hairs of her flank in a quiet halo that rose and fell with her breath. Then Theron saw the red: a streak scored her shoulder where a broken shaft jutted from the muscle—Falric's.

Blood threaded slow trails down her leg to bead at the fetlock before dropping one by one. Each impact bruised the moss. A sparse line of

droplets traced the distance toward Theron, ending near the tip of his boot.

Falric's fingers found his bowstring, pulling it slow and sure, until Theron's hand closed over his. The leather was warm under his palm. Falric's grip eased, but didn't let go.

"No. She brought us here," Theron said, eyes locked on the pale shape in the mist. "She's keeping us here."

Falric's jaw tightened. His hand locked on the bow grip, the tendons standing sharp and rigid beneath his skin.

"If we kill her," Falric murmured, "nothing will be keeping us here."

Theron didn't lift his voice. "She won't allow that." The stillness pressed flat against his eardrums, a physical weight ready to crush his windpipe if he broke it.

Falric turned his gaze to Theron. A deep, searching furrow cut across his brow. Leather gave a tight creak in the hush. He let the tension bleed from his fingers and loosened his grip on the bow.

Turning, Nyxantera cut a path neither away nor toward them, tracking a geometry hidden in the rock. Her hooves struck the moss in dead silence. No earth broke. No stems crushed. But the air in her wake hummed, vibrating against Theron's teeth with the sheer, invisible mass of her passage.

Theron followed.

Falric's hand brushed his sleeve in a brief warning—stay—then let go. They moved in Nyxantera's wake at a careful distance, feet feeling for root and stone. They kept their breath small.

She brought them to a drift of blackthorn so thick even deer would have chosen another way. The canes were woven tight, hooked tips black with last season's fruit. Nyxantera halted before it and for a heartbeat the wall looked impenetrable; then the briar's face changed and a parting revealed itself, a darker mouth where growth had lacquered over a hollow to keep its secret.

Nyxantera crossed the threshold. Her pale shape dissolved into the dark without brushing a single thorn. Mist weighed against her hide, then

peeled away into the gloom. The thicket did not stir. Only the cold moved.

Theron swallowed.

The opening would take a man if he turned his shoulders just so. The smell of crushed stone and stagnant water coated the back of his throat, an iron-thin taste that locked his spine in a sudden chill. Somewhere inside, a drop fell and fell again—a rhythmic, hollow sound against the stone. He watched the damp bead on the threshold, a silver-dark sweat in the gloom.

"This doesn't feel right," Theron said. The old warning rose unbidden, a remembered hiss from road fires that had once made him laugh. You don't hunt her; she hunts you.

It felt so close it might have been spoken at his ear.

Falric kept his gaze on the dark mouth. "Where else will we go? If she's keeping us and we turn away, the wood will fold and bring us back."

A sudden shift brought him ready to slip past the cane, pausing to look over his shoulder. His eyes were steady in the dim light, hard with decision. "We follow her path and see where it leads. If it leads nowhere, we end it and find our own way."

Dropping to a crouch, Falric hovered a hand a finger-width from the seam, careful of every hook. Breath from the opening slid over his palm, cave-cold, damp, heavy with the breath of the deep earth.

"It holds." He rose on the other side, rubbing his numbed fingertips until the joints popped. "We follow slow."

Falric slipped into the dark. Shadows of the tunnel claimed his vanishing shape.

Hesitating for a single breath, Theron drove his shoulders into the narrow choke.

Thorns dragged heavy across his sleeves, sinking through the wool to tear hot, wet lines into the flesh of his forearms. He pushed deeper. Deep inside the canes, a thick branch caught the lip of his quiver. Lunging to break the snare only pulled it tight. The leather strap jerked

hard against his collarbone, choking his momentum and inverting the quiver in a single motion.

Wood clattered.

His shafts spilled outward, sinking into the dark mulch beyond the threshold.

A harsh breath scraped his throat. He moved back toward the gap. Before his fingers could breach the threshold, the blackthorn collapsed inward, knitting together with a dry, violent crackle to seal the way. He jerked his hand free.

Through the shrinking lattice, he watched the mist drag its weight over his spilled arrows where they lay tangled on the moss. He weighed the loss against the teeth of the wood, abandoned the shafts to the damp, and turned his back on the pale light. The dark claimed him whole.

A heavy, mineral dampness choked the threshold. Sound tightened. Every drip of condensation struck the stone with a concussive, echoing crack. Theron crushed his fingers around the bowstring, letting the coarse hemp bite into his palm. Without shafts to draw, the carved wood was nothing but dead weight. He placed the weapon against the wet rock, leaving it to the dark.

The sudden absence of the quiver's bulk threw his stride into a lurch. Muscle memory forced his right hand over his shoulder, fingers curling to draw fletching. They scraped against empty leather. Digging deeper into the quiver, his thumb caught on a jagged edge—the splintered nock of a single, broken shaft.

Useless.

He dropped his hand from the torn leather. To steady his uneven gait, Theron pressed a palm to the wall. The floor tilted gently underfoot, each slab of stone slicked with algae. Cold needles pricked his fingertips, travelling up his forearm in a fine, careful thread. Slivers of light ran through the rock like buried veins, pulsing in sync with his own erratic heartbeat and vanishing whenever he tried to pin them with his gaze. They moved single file, hands to stone, mouths closed. The passage bent, then bent again, twisting deeper into the dark. Twice the thin, bitter curl

of burning green wood drifted past, vanishing the moment he turned for it, leaving only the mineral breath of earth and the heavy thud of his own pulse.

Nyxantera's pale shape kept ahead of them, a quiet lantern in the gloom. Veins along the walls brightened in her passing and faded back to shadow. Theron's gaze tracked her shoulder. No broken shaft jutted from the muscle. No blood traced her flank. Her hide shone clean, the skin seamless.

"She is whole," he whispered.

Falric did not answer. The longbow creaked under his tightening grip, the sharp sound lingering in the damp air long after shadows claimed the hard angles of his silhouette.

The floor's slope sharpened. A damp chill tightened across bare cheeks and wrists, beading on the wool of their cloaks before sinking straight to the spine. Water dropped from the ceiling, a heavy, rhythmic tick… tick… against the stone.

"Feel the air?"

Theron's whisper was a dry rasp.

Falric pressed a hand to the rock. Cold moisture slicked his skin. "Condensation. We're close to water."

The buried light flared, clustering into sharp, fractured webs. The light cast long, pale shadows down the passage, guiding them deeper.

A low vibration ground into the marrow of his jaw. The passage ended at a wall, choked by a blunt face of motion. Shadow gave way to a vertical sheet sluicing downward in a thin, even skin. A watery fall ran from arched ceiling to stone floor without a splash, luminous with the same unsettled light as the veins, humming with a low, predatory vitality.

Nyxantera did not hesitate. Stepping up to the moving wall, she lowered her head, listening, then pressed forward. The flowing surface parted around her with no splash and no ripple wide enough to count. Horns slid through, then shoulder and flank; light braided along her hide and then she was gone, the sheen knitting closed behind her. Without

her, the light faded, leaving the tunnel in a heavy, residual gloom that shimmered from the pulse behind the barrier.

Falric stepped into the dimness, forcing two fingers straight into the sheet. The surface silvered around the touch, cool, slick, resisting with the density of stone. A sharp chill bit into his marrow, drawing the heat from his blood. He jerked them back. His skin was dry, but the fingertips remained ghostly pale.

Theron stepped in, pressing the heel of his palm straight into the fall. Rushing weight moved over skin—a cool, heavy fluid—yet the barrier held firm. The same numbing thrum climbed his forearm, a deadening chill settling deep behind his ribs. Fingers pulled back. The skin was dry.

Falric stared at the shimmering pane. His hand remained locked on the bow's grip, his knuckles a series of hard, white ridges.

Theron's jaw set.

"Why did it take her and not us?"

Falric looked at the sheet and the pulse beyond. "Because she belongs here."

Theron swallowed. A tight click echoed in his throat. His hands were pale, waxen things, the edges blurring in the dimness. His fingers closed with a slow, grinding reluctance. The cold wasn't a temperature anymore; it was a thief stripping the life from his bones.

"I think we're the key. The Orc hunters didn't lose our trail, they herded us—driving us like cattle toward a butcher-gate." Theron's whisper scraped against the damp.

A hollow cold carved out the centre of his chest. He turned to Falric. A sluggish ache locked his joints, the skin pulling tight and bloodless over the bone. "This place wants us alive. I don't like this."

He held up his hands. "By the gods, Falric, look at them. It's drinking us. I'm not staying here to wait for the mountain to decide we've paid enough. I'm going back to the air."

Falric exhaled, controlled. "The woods won't let us leave, Theron."

"I'd rather die under a sky I know than in this throat. We leave. Now."

He turned before Falric could answer. Without the door's light, the gloom closed in, thick, heavy, forcing movement by touch. Numb fingers brushed the cold stone walls, reading the cruel map of the rock. Seven bends, then a longer straight, then three sharp turns that should have led back to the entrance and the forest air. Instead, the tunnel bent, then bent again, laying them back in the same place—facing the same watermarked barrier, the same pale pulse.

Theron stopped short, his jaw tightening. He stared at Falric—at the man who had led them into the throat, whose certainty had been the compass that brought them to a dead-end loop. For a jagged heartbeat, Theron hated Falric's rigid spine—the exact unyielding certainty that had marched better men into the dirt before them. The world was drinking them whole.

"The trap is shut," Theron said.

Falric nodded once.

"Then we have no choice. We try to push through together, or we stay in this grave." He leaned his longbow against the cold stone of the tunnel, a curved shadow left to the dark.

The wood tipped against the rock. Theron's thumb worked the frayed hilt wrap of his sword, tracing the deep grooves worn into the leather by his father's grip before him. He stepped up to the sheet. Together they set their palms against the cold gleam, ready to push.

For a breath, the surface remained only shine and slow pulse. Liquid flowed over skin, never falling to the stone floor. Then something on the far side found them. Pressure closed from within the flow. The sheen tightened around their fingers, crept to their knuckles, climbed their wrists. A cuff of light drew tight. Dry skin met dry light. Caught.

The wet doorway took hold of Falric's palm, dragging him forward. "What—"

The ward pulled, not a tug but a decision. The sheen tightened. The last scent of the larch-wood and the cold river-mist vanished from their

cloaks, replaced by a mineral sterility that smelled like bone-dust and ancient stone. Their hands went first, the wall swallowing them to the wrists, forearms slipping after without wetness or weight, ribs meeting a cool void with no temperature at all.

"Oh gods!" Theron managed. The ward pulled them through. The dark snapped shut.

Chapter 3 - Into the Sanctum

The door spat them out in a rush of cold air. Spray slicked the wet granite, stealing the purchase from beneath Theron's boots before he could plant his weight. Grit bit into Theron's heels; his toes scythed empty air as his balance collapsed. The drop yawned—wet, mouthless, and pulling at his chest with fingers inside his ribs—and the metallic tang of deep water rose from the dark.

Weight tipped. The ledge slid past his eye-line. Nothing waited but depth.

"Fal—!"

The name snapped off in his throat. A fistful of his tunic pulled taut as Falric seized him. Fabric bunched, threads groaned, and then popped. Leather rasped over grit, followed by the sharp, anchoring crack of Falric's knee against the stone. For a heartbeat they both tilted into the void, suspended by nothing but stretching linen and a seam screaming under the weight.

Hauling Theron toward him, Falric slammed him onto the rock a full pace from the edge. Bone-deep tremors seized Theron's frame, reducing his breath to ragged gasps that sawed the hush to pieces. Scraping backward in short shifts, they put a safe span of granite between their boots and the drop. Only the frantic drum-work inside his own ribs filled the silence.

Meeting Falric's gaze, Theron gave a single, tight nod. He forced his breathing to slow, counting the heavy strikes of his pulse until the cavern's quiet knitted itself back together. A suffocating smell of cold copper flooded the ledge, followed by a low, watery vibration that hummed through the granite beneath his boots. Metallic hisses rang out, too loud for the dead space. Theron drew his sword, the familiar weight of the hilt offering little comfort against the vastness.

A wet, heavy thud resounded behind them. Theron's shoulders bunched, his spine tightening in a sudden, icy knot. He turned to see the watery doorway seal, the fluid gathering into a still pane that swallowed its own shimmer and left only the heavy, brine-rot stench of depth.

Ahead, a grey wash brightened into a raw, hollow glare. The ledge jutted into space, stone falling away on every side. Mist coiled upward from a cavern vast beyond counting. Shadows swallowed the ceiling. Along the wall's curving lip, mineral

curtains hung in heavy folds—razor-thin sheets of stone with edges keen enough to flay.

Theron peered over the lip, breath hitching. Far below, the lake lay suspended. A dark, iron-cold skin concealed fathoms of depth, unbroken and motionless.

At the far end of the ledge, Nyxantera stood as a pale sigil against the gloom, burning with a cold, internal glare. As the cavern wind groaned, shifting down then up, pressure cycled against Theron's eardrums, drawing the dead air thin and sharp. A metallic, ozone-tinged chill pricked his skin, pulling his gaze toward the tower rising from the black water. It stood stark enough to tighten his stomach—an impossible landmark that felt an arm's length away yet receded into a blur of shifting mist and distance. Clean, sharp masonry climbed toward the drowned ceiling, culminating in a narrow skirt of rock that jutted from the tower's side, choked by crawling fog.

The tower pressed near, yet the dark insisted it was distant. Something sat upon the summit—low, squat, and hard to name.

Theron squinted at the tower's face. A relief emerged from the grey wash, more fog than stone. He traced the lines: a woman's profile, seven braids falling beneath a crown of thorn-like points. A single hand reached outward.

The stone around her had been savaged. Methodical, frantic strikes—deep, concentrated gouges—had torn away the sigils that once framed her face. The violence spared the woman alone, leaving her haloed by a ring of empty, desperate scars.

Falric stepped closer. His gaze crawled over the relief, tracing the braids, the crown, the jagged scoring with a cold, detached scrutiny.

"Who is she?" Theron asked. His voice sounded brittle, thin in the throat. He kept it low, not for fear of echo, but for fear of being answered.

Falric shook his head. "No one I recognize. Just a ghost carved in rock." He turned away, dismissing the stone to scan the deeper dark.

Nyxantera lifted her head. The cavern wind shifted. Down, then up, then down again. The pressure cycled against Theron's eardrums, pulling and pushing the dead air in a slow, colossal respiration. Below, the lake did not lie flat. It puckered in a slow, repeating pattern, pressing upward against the water's skin with methodical, unseen touches.

A prickle raced along his scalp. "We shouldn't be here."

"We are here." Falric's voice sounded distant.

The water stirred with the slow, heavy draw of a lung. It swelled hand-spans at a time, heaving upward beneath the dark skin before subsiding in a long, measured

exhale. Up, shoulders of black liquid lifting toward the ledge. Down, settling flat, yet never as low as before. The vastness beneath the surface inhaled to raise the lake, exhaling to lay it down.

Theron stared, the motion catching in his throat. It wasn't water; it was a held thought. It reflected nothing. It admitted nothing. Yet it moved in measured steps, creeping closer to his boots with every beat.

"Falric." His voice rasped, thin and tight. "Look at the surface. It's climbing."

Before Falric could answer, the far end of the ledge flared. Nyxantera kindled into a pale, blinding intensity—a dawn trapped inside bone. Radiance bled along the stone, a spill of liquid gold that devoured the shadows and turned the cavern into a hollow, aching white.

Nyxantera lifted a hoof, placing it deliberately into the void beyond the lip. No stumble marred the movement, only a cold, absolute surrender of weight. As she shifted, gravity claimed her and she dropped toward the liquid.

She struck the black skin with the force of falling iron. The surface bowed beneath her—stubborn, skin-tight—yet the dark water did not tear. She sank into the black, silent and complete.

Theron stumbled back, heel scraping the stone. His chest tightened, a frigid pressure blooming behind his ribs. "She didn't break it, Falric." His voice sounded thin, brittle. "The water—it didn't even ripple."

Falric did not answer. With a harsh scrape of steel, he slammed his sword into its scabbard. Turning from the drop, he scrambled back to the rock face and shoved his palms against the weeping seal. It was no longer an open threshold. A silent, heavy cascade of fluid sheeted down an unseen, vertical plane, pouring in an endless weight but spilling nowhere.

Theron was a heartbeat behind him, sheathing his own blade with a metallic rattle before plunging both hands into the freezing, vertical current beside his mentor. Together they heaved, throwing their combined weight against the drowning barrier. The liquid parted around his wrists, and the transparent surface beneath flexed—cool and slick with the heavy, muscular give of deep water—but it held firm. They were the key, yet the lock had been changed.

Falric broke contact first. He stepped away with a sharp exhale, snapping his wrists to throw off the freezing current. Theron followed a heartbeat later, thrashing at the numbing ache in his fingertips. The chill sat marrow-deep.

A stench of stagnant brine and ancient rot surged upward, choking the dead air. It turned raw against his teeth, a heavy, freezing pressure settling tight across his ribs. A wet, rhythmic sloshing echoed from the void. It rose in a single slow heave and didn't fall back. Another breath.

Falric stared into the abyss, jaw tightening as he measured the water's steady, rhythmic rise. He swore, a jagged sound in the gloom, then snapped his head away from the black tide to scan the receding darkness for a way out.

The next swell reached them. A tongue of iron-cold liquid slid over the lip, slicking around Theron's boots. He jerked back with a sharp gasp, the vibration of the stone beneath him faltering. The ledge was shrinking. Inch by inch, the solid world drowned.

"We aren't waiting to drown." Falric's hand clamped onto his arm, fingers biting deep into the muscle. "We jump. We swim for the tower. We find a way out."

Theron stared down at the black lake. It held itself taut—muscle coiled to strike, waiting for the killing blow. "That's not water."

"It doesn't matter what it is." Falric rasped the words, eyes locked on the distant tower's lip.

The cavern inhaled. The black skin gathered beneath them, swelling, depthless. Falric braced himself. He poised to hurl them both into the void.

The dark liquid split. A jagged fissure tore the expanse between them and the tower, vibrating with a low, glassy hum. Stone shouldered up through the black, grinding against the depths in a shudder that sprayed cold mist into the air.

A bridge of raw, wet granite breached the surface. The unnatural tide recoiled, hissing as it slid down the rock until it steadied a mere finger-breadth below the ledge. The bridge groaned, rising until it sat flush with his boots. Droplets beaded along the edges, weeping in clean, rhythmic threads.

What hadn't existed a heartbeat ago now held fast between ledge and tower. A narrow causeway, slick and glistening, cut the lake in two.

Falric's grip tightened. "Invitation."

Theron swallowed against the dry patch in his throat. "Or bait."

They stepped onto the causeway, testing the stone. It was narrow, barely a few paces wide, and wept black fluid along its jagged edges, yet it held under their weight. To either side, the lake lay motionless. It radiated a cold that seeped past his skin, anchoring itself deep within his marrow.

Mist thickened at the tower's base, loosening in small drafts to reveal masonry edges too straight for nature. The structure emerged from the gloom—flat, square, and beaded with moisture. The shape solidified from the fog until it stood revealed. A crushing weight settled against his chest. The air turned cold and biting, radiating from a single focal point: a black stone altar.

It rose from the mist like a bruise on the world. Longer than a tall man could lie, its sides shearing into absolute vertical planes of obsidian. The surface was not merely flat; it was a geometric absolute, level enough to shame a mason's rule, crafted from rock that drank the cavern's weak light rather than reflecting it.

At the base, bones lay tangled. Dominating the pile was a single skull, its lineage betrayed by the heavy, curved tusks rising from the lower jaw—an Orc. It lay haloed by fragments of armour that had suffered a death worse than rust. The steel shards were burned to ash and melted in the same breath, crumbling grey slag that held the memory of shape but none of the strength.

Scattered among the ribs were the remnants of leather gloves, charred by fire rather than decayed by time. One was half-missing, fingers scorched away to the palm. The second remained only as a blackened cuff, fused to the pale bone of the wrist by unnatural heat. The skeleton's arms were thrust forward, fingers splayed against the obsidian base. The spine arched in a violent, frozen spasm, throwing the heavy ribcage backward. The fatal heat had not struck the creature from the shadows. It had detonated outward, blooming from the creature's own empty grip.

There was no weapon in sight.

The mist shifted, revealing a detail rising from the blur: a sliver of vertical brightness at the altar's crown. A trick of wet glimmer held in the air, then thickened into a blade. Steel stood upright, perfectly still, its point driven into a parasitic lump of black rock set upon the altar's top.

Unlike the sheer, geometric obsidian beneath it, this mass was porous and irregular, clinging to the perfect surface like a rusted barnacle. The hilt lifted from the mist, simple and severe.

Theron slowed. The causeway stretched on, flanked by black water. A heavy, displacing pressure vibrated through the granite beneath his boots. He looked down. Movement rippled the dark skin. Not current. Not bubbles. Shapes. Pale hints of limbs and coils grazed the underside of the surface, flickering into the gloom before vanishing.

His boots dragged on the slick stone of the causeway. The pale shapes gliding beneath the black water anchored his gaze, widening the gap between him and his mentor. From his lingering vantage on the bridge, the mist parted over the open water, leaving a clear, unbroken sightline all the way back to the abandoned ledge.

"Falric." His voice came out low and tight. "There's motion under it. On both sides. Shapes. Like things waiting."

The faint, metallic tang of drawn blood cut through the damp air. Falric did not look away from the dagger. "Reflections."

A sickening weight settled deep in Theron's gut, a crushing gravity pulling at the marrow. The dark skin of the lake reflected nothing. With each step he forced to close the distance to Falric, the mist thinned. The rock holding the dagger's point bore a rough, glassy grain, blacker than the altar beneath it. A faint halo of moisture ringed the blade's entry, beads trembling but never falling.

Falric's stride steadied. Every line of him drew toward that single, upright gleam.

The cold radiating from the stone seeped upward through Theron's boots. Dragging steps closed the remaining distance, his gaze still locked on the shapes flowing beneath the black surface. Fingers clamped onto Falric's sleeve. "Listen to me. This is wrong."

Falric eased his arm free without malice, without focus to spare. "Then we'll make it right."

The sharp, chemical sting of bruised ozone cut the dead air. Gaze fused to the dagger, Falric took the last steps onto the wet stone, stopping at the perimeter of the bone-strewn dais. A low, rhythmic thrum vibrated through the floor, settling as a cold pressure at the base of the skull.

Breath came slow. Violet light from the blade's black pommel stone painted the planes of Falric's face. The blade did not reflect the light. It consumed it. The metal was perfect, untouched, carrying the silent weight of steel born from places no sun had reached.

"Falric, we need to find a way out." Theron's voice carried a flat, heavy certainty. "The doe, the water, the bones. None of this obeys the world. Nothing is right."

The mentor's gaze remained locked on the blade-crowned altar.

Theron's boot stepped forward into the ring of remains. The dull, wet thud did not fade; it stretched through the hollow space. Scalding heat flared in his veins. The instinct to drag Falric backward shattered against a crushing pressure seizing his chest, locking words in his throat.

Brittle bone crunched like dry glass underfoot. Soft echoes rose throughout the chamber, twisting into an impossible cadence: laughter bleeding into prayer. Blood roared through Theron's ears. The whispers bypassed the air entirely, vibrating directly against the inside of his skull.

A rigid, hollow grace carried Falric to the altar. Empty palms flattened against the obsidian surface.

The world stopped. The cavern's glow guttered, flickering in weak spasms until the colours bled out. Everything turned pale. Sickly. Stripped of warmth.

Then the whispers changed. They weren't background anymore. They were speaking. The voices spoke no tongue Theron knew, but the grating, multi-tonal cadence matched the forbidden hymns of a past turning. The meaning crawled into the marrow. '*Draw the blade. Break the dark.*'

The sharp tang of ozone and rot coated his tongue; freezing pressure clamped his skull. He staggered backward, slamming a palm against his ear to silence the scream. His fingers spasmed, clawing uselessly at the sword on his thigh. A dead weight. He tried to shove the intrusion away, yet the whispers sank deeper, hooking into his thoughts to drop anchor.

The altar throbbed as bones rattled at its base, the ancient skull rolling with a dry rasp to fix empty sockets upon Theron. Across the dais, Falric's hand rose toward the dagger.

The dead air soured, thick with the sharp scent of crushed flint and ancient dust. A drop in pressure crushed his chest, popping the eardrums. A subsonic thrum vibrated upward through his boots, rattling his teeth. Deep within the bedrock, a massive grinding echoed through the dark—a colossal, wet sigh of shifting plates and waking bone. Fine grey silt bled from the ceiling, whispering down through the violet light. The walls contracted.

A pounding heartbeat shook the air from his lungs. A voice bled through the hush, using the living breath against the breather.

"Falric, look at me." The command carried a flat, heavy certainty. The mentor did not turn.

Theron stared and froze. Falric's outline broke apart. The physical form frayed into the air, threads of the man drifting away to sink into the dark. The cavern was no longer a place. It was a predator, already feeding.

A dry, agonizing friction scraped inside his skull, a silent, grinding pressure forcing all attention toward the altar. The weapon was a flawless length of absolute,

light-consuming perfection, but the hilt lived. A bruised, violent light of deep violet bled from the sigil-lattice, weeping down the dark metal. Woven deep within the dark steel, the heavy engraving of a single, closed eye smouldered with a sullen, ember-red glow.

Between the hilt and the blade, an hourglass glimmered, twin bulbs joined by a narrow throat. The casing caught no illumination. It radiated a cold older than the rock. Inside, crimson sand did not flow. The grains hung static at the neck, trapped in a breathless stasis, defying gravity. His chest locked.

"Do you see it?" Falric's voice fractured the silence. It rang wrong. Too loud. Too bright. Threaded with an alien hunger. Fingers reached, trembling with need.

No! Theron's syllable tasted thin. Too late. Falric's fingers clamped around the dagger's hilt.

Reality did not tear. It yielded.

An iron chill snapped against Theron's marrow, accompanied by the scent of ozone and scorched earth. A low, glass-sharp hum vibrated through the dais as the crimson sand collapsed, pouring through the narrow throat to pool against the steel. Violet light erupted from the hilt, blinding him as the blade tore itself free. The cavern's dim glow bent inward, streaming into the flawless metal. Pale radiance bled over the knuckles.

Falric turned back toward the causeway. A grin split his jaw—triumph, fever, and something ancient wearing the skin. The stale reek of the outer tunnel rushed inward. The crushing atmospheric pressure of the ward vanished. A freezing hollow opened inside Theron's ribs.

Behind the ledge, a wet, heavy slap echoed against the cavern walls. Theron spun. The light shifted. The watery doorway—the only threshold back to the world—buckled. The vertical river dropped. Fluid smashed across the granite in a heavy spray, rolling in silent beads to join the black lake below.

A boot caught on the slick granite. He stumbled backward, retreating from the collapsed exit. The instinct to shout a warning flared, then burned away to nothing. There was no mentor left to warn. Only that grinning, alien mask waiting behind him. Pivoting back to face the altar, a scream surged up his throat and died against clenched teeth.

The porous lump resting on the altar did not crack. It convulsed.

A wet, heavy beat distended the irregular rock, stretching the surface like a membrane. Another thud followed, violent enough to shake dust from the air. The

frantic, hammering pulse in his throat vanished, swallowed by the scale of the sound. The rhythm took hold, impossibly slow and insistent: a buried rhythm screaming that its cycle had come.

The parasitic stone bruised purple, then a wet, luminous crimson. It flushed like a translucent organ stripped of its cage. Then the surface tore. Fissures webbed the block with veins of pale fire. The air froze, biting sharp enough to snap the moisture inside his nose. A low hum vibrated through his teeth. The taste of metal and salt flooded his tongue.

The mineral skin peeled back. Charred fragments fell away in crisp, scab-like flakes.

At the core, something red and slick pressed outward. A slow, muscular push.

A heart.

Bright as fresh coals, the organ pulsed, free of the calcified shell. But the beating did not echo in isolation. It anchored the empty space around it.

The air surrounding the organ thickened into solid form. Transparency gathered on the slab like cooling glass, sketching an outline: a shoulder, the slope of a ribcage, the hollow of a throat. The shape inhaled nothing, yet the chest lifted. The heart tethered itself to this ghost-form with cords of light that sank into the forming tissue and vanished.

Layers of matter accumulated, sinew knitting from the shine and bone hardening from the brightness. Mist coalesced into skin, taking on the rough, porous grain of living flesh. For a single breath the silhouette mimicked a woman, but the lines sharpened into a geometry that felt wrong, uncanny in its balance, too composed to be mortal, too precise to be kind.

The colour in the heart deepened with every beat. The figure on the altar clarified, the last of its translucence fading into a heavy, breathing reality. Frost misted from parted lips as a pulse throbbed in the hollow of that newly formed throat.

This was not a heart beating alone. It was an organ arriving to claim its owner. And the owner had arrived.

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