



Der geerbte Turm

Eine Geschichte im Kynéxis-Universum

Kairos Prime

The Legacy Tower

A Tale of the Kynéxis Universe

Kairos Prime

Six strangers, who had never met before,
ready to step into an adventure.
An inheritance to be tested,
a solitary tower upon a clearing—
what seems a simple task
becomes their first trial together.

Imprint

The Legacy Tower

A tale by Kairos Prime

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For all
who dare to glimpse, in ancient walls, something greater
than cold stone.

*“The tower was there before the first stones marked the borders.
It witnessed our coming—
and fell silent once we learned to fear it.”*

- From the notes of a Binder, Threshold Archive,
Fragment 112

Prologue - The Tower

Night lay upon the fields like a heavy shroud, starless and unmoving. From the drifting mists a tower rose, stark and solitary, a fang of stone biting at the sky. Its narrow windows shone with no light, yet those who gazed too long upon the silhouette swore they glimpsed a faint glow beneath the masonry—something like breath within the stone.

In the village they whispered that the tower was older than the town itself. Some said it was raised by the first bind-weavers, who roamed the young world when all was still raw and unshaped. Others spoke of an inheritance never meant to be claimed, for every master of the tower had vanished in time—some without a trace, others leaving nothing but a scream in the night.

One shepherd boy, bold enough to stray into the tower's shadow, swore the stones were warm to the touch, like living flesh. An old fisherman claimed that under the full moon he had seen the walls shifting, the mortar seams crawling as though alive. None could prove the tales, yet all kept their distance.

One truth alone endured: to inherit the tower was to inherit the fear that clung to it. And now, as a new name bore its seal, the tower waited once more. Patient. Silent.

Chapter 1 - The Posting

The bell of the town hall tolled, a dull reverberation that rolled across the square and briefly crested like a wave above the tangle of voices, merchants' cries, and the clatter of hooves. A warm wind carried the scent of fresh bread and tanned leather between the stalls, where bright cloth canopies snapped and fluttered. In the center, upon the stone rondel, children pressed close, staring at the new notice board as though it were a gateway to adventure—though it usually bore only proclamations, trade offers, and the stern warnings of the town council.

That morning, however, a single sheet of parchment drew every eye. Freshly nailed, its bold letters, inked in a firm hand, promised silver and renown:

“Brave souls sought to uncover the truth of the Inheritance Tower. Tales and myths cling to it—its safety must be tested, its dangers contained.”

A sweeping seal at the bottom betrayed not only the wealth of the tower's new owner but also his reluctance—perhaps even his fear—to lay a hand himself upon the stonework of his legacy.

Holdine stood a little apart, her hands clasped tightly behind her back. The silver ring of her order glinted in the sunlight, but it was the fire in her eyes that shone brighter still. She had only just stepped beyond the gates of Sanctum Kreolis, her instructor's words still echoing in her mind: *“Prove yourself out there, child. Not within our halls will your vow be tested, but in the dust of the world.”*

Here, then, was the chance. A first step. A first trial. A tower, a summons—and the promise of no longer being merely a novice.

She stepped closer, reading the lines again as if to etch them into her memory. Yet she hesitated. The script promised silver—but only to a group. And her vow was clear: she was sworn to protect. She would need companions. At least two.

As she wrestled with how to approach strangers, the tread of heavy boots rang across the cobblestones. A woman with cropped hair pushed through the crowd, a staff at her hip and a sword strapped across her back. Her eyes were sharp, assessing, not reverent—more like one accustomed to work, taking life as it came. Fryda.

Her glance skimmed the notice, brisk and businesslike, before resting on Holdine. For a heartbeat the market's clamor seemed to ebb, as though the first faint thread between them had been drawn.

“You too?” Holdine asked before she could stop herself. Her voice came out too rigid, as if she were back in the training yard reciting commands.

Fryda measured her with a glance—the silver ring, the stiff posture. “I’m looking for work, not a vow,” she said curtly, though not unkindly. “But if there’s silver to be had—why not.”

Holdine squared her shoulders. “The posting calls for a group. At least three. I swore to protect those who fight beside me. If you... if you join, that is the first step.”

Fryda raised a brow. “Protect me? I’ve carried staff and blade for years. I don’t need a hand to guide me.” Yet a quick grin tugged at her mouth when she saw the fire in Holdine’s face. “But if it pleases you—protect me. Who knows, perhaps you’ll even save my skin.”

Holdine nodded solemnly, as if a pact had been sealed. Fryda shook her head, amused, then said, “We’re still one short. Without three, we’ve no right to claim that seal.”

At that moment a young man edged through the crowd, his hair tousled, a bundle of books clutched under his arm. His gaze latched onto the posting at once, as if he had been waiting for it. He murmured phrases like incantations and traced the seal absently with a fingertip.

“Another one,” Fryda muttered.

“Perhaps the one we need,” Holdine answered.

The youth laid his books carefully on the rim of the fountain, as though loath to let them touch the grimy cobbles. Ink still stained his sleeve, and a bent quill rested between his fingers.

“The seal is genuine,” he murmured, studying the parchment. “The patron must command considerable wealth.”

Fryda folded her arms. “And you are?”

“Cjendadz,” he said without hesitation. “Adept of Bindings, trained at the Institute of Reinforcement. My studies are complete. Now I seek my first true task. This tower seems... fitting.” His eyes gleamed at the last word,

as though he had already glimpsed something in the mists of legend.

Holdine stepped closer. “Then we are three. Order knight, warrior, binding mage. Together we can claim the seal.”

“We can,” Fryda echoed dryly. “But what if one of us takes a blade in that tower, or a stair crumbles beneath us? We’ve no one to tend wounds. I’ve no desire to bleed out on my first job.”

Cjendadz nodded gravely. “She is right. Every record of expeditions stresses the need for a healer or one skilled in restorative bindings. Even the strongest fall without support.”

Holdine’s gaze swept the square, past the merchants calling their wares and children racing round the fountain. “Then it is settled,” she said at last. “We three will take the posting—once we find a fourth. Someone who can heal when the moment comes.”

For a breath they stood together in silence, three strangers bound by something not yet known, but already felt.

Around them, the crowd’s chatter pressed in again:

“A tower older than the town itself, I tell you! My grandfather swore the stones shuddered whenever the east wind blew.”

“Nonsense,” snapped a market woman, shifting her baskets of apples. “Just tales. But every heir vanished, you can’t deny that. Even the last one—what was his name...?”

“Taron,” rasped an old fellow hunched by the fountain, a

mug of ale in his hand. “Claimed the inheritance, three days later they found nothing but his boots at the door.” His laughter was harsh, without mirth.

A freckled child giggled. “My sister says shadows climb the walls at full moon. Touch them and you’re gone forever.” “Bah!” A trader spat on the cobbles. “Stories, all of it. If there’s silver, let some fool try. But it won’t be me.”

The three said nothing. For a heartbeat the market seemed to fall silent, save for the parchment fluttering in the wind—as though it whispered: *Come, if you dare.*

Holdine’s hand closed around her sword hilt, almost like a vow.

“Then we find one who can heal,” she said firmly. “Only when we are whole will we stand before the patron.”

Fryda gave a soft snort. Cjendadz inclined his head. And as the notice quivered in the wind, something like resolve settled between them for the first time.

Chapter 2 - The Search for Healing

By late afternoon they had left the clamor of the square behind, winding through the narrow lanes at the city's edge. The scent of spices and roasting meat gave way to damp timber and wet stone. Soon only the creak of old shutters in the wind accompanied them as they made for the eastern gate.

“So,” Fryda began, resting her staff lazily against her shoulder, “where do we find someone to stitch us back together when things get ugly?”

Cjendadz shifted the books in his satchel. “Healers are rare—true binding-healers rarer still. But in the countryside there are herbalists. Some of them work with more strength than they realize.”

“Unconscious binding?” Holdine asked keenly.

“Sometimes,” Cjendadz nodded. “Nature itself balances what human hands cannot.”

They passed through the city gate; the guards, bored and listless, barely glanced their way. Beyond stretched a narrow country road that vanished into the fields.

The path first wound through rolling hills. Farmers pushed carts piled with turnips and onions. Dogs barked, geese scattered as Fryda strode impatiently through their midst. An old man leading a donkey raised a warning hand. “If you’re bound for the forest, take care. Strange sounds have been heard these past nights.”

“More stories,” Fryda muttered, but Holdine returned the greeting with solemn courtesy.

The nearer they drew to the woods, the quieter it became. Fields gave way to lone fruit trees, scattered like watchmen. A hare darted through the grass; crows shrieked in the distance. The wind carried the scent of damp earth.

Halfway along they nearly stumbled over an old trap: a rusted iron jaw half-buried in the soil. Holdine crouched, brushing away the dirt. “Freshly set,” she murmured. “Someone hunts here.”

“Then we’re close,” Cjendadz replied. “The herbalist must be near.”

Before they could go on, a sharp crack of branches made them pause. A startled deer bolted from the undergrowth, and a voice rang out: “Stop where you are! Another step and you’ll land in my snares!”

Only a few paces off the road stood a young woman in a plain leather vest, a bow slung over her shoulder, a basket of herbs hooked in the crook of her arm. Her eyes were watchful, wary—yet there was no fear in her stance.

“You are Krexila?” Holdine asked.

The huntress studied them for a long moment before nodding. “And who are you, that you know my name?”

She lowered the basket carefully into the grass and slid the bow from her shoulder. Not drawn, but ready. Her gaze moved from Holdine to Fryda, to Cjendadz, then back again.

“You trample through my ground like oxen in a garden,” she said coolly. “Keep to the path, if you don’t want to end up in my traps.”

Fryda folded her arms. “We’re not here to quarrel.”

“Good,” Krexila returned. She crouched, rummaging in her basket until she drew out a handful of plants—leaves, flowers, roots—which she sorted with practiced ease. With deft fingers she bound them into a bundle, rubbing stems together until a sharp fragrance rose. “For a scrape, this keeps the rot out. Better than the brandy your city-healers pour on.”

Holdine watched intently. The woman moved with surety, as though she belonged to the earth itself. Her hands were its instruments, and the traps and bow spoke of one who both gathered and hunted.

Cjendadz leaned forward, fascinated. “You know more than plants. You know how to strengthen the body.”

Her eyes flashed, a mixture of pride and suspicion. “I know the forest. I know the game. And I know how to use both without waste.”

Holdine stepped closer. “We need someone to come with us—someone who can tend wounds. Without a healer it would be folly to accept the posting at the board.”

Krexila frowned. “A healer?” She shook her head, tying off the bundle. “I’m no scholar, no scribe of charms. I can clean cuts, set bones, ease fevers. No more.”

“Often that’s all we need,” Fryda said. “When a blade bites deep, sometimes it’s just a steady hand that keeps you alive.”

Cjendadz studied her closely. “But the plants you use—they carry more power than you admit. I can sense... bindings.”

“Nonsense,” Krexila snapped. “I gather what grows. If it heals, it’s because nature meant it so—not because of your talk of magic.”

Silence lingered. The wind rustled through the branches; a crow croaked somewhere unseen. Then, quieter, almost reluctant, Krexila added: “But there is another. A being I’ve met, deeper in the woods. It understands the bonds of nature far better than I ever could. It heals as if the world itself were its source. If you seek more than poultices and salves—speak with it.”

“A being?” Holdine asked.

Krexila nodded. “It calls itself Tsaluah. Half human, half bird, half lizard... I cannot name it otherwise. It has never done me harm. Yet it is strange all the same.”

Cjendadz’s eyes shone as though he had unearthed treasure. “A natural binder...” he whispered. “That could save us.”

Holdine inclined her head. “Then lead us to it.”

Krexila regarded them for a long while, as if reading their faces for folly or truth. She checked her snares, shouldered her basket, adjusted her bow. And so they stood, four at the forest’s edge, the voices of the city already distant, the shadows of the trees before them.

“If you truly wish it,” she said evenly, “I will take you to Tsaluah. But I promise nothing. It chooses for itself whom it will follow.”

Holdine nodded; Fryda gave a shrug; Cjendadz gazed into the gathering dark with eyes alight.

Their first steps crunched over needles and leaf litter, and with them began something greater than a summons tacked to a board.

Chapter 3 - The Search for Tsaluah

The forest embraced them before the sun had fully slipped behind the hills. Light fractured in the canopy—now gold, now shadow—as if the trees themselves had chosen who was welcome, and who was not.

Holdine's hand strayed to her sword hilt when the crack of a branch behind her sounded too much like footsteps.

“Everything here feels... watchful,” she murmured.

“The forest is always watchful,” Krexila answered softly, almost reverently. “It hears all who enter. You are only too loud not to notice.”

A breeze stirred the undergrowth, sending leaves whirling. Fryda glanced over her shoulder. “I swear something just moved.”

“A fox, perhaps,” Krexila said, not slowing. Her eyes swept the earth for signs, a quick nod, then a hushed call: “This way.”

Cjedadz followed in silence, his fingers sketching faint patterns in the air as if testing unseen bonds. The deeper they went, the more strongly he felt a resonance—not threatening, but strange, like a song whose words he could not yet understand.

“There is something here,” he said at last. “Something neither beast nor tree.”

Krexila gave a faint, knowing smile, like a teacher humoring a gifted pupil. “Now you begin to hear. But it is still far.”

A low sound echoed through the distance—neither animal nor human, but caught between. Holdine's breath stilled, Fryda tightened her grip on her staff. Only Krexila remained calm, as if she had recognized a familiar voice.

“Tsaluah knows we are here,” she said. “It has been watching us all along.”

They pressed on, deeper beneath the ancient boughs. Light faded, smothered by the lattice of leaves, and with it their sense of time. Each step seemed too loud on the soft loam, each breath too heavy.

“There.” Cjendadz knelt, hand hovering above a hollow in the moss. An imprint—wider than a human's foot, yet edged with claws that had scored the soil.

“Not deer. Not boar,” Fryda muttered, frowning.

“No,” Krexila said evenly. “Tsaluah's mark. Broad, but upright. Human-shaped, but heavier.” She spoke as though recognizing a pattern long known.

Holdine brushed her fingers across the grooves. A chill raced her spine. “It's fresh.”

A little farther on, a lone feather clung to a branch. Dark, edged with shimmer, as though it had stolen the moonlight into itself. Cjendadz lifted it carefully between thumb and finger. “The binding within this... it is as if it still breathes.”

“For me it's only a feather,” Fryda muttered, but her voice was quieter now.

Then they came upon a tree whose bark was strange: a deep split had run the trunk, yet instead of gaping raw it

had been drawn shut by threads unseen. The wood was healed, its grain closing where it should have torn apart.

“No forester could do this,” Holdine whispered.

Krexila touched the seam gently, almost tender. “Tsaluah mends what is broken. Trees. Animals. Sometimes... people.”

A shiver passed through them. They knew now they were not chasing rumor. The being was real—and close.

A sudden gust swept the canopy, the leaves hissing like a thousand whispers. For a heartbeat Holdine swore she heard footsteps beside the path—too heavy for deer, too deliberate for wolves. She slid her blade partway free, the sound sharp and out of place among the voices of the forest.

“Put it away,” Krexila murmured without lifting her voice. “Weapons only make it wary.”

“Wary?” Fryda narrowed her eyes at the shadows. “That thing leaves tracks bigger than my head. If it were wary of us, we’d never have known it was here.”

Then a branch snapped—loud, close—so that even Cjendadz froze. “It is watching us,” he whispered. His fingers traced unseen signs, a faint glow flickering between the gestures. “The bindings here... they flow like water, and we are the stone breaking the current.”

“Not you,” Krexila said softly, hands open. “All of us.”

A cry split the forest—strange, familiar, unnerving. Part raptor, part human, part something else altogether. Fryda

raised her staff, Holdine stepped forward to shield Krexila. But Krexila did not move; a small smile touched her lips.

“That is its voice.”

A shadow slipped between the trunks. Then two eyes appeared, glowing not like fire but like moonlight dimly mirrored on water. A figure emerged: tall, upright, humanoid in shape, yet feathered in hues of dusk. Hands ended in talons. A beak curved sharp and cruel. Behind, a heavy tail balanced its stride.

Tsaluah.

The air itself seemed to shift as it approached—not heavy, not menacing, but as though the forest drew breath with it.

“You are not like the others,” it spoke. The voice was uncanny—both guttural and clear, as if carried by two throats at once. “You step deeper than strangers are allowed. Why?”

None answered at first. Holdine fought the urge to raise her shield, Fryda’s body was taut with caution, Cjendadz trembled in awe. Only Krexila stepped forward.

“They seek you,” she said simply. “As once I found you.”

A rasp—half growl, half laugh? Tsaluah tilted its head, the curve of its beak glinting in the dim light. “And yet it is not me they seek—but what I might give.”

“Healing,” Holdine said. Her voice steadier than she felt. “We do not ask you to fight for us. Only to walk beside us—so that none of us is left behind if we fall.”

Tsaluah's eyes shimmered, reflecting something they could not see. "Many have come with such pleas. Few returned." It bowed its head, feathers settling. "But you are not many. You are only... beginning."

For a long moment silence reigned, broken only by the rustle of the leaves. Then Tsaluah reached out a clawed hand, brushing lightly across the healed scar of the tree.

"I will not decide today," it said at last. "Meet me when the moon leaves the forest and the sun returns. Where the river kisses the stone. Then I will give you my answer."

With a sudden sweep it spread its arms, feathers rushing like a storm of leaves. One leap—and it vanished among the trees, as if it had never been.

Only the feather in the moss remained, glowing faintly in the fading light.

Long they stood, staring at the place where Tsaluah had been. The forest was calm again, yet the air seemed changed—charged with expectation.

Fryda broke the silence first. "Half man, half beast... and we are to travel with it? I don't like it."

"It was not hostile," Holdine replied steadily. "It tested us, nothing more. And we did not falter."

Cjendadz's fingers trembled as he traced the feather. "Did you feel it? The bindings, as though the forest itself breathed through it. If Tsaluah joins us, we gain more than a healer."

"Or more than we can control," Fryda muttered.

Krexila hefted her basket once more. “It did not reject you. That is more than most receive. Be grateful.”

The three exchanged uncertain glances. Resolve had not yet taken root. But as they turned back through the gathering dark, Tsaluah’s voice lingered in their minds—an echo of a decision yet to come.

Chapter 4 - Zoltian

Dusk painted the sky in shades of violet as they returned through the eastern gate. The market's voices had softened; merchants folded their carts, children chased the last threads of daylight through the alleys.

Holdine looked thoughtful. "We have a lead. Tomorrow at dawn we meet Tsaluah by the river. Only then will we know if it will walk with us."

"Until then, we're too few," Fryda muttered. "Four won't be enough if the Tower truly holds all the whispers claim."

"We are not alone," Krexila answered, more firmly than she intended. "The forest stands with us. And perhaps Tsaluah as well."

Cjendadz cradled the feather as though it were treasure, wrapping it carefully in cloth. "It will come. I know it."

They had scarcely stepped onto the square before the town hall when they saw someone leaning against the notice board—not solemn, as Holdine had that morning, but relaxed, almost mocking. A man with dark hair, narrow face, and a vest more patch than fabric. In his hand he twirled a small knife as if it were a toy.

"Already a band, is it?" His grin widened as he spotted the four. "Order knight, fighter, bookworm, herb-gatherer. Looks almost like the beginning of a hero's tale."

Fryda crossed her arms. "And you are?"

"Zoltian," he replied with a half-bow balanced somewhere between mockery and charm. "Survivor, performer,

sometimes a door-opener—depending on what's needed. I read the posting. Figured anyone heading into a tower full of myths might need someone who finds doors that prefer to stay shut.”

Holdine regarded him gravely. “Or someone who locks them behind us.”

“Depends who pays me,” Zoltian said, grin unbroken.

Krexila gave a soft snort. “I'd wager you're quicker with your hands in my basket than at any door.”

“Only when I'm hungry,” he laughed. “But I don't bite. Not often.”

A brief silence fell. Then Fryda glanced at the others. “He might be useful—if he doesn't lighten our purses first.”

“Then I swear,” Holdine said firmly, “that I will keep him in sight. And if he turns against us, I will protect you—from him.”

Zoltian clapped his hands as if she had offered him the warmest welcome. “Then we're agreed.”

“So,” he went on, flicking the knife between his fingers, “if you mean to take the job, why wait? Go in, claim the silver, get it done.”

“Not without Tsaluah's word,” Holdine shook her head. “We are not yet whole.”

“Whole?” Fryda barked a dry laugh. “We're five already. More than most mercenary bands muster. Wait too long, and someone else might snatch the task.”

“A tower like that steals nothing,” Krexila cut in. “It only takes those foolish enough to go in unprepared.”

Cjendadz nodded slowly. “We’ve seen what Tsaluah can do, even without joining us. With it, we would carry more than healing into the Tower. Without it... we walk into peril.”

“Peril is my second name,” Zoltian grinned. “The first is profit.”

“And that,” Holdine said sternly, “is why I will not take a step until Tsaluah has given its answer. I have sworn to protect my companions. And for that, we must not walk in unprepared.”

Fryda pulled a face but said no more. Instead she turned to Zoltian. “Get used to it. Our leader here likes her vows.”

Holdine opened her mouth to protest, but Krexila touched her arm. “Better to go with caution. The Tower will not run away.”

Zoltian shrugged, slipping the knife away. “As you will. But if we’re to wait, then someone drinks with me. Or I won’t last the night.”

By the time lanterns flickered, they had found a low doorway beneath a creaking sign: *The Copper Pan*. The scent of smoke and roasting fat drifted out.

“Perfect,” Zoltian said. “An evening without ale is like a purse without coin.”

They took a rough-hewn table. The innkeeper brought mugs heavier than Cjendadz liked. Fryda clinked hers against Holdine's with a grin, drained it in three gulps, and ordered another.

“I underestimated you,” Holdine murmured, before setting her own mug to her lips. She drank slower, but left hers just as empty.

Krexila sipped as if it were water and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. “Nothing compared to the berry spirits we burn in winter. But it warms.”

Cjendadz lifted his mug cautiously, sniffed, and grimaced. “Too bitter.” He took a sip, coughed, and Fryda burst out laughing. “What’s wrong, adept? The bindings in ale too strong for you?”

“I prefer wine,” he croaked, which only made the laughter louder.

Zoltian drummed the table. “You’re a strange lot. But maybe that makes you interesting. An oath-sister who drinks like a soldier, a huntress who downs liquor like water, a fighter with a barrel for a stomach, and a mage who sways after a single mug. What could possibly go wrong?”

They laughed, they teased—and for the first time since the posting, they were not just sitting beside each other, but truly together.

Later, when the mugs stood empty and the voices had risen, Zoltian leaned back, grin broad. “So. You’re no

heroes for ballads. But you're no fools either. Maybe that's the best mix."

"Ballads?" Fryda scoffed. "If anyone sings of us, it'll be because we drank the tavern dry."

"Or because tomorrow we are too few," she added, though her eyes held less scorn than respect.

Holdine kept silent, hands tight around her mug. Her gaze drifted over the faces at the table—stern, mocking, curious, calm—and for a moment she felt it: This was the beginning. At last her vow bore weight.

Cjendadz blinked, already swaying from the ale, and Krexila chuckled softly as he nearly spilled his drink. For an hour, the Tower seemed far away—yet all of them knew it was waiting still.

Chapter 5 – By the River

The sun still hung low when they reached the river. Mist lay across the water like a veil, the current lapping softly against the stones. Where the stream struck a jut of rock, the light fractured into a thousand shards—golden, silver, shimmering all at once.

They waited in silence. Holdine stood with her head high, as though she herself were being judged. Fryda pressed her staff into the earth, boots scuffing with impatience.

Cjendadz knelt at the bank, his fingers hovering just above the surface, tracing some unseen melody. Krexila sat in the grass, as if this place were her own hearth.

Then the air changed—not with sound, but with a silence of another kind. A shadow moved across the fog, and Tsaluah stepped from the shifting mists, as though born of water and light. It seemed not to arrive, but to reveal itself—as if it had always been waiting for them to find the right place.

“You have come,” it said. The voice was softer than the night before, yet filled the morning like a second breath.

“As agreed,” Holdine replied.

Tsaluah tilted its head, feathers catching the first touch of sunlight. “I have seen you. In your steps, in your doubts, in your laughter. You carry more than weapons and knowledge. You carry one another. For this, I will walk with you.”

Fryda let out a breath she had not realized she was holding. Cjendadz's eyes shone, while Krexila only gave a quiet nod, as if the outcome had always been certain.

From the back, Zoltian whistled low through his teeth. "Well then. Looks like we're complete."

Tsaluah moved closer, and for a moment the river's murmur seemed to follow in rhythm with its stride. "Complete," it echoed. "But not finished. For paths change what they bind."

For a while they stood at the water's edge, eyes fixed upon Tsaluah. It did not feel like a choice, but a fact: the being was now part of their road.

"We must seek the patron," Holdine said at last. "Without the seal, we cannot enter the Tower."

"Then go," Tsaluah replied. "The city is not my place. I will wait beyond its walls, where forest and river know me. When you are ready, you will find me there."

Krexila nodded as though such a rule was self-evident. Fryda looked relieved that they would not be parading a feathered being through the streets. Cjendadz lingered, glancing back with something like longing.

"Then it is settled," Holdine declared. "We claim the task—and when we return, we set out together."

Tsaluah inclined its head, feathers glowing in the sunlight. "Together," it said, "until the paths test you."

With those words it remained by the riverbank, while they turned toward the city. Five figures fading into the shadow

of the walls—knowing that, at last, the beginning was truly made.

Chapter 6 - The Patron

The streets were still damp from the morning as they reached the quarter of wealthy merchants. Here the clamor of the marketplace scarcely carried—only the snort of draft horses and the creak of costly wagons echoed through the narrow lanes. The houses rose taller, their facades adorned, iron lanterns hanging before the doors, their glass glittering in the sun.

“So here he sits, fearing his own Tower,” Fryda muttered as they passed beneath an arch with gilded carvings.

“Everyone has their trials,” Holdine replied, though her tone was restrained.

Cjendadz carried Tsaluah’s feather in his pouch as though it were a seal of their fate to come. His eyes wandered, curious, seeking hints of hidden bonds even in the city walls.

Ahead stood a broad house with stone pillars, shutters freshly painted, and a tall gate more show than safeguard. Two servants in simple but clean garb stood before it, hands folded, their eyes scanning the newcomers.

“We’ve come for the notice at the town hall,” Holdine declared. “The task concerning the Tower.”

The servants exchanged a look. Then one opened the gate and gestured to the courtyard. “The master awaits you.”

Inside, the city’s noise fell away. Only the soft trickle of a fountain filled the yard. The air smelled of roses and expensive oil.

“A different world,” Krexila murmured, feeling more a stranger here than in the darkest wood.

“And yet they need us,” Zoltian grinned, winking toward the servants.

The master of the house received them in a lofty hall paneled with dark wood. A man of middle years, well-kept, though his brow was furrowed and his hands were those of a merchant—soft, uncalloused. On the table lay documents and a seal ring, beside an untouched goblet of wine.

“So you are the ones who answered,” he began, leaning back. His gaze measured them: lingered on Fryda’s sword, on Cjedadz’s books, on the ring of Holdine’s order. He nodded, as if reassured they were no beggars.

“It concerns the Tower I inherited. An old structure, as you’ve no doubt heard. People talk much of it. I do not.” His voice was clipped, almost brusque. “What matters to me is simple: Can it be entered safely? Can it be used—or not?”

He tapped two fingers against the table. “That is all you need know. I expect no heroics, no grand discoveries. Only clarity.”

He pushed a small chest toward them. “Your pay is twenty gold. Five upon your return, five more if the Tower is found empty and safe, the remaining ten if it proves fit for use.”

Zoltian whistled softly through his teeth, but Holdine only gave a grave nod. “That will suffice.”

The man produced a parchment sealed with his ring.

“This writ authorizes you to purchase provisions in my name—bread, meat, dried goods, whatever you require. Present it to my merchants.”

Fryda took the document, turning it between her fingers.

“So no excuse to march in empty-handed.”

“Exactly,” the patron said curtly. “Do your part, and I shall do mine.”

He rose, a clear dismissal. “You are free to prepare. I expect you back within two weeks at most.”

The square was alive with voices again when they left the merchant’s courtyard. Vendors shouted their prices, children darted between stalls, the air rich with bread and roasted meat. With the writ in hand, they had no trouble clearing a path—seals opened more doors in this city than any blade.

“Two weeks,” Fryda muttered as they stopped at a baker’s stall. “Generous. Best we provision as if it might last longer.”

“Bread and cured sausage,” Holdine said briskly.

“Something that keeps, something with strength.”

The baker wrapped dark loaves, heavy in the hand, and flatbread for the first days. Next, a butcher cut thick lengths of dried sausage, fit to be fastened at their belts.

At the fountain they bought leather waterskins and two broad packs, sturdy enough to bear food and tools.

Krexila sought out a herb stall, her fingers testing leaves and roots, her gaze sharp. “Willow bark for fever, comfrey

for wounds, sage for the lungs,” she murmured. “And bandages—we’ll need plenty.”

Cjendadz watched her, fascinated, while purchasing a small vial of lamp oil. “One never knows if the Tower gives light—or takes it.”

Fryda slammed a fist against a pack to test its seams. “If this tears in the Tower, I’m not hauling your gear,” she growled. Zoltian only grinned, slipping a few surplus coins from a merchant’s hand with practiced ease.

At last, a modest pile lay at their feet: bread, sausage, dried fruit, waterskins, packs, bandages, a clutch of herbal phials. Not the gear of heroes—but of those who knew that foresight saved more lives than courage.

Holdine rolled the writ once more, tucking it carefully away. “We have what we need. Tomorrow we go—first to Tsaluah. Then to the Tower.”

When all was stowed, they found a shaded corner by a fountain’s wide steps. Water murmured, steady, while the market’s din seemed for a moment more distant.

Fryda tore a flatbread, passed pieces around, and grinned. “All that preparation—and the first bite tastes best of all.”

Holdine accepted hers, chewing in silence, her gaze weighing each companion in turn, as if testing whether they were truly the ones her vow deserved.

Krexila sat beside her, legs stretched, herb basket at her side. She said little, but when a child wandered close to touch the plants, she explained their names with patient ease, as though it were the most natural thing in the world.

Cjendadz sketched lines on parchment with a charred stick, muttering to himself. “If the Tower is built as they say, it must hold binding-lines... perhaps I can trace them.” Fryda leaned over, baffled, then laughed. “As long as you tell me where not to step, that’s enough.”

Zoltian lounged back on the steps, hands behind his head. “You plan as if for a feast. In the end, it may be only a hollow tower filled with cobwebs.”

“Then we will have tested it,” Holdine answered solemnly.

“And still be paid,” Zoltian added, smirking.

For a while they simply sat together, sharing bread, trading words, letting the city’s sounds wash over them. No oath, no banquet—only a quiet hour of time divided and shared. Yet as the sun sank lower, it felt as though something had begun to grow among them—unseen, but real.

Chapter 7 - Departure

Morning still lay over the city when they passed beyond its walls. Mist clung between the rooftops, the first merchants opened their shutters lazily, and only the ring of smiths' hammers echoed through the streets. Their packs were strapped tight, waterskins filled, provisions rattling faintly in their bags—a sober sound that promised more than words.

“At last, out,” Fryda muttered, resting her staff against her shoulder. “Two days of city air is already too much.”

“You’ll miss the stone streets when the forest keeps you awake at night,” Krexila answered with a faint smile.

Cjendadz walked in silence, Tsaluah’s feather wrapped carefully in his satchel. He murmured fragments of formulas, as if ordering them in his mind before the Tower put them to the test.

No one waited at the eastern gate—save for the shadows of trees stretching in the morning light. But when they reached the narrow bend where the river curved, a figure rose from the mist: feathers gleaming, a long tail etching its line in the dew.

Tsaluah.

It stepped from the haze as though it had been there all night, waiting. Its eyes glowed dimly, like the light of a veiled moon.

“You have come,” it said.

“We are whole,” Holdine answered, laying her hand on the hilt of her sword—not as a threat, but as a vow.

Zoltian stepped forward, bowing with mock flourish and a wink. “Then only one thing is missing: the Tower.”

Tsaluah inclined its head, feathers folding close. “The Tower calls. And what sleeps within will test you. Yet you do not walk alone.”

With those words it joined them, and together they took the path deeper into the woods. For the first time, they walked side by side—six figures, bound by more than a commission.

The morning smelled of damp grass and young leaves as the path led them under the canopy. Within moments the forest swallowed the last sounds of the city; only the crack of their steps remained.

“At last, the forest again,” Krexila murmured, brushing her hand across a low shrub. “Here, at least, one knows what is true.”

“Until something moves behind you,” Fryda retorted, but her grip on the staff had tightened.

Sunlight broke through the branches, scattering golden flecks on the ground. For a while they walked in silence, each lost in thought. Then a sudden crash shattered the calm—branches splintered, heavy snorting, leaves thrashing. Holdine’s sword flashed free, Fryda stepped forward, staff raised, Zoltian crouched low and snickered.

A boar burst from the undergrowth, barreled across the path, and vanished back into the thicket. Only the clamor of a startled forest remained.

Fryda exhaled sharply. “Wonderful. Nearly lost a heartbeat over a pig.”

“If you’d slain it,” Zoltian grinned, “we’d have supper already secured.”

Holdine slid her sword back into its sheath, her sternness fading slowly. “The forest tests us in ways we do not expect. Even the smallest beast can break our focus.”

At midday they rested by a brook. Water glimmered over round stones, cold and clear. Cjendadz knelt, fingers circling just above the surface. “The bindings here are strong. There is more than water in its flow.”

“It quenches thirst,” Krexila said simply, filling their skins. “That is enough.”

Zoltian drank, wiped his mouth, and winked. “Tastes like water to me. Perhaps I lack the scholar’s eyes.”

By evening they reached a clearing. Fryda gathered wood, Holdine coaxed fire to life. Krexila steeped herbs in a pot until the steam carried the scent of mint and sage.

“Better than any ale,” she said curtly when Fryda wrinkled her nose.

Zoltian dropped into the grass. “Drink enough of that and you’ll forget the boar’s charge.”

“That was no charge,” Holdine replied sternly.

“Then it was a very frightening pig,” Fryda laughed.

The tension eased. Stories flowed—Fryda of the beatings from her instructors, Zoltian of botched thefts that nearly landed him in chains. Krexila listened, arms wrapped around her knees.

Tsaluah sat apart, hardly touched by the fire’s glow. Only when Cjendadz offered tea did it answer: “The forest feeds me otherwise.” Nothing more—but the words lingered, strange against the homely crackle of the fire.

When night fell, they lay in uneasy rest. Shadows kept their watch, yet so too did the faint thread that now bound them. The first day had passed, and they were still together.

The second dawn brought mist heavy between the trunks, dimming the light, bending each sound. Every step grated, as though the ground betrayed them.

“Everything here sounds as if we’re not alone,” Fryda murmured, her fingers tightening on the staff.

A cry rang out. Distant, but clear—the voice of a man calling for help. They froze, the sound breaking across the trees.

“There’s someone out there,” Holdine said, blade half-drawn.

But Krexila shook her head. “No. Listen closer.”

The call came again—harsher, croaking. And then, from the mist, dozens of ravens burst upward, their wings thrashing the air, their cries like laughter.

Zoltian chuckled grimly. “If even birds toy with us, I dread what the Tower has in store.”

By midday they reached a small glade where an ancient boundary stone stood. Moss clung to its surface, spirals weathered and faint. Cjendadz touched it reverently.

“These are patterns. Binding-lines. The Tower may be part of something greater—a chain of places, linked.”

“Or simply a stone,” Krexila said dryly, almost stern. “Sometimes a stone is only a stone.”

They pressed on. The mist thinned, yet unease clung to them. In the afternoon a branch cracked high above, and they froze, hands on weapons and signs. For long minutes, nothing stirred—until a squirrel darted across the path and vanished.

“Deadly,” Zoltian muttered, though his voice was rougher than usual.

The sun sank, painting the sky violet. And then, through the trees, a shape rose—first a dark line, then clearer, massive. The Tower. Gray and tall, a lonely fang of stone above the canopy. No banner, no smoke, no light. Only silence.

They halted, staring at its silhouette.

“There it is,” Holdine whispered.

“Looks tamer than the tales,” Fryda said, though her voice was tight.

“Or far worse,” Cjendadz murmured.

The path carried them from the last fringe of trees. The hollow before the Tower lay still, but at its base a fire flickered. Two figures sat there—rough men, weapons thrust into the earth at their sides. And in the highest window, a third shadow moved back and forth before the light.

“Bandits,” Fryda hissed, clutching her staff.

“Rats nesting in walls not their own,” Holdine growled.

They drew back into the shadows of the wood. None spoke loudly, yet all knew: before the night was through, they would have to act.

The Tower loomed above the fire’s glow, silent, waiting. The darkness seemed to hold its breath for their first step.

Chapter 8 - The Bandits' Camp

They had withdrawn until the Tower showed only as a line between the trees. At its foot the bandits' fire burned. The two men there laughed hoarsely, knocked pewter cups together, and pitched bones into the flames. Above them, in the highest window, the third shadow kept its slow patrol, heedless of what happened outside.

"We have to take them quietly," Holdine whispered.
"One shout, and the one above has our backs."

Krexila nodded, testing her bowstring and studying the camp. "From here I have a clean line on the man by the fire. The other sits in shadow—I'll need Fryda to draw him out."

Fryda's grin turned crooked. "I'll circle round. I'll be on him from behind before he stands."

"Not without me," Cjendadz said. His fingers hovered in the air, searching for threads no one else could see. "I'll bend the bindings so steps and voices... run away from us. But I warn you—the working isn't finished."

"Give me a heartbeat's lead and it's enough," Fryda growled, then slipped into the brush.

Holdine took a place with a view of the Tower door. Her sword lay easy in her hand, though her shoulders were tight. Zoltian ghosted beside her and murmured, grinning, "I'll tell you if one comes out. Then we bar him in—or I bar his throat."

Cjendadz's voice fell into a low hum as he knotted the pattern. A sheen settled over the clearing, thin as mist.

Fryda's steps vanished into it; Krexila's breath sounded no more than wind in leaves.

But inside the weave his grip wavered. A twig snapped too loud; the bindings tore for a blink—and Fryda froze as one bandit looked up.

“Hey, what was that?” He reached for the club lying in the grass.

Cjendadz felt the hole in his working and, panicking, reached deeper. A prickling heat ran through his hands; the shimmer thickened. The second bandit, already rising, blinked, confused—as if the sound somehow failed to reach him.

“Now,” Krexila hissed.

Her arrow flew, whispering through the dark, and struck the first man in the shoulder. He toppled back against the woodpile. At the same instant Fryda burst from shadow; her staff cracked against the second man's skull. He staggered, groped for the club, and Fryda drove the staff again, hauling him down.

The fire flared, sparks leaping. The wounded man roared—half pain, half rage.

“Quiet,” Fryda growled and clubbed him into silence.

Holdine ran for the Tower's base and took stance at the door, blade raised. “Not a sound upstairs,” she commanded. Zoltian slid beside her, testing the old timber. “No bar,” he breathed. “But I can wedge it.”

Above, the third shadow still paced, untroubled.

Cjedadz let his hands fall. Sweat beaded his brow; his fingers trembled. “I... couldn’t drown it completely. But it was enough.”

“Barely,” Fryda said, brushing grit from her cheek. “Too close.”

“Close is enough,” Holdine replied, steely. “So long as none of us falls.”

The fire crackled on, but the voices at the Tower’s foot had gone. They listened. No movement from within. The third man suspected nothing.

“Secure the door,” Holdine said softly. “Then we take the rest.”

The Tower door groaned as Holdine and Zoltian eased it inward. Smoke, sweat, and old wood rolled out. A narrow stair coiled upward, damp with years of neglect.

“Quiet,” Holdine warned, and they edged up step by step. The stair’s complaints no longer yielded to Cjedadz’s working—within the walls, his art seemed to fail.

The first landing lay empty: a scatter of pelts, a gnawed bone, a broken jug. No breath. They climbed higher; the air grew stale.

On the middle floor they shoved the door wide—only to find Fryda and Krexila already at the window. Krexila had slung her bow, hand on a knife. Fryda stood with sword drawn, eyes fixed on two forms curled in straw.

Before anyone moved, one man lurched up. His eyes flickered, saw the strangers—and bellowed. The other jolted awake, reaching for an axe.

“Damn it,” Zoltian spat.

“Back!” Holdine called as they charged. She caught the first blow; the force numbed her fingers to the hilt.

Fryda stepped in—steel against steel. Sparks leapt as the blades crossed. She drove her man hard, slammed him into the wall; he slid down and lay still.

Krexila was no duelist, but she was quick. She sprang at the axeman as he lifted the weapon. Her knife flashed, slashing his arm; the axe clattered to the boards. Holdine was there a breath later, shoulder to his chest, hammering him to the floor.

Silence held for a moment—only harsh breathing, sweat patterning wood.

“Two fewer,” Fryda muttered, wiping someone else’s blood from her blade.

Then they heard it: footsteps overhead, heavy and sure. The third bandit.

“Up,” Holdine ordered, racing for the stair. Zoltian on her heels, knife ready, eyes bright with feverish edge.

In the garret the last of the gang stood waiting. He had left the window and taken the center of the room, sword in hand. His gaze was cold and steady—different from the panicked brawlers below.

“Fools,” he snarled. “Do you even know who owns this Tower?”

Holdine gave no answer. She advanced, blade high. Zoltian slid sideways into shadow, ready to strike from behind.

The man attacked—fast. His blade came down; Holdine caught it, knees dipping under the weight. Zoltian lunged from the side, driving his knife into the man’s ribs. A shout—rage, despair—then Fryda burst in and smashed him against a beam with a single cut. The timber groaned; he collapsed and moved no more.

They stared at one another, breath ragged. Three men lay silent—unconscious or dead. The Tower was still.

Then a sound tore through the stone. Not a human cry, not any beast. A grinding, a bellow, a howl—everything at once. It rose from the Tower’s depths, thrummed through the walls, and rattled their bones.

Cjendadz staggered back, eyes wide. “That was... no binding I know.”

Holdine lifted her sword as if steel could guard against a noise. Fryda stared toward the stair; Krexila pressed her lips thin; even Zoltian—smiling moments ago—had gone pale.

“That,” he whispered hoarsely, “wasn’t human.”

The echo rolled on, a breath drawn by the Tower itself. The companions stood with blades still raised as the strange sound faded into the stone. No one spoke. Only

their breathing filled the room, and every creak of the beams made them flinch.

From below another sound drifted up: claws on wood, the rustle of feathers. Not an enemy—familiar, yet other.

Holdine tensed—but before she could rush down, Tsaluah’s voice carried through the dark, the words striking the walls as if spoken by two throats at once:

“Something shook the Tower.”

They hurried to the ground floor. Tsaluah waited in the half light, eyes glimmering, feathers along arms and back raised as if a storm had passed through it unseen.

“I felt it,” it said softly, almost burdened. “Not only heard—felt. Something lives in these stones. It knows you now.”

It stood there in the flicker of the fire, arms slightly spread, feathers quivering as if to some hidden tide. Waiting—for them, for answers, or for the Tower’s next breath.

Chapter 9 – Beneath the Trapdoor

The Tower offered little more. Among the scattered straw and toppled jugs they found only the usual: ragged blankets, dull knives, a few coins long past their shine. Whoever had lived here last left nothing worth more than a hungry evening.

Tsaluah moved slowly across the ground floor, as if its gaze reached deeper than any of theirs. At length it halted, laying a clawed hand upon a rough chest half-swallowed by shadow.

“This has not moved in years,” it said. “But it blocks something beneath.”

Fryda and Zoltian traded a look, then heaved together. The box scraped across the boards with a dull rasp, revealing an iron-banded trapdoor, its handle rusted but still sound.

“An entrance,” Holdine murmured, tightening her grip on the sword. “Down.”

The hatch groaned as they hauled it open. A steep wooden ladder yawned into dark. A sour, damp breath rose to meet them—rot, like old leaves.

“Without light we won’t go far,” Krexila said dryly.

Cjendadz nodded and struck a flame. The torchlight jittered, throwing long shadows over the Tower room—then he leaned over the opening, and the fire seemed to recoil, as if it shunned the depth.

One by one they climbed. The wood creaked beneath their weight but held. The smell thickened; the air grew clammy.

The ladder ended in a low chamber of rough stone, the mortar glistening with damp. Somewhere water dripped—soft, steady, a patient tick.

Directly before them stood a heavy wooden door, thick bolts thrust from the outside—as if not a room were shut, but something kept in.

To their left, a passage opened—so black the torch could win only a few paces of it.

“Which first?” Zoltian asked, knife turning lightly in his fingers.

The iron bar slid back with surprising ease. Holdine frowned at the dull *clack* of metal—too easy for a door meant to bind anything truly dangerous.

When they drew it open, stale, wet air washed out. In the torchlight a narrow space took shape, scarcely larger than a gaol cell. The walls sweated moss.

Two figures crouched inside: a youth—no more than a smith’s apprentice or farmhand—eyes wide as if he had spent days waiting only for death; and beside him a woman of middle height who pushed herself upright when the light struck her.

She had languished here long: skin gone pale, clothes filthy and torn. Yet her posture was straight, almost defiant. Her features were stern but not without beauty—

the look of one who greets life not as a gift but as a challenge.

“By all thresholds...” Fryda muttered, lowering her blade. “These aren’t bandits.”

Heavy iron chains bound both to rings set in the wall. Zoltian stepped close, letting the torchlight play over the locks, and clicked his tongue. “Good work. Not beyond me.”

His tools flashed to hand. The boy stared at him, stunned. “You’re... not with them?”

“Not in the slightest,” Fryda growled. “And if you scream again, the rest of the forest might doubt it.”

A click—the first lock sprang. Chain clattered to the floor. The youth sagged, nearly falling into Krexila’s arms.

Zoltian turned to the woman. She met his look with a pride remarkable for a prisoner; when the lock yielded, she took a step and would have stumbled if Holdine hadn’t caught her.

“My thanks,” she said, her voice schooled, courtly, full of grace. “I am Comtessa Morinde of Neral-Baliiri, a lady of the Kingdom of Rhavarn on the western coast of the continent Keloria.”

Cjedadz’s eyes flew wide; even Fryda blinked. A noble—down here?

Morinde dipped a slight bow—so far as her weakness allowed. “These brigands kept me three moons in hope of ransom. A most unhappy mistake.”

“Mistake?” Krexila arched a brow.

The woman’s smile was faint, and something bold glinted in her eyes. “They took from me a signet ring I had... imprudently acquired. For them it proved I was high-born. The more I explained that my trade lay closer to theirs, the less they believed me.”

Zoltian barked a rough laugh. “A rover dressed as a lady. Irony enough.”

Holdine studied her. Something in Morinde’s words struck off-key—not enough to refute, enough to refuse an easy picture. She said nothing.

Tsaluah stepped closer, claws whispering on stone, and inclined its head. “She speaks with two voices,” it murmured, listening not to words but to the weave behind them. “Truth and mask walk together.”

Morinde lowered her gaze, the smile unbroken. “I owe you my life. Whether you believe me is yours to choose. Without you I would never have seen the sun again.”

She swayed; Holdine’s arm tightened around her. “You need rest,” the oath-sister said.

“And a clean cloak,” Fryda grunted. “Otherwise you’ll draw eyes faster than any bandit.”

The village boy sobbed quietly against Krexila’s shoulder. Morinde stood as straight as she could. However thin her strength, her bearing was that of someone who had never learned to make herself small.

The chains lay on the floor now—cold, useless. But the cellar still held more: that dark mouth to the left, a corridor running into the unknown.

They guided the freed pair up the groaning ladder. The boy clung to Krexila, shaking, while Fryda pressed him from behind so he wouldn't stall. Morinde tried to climb upright, but each step set her swaying; Holdine kept a firm hold, her hand upon the woman's arm like a vow.

On the ground floor the familiar smell of smoke and cold ash met them. Zoltian's torch threw the stonework into a stouter cast than before. Tsaluah emerged from the shadow, eyes steady, though the feathers along its arms still bristled, as if they had drunk the weight of the dark below.

“Take them out when you leave the path,” Holdine said, meeting the being's gaze.

Tsaluah inclined its head. “I will remain with them. What waits below knows neither wall nor lock. Here, in light, they are safer.”

The boy sank to the floor with a shuddering sigh, tears of relief bright on his face. Morinde straightened despite her weakness, smoothed the tears and rents of her dress, and fought to keep her poise. “I shall wait,” she said with careful grace, “and hope you return swiftly.”

Zoltian's smile tilted, all mockery. “We always return. Just not always all of us.”

“Enough,” Fryda cut in, turning to the open hatch. The black throat gaped in the boards, darkness crouching beneath.

Cjendadz hugged the torch closer, as if its heat might lend him courage. "Something waits down there," he whispered. "And it already knows we're coming."

No one argued.

The two rescued souls remained above with Tsaluah. The others gathered once more at the hatch; the flame shivered over the steep ladder. The side-passage loomed—still, dark, undefined.

And the Tower seemed to breathe.

Chapter 10 - The Descent into Depth

The breath of the tower still lingered in its walls when they had dragged the captives down into the ground floor. The fire of the raiders had long since burned low, yet in the torchlight the room still looked like a snare, waiting for the next careless step.

The village lad they had freed hesitated long before he finally found his voice.

“The raiders...” He swallowed, glanced toward the hatch. “They feared the passage down there as if it were death itself. Not one of them ever set foot inside. And if one made the mistake of merely speaking of it, the words withered in his throat.”

Holdine fixed him with a sharp gaze. “And yet they brought you here. Through this very hatch, which had not been moved in years?”

The boy shook his head quickly. “No... differently. There is an entrance, somewhere along the outer wall. I do not know where—our eyes were bound. But that chest up there—they never touched it. Only the hatch, never.”

Fryda growled. “Then more of them must be hiding somewhere in these walls.”

Zoltian gave a crooked grin, without a trace of mirth. “Or they were wise enough to crawl into holes we have not yet uncovered.”

Later, when they had roused one of the unconscious bandits, Holdine dared the question: “Where does the passage beneath the tower lead?”

The raider turned ashen. His eyes slid away, his body shook. Hastily he traced a sign in the air—the mark of Dalmor, clumsy as peasants knew it, not as priests did. “Not... not there. That is evil! Evil itself!”

Fryda seized him by the collar, yanking him up. “Speak plain!”

But he only shook his head, tears gathering. “Whoever goes there is already dead!” Nothing more could be wrested from him—only stammers, sobs, and the thin echo of terror.

Krexila unclasped Fryda’s grip and shoved the man back to the floor. “So much fear in one who, only yesterday, thought he could slit our throats as we slept.”

“That makes it worse,” murmured Cjendadz, clutching the torch more tightly. “For fear... fear is sometimes the truest counselor of all.”

A shiver passed through them. Below lay the dark passage, unfathomable and black, and even the raiders who had sought refuge here dared not step inside.

Holdine set her hand to her sword. “Then we shall go where they dread to tread. For if true evil waits there—then it is our duty to meet it.”

The torch flickered as if in protest. Yet the passage waited.

They were six when they opened the hatch again in the ground floor and climbed down the groaning ladder. This time none remained above: neither Morinde nor the village lad could have borne the silence that lurked below—

and Tsaluah had insisted with cool certainty that it, too, must walk the way.

The passage beneath the trapdoor was damp and narrow. After only a few paces they stood before a slick stone stair, spiraling steeply down. Torchlight danced across the wet steps, making them gleam as if snails lay upon them. Each footfall carried the risk of losing balance.

“Slowly,” cautioned Holdine, as Fryda strained to rush ahead. “If one falls, he drags us all with him.”

At the bottom the stair gave way to a narrow corridor stretching endlessly straight. The fire of their torches reached only a few steps, beyond which darkness began—thick as cloth.

The air was stale, mold-laden. Each breath came heavy, as though some unseen weight pressed upon the chest. Cold droplets fell from the ceiling, beading their faces—once making Krexila flinch as an icy rivulet ran down her nape.

“It smells as if no one has walked here in a hundred years,” muttered Zoltian, wrinkling his nose.

“Perhaps there is reason for that,” Cjendadz replied softly, his fingers sketching restless signs in the air, as though seeking bindings too elusive for words.

The walls glistened with slimy growths; the floor was treacherous. More than once they had to steady each other against a fall. Cautiously, step by step, they felt their way forward until, suddenly, the corridor sloped sharply upward.

“We are beneath the pool,” whispered Krexila, one hand pressed to the clammy wall. “I can feel it—the weight of water above us.”

At last the passage opened into a chamber—broad, still, unnaturally dry. The foul air lay heavy, yet no drop fell. Dust lay on the floor so thick their steps left trails like footprints in snow.

“This... is not natural,” Holdine whispered, raising her torch.

On the far wall they saw a door—but it was not simply barred. Old chairs, chests, beams of wood, even iron rods had been piled high before it, as though someone had sought at any cost to prevent it ever being opened.

“A barricade,” Fryda said, tapping a plank with her sword-tip. “From this side. But why?”

More disturbing still were the symbols carved into the timber. Crude, trembling hands had scratched shapes that echoed the old wards—awkward, misshapen, yet marked with desperate resolve.

“Peasants’ marks,” murmured Krexila. “Wards against ill fortune.”

“Or against sorcery,” added Cjendadz. He leaned close, hand hovering over the runes. “The bindings here are... twisted. As though someone had tried to hold back evil with bare fingers.”

Tsaluah stepped forward, its eyes dimly aglow in the torchlight. “They came from priests—or from those who mimicked their rites. But whoever carved them knew:

behind this door lies something that must never be awakened.”

A chill swept the group. The barricade no longer felt like a safeguard—
but like a warning.

Chapter 11 - The Enchanted Gate

Clearing the barricade took longer than any of them liked. Chairs cracked, iron rods clattered, chests splintered. Every sound echoed a hundredfold through the chamber, as though the walls did not merely hurl the noise back but gathered and magnified it.

“If something slumbers down here, it already knows we are present,” murmured Krexila, casting aside a broken beam.

At last the door stood revealed: massive, oaken planks bound in iron, so ancient the very wood seemed to hold its breath. Yet what silenced them was the visage carved into its surface.

A grotesque face. Distorted, overlarge, tongue split, eyes deep-set and brimming with mockery, as though they glimmered in the torchlight. Three horns curled from its brow. The maw yawned so wide one almost expected it to devour them at once.

Around the face spread lines and sigils, hastily carved into the wood—overlapping, contradictory. Some resembled the ward-signs priests of old inscribed into their banishments; others bore the jagged shape of frantic scratches, as though someone had etched every name, every fragment they knew to fend off darkness.

Cjendadz stepped closer, torch lifted high. “This is not the raiders’ work. This is older. Far older.”

Then Holdine noticed the markings on the floor. In the dust they had been nearly invisible—but now, with the

barricade cleared, they shimmered faintly. A circle, a five-pointed star whose tips were marked with runes.

“A binding circle,” whispered Tsaluah, feathers bristling. “It keeps the gate sealed. Not iron, not wood—this is the true lock.”

Silence fell. The fire crackled, dust lay thick over their boots like snow.

Then Fryda broke the stillness. She stepped forward, sword in hand, and drove it with full force against the wood. A crash; the blade shuddered in her grip—yet the door did not yield. A second blow, a third. Nothing. Only the steel itself, notched and scarred.

“Cursed thing!” she spat, flinging a splinter from her blade. “It cannot be broken.”

“Not unbreakable,” countered Cjendadz, “sealed.” He crouched, hands hovering above the lines of the circle. His lips murmured ancient formulas, the torchlight shivered. For an instant the pattern glowed, a star of smouldering dust.

Then he groaned, breaking off, hands trembling. “Too strong. I... I cannot unweave it. This binding was wrought by a master. One who possessed not only knowledge—but power.”

“So we are trapped here?” asked Zoltian, tapping his knife absently against the iron bands.

Holdine knelt, brushed her gloved hand across the dust. Her fingers traced the lines—not as a mage, but as one who

reads tracks in soil. “Perhaps... it is not the door we must strike. Perhaps only what holds it shut.”

“The circle,” Krexila breathed, bending beside her. “Like a snare that might be swept aside.”

Tsaluah tilted its head, feathers trembling. “Where no circle is, no binding lives. The seal endures only so long as the pattern stands.”

“Then we destroy it,” Fryda decided.

Zoltian’s grin was crooked. “Then start sweeping.”

But even that proved difficult. The dust clung damp, viscous, as though it resisted them. With hands and cloths they made little progress. Only when Krexila poured a flask of lamp-oil across the lines did the layer yield. The circle broke apart, the points of the star blurred and ran.

A shiver swept the chamber. The torches flared, as if some vast breath had been drawn—and released.

Slowly, groaning, the door began to move. No blow, no spell—only the sundering of ancient hinges that had lain fettered for centuries.

A rush of musty air surged forth, so heavy it choked them all. It was the breath of a grave that should have remained sealed.

“Weapons ready,” Holdine said. Her voice was firm, but her fingers trembled on the sword-hilt.

The passage beyond gaped black. Puddles shimmered in the light, mould crawled along the walls. From far off, faint, came a strange crackling—like embers cooling.

“Something waits down there,” murmured Cjendadz.

And they knew: the tower had shown them only its threshold.

Beyond it began its secret.

Chapter 12 - The Passage of Bones

They felt their way forward. The corridor beyond the gate was narrow and wet, the torches casting long shadows across walls stained dark with mould and lichen. Water seeped from between the stones, pooling in puddles that glittered treacherously in the light.

The air was stifling, rancid—so heavy that each breath burned. Tsaluah moved uneasily, feathers raised. “Bindings rule here that contradict themselves,” it whispered. “This is... against nature.”

They went on, eyes forward, hands on hilts and grips. The faint crackling they had heard before was clearer now—as though something burnt and long since cooled were still not dead.

Suddenly Fryda stumbled. Metal clattered through the dark, followed by a crash that sounded like a scream. In the torchlight the obstacle strewn across the way came into view:

A heap of human remains, stacked in a pyramid against the wall. Bones, skulls, corroded scraps of armour; among them rusty blades that shattered with a crash beneath Fryda’s step.

“By all thresholds...” Krexila recoiled by instinct, but the passage left no room.

The sound reverberated as though the very stones wished to lament with them. Dust of centuries lifted and drifted upward like mist.

“This is no accident,” Holdine growled, sword raised.
“Someone stacked it so.”

Even as she spoke, the sound changed. A faint scraping—from ahead and behind at once—metal on stone, claws on glass. Cjendadz froze, torch held high.

“Still!” he hissed. “Do you hear it?”

The crackling was closer now, and with it a rattle, as if bones moved against bones. In the wavering light they saw pieces slide within the heap, skulls turning as though they had eyes.

Then the first shape struggled up out of the chaos. Bones knit together, joint to joint, as if drawn by an unseen thread. A hand closed on a rusty blade; the skull grinned hollowly, yet in its sockets a red light glowed.

And not just one. Two more bodies coalesced—both before and behind them.

“Undead,” Zoltian breathed. His crooked grin was gone.

“Bindings twisted to the marrow,” Tsaluah added, voice like a knife. “You do not fight flesh here—but that which refuses to die.”

The skeletons lifted their weapons. The scrape of their steps filled the passage.

Holdine stepped forward, blade up. “Then let us lay them to rest at last.”

The crackling turned to clamour. Bone rattled on bone, as though invisible hands were finishing their assembly. The red lights in the skulls flared—greedy, unholy.

“Front and rear!” Krexila cried, tearing her bow from her shoulder—only to find the cramped tunnel denied her any chance to shoot. She drew the short-sword—far too light for bone, but better than nothing.

The skeletons charged, rusty blades raised.

Holdine held the front, torchlight at her back, sword steady in both hands. The first blow hammered into her steel, sparks flying as metal met metal. She shoved back, but the cold bones did not yield. “They feel no pain!” she called, driving her shoulder into her foe’s skull to force it off.

Fryda sprang beside her—steel against steel. Her blade crashed into the bone-forearm of the second skeleton, shattering it to splinters. But instead of falling, the thing pressed on, left hand outstretched, fingers like claws. “By all thresholds—they keep fighting!” she swore, ripping her steel free and this time cleaving crosswise through the ribcage. The bones gave, and the thing collapsed in a clattering heap.

“One less!” she cried, breath ragged—then heard the scrape behind her.

Zoltian had taken the rear. Darkness lay thicker there; only the flicker on his knife flashed. “They’re coming from behind!” He lunged, drove the blade deep into the ribs of the next undead—and the point slid between the bones without effect. “Damn it! My knife does nothing!”

“Hit the bone, not the gaps!” Fryda bellowed, eyes never leaving her foe.

Tsaluah moved among them, no fighter—and yet risen. Its taloned hands raked the air as if tugging unseen strings. A keen shriek filled the passage as the bindings of the undead bucked against Tsaluah's force. One skeleton stumbled; for an instant the bones loosened, the structure seeming to fail—but then the red gleam found its purchase again, and the thing lurched upright.

“I can weaken them,” Tsaluah gasped, “but not break them.”

Cjendadz stepped forward, torch in one hand, the other thrust out. “Then hold them,” he murmured, and began to shape words. His voice rang strangely, as if it spoke not only in the tunnel but through the stone itself. A pale sheen washed over a heartbeat over the bones of the next skeleton—and its skull burst with a dry crack.

Krexila seized the opening. She thrust not at the trunk but at the legs. The bones splintered, the thing crashed down, arms still flailing until Holdine dipped her blade and split the skull.

“Rear! Rear!” Zoltian’s voice broke. He had fallen back, shoulder bloodied where a rusty edge had grazed him. Two skeletons pressed in, their sockets like torches in the dark.

Fryda shoved off and drove backward. Her sword swept wide, smashed the chest of the first attacker and tore it apart. Zoltian seized the second by the arm, twisted, and Krexila slid into the gap, driving her short-sword crosswise through its skull. Bone shattered; the frame collapsed.

Panting hard, they stared about them. Four skeletons lay broken in the passage, bone and rusty iron scattered, dust thick in the air.

But then, in the echo of silence, the scraping returned. Not louder—yet everywhere.

“That was not all,” Cjendadz murmured, wiping sweat from his brow.

Tsaluah slowly raised its head. “No. This was only the watch.”

And again the crackling came—not from the darkness ahead, but from the walls around, as if the passage itself were birthing bones.

The scraping swelled. Among the shattered remains they had just destroyed, new motion stirred. Fingers groped for ribs, skulls rolled, found vertebrae. It was as if the walls themselves yielded bones to form more warriors.

“It has no end!” Krexila cried, parrying a grinding blow that nearly pinned her to the stone.

Holdine fought two at once in the front, sword in ceaseless exchange. Her movements were precise but slowing. A cut grazed her shoulder; blood darkened the mail.

Fryda struck with savage force, her blade smashing skulls and arms. Yet each time a body fell, others rose. Her breath came in jolts; sweat plastered her hair to her brow. “We cannot kill them all!” she shouted.

Zoltian fought at the rear, back crosshatched with scratches. “Too many!” He slipped past a slash, knocked a skeleton’s knee out—but a rusty blade tore across his arm.

Tsaluah loosed a shrill cry, feathers flared. Bindings ripped in the air; a few skeletons stumbled, fell apart—only for seconds. The red gleam in their sockets did not die.

Then Cjendadz heard something. No sound—no noise at all—but a pull. A line in the air he had never felt before. Instinctively he seized it, like a drowning man clutching a branch.

And the world responded.

For one breath everything stood still. The battle fell silent; the bones froze, as though some unseen threads had been cut. The red lights guttered out in every skull at once. Weapons clanged to the floor.

The skeletons collapsed—not slowly, but all at once, as if every force abandoned them together. The passage rang with the crash of falling bones—then held its peace.

No one dared move. Only the crackle of torches remained.

Cjendadz stood with his hand raised, eyes wide, breath ragged. “I... do not know what it was,” he whispered. “I did not understand it. But I could... sever them.”

Tsaluah came close, eyes glimmering uneasily. “You grasped a binding that was not yours. Foreign—and older than anything you know.”

“But it saved us,” Fryda panted, sword still lifted.

Holdine leaned on her blade, sweat and blood at her brow. “Perhaps... but at what price?”

The dust settled. The bones lay still. Yet each of them knew: the end of this fight was not their doing alone—it had been an intervention by forces none of them understood.

And Cjendadz, still trembling, felt deep within that he had touched something that would not forget it had been touched.

They paused there—breathing hard, sweat and blood on their faces, weapons still raised though no foe remained. Only bones lay scattered, broken, mute.

Slowly Holdine lowered her sword, bracing her weight upon it. “We... still live.”

“Barely,” Fryda growled, hands still shaking as she wiped her blade on her cloak.

Krexila slid down against the wall, short-sword across her knees. “I thought... we would not make it.”

Zoltian simply sat in the dust and scrubbed his face with his palm. “Too close.”

Tsaluah stood motionless, feathers taut, eyes deep in the torchlight. “It was not your battle that saved you. It was a binding that does not belong to you.”

Cjendadz stared at his hands as if he no longer knew them. “I touched something... not mine. It heard me. And obeyed.”

No one answered. The words lingered in the stale air, heavier than the dust.

Then they sank into silence, each where the passage offered space. The torches burned on, throwing flickering shadows across bones that at last lay quiet.

For a moment the tower was mute—but none of them believed that silence meant peace.

Chapter 13 - The Old Mage

The passage ended in a chamber barely three paces wide and four deep. A curtain in the far wall stirred in the faint breath of air, as though the room itself were breathing.

Two heavy chests flanked the opening, thick with dust and cobwebs.

To their right loomed a great cupboard, its doors half open. Rags of cloth hung within—old mage’s robes that crumbled to powder at the slightest touch. In the corner beside it stood a fireplace, black with soot, long cold for decades. The centre of the room was marked by a decayed table and an overturned chair. Dust lay ankle-deep across the floor; each movement left trails behind them as though they walked upon snow.

But all eyes were drawn to the canopy bed against the left wall. The curtains, once finely embroidered, were now shrouded in webs and disintegrated at the first touch, crumbling like rotten parchment. A shower of dust fell, and what lay behind drove the breath from their throats.

Upon blotched, brittle sheets lay the corpse of a man. Bones, dim in the torchlight, clothed in a robe of red and black whose colours still carried menace. Upon his skull perched a pointed hat, crooked, as if mocking the world even in death. Ragged slippers clung to his feet, one leg half raised, one hand clawed into the linen.

The other hand clutched a book.

“He holds it fast,” whispered Krexila, stepping back.

Fryda advanced, sword at her side, and seized the binding. The bone-fingers did not yield. Even when she tugged, the grip seemed only to tighten, as if the corpse itself pulled back. “By all bindings!” she snarled. She wedged her blade between, heard brittle fingers snap. Only then did the hand break, and the book fell into hers.

It was of dark red leather, smooth and firm, without inscription. When Cjendadz opened it carefully, the pages crumbled to dust. Yellowed paper drifted down, flaking across the sheets like ash. Only the cover remained—empty, heavy, cold.

“A vessel,” murmured Tsaluah, eyes faintly aglow. “This is no empty book. It was filled—and then consumed.”

“With what?” Holdine demanded sharply.

“With bindings that should never have been touched,” Tsaluah replied. “This is the work of those who misused the Nyssareth. He sought to grasp it, to bend it—and was broken by it.”

Cjendadz stared at the book, fingers trembling. “I... feel threads. They are not dead. They... wait.” He swallowed hard. “It feels like when I severed the bones. Only... greater. Deeper.”

“Then we burn it,” Fryda urged. “This very night.”

“No,” said Holdine calmly. “To burn it is to set it free. As it is, it remains bound. And perhaps... it is the key. To what is hidden below.”

Zoltian spat into the dust. “Keys, traps, curses—it’s all the same. Books rarely bring fortune.”

They searched the room further, but found only dust, rotted cloth, worthless debris. Yet the atmosphere pressed heavy upon them. Two massive candlesticks lay toppled on the floor, caked with black wax, as though they had burned night after night into darkness. Krexila bent over the remnants and murmured, “He needed light, but could not bear it.”

Holdine straightened. “This place is no grave. It is a warning. He lies here not because he found rest—but because the binding itself consumed him.”

Tsaluah inclined its head slowly. “The Nyssareth was his temptation. And it devoured him.”

The group fell silent. The skull grinned at them, dust lay thick as snow, the curtain on the far wall swayed in the faint draft. Behind it came that familiar crackling—louder now than before.

The mage was dead.
But his work endured.

Chapter 14 - The Study

The curtain rustled softly as they drew it aside. A damp breath washed over them—musty and heavy, as though the room itself had held its air for centuries. The familiar crackling was there again, nearer now, almost impossible to ignore—like smouldering sparks imprisoned within stone.

The chamber was larger than the mage's bedchamber. On either side rose shelves, groaning beneath their burdens. To the left, books stood packed tight, surprisingly orderly, save for a narrow gap in the middle row. To the right: rows of bottles, vessels, and strange devices glimmering in the torchlight. Some jars were clear, others clouded, still others crusted with deposits. High on the upper boards stood dark containers, within which floated shapes: birds with wings spread, a snake with jaws open—and a small lizard-like creature, scarcely longer than a forearm, its glassy eyes reflecting the light with uncanny brilliance.

Krexila drew in a sharp breath. “He collected animals... and drowned them in liquid.”

“Not collected,” Holdine corrected softly. “Studied.”

Zoltian grimaced. “Not for a cook's book, I'd wager.”

They moved further. In the centre of the room stood a long table, strewn with papers, scrolls, and devices. An inkpot, finely worked, remained ready, a quill set in it, its tip black and crusted. Beside it stood an oil lamp, long extinguished, and glass vessels with dried residues whose stench still bit the air after centuries.

Fryda lifted one of the crumpled sheets. It dissolved in her hands to dust. "All rotted."

"Not all," said Holdine, raising a scroll that proved surprisingly firm. She spread it across the table, brushed away the dust with care, and began to read.

The first lines were illegible, obscured by wax. But the lower portion could still be deciphered:

"My work remains unfinished. It has no will, no consciousness, whatever I have tried.

Only one path remains: the sacrifice of a human—whether freely given or compelled—to fill the shell.

All is prepared, I am confident—something great draws near.

Yet the last step is the hardest. The transference devours me, drains every fibre of my strength. The soul resists my words, and my grasp is too weak. But tomorrow I shall complete it: then I shall force the immortal into my creation. Then it will live—and I shall be lord of new life, beyond all boundaries.

Those who call themselves guardians may keep their warnings—my work shall mock them. Thus speaks Kavorh Nyth, the Unbroken, master of hidden bindings.

Tomorrow... yes, tomorrow it shall be so. If only this burning in my chest does not weaken me. I must not forget to weave myself a new draught. I shall need every ounce of strength."

The words hung like lead in the air.

Cjendadz stared at the scroll as though he could glimpse within it something hidden from the others. His lips

moved silently, echoing the lines. “He sought to tear the soul,” he whispered at last. “To wrench it free. To force it into what he had made.”

“Impossible,” Holdine said sharply. “A blasphemy. Even the priests would shrink from it.”

“And yet...” Cjendadz’s eyes glowed feverishly. “I feel it in the words. He was close. The bindings—they fought him, yet he nearly seized them.” He wiped his brow, sweat shining in the torchlight. “It is... the same current I felt in the passage, when the bones ceased to stir. The same—only deeper, stronger.”

“Caution,” warned Tsaluah, feathers bristling. “Those are threads not yours to touch. They are corrupted—they cut into all they touch. He opened the abyss, and it killed him.”

Fryda growled, seized the scroll, and tried to tear it. But it crumbled at her grasp, as if it had waited only for the touch. A breath of air scattered the grey flakes across the chamber, before they sank into the dust below.

“Dust,” Krexila murmured. “In the end it is all only dust.”

But Cjendadz stood unmoving, hands trembling. “No,” he whispered. “Not dust. It yet lives. Not here, not now—but it left its trace.”

They turned to the far wall. There a half-rounded niche rose, within which stood a skeleton—upright, as though alive. Yet no sinews bound the bones. Instead, an iron frame held them in shape, as if the mage had forced death itself to remain.

Fryda raised her sword. “It does not move?”

“No,” Cjendadz answered after a careful glance. “It is bound. A specimen.”

“Study,” Fryda repeated with disgust. “He made death his plaything.”

Above the frame hung a large chart. In the torchlight they discerned the drawing: a human body without skin, muscles and organs laid out cleanly, precisely. Veins traced like lines, so clear it almost seemed alive.

Krexila turned away, her face pale. “How did he come by such knowledge?”

“Not by insight,” Holdine replied grimly. “By theft. Always by theft.”

Cjendadz stepped closer, almost reverent, eyes running over the lines. “But he understood... He knew things we only guess. He was too close.”

“Too close to the Nyssareth,” Holdine cut him short. “And so he fell.”

For a moment only dripping was heard, somewhere in the back. Each breath seemed to bear the weight of centuries.

They searched the shelves further. Many books disintegrated at their touch, others endured. Their titles whispered of forbidden paths: *Encyclopaedia Kynéxis*, *The Nameless Bindings*, *Alchemic Excuses*.

Tsaluah paused, feathers erect. “The bindings here are diseased. They are like encrusted wounds that will not heal. Everything in this room bears the scars of his work.”

“Scars that still bleed,” Krexila murmured.

Then a faint draft stirred again—damp, cold. It came from the left side of the bookcase, where the narrow gap yawned.

Zoltian pressed his hand to the volumes. “Here. Something is hidden.”

“And I wager the key is the book,” Fryda growled, lifting the red binding they had carried since the bedchamber.

Cjendadz placed it in the gap. For a moment nothing happened. Then, softly, as though stone itself drew breath, the shelves shifted. A seam opened—narrow, just wide enough for a single person.

A new breath of air wafted forth—damp, cold, alien. And the crackling was now so near it felt like a whisper in their very skulls.

They stood upon the threshold.

Chapter 15 – The Stream

The passage behind the bookcase led them deeper into the rock. Damp air wafted toward them, droplets beaded from the ceiling, and soon they heard a steady rushing. The familiar crackling mingled with it—now like a distant hiss, caught within the water itself.

At last the narrow way opened, and they stepped onto the bank of a stream. Black water gurgled past, swifter than they had expected. Mist rose from its surface, shaping into whirling figures that danced in the torchlight and dissolved again at once.

“Here he did not merely study,” murmured Tsaluah, feathers on edge. “Here bindings have shifted. Water against stone, air against dark—nothing is in balance.”

On the far side of the stream rose a portal. Two massive dragon statues flanked it, crouching, wings half raised, jaws agape. Their stone seemed not dead but watchful, as though for centuries they had waited to devour.

The wings of the gate stood ajar. A flickering glow leaked through—warm, yet disquieting. The heptagram carved into the stone shimmered faintly, pulsing in rhythm with the water.

“This is not the raiders’ work,” Holdine said softly. “This is older. Far older.”

Fryda snorted, wiping sweat from her brow. “And we are to pass through?”

“We must,” Krexila answered curtly. “Too much leads here, too much we have already seen. The heart of the tower lies beyond.”

They did not deliberate long. The stream was too broad to cross in a step, but a leap might suffice. One by one they dared it. Fryda sprang first, landed hard, nearly slipped, but caught herself on the rock. Holdine followed, then Krexila, Zoltian, Tsaluah—and last Cjendadz, holding the torch high as he leapt.

The water gurgled beneath them, cold, black, greedy. For a moment it seemed as though hands of mist reached up to seize them. Yet all gained the opposite bank.

They now stood before the portal. Torchlight danced across the dragon statues, set their eye-sockets aglow as though old fires smouldered within.

The crackling was clear now, like sparks upon heated metal. It came from the darkness beyond the door.

“You hear it?” Zoltian asked, voice rough. “It waits.”

Holdine laid her hand upon the cold stone wings. “Then we shall see what was bound here.”

Slowly they pushed the gate wider. A rush of light burst forth—flickering, restless—and drenched the stream’s mist in golden sparks.

Beyond the portal began the hall.

Chapter 16 - The Hall of Bindings

The sweep of the gate's wings made the torchlight waver. Beyond lay a hall so vast the ceiling vanished into darkness. The floor was a smooth, black expanse, threaded with mosaic lines that caught the light in thin filaments of shimmer. To the right of the entrance stood stone troughs filled with a glowing fluid that seemed to breathe in slow pulses; beside them shelves of phials, chalices, tubes-tools of a failed world-forging, neatly ordered as if left behind in resignation.

But it was the far end that stopped their steps.

To the left, upon a dais, rose a cage wrought not of metal but of silver lattice-lines of light congealed into shape. Behind it stood a being taller than two men. It bore the semblance of a human, and yet not: its right arm blazed, its left dripped water, its chest was cracked like molten stone, and a constant wind drew along its flanks, scattering sparks and droplets alike. Within it the world strove against itself.

To the right, on a second dais, lay a woman. She rested on a stone bier, enclosed within a translucent bell of light, where runes shimmered and faded like drifting motes. Her hair shone like copper in the dusk, her lids closed, her breath steady. No chain touched her body-yet something held her firmer than iron.

“Nothing here is in balance,” Tsaluah whispered. It raised a hand as if to listen within a nest of unseen threads. “Bindings, twisted against each other... and a divided core.” Its gaze moved from the sleeper to the chimera in the cage. “The same soul. Two bodies.”

“Nyssareth, bent,” Cjendadz murmured. The torch in his hand shook. “Exactly so.”

They spread as they had learned: Holdine forward, blade low; Fryda covering, steel bared; Krexila to the flank, bow half raised; Zoltian near the bier; Tsaluah beside Cjendadz, who traced the air with searching fingers as though stirring the water of a black well.

“First the woman,” Holdine said. “Then we think on the thing yonder.”

Zoltian nodded, leapt up the dais steps, and laid a hand upon the light-bell. The skin of his fingers tingled. “It holds,” he hissed. “Like hardened mist.”

“Careful,” Krexila warned—too late. As Zoltian pressed flat, testing, a crack ran through the light, soundless at first, then chiming like fine glass. The runes burst apart like startled fireflies.

A single tone rang through the hall—high, metallic, like a snapped string.

The bell collapsed inward. Sparks danced over Nyara’s skin, her breath caught, her lids fluttered open. Green eyes—wide, confused. A flicker of fear. “Who...?” Her voice was raw, as though from afar.

In the same heartbeat the cage flared. The lattice lost its hardness, thinned to rain. The elemental lifted its head. Fire on one side, water on the other, stone riven down the centre, wind weaving through it all. The hall’s sounds—crackling, hissing, grinding, whistling—clashed together into a single roar.

“Back!” Holdine shouted. “Zoltian, the woman! Fryda, flank! Krexila, forget the bow—steel!”

They moved. Zoltian half-lifted Nyara; her legs obeyed, but reluctantly. “It still pulls,” she gasped, as though something tugged at her within—and across the cage the chimera jerked, as if answering the same pull.

Cjendadz raised his free hand, fingers spread as though grasping an invisible cord. “If I can find the thread that binds them—”

“You would break upon it,” Tsaluah cut him off, never looking from the creature. “We need not severance, but escape.”

The cage yielded. One bar melted, drops hissed on the black floor, hardening to ragged beads of metal and stone. The chimera stepped forward; the wind of its body swept the troughs, the glowing fluid rippled, began to boil without heat.

Fryda hurled herself forward, sword across in a desperate strike. When the blade struck the fire-torso, it bent in the heat’s shimmer—but she forced it down, biting into stone. A crack, a splintered line, a cry like stormwinds and scalding water together. Sparks flew, droplets spattered. “Time only, nothing more!” she gasped, leaping back.

Krexila cast aside her bow, drove her short-sword not into the beast but into the last lattice of the cage. Metal tore—the path was open.

“Out!” Holdine roared. “To the gate!”

They ran. Zoltian steadied Nyara, who moved with clenched teeth; Cjendadz held the torch aloft and glimpsed from the corner of his eye lines in the mosaic floor glowing, as though the hall remembered each step. Tsaluah loped at the side, gaze fixed on the creature, claws sketching formulas in the air—but the air itself unraveled them, as though it would carry no order.

The chimera followed. Each stride remade it: a gust lifted it from beneath; a stamp made the floor quake like mountain thunder; fire leapt, then a flood burst from its arm only to vanish into steam mid-arc.

“Stay with me!” Holdine seized Nyara’s arm, pulling her across the portal’s threshold. Behind them one of the stone troughs shattered; the glowing fluid spilled with a hiss, streaming along the mosaic lines. Where it touched the chimera’s trail, the floor seethed, as though two laws fought for the same ground.

Then the portal and dragon statues loomed. The mist above the stream was thicker now. The chimera’s roar filled the chamber.

“Jump!” Krexila cried. “Now!”

Fryda leapt first, landed hard, rolled, rose again. Holdine vaulted after, dragging Nyara, whose foot slipped at the edge. Zoltian caught her hips, heaved, she fell into him. Tsaluah sprang in one lean motion, little more than feathered air. Cjendadz last, torch to his chest, soles skidding on wet stone—Krexila’s hand caught his, a curse, a yank—“Got you!”—and he was across.

The portal quaked. The chimera filled it with fire, wind, water, stone. Its gaze—if such it had—was not sight, yet they felt it, cold heat upon their skin.

“She will follow,” Nyara breathed. Her voice was clearer now, yet frail. “She must... so long as I...”

“Not long,” Tsaluah said softly. “Look.”

The creature set its foot into the stream.

The current seemed ordinary water. Yet in it lay the ancient binding of the place, flowing beneath the tower—stone and spring, dark and breath—in its own measure. The stream admitted nothing that contradicted itself.

As the elemental set its first step, its sound changed. The hiss became a shriek; the flames clutched at their own steam; the wind found nothing to bear; the stone in its chest twisted, as if its thread had been torn away. It set a second step. The stream did not bend—it simply was. And what entered it became what the place decreed.

A cry ripped the chamber—a chorus of fire, surge, fracture, storm. Steam surged, white and thick, the portal turned to a bright cloud. Within it cracked like bursting bubbles, then clattered like shattering glass. One last high tone—like that broken string—and silence. The mist drifted away.

Upon the water floated dark scales like burnt stone, and gleaming streaks as if wind itself had snagged and stilled. The stream bore them, dissolved them, carried them on.

The companions stood at the bank, gasping, weapons half raised though nothing came.

Nyara leaned on Holdine, hand to her chest. “It... is quiet,” she said, as though listening inward. “The pull is gone.”

“Not gone,” murmured Cjendadz, lowering the torch. “Undone. Here the stream rules—not the will of the dead.”

Tsaluah gave a short nod. “The place has claimed its right.”

Zoltian exhaled, a rough laugh breaking through his cough. “I’ll take that as a yes: we live.”

Krexila retrieved her bow. “And we leave. Before the hall remembers us.”

Holdine cast one last look across the stream, back through the portal into the towering dark where the hall lay.

“Kavorh Nyth’s work is broken.” Then she turned. “Now we bring Nyara to the light.”

They began their ascent, one by one, with the dull knowing that the tower behind them was not mere stone but a tale they had stirred—and now carried with them like a scent on their clothes. Yet for the first time since the fall of the gate, the passage did not breathe against them.

The way upward would be long. But it led out. And the bindings held—at last, on their side.

Chapter 17 - Nyara

The ascent through the winding passages of the tower felt longer than the descent had ever been. Each step echoed as though the walls themselves meant to test whether those who had stirred something within them would be permitted to leave again. Torches cast wavering shadows over damp stone, and the faces of the companions still bore the strain of battle.

Nyara leaned upon Holdine's arm. Her movements were uncertain, yet not frail—rather those of someone who, after long darkness, must learn the light anew. The sparks that had danced over her skin when the bell of light broke were gone, but they had left behind a trace, like an unseen ember, in her gaze.

“How long...?” Her voice was brittle, yet not fearful, but searching.

“Over a century,” answered Tsaluah, its eyes faintly aglow. “Your breath was held by cords of binding while generations passed outside.”

The woman halted. Her fingers brushed along the cold wall as though she might feel the time engraved within it. “A century... then there is no one left to ask after me.” A faint smile, more grief than joy, crossed her face. “They will have buried me long ago—without a grave.”

Fryda wiped the sweat from her brow. “Who are you?”

Nyara straightened as best she could. “Nyara of Orvath, daughter of a line that once bore land and title. I was

young when the tower called me. Too young to know that it held not only walls, but hunger.”

“And now?” asked Krexila.

Nyara met her gaze. “Now I walk my path. I will seek my descendants—if they still live. And if not, I shall find at least their graves.”

For a moment only the dripping from the cracks in the walls could be heard. Then Holdine nodded slowly. “It is your path. And it belongs to you alone.”

None contradicted, none offered escort. All felt there was no place for companions here. She had lost enough time, and none of them wished to bind her again—by worry or by duty.

When they left the tower, night lay upon the forest. Stars shone bright above the crowns, the wind carried the scent of damp moss and ash. Nyara stood still a breath, looked back at the grey shaft of the tower, then drew in a deep breath.

“He did not devour me,” she said softly. “So he shall not remain my prison.”

She swept her hair back, lifted her posture, and turned away. No gestures of farewell, no embrace—only a brief look, which was both thanks and dismissal. Then she walked down the path, alone, into a darkness that was no longer bondage but freedom.

The companions watched until the shadows took her. None spoke the obvious: that this was the last moment she was part of their road. And none felt it as loss.

For so it was meant to be.

Chapter 18 - Return to the Patron

The road back to the city was quieter than the way out. Few words were spoken; only the tread upon damp earth, the crack of twigs, and the distant murmur of the river accompanied them. The tower lay behind—grey, still, as though it had never held more than dust and stone. Yet within them its shadows echoed, and each carried an unseen weight.

At the city gate they were met by the voices of merchants, the cries of children, the snort of horses. Life went on unchanged, as if nothing had happened. For the people in the streets the tower was only a rumour beyond the trees; for the companions it was a place never to be forgotten.

They walked the cobbled streets to the merchants' quarter. There their patron awaited: a man of middle years, well kept, his brow lined with worry, his hands soft as dough. He received them in the hall of his house, where the air smelled of rose oil and wax.

“You have returned,” he observed, without joy but with audible relief. His gaze moved across the company, lingering a moment on Fryda’s sword, on Holdine’s grave bearing, on Cjendadz’s weary eyes. “So—what have you found?”

Holdine stepped forward. “The tower is free of raiders. But in its depths lay an inheritance that should never be used. We have seen what was wrought there—and we have ended it.”

The merchant raised his brows, as though he had expected more. “Ended? Does that mean I may now open the tower without fear?”

“You may enter it,” Holdine replied curtly. “But do not make use of it. Some walls bear more than their own weight.”

The patron pressed his lips together, but asked no further. Perhaps he did not wish to know. Instead he opened a casket already on the table. Gold pieces clinked within—the weight of promises and payment.

“Twenty gold, as agreed,” he said. Then he hesitated, reached beneath the documents, and added three more coins. “And ten more, for your timely return. It is said trust should be rewarded.”

Zoltian grinned broadly, sliding the coins to himself with practiced ease. Fryda only snorted and muttered, “He trusts his chest more than he does us.”

But none contradicted. The coins were real, the gold cool and heavy. The merchant gave them a nod, already half turned away, his mind no doubt on his business again. “You have fulfilled your part. Our contract is ended.”

They left the house. Behind them the door closed with a sound that seemed final.

In the market the noise had grown. Children raced around the fountain, women hawked herbs, a smith struck glowing iron. The world moved on, indifferent to all that had taken place in the tower.

“Just a commission,” Fryda murmured.

“For him,” Holdine answered. “For us, it was more.”

Tsaluah, who had waited at the edge of the square, stepped from the shadow. None spared the feathered being a glance—perhaps because people’s eyes were fixed only on coin and wares. It inclined its head as they approached. “The tower is silent now. But silence is not always peace.”

Cjendadz closed his hand over the red binding they still carried. “Some threads continue to hum, even when they are cut.”

“Then let us move on,” Krexila said softly. “For here we may not stay.”

And so they turned away from the merchants’ streets, out of the city. Behind them remained gold and busyness; before them lay the next road—uncertain, but their own.

Epilogue - Farewell

Their road out led them one last time through the fringe of the forest. The sun hung low, bathing the treetops in warm gold. Behind them stood the tower, a grey shaft of stone, now more silent than ever before. Nothing remained to speak of binding circles or chimera—yet each of them knew such places never fall wholly mute.

At the riverbank Tsaluah paused. Feathers gleamed in the evening light, the beak sharp as if drawn with ink. “Here my step with you ends,” it said. “The forest calls, and my bindings lie not along your paths.”

Holdine inclined her head gravely. “You guided us when we needed it. That is enough.”

Krexila set her hand upon the moss of a tree trunk and smiled faintly. “The forest holds you—and we shall know where to find you.”

One last glance, then Tsaluah vanished into shadow, soundless as a thought sinking back into its depth.

The others walked on; the path seemed bright and easy after all those dim corridors. Zoltian tossed the coins again and again into the air, as though to assure himself they truly lay in his hand. Fryda only shook her head, yet the glimmer in her eyes spoke of relief.

“We should find someone,” Holdine said at length, “who can mend bindings. Tsaluah was more than that—but without it, we lack something.”

“Then we shall find one,” said Cjendadz, whose fingers kept brushing the binding tucked in his pouch. “The roads are long, and none walk them alone.”

The evening air was mild, and for the first time in days no shadow lay upon their steps. Krexila passed around pieces of dried bread, Fryda told of a brawl she had once barely lost, and even Holdine laughed softly at the telling.

So they walked together—not strangers any longer, but companions.

Behind them remained a tower full of secrets; before them stretched a new road. Perhaps traces of old orders would cross their way again, perhaps names like Nyssareth would return—but for today, it was enough that they went on.

And somewhere, far ahead, the next story had already begun.

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His worlds and magic systems, though far removed from my own, have shown me that even the firmest rules can be bent—if one dares to rethink them.

Perhaps this is why the bindings in this story speak differently—not only as power, but as a reminder that even an entire weave can be changed.