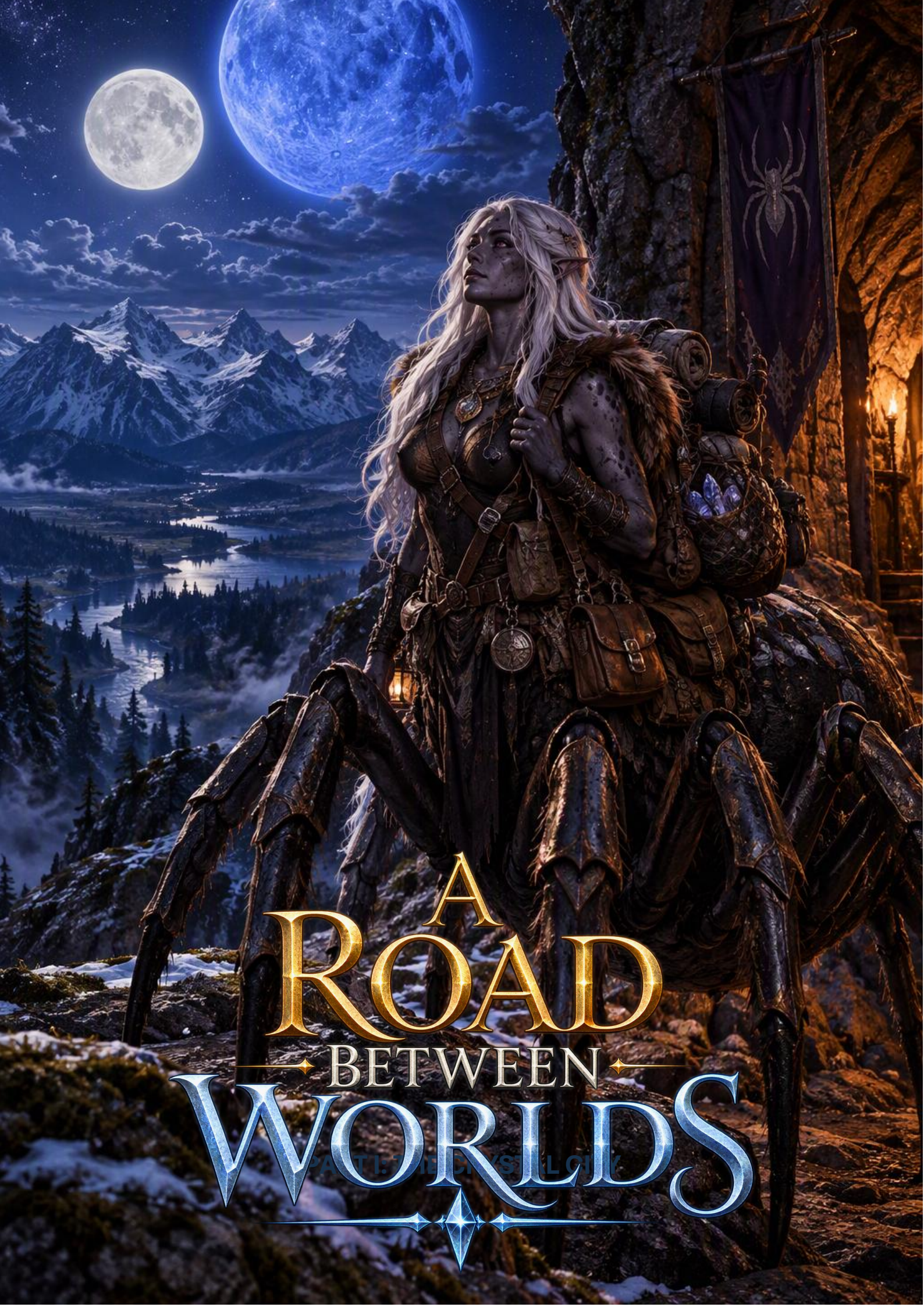




# A ROAD BETWEEN WORLDS

# Chapter One

## The Clicking Upon the Stones

Click. Clack. Click. Clack.

The sound followed Nymira across the dark stones of the market square, clear and even beneath the merchants' calls and the gentle music of water flowing through the central fountain.

Several children attempted to imitate the rhythm by striking pieces of wood against the pavement.

Click-click. Clack.

They were hopelessly out of time.

Nymira smiled and continued between the stalls.

The children pursued her for another dozen paces, their little wooden sticks tapping furiously against the ground. One abandoned the game and darted between two market tables in pursuit of a cloth ball. Another remained beside Nymira, concentrating fiercely, as though mastery of her peculiar rhythm were a matter of great importance.

Click.

Clack.

Tap-tap.

Click.

"No," Nymira murmured. "Still dreadful."

The child looked up indignantly.

She did not slow.

Blue-violet mushroom lamps hung in long chains from the balconies above the street. Their light passed over her silver-white hair and shimmered across paving stones worn smooth by centuries of feet, carts and clawed creatures. Narrow channels ran along either side of the road, carrying clear spring water from the central fountain into the lower quarters of the city.

Anyone who heard Nymira approaching without seeing her might have imagined hard heels striking the pavement.

Perhaps some court lady was hurrying toward the palace, late to another official meeting and far too proud to run.

That would not have been an entirely unreasonable assumption.

Nymira was, after all, a lady of the royal house.

Technically.

It was the sort of technicality Nyrandel enjoyed reminding her about whenever another council meeting appeared on the horizon.

But no polished shoes waited around the corner.

Nymira did.

The sound came from eight long, dark legs.

Each was covered in overlapping plates of glossy black chitin that caught the blue light of the market lamps in flashes of midnight purple. The legs emerged around a massive arachnid body, powerful without being

cumbersome, its abdomen rounded and armored, its surface marked by faint natural patterns that resembled black water flowing beneath glass.

Each leg narrowed through several elegant joints before ending in a hard, claw-like point.

Those points made the sound.

Click.

Clack.

Click.

Clack.

Her legs moved in an intricate alternating rhythm, one set advancing while another supported her weight. The result was a flowing gait so familiar that Nymira no longer consciously considered where any individual foot should land.

She could cross polished stone without slipping.

She could sprint over broken rock.

She could climb a vertical wall almost as easily as another person crossed a room.

A ceiling required moderately more concentration, mostly because ceilings tended to contain lanterns, banners, pipes, decorative chandeliers and people who became annoyed when dust fell into their drinks.

She had learned that lesson repeatedly.

An elderly metalworker backed away from his stall to give her room. Nymira shifted three legs without interrupting her stride and passed between the metalworker and a stack of copper pans with scarcely a hand's breadth to spare.

The child beside her attempted the rhythm again.

Tap. Tap-tap. Clack.

Nymira glanced down.

"Worse."

"I nearly had it."

"You nearly invented a ninth leg."

The child considered that.

"Would you like a ninth leg?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I have nowhere sensible to put it."

The child nodded solemnly, apparently satisfied.

From the forward part of the spider body rose Nymira's Velyri torso, joined so naturally to the dark chitin beneath it that there was no visible boundary between creature and woman. The lines of her abdomen continued into the forward plate of her arachnid body, charcoal-gray skin gradually giving way to glossy black chitin through branching patterns of deep violet and black.

Nothing about her upper body was delicate.

Nearly three centuries of climbing, fighting and hauling herself through the Underfolds had shaped her into something lean, powerful and extraordinarily strong. Her shoulders were broad beneath the fall of her silver-

white hair, and she carried herself with the easy confidence of someone long accustomed to both her strength and her size.

She occupied space without apology.

Fine golden chains crossed the dark fabric near her collar, catching the blue-violet light whenever she moved. Nyrandel had given them to her many years ago after declaring that even a determined enemy of courtly responsibility ought occasionally to resemble a member of the royal family.

She wore them less as a mark of rank than as a sign of affection.

Dark markings curled across her charcoal-gray skin, following her shoulders and throat before disappearing beneath her hair. Long, delicate ears emerged through the silver-white strands.

Her eyes were violet.

Not purple.

Nymira had once heard a particularly unimaginative court poet describe them as purple and had corrected him in front of half the royal household.

Purple was a color.

Violet was a proper description.

There was a difference.

The poet had disagreed.

He had not made that mistake twice.

Her eyes possessed an unusual luminosity common enough among the Velyri, although Nymira's were brighter than most. In deep darkness, particularly after several hours away from artificial light, they reflected the glow of azuryte and luminous fungi until they seemed almost to shine from within.

Her hair provided the sharpest contrast to everything below it.

It fell beyond her waist in a thick torrent of pale silver-white, never entirely obedient no matter how carefully it had been brushed. Today she wore most of it loose, except for two narrow braids drawn back from her temples and fastened behind her head with a clasp of polished blue crystal.

She had once tried cutting it short.

She had hated it.

That experiment had lasted perhaps eight years.

Eight legs.

Two arms.

One powerful, indivisible body.

It had not always been so.

Nearly three centuries earlier, she had run barefoot through these same streets.

At least, she believed she had.

Sometimes, when she watched the children, something returned.

Not a proper memory.

More an impression.

A flash of small gray feet slapping against wet stone.

A scraped knee.

Someone shouting her name.

The conviction that if she ran fast enough through the western market, she could reach the fountain before her cousins.

A group of children shot around a mushroom seller's stall ahead of her, scattering amid delighted shrieks as an elderly merchant waved a cleaning brush at them.

"Walk!"

They ran faster.

"I said walk!"

One ducked beneath a hanging string of dried mushrooms. Another vaulted a basket. A third nearly collided with a customer carrying an armful of cloth.

Nymira slowed.

For a heartbeat, she saw herself among them.

Not as she was now.

As she had been.

Small.

Thin.

Silver-haired.

Barefoot.

She could almost remember the slap of her feet against these stones.

Almost.

The strange thing was that she could no longer recall the sensation itself.

She knew what feet had been. Of course she knew. Somewhere inside the enormous library of memories accumulated over more than three centuries was the experience of standing on them.

But when she tried to summon the feeling, there was nothing.

She could remember the warmth of her mother's hand.

She could remember stealing honeyed root cakes from a windowsill.

She could remember the smell of the school chamber after the lamps had been extinguished.

She even remembered being terrified during her first formal presentation to the royal council.

But toes curling against cold stone?

Nothing.

Sometimes she wondered whether the memory had disappeared gradually or all at once.

She flexed the foremost pair of her spider legs.

Their hard tips scraped lightly against the pavement.

That sensation she knew perfectly.

Minute vibrations entered through the chitin and travelled upward through joints capable of detecting differences in a surface too subtle for ordinary feet.

A loose stone three paces ahead.

Water trickling beneath the pavement on her left.

Six children running behind her.

A heavily loaded handcart approaching from the next street.

Home.

That was what stone felt like now.

And Nymira was content with it.

More than content, if she was honest.

There had been a time when she had hidden the lower part of herself beneath enormous cloaks and avoided polished surfaces.

That Nymira seemed nearly as distant as the barefoot girl.

Nearly three centuries were enough to mourn almost anything.

They were also enough to discover advantages.

Bare feet had never allowed her to hang upside down from a cavern roof.

They had certainly never carried her fifty paces up a cliff in the time it took an opponent to understand where she had gone.

And they had never inspired six neighborhood children to follow her around a market square making terrible clicking noises.

One of those children now dashed directly beneath her.

Nymira stopped without hesitation.

All eight feet became perfectly still.

"Tavin."

The child froze.

A grin spread across a face missing two front teeth.

"I knew you saw me."

"I heard you from three streets away."

"You did not."

Nymira bent at the waist, her long silver hair spilling over one shoulder as she reached down and tousled Tavin's hair.

"No," she admitted. "But your lies can be heard all the way to the palace."

The vegetable merchant beside them laughed.

Tavin scowled at the merchant, which only made the old woman laugh harder.

"Go on," Nymira said.

Tavin darted away.

"Not under the cart!"

Tavin altered course at once.

Nymira smiled.

That, at least, was one advantage of belonging to the royal family.

Sometimes children actually listened.

She continued across the square.

Ilyr-Veyn was waking into its busiest hours.

Calling Ilyr-Veyn a city was technically correct, though the word suggested something broader and more orderly than the home its inhabitants knew.

It possessed no grand avenues planned by ancient architects. There were no perfectly measured districts or broad ceremonial streets. The city spread vertically as much as horizontally, growing wherever the cavern permitted life to take root.

No living person in Nymira's memory had arrived from the surface to compare Ilyr-Veyn with the cities described in old stories. The people of the deep knew those remote places only through damaged maps, inherited songs and accounts copied so often that nobody could say where history ended and imagination began.

No architect had designed the whole.

That was part of its beauty.

Each generation had simply added what it needed.

An older house might begin as three rooms carved into the stone. A century later, someone added a fungalwood balcony. Two generations after that, another family built a workshop beneath it. A narrow staircase might wind around the entire structure because nobody remembered why the original stairs had been placed elsewhere.

Nothing quite matched.

Everything belonged.

Dark stone formed the bones of the city, but the Velyri disliked darkness more than inhabitants of the distant settlements assumed they ought to.

Light was everywhere.

Lanterns burned with rendered mushroom oil behind colored glass.

Pale fungal strands were woven through balcony railings.

Azuryte shards no larger than fingernails sat inside polished metal cages and gave off a steady blue glow.

Huge cultivated mushrooms rose through openings in the paving stones, their caps spreading overhead like luminous umbrellas in shades of cobalt, turquoise and soft violet.

Against all that cool light, doorways glowed gold.

Windows glowed amber.

Cooking fires glowed orange.

It made the enormous cavern feel less like an abyss and more like a night that had learned how to be comfortable.

There were smells too.

Hundreds of them.

Fresh bread made with cave grain and ground mushroom flour.

Peppered riverfish curling over charcoal braziers.

Fermented moss wine.

Hot mineral tea.

Wax.

Wet stone.

Metalwork.

Sweet root syrup.

The sharp smell of tanning solution drifted down from somewhere above and immediately spoiled all the more pleasant aromas.

Nymira wrinkled her nose.

"Morning, Your Highness!"

Nymira turned.

Kessa, who sold preserved cavefruit from a bright green stall, held up a jar.

"No."

"You haven't even seen what it is."

"I saw the last one."

"This is different."

"The last one tried to crawl out."

"It was fermented."

"It had legs."

"Natural variation."

Nymira continued walking.

"I'll save you a jar!"

"Give it to Nyrandel."

Kessa gasped.

"Have you no love for your uncle?"

The surrounding merchants laughed.

That was Ilyr-Veyn.

Nymira could have crossed the same marketplace wearing a ceremonial circlet with royal guards surrounding her.

Nobody here would have cared.

To them she was Princess Nymira during ceremonies, Lady Nymira when a dispute required formality, and simply Nymira the rest of the time.

The children occasionally called her Spider-Nymira, usually when they wanted her to climb something.

She greatly preferred that to *Your Highness*.

Near the fountain, the market widened.

The spring had flowed there since before the first Velyri settlement. Nobody had ever attempted to tame it into perfect architectural symmetry. Water emerged from a split in a massive column of pale rock and spilled through a succession of natural basins worn smooth by time.

Generations had added small improvements.

A carved lip here.  
A drinking channel there.  
Low stone seats around the largest basin.  
Someone, long ago, had carved dozens of tiny fish into the rock below the waterline.  
Nobody remembered who.  
That made Nymira love them more.  
People gathered around the fountain throughout the day.  
A smith washed black dust from both hands.  
Two elderly Velyri argued quietly over a board game.  
A delivery porter filled three ceramic bottles.  
A parent attempted unsuccessfully to persuade a toddler that climbing into the fountain was unnecessary.  
Above them, bridges crossed the open cavern.  
Beyond those bridges rose more homes.  
Beyond those homes, lights.  
Thousands of little points spread into the darkness until distance swallowed them.  
Not a vast kingdom.  
Not an empire.  
Their corner of the world.  
Nymira paused beside a fruit stall.  
Pale caveberries lay in shallow reed trays beside clusters of yellow bulb fruit and translucent pods filled with tiny black seeds. The merchant had arranged everything with exaggerated precision, separating the colors into neat spirals that made the stall look more like a mosaic than a place of business.  
At its center stood a bowl of deep-crimson lantern-plums.  
She reached for one.  
The merchant slapped her fingers lightly with a folded cloth.  
"Payment first."  
Nymira drew herself upright.  
"You just struck a member of the royal family."  
"A member of the royal family just attempted to steal a lantern-plum."  
"I was judging its quality."  
"With your fingers?"  
"My eyes are occupied."  
The merchant folded his arms.  
Nymira considered him.  
He considered Nymira.  
Around them, three customers pretended not to listen.

"Put it on Nyrandel's account," Nymira said.

"Prince Nyrandel has forbidden that."

"When?"

"After the honey-root incident."

"That was nearly forty years ago."

"He was very specific."

One of the customers coughed into a sleeve to hide a laugh.

Nymira placed a small bronze coin upon the stall.

The merchant inspected it, then handed her the largest plum in the bowl.

"A pleasure conducting honest trade with the royal house."

She bit into the fruit.

Its skin broke with a soft snap. Warm, peppery sweetness spread across her tongue.

"Overripe," she declared.

"Liar."

"Your lies," Nymira said, pointing the half-eaten plum at him, "can be heard all the way to the palace."

"You already used that one on Tavin."

She continued walking before the merchant could claim victory.

The market gave way to a narrower street.

Here the city became quieter.

Workshops replaced food stalls. Hammers rang against anvils. Somewhere, a saw rasped steadily through pale fungalwood harvested from the towering stalk-forests of the eastern deeps. An apprentice hurried past with a tray of tiny brass gears balanced between both hands.

An old shop occupied the corner ahead, squeezed between a metalworker's yard and a narrow flight of stairs climbing toward the upper terraces.

Calling it a shop had always seemed inadequate to Nymira. It was part mapmaker's workshop, part archive, part antiquities dealer and part dumping ground for historical objects whose purpose everyone except Nyrandel had forgotten.

She stopped outside.

Its sign had once displayed a perfectly respectable inscription:

**NYRANDEL VAE  
CARTOGRAPHY, ANTIQUITIES AND HISTORICAL INSTRUMENTS**

Someone had added a smaller sign beneath it.

**NO CLOCKS**

And beneath that:

**THIS MEANS YOU, GRIBBLE**

Nymira smiled.

She ducked beneath the doorway.

The interior smelled of paper, cedar oil, dust and hot tea.

Maps covered nearly every vertical surface.

Some were framed.

Some hung from wooden rollers.

Others had been pinned directly onto the walls wherever space permitted. Shelves bowed beneath journals, stone tablets, navigational instruments and objects whose functions Nymira could only guess.

A model of the eastern tunnels hung from the ceiling.

A collection of compasses occupied an entire cabinet.

One of them appeared to be pointing at Nymira.

She frowned at it.

It continued pointing.

"Don't encourage it," said a voice from behind a stack of books. "It has been doing that all morning."

Nyrandel emerged.

Age had narrowed him without diminishing him.

He remained tall, although the straight-backed scholar Nymira remembered from childhood now leaned on a dark wooden staff when tired. His skin was the same deep charcoal gray as Nymira's, but time had softened its patterns until the markings around his temples resembled faded ink.

His hair had once been silver.

Now it was almost entirely white.

He wore it in a single long braid that fell over one shoulder nearly to his waist, bound at intervals with bronze rings. His face was narrow and angular, dominated by high cheekbones and a nose that had been broken once and healed slightly crooked.

Nymira knew exactly when it had happened.

She had been there.

Nyrandel insisted the incident involved diplomacy.

Nymira remembered a chair.

His eyes remained astonishingly sharp.

Pale violet, considerably lighter than Nymira's, they had the unpleasant habit of making anyone caught in them feel as though Nyrandel had already heard both sides of an argument and discovered three flaws nobody else had noticed.

He wore a long, dark robe embroidered at the cuffs with tiny geometric maps.

There was ink on two fingers.

There was always ink on two fingers.

Nyrandel looked at Nymira.

Then at the doorway.

Then back again.

"You are late."

"I wasn't aware I was expected."

"That has never prevented you from being late."

She folded her arms.

"I came to see my beloved uncle."

"Then I am touched."

"You should be."

"What do you want?"

She grinned.

Of everyone in Ilyr-Veyn, Nyrandel was perhaps the only person entirely immune to her titles, reputation and attempts at charm.

For most of Nymira's childhood, Nyrandel had overseen the royal archives, though *overseen* hardly described what he actually did.

He was her mother's elder brother and therefore belonged to the highest branch of Ilyr-Veyn's royal family. Neither Nyrandel nor Nymira stood directly in the line that currently occupied the throne, though both belonged to its closest circle.

In Ilyr-Veyn, that distinction carried enormous weight during ceremonies and considerably less when something actually needed doing.

His blood gave him a place close to the throne.

His mind had kept him there.

He had counselled three rulers, including Nymira's grandmother, and each had learned that asking for his opinion was easier than ignoring it afterward.

He remembered things.

Roads abandoned two centuries earlier.

Names erased from public records.

Agreements whose signatories had been dead for generations.

Which family had once lived behind a sealed door uncovered during a tunnel excavation.

Why a particular bridge had been built three handspans narrower than every other bridge in the western quarter.

He possessed the peculiar mind of someone who never regarded the past as dead.

To Nyrandel, history was simply a very long conversation, and most current problems were caused by people entering halfway through without bothering to discover what had already been said.

Like Nymira, Nyrandel possessed little natural enthusiasm for ceremony, administration or the countless performances expected of the royal family.

Unlike Nymira, he was exceptionally skilled at all of them.

He could settle a dispute between merchant families before either side realized it had conceded anything. He could guide a formal council through six hours of argument and arrange matters so that its members eventually arrived at the conclusion he had quietly suggested at the beginning.

He knew precisely when to invoke royal authority and, more importantly, when authority would only make a problem worse.

Nyrandel attended to his duties because someone had to perform them well, not because he enjoyed being watched while doing so.

Whenever possible, he retreated afterward to this crowded shop, where maps covered the walls, instruments waited to be repaired and ordinary citizens could enter without petitioning a chamberlain.

Here he remained a prince of Ilyr-Veyn.

He was simply a prince with ink on his fingers, dust upon his sleeves and a permanent sign over the door refusing to repair Gribble's clocks.

He had declined more ceremonial offices than Nymira could remember, usually by demonstrating that he was already doing the necessary work more effectively without the title.

She suspected that was exactly how he wanted it.

She wandered towards his worktable.

An enormous map lay open across it.

"What is that?"

"Paper."

Nymira gave him a look.

"Remarkable. Three centuries old and still learning."

"Your humility improves with age."

"I meant me."

"So did I."

She leaned over the map.

It showed Ilyr-Veyn and the surrounding tunnels.

At least, she thought it did.

Some passages she recognized immediately.

Others were unfamiliar.

Several continued far beyond the borders found on modern maps.

"Where did you get this?"

Nyrandel's humor faded.

"Sit."

Nymira looked at him.

He pointed towards a chair.

She looked at the chair.

Then she deliberately looked back at the vast spider body occupying most of the available floor.

Nyrandel sighed.

"An expression, Nymira."

"Nearly three hundred years."

"Yes."

"And you still do it."

"Nearly three hundred years," Nyrandel countered, "and you still find it amusing."

"I do."

That earned the faintest smile.

She lowered her body instead, folding four legs beneath herself while the others found comfortable positions among the furniture.

One long leg crossed beneath the worktable.

Another settled beside a bookcase without touching it.

A third hovered uncertainly over a tray of ancient glass instruments.

Nyrandel moved the tray.

"Do not break those."

"I wasn't going to."

"You were considering it."

"I was considering whether they deserved to survive."

Nyrandel carefully rolled one edge of the map flat.

"Do you remember the Ulren Road?"

Nymira searched her memory.

"A children's story."

"A road."

"A children's story about a road."

"Those two things are less different than you imagine."

"The road supposedly reached the surface."

"It did reach the surface."

Nymira looked at him.

Nyrandel tapped the map.

A thin line wandered north through regions that modern maps left blank.

She leaned closer.

"That's impossible."

"An unfortunate word to use in this family."

"You know what I mean."

"I usually do."

His finger followed the faded line.

"The road predates the western collapse. Before your grandmother's grandmother was born, traders travelled through these passages."

"To where?"

"The surface."

Something about the word made the room feel subtly colder.

The surface.

She knew it existed.

At least, she knew what the word meant.

She had read descriptions preserved in the royal archives. She had studied brittle maps on which the mountains ended and enormous blank spaces began. She had listened to songs claiming that water fell freely from a roofless world and that forests covered distances greater than the entire known span of the Underfolds.

She knew the old stories of surface cities, though no living storyteller agreed on what those cities were like.

In one version, towers of white stone rose higher than the pillars of the deepest caverns.

In another, people lived in fragile wooden houses that stood completely exposed to wind and rain, whatever those things truly felt like, as well as to wandering beasts.

Some tales described cultivated fields extending beyond sight.

Others insisted that the surface was mostly frozen wilderness, populated by fur-wrapped warriors and animals large enough to carry people upon their backs.

The contradictions had made the surface feel less like a place and more like a collection of impossible ideas.

There had been trade once.

The oldest records agreed on that much.

Objects had come down through the mountain: lengths of timber cut from unknown trees, woven fabrics faded nearly colorless with age, seeds that no longer germinated and the yellowed bones of creatures that had never walked beneath stone.

But the roads had closed centuries ago.

No surface traveller had entered Ilyr-Veyn within Nymira's lifetime.

No merchant had returned with reliable news.

No royal messenger had crossed the forgotten passes.

The surface survived in stories, artifacts and increasingly doubtful maps.

She understood, intellectually, what a horizon was.

She understood that the sky was a vast open distance above the land.

She understood rain as water falling from that distance.

None of those ideas felt entirely believable.

A world without stone overhead.

An emptiness so immense that people had given it a name.

She glanced towards the shop window.

Beyond it lay the familiar cavern street, its glowing lamps, carved homes and stone archways.

Solid things.

Sensible things.

Safe things.

"Why are you showing me this?" she asked.

Nyrandel was silent.

That was unusual enough that Nymira looked at him properly.

The years were visible then.

Not merely in the white hair or the faded markings.

They revealed themselves in the slight hollowness beneath his eyes and in the fraction of a second before one hand closed around the edge of the table.

Nyrandel had always seemed old to her.

That was the peculiar cruelty of growing up around someone much older.

Childhood converted age into permanence.

He had been old when she was thirty.

Old when she was a hundred.

Old when she had returned from the eastern deeps half-dead and too stubborn to admit she needed assistance.

But now Nymira saw something different.

Not old.

Aging.

"Nyrandel?"

He straightened.

Whatever she had noticed disappeared behind his familiar composure.

Before he could answer, something sounded outside.

A bell.

One note.

Deep.

Metallic.

It rolled through the street and entered the shop.

Nyrandel's head turned immediately.

Nymira rose.

Every leg unfolded at once.

Another note sounded.

Then another.

The noise of the street changed.

The saw stopped.

The hammering ceased.

Voices died.

Even the children knew to stop playing.

From far across Ilyr-Veyn, another bell answered.

Nymira knew that pattern.

Every child in the city knew it.

Not fire.

Not collapse.

Not flood.

The eastern tunnel.

Warning.

Nyrandel looked at Nymira.

For the first time that morning, there was no trace of amusement in the old Velyr's face.

Outside, someone shouted.

The bell rang again.

Nymira moved towards the door.

Her clawed feet struck the stone.

Click.

Clack.

Click.

Clack.

The same sound as before.

But the city had stopped laughing.