

Tavin Roadwarden

**A ROAD
BETWEEN WORLDS**

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PROLOGUE
THE MAINTENANCE WORKER



G RIBBLE HAD BEEN told not to enter the princess's chambers. This was reasonable. He entered them anyway. There was water running down the wall.

He stood in the doorway and watched a thin stream emerge from somewhere behind a carved stone panel, travel behind a shelf, cross the floor, and disappear beneath an expensive rug.

He looked from the rug back to the water.

Someone had placed a folded cloth over the wettest part.

He closed his eyes.

"No."

Something moved farther inside the room.

"Hello?"

There was no answer. He put down his maintenance case.

"I was told there was a leak."

Still nothing.

He had also been told that the princess was resting, did not wish to be disturbed, had been through a difficult period, and required consideration, privacy and patience.

He had listened carefully, until somebody mentioned water coming through a wall. That part had seemed considerably more urgent.

He stepped inside.

"Princess?"

A voice came from somewhere beyond the partition.

"Go away."

Gribble considered this.

"No."

Silence.

"What?"

"The wall is leaking."

"I know."

"Good."

He picked up his tools.

"Then we're already making progress."

The water came from the bathing room. Gribble reached the doorway and found the stone basin torn partly from the wall. One side still clung to its mounting; the rest lay broken across the floor, water running freely from the pipe behind it.

He studied the pieces, then looked towards the partition.

"What happened?"

"Nothing."

His gaze returned to the shattered stone.

"Nothing did this?"

"I barely touched it."

He crouched beside one of the pieces. The basin was thick stone.

"You barely touched it."

"Yes."

"With what?"

"That isn't important."

"It is if I'm expected to repair it."

Silence.

"I was angry."

That made him pause. "With the basin?"

"No."

He waited, but nothing more came, then looked at the broken stone again.

"All right."

"All right?"

"Yes."

"You aren't going to ask?"

"No."

"Why?"

He opened his case.

"I'm here to fix the basin."

For a moment there was silence behind the partition.

"Gribble."

"Yes?"

"You're strange."

"So I've been told."

He closed the water valve.

"What are you doing?"

"Stopping the leak."

"I can see that."

"No, you can't."

He smiled and reached for his wrench. The pipe was easily repaired; the basin was not.

"I'll need to bring another tomorrow."

"I don't want another."

"Why?"

Silence. Then, quietly:

"I'll break it too."

He glanced at the pieces.

"No."

"You don't know that."

"No. I mean I won't bring one like this."

"What will you bring?"

"I haven't decided."

"That isn't reassuring."

"It isn't supposed to be."

He packed his tools. At the door, he stopped.

"Tomorrow."

"The leak is fixed."

"Yes."

"So why are you coming back?"

He glanced at the shattered basin.

"Because the job isn't."

He returned the next day with a basin that was simpler and stronger.

He changed the mounting and set it farther back, leaving more room around it.

The princess remained behind the partition while he worked.

"You're making a lot of noise."

"I'm attaching stone to stone."

"Do it quietly."

"No."

"Why not?"

"Stone is difficult to intimidate."

She laughed, and he continued working. When he finished, he packed his tools.

"There."

"Will it break?"

"Everything breaks eventually."

"That isn't reassuring."

"That's why there are maintenance workers."

Silence followed.

"Gribble?"

"Gribble?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you."

He shifted the case in his hand.

"Yes."

"Yes."

"That wasn't a very good response."

"It was a very good basin."

He left.

The next time, nobody summoned him. Gribble came anyway, and she heard the maintenance case touch the floor.

"What's broken?"

"Nothing."

"Then why are you here?"

"Checking the basin."

"It works."

"So did the old one."

When he returned from inspecting the basin, something small sat on the table beside his case.

"What's this?"

"What's this?"

"Nothing."

He picked it up.

"You keep leaving remarkably edible nothing in here."

"I thought maintenance workers required feeding."

"Occasionally."

"Is that a thank you?"

"No."

"Good."

He ate it anyway.

Over time, the broken things became less important: a lamp fitting, a door, furniture moved to accommodate a body the chambers had never been designed for.

He began to understand that the princess's chambers had been built for circumstances that no longer existed. He didn't ask her to explain. Instead, he asked simpler questions.

"More room?"

"Yes."

"Higher?"

"No."

"There?"

"Perfect."

He nodded and moved on to the next job.

On another visit, the princess was unusually quiet. Gribble worked on a door fitting for several minutes before speaking.

"You're not criticising anything."

There was no response. He tightened another screw.

"This is unsettling."

"I'm tired."

His hand rested on the screwdriver for a moment. He could have asked why, but didn't.

"All right."

He went back to work. A little later, she spoke.

"Gribble?"

"Yes?"

"Can you keep making noise?"

He glanced at his tools.

"What kind?"

"I don't care."

He picked up a file. Metal scraped against metal while he worked, and neither of them spoke. When the repair was finished, he found another part that probably needed filing, then another.

"You finished a while ago."

"Yes."

"Then what are you doing?"

"Preventative maintenance."

"Is that real?"

"It is now."

He heard her laugh softly and kept filing. The first time the princess came out while he was working, Gribble was underneath a cabinet. He heard movement behind him, then silence, and tightened the fitting.

"Could you hand me the narrow wrench?"

Nothing happened.

"The narrow one."

Still nothing. He reached backwards without looking, and she placed the wrench into his hand.

"Thank you."

He continued working. After several moments, she spoke.

"Gribble?"

"Yes?"

"Nothing."

"Good."

He tightened the last fitting.

After that, she kept helping him, and he behaved exactly the same either way. He complained about poor workmanship while she asked too many questions. He told her not to touch things; she touched them anyway. Occasionally something broke. Increasingly, nothing did.

One day, Gribble arrived to find the princess waiting.

"Nothing is broken," she said.

He looked around.

"Nothing?"

"Nothing."

"This is suspicious."

"I thought we could eat."

Food waited on the table, as he had started getting used to.

"You summoned maintenance for this?"

"No."

"Good."

"I summoned you."

He considered that, then put down his case.

"Acceptable."

"High praise?"

"The highest."

She smiled.

Grandcycles passed and the young princess grew. Eventually, people stopped asking why a maintenance worker spent so much time in her company. It simply became one of those things about Ilyr-Veyn.

At first, he had come because something was broken. Later, he came because something might break. Eventually, nobody bothered pretending.

Sometimes the princess found something she wanted to explore; other times, Gribble discovered something interesting and was foolish enough to mention it. He told her when her ideas were terrible. She ignored him, and he followed anyway.

The city changed, and so did the princess. Repairs needed repairing; everything broke eventually.

He had been right about that, but some things changed without breaking.

The partition ceased to matter, and laughter came more often. Somewhere along the way, without either of them deciding when it

had happened, he stopped being the maintenance worker who came to the princess's chambers.

He was simply Gribble.

PART I
THE UNDERFOLDS

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, while another remained beside her, concentrating fiercely as though mastery of her peculiar rhythm were a matter of great importance.

Click. Clack. Tap-tap. Click.

"No," she murmured. "Still dreadful."

The child looked up indignantly. She did not slow.

Blue-violet mushroom lamps hung in long chains from balconies above the street, their light passing over her silver-white hair and shimmering 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.

The water was low today. Twenty-one days since the last rise, and she knew it without thinking. Everyone did. Nine days remained before the Timekeepers would begin checking the lower channels more frequently, and twelve before the river rose again and another cycle began.

In Ilyr-Veyn, water kept time better than darkness ever could.

Darkness was always there.

Anyone hearing Nymira approach without seeing her might have imagined hard heels striking the pavement, perhaps some court lady hurrying towards the palace, late to an official meeting and far too dignified to run.

That would not have been an entirely unreasonable assumption. She 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, and Nymira had no feet that could reasonably be mistaken for them.

Eight long legs carried her over the stone, rising from a massive arachnid body. Each was protected by overlapping plates of glossy black chitin, and blue-violet light moved across them in flashes of midnight purple as she walked. The great abdomen behind her was rounded, powerful and armoured, its dark surface carrying faint natural patterns like black water beneath glass.

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

Click. Clack. Click. Clack.

They moved in an intricate alternating rhythm, four supporting while the others advanced and shifted, the pattern changing continuously beneath her without conscious thought. The result was far smoother than the sound suggested. She could cross polished stone without slipping, sprint over broken rock and scale a vertical wall almost as easily as most Velyri crossed a room.

A ceiling required moderately more concentration, mostly because ceilings tended to contain lamps, pipes, banners, decorative fixtures 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 sideways without breaking stride, altering the position of three legs while the others took her weight, and passed between him 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.

She 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 this was sufficient.

From the forward portion of Nymira's arachnid body rose her Velyri torso. Her two forms belonged to the same body, charcoal-grey skin descending from her abdomen and hips into branching patterns of deep violet and black before gradually becoming the glossy chitin of the larger body beneath.

Eight arachnid legs. Two humanoid arms.

One indivisible Nymira.

Her Velyri half would have seemed tall even without everything beneath it. With all eight feet planted naturally upon level ground, the top of her head stood nearly two and a half metres above the stone.

There was nothing delicate about her. More than three centuries of climbing, exploring, fighting and hauling herself through places sensible people avoided had built strength across her shoulders, arms and abdomen. Where another Velyri rarely approached eighty kilograms, Nymira's transformed body weighed closer to two hundred.

She did not think of herself as heavy.

Floors occasionally did.

She carried her size with the unconscious ease of someone who had inhabited the same body for centuries, occupying space without apology.

Fine golden chains crossed the dark fabric near her collar, catching the blue light whenever she moved. Nyrandel had given them to her 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 naturally over her charcoal-grey skin, running across her shoulders and throat before disappearing beneath her hair. Her ears were long and sharply pointed, larger than human ears in the illustrations preserved in old books.

Her eyes were violet.

Not purple.

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

Her eyes were violet, not purple. Nymira had once heard a particularly unimaginative court poet describe them as purple and corrected him in front of half the royal household. Purple was merely a colour; violet was a proper description, and she maintained there was a difference. The poet had disagreed only once.

Velyri eyes possessed a subtle luminosity in darkness, and Nymira's were unusually bright. After hours away from the lamps, they gathered the glow of fungi and azuryte until they sometimes appeared almost to shine from within.

Her hair provided the sharpest contrast to everything beneath it. It fell beyond her waist in a thick torrent of silver-white, never entirely obedient no matter how carefully it had been brushed. Today most of it hung 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 and hated it. The experiment had lasted perhaps eight years.

For a Velyri, this barely qualified as an impulsive mistake.

One of the children dashed directly beneath her.

One moment she was moving; the next, all eight legs were 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."

She lowered herself, her body descending remarkably far without her Velyri torso bending at all. Her legs folded outward until her face was considerably closer to Tavin's.

She reached down and tousled his 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, and he shot away.

"Not under the cart."

He changed direction immediately.

She watched him disappear into the market.

For an instant, another child occupied exactly the same place: small and thin, charcoal-grey, silver-white hair flying behind her and bare feet striking wet stone.

Then she was gone.

The market returned around Nymira, but the image lingered. It wasn't a proper memory. Those became rarer with every passing grandcycle. What remained were fragments: a scraped knee; someone shouting her name across the western market; the certainty that she could reach the fountain before her cousins if she ran hard enough; her mother's hand around hers.

Honeyed root cakes cooling on a windowsill, and the absolute conviction that taking one before supper did not constitute theft if nobody actually witnessed it.

The smell of the school chamber after the lamps were extinguished. Fear during her first formal presentation before the royal council.

She remembered all of those things.

What she could no longer remember was having feet.

She knew she had once possessed them. She had seen portraits and carried memories that could not have existed otherwise. Somewhere beneath three centuries of everything that had happened since, there was a young Velyri who had stood on two legs and curled ten toes against these same cold stones.

But she could no longer summon the sensation.

Nymira flexed the foremost pair of her arachnid legs, their hard tips scraping softly against the pavement. That she understood perfectly. Minute vibrations travelled through chitin and upward through sensitive joints: a loose stone three paces ahead, water moving through a narrow channel beneath the pavement to her left, children running behind her, a heavily loaded handcart approaching from the adjoining street, someone hammering metal two buildings away.

Home. That was what stone felt like now.

And she 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, when polished metal and still water had been things to avoid, when every movement reminded her that this body had once been impossible.

That Nymira now seemed almost as distant as the barefoot child.

Three centuries were enough to mourn many things.

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 neighbourhood children to follow her across a market making terrible clicking noises.

She rose to her full height again.

Click. Clack. Click. Clack.

Life moved around her. Not morning life or evening life. Simply life.

There was no morning in Ilyr-Veyn. No sun rose above the cavern, and no night arrived to send the city to bed. One baker might be beginning work while another finished; children slept while workshops opened beneath them, and a family could sit down to its first meal while neighbours across the passage prepared for rest.

Nobody found this particularly confusing. Families found their rhythms, workshops found theirs, and the city continued. When common time mattered, the Timekeepers kept it.

When it did not, nobody worried terribly much.

A bell rang somewhere on the western terrace.

Two clear notes.

A few merchants glanced up. Most did not.

Nothing important.

The next river rise remained days away. Nymira continued across the square.

Calling Ilyr-Veyn a city was technically correct, though the word suggested something broader and more orderly than the home its inhabitants knew. The city spread vertically as much as horizontally, growing wherever the cavern permitted life to take root.

No architect had designed the whole. That was part of its beauty.

An old house might begin as three rooms cut directly into the stone. A century later, someone added a fungal-wood balcony; two generations after that, another family built a workshop beneath it.

Bridges connected terraces and stairs disappeared upward. Doorways opened into the cavern walls, while homes stood above workshops that stood above older homes.

Nothing quite matched. Everything belonged.

Dark stone formed the bones of the city, but the Velyri had never shared the distant world's assumption that people who lived beneath mountains ought to enjoy darkness.

Light was everywhere. Lanterns burned rendered mushroom oil behind coloured glass, pale fungal strands were woven through balcony railings, and azuryte shards no larger than fingernails sat inside polished metal cages, giving off a steady blue glow. Enormous cultivated mushrooms rose through openings in the paving stones, their caps spreading overhead like luminous umbrellas in cobalt, turquoise and soft violet.

Against all that cool light, doorways glowed gold, windows amber and cooking fires 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 from cave grain and ground mushroom flour; peppered river fish curling over charcoal braziers; fermented moss wine, hot mineral tea, wax, wet stone, metalwork and 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.

"Your Highness!"

She turned.

Kessa, who sold preserved mushrooms, cave roots and whatever else had survived her experiments in brine, held up a jar.

"No."

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

"I can see it from here."

"This one is excellent."

Something pale floated inside the jar. Nymira narrowed her eyes.

"Did it begin as a mushroom?"

"Mostly."

"Mostly?"

"Do you want to try it?"

"No."

"You don't even know what it tastes like."

"I intend to preserve that advantage."

Kessa put one hand against her chest.

"You wound me."

"I have done nothing of the sort."

"I'll save you a jar."

"Give it to Nyrandel."

Kessa stared at her.

"Have you no love for your uncle?"

The surrounding merchants laughed. Nymira moved on.

That was Ilyr-Veyn.

She could have crossed the market wearing the ceremonial circlet of her house with royal guards surrounding her and accomplished little except blocking traffic. Here she was Princess Nymira during ceremony, Lady Nymira when formality demanded it, and simply Nymira nearly everywhere else.

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 oldest surviving plans of the city, and nobody had ever attempted to force it into perfect symmetry. Water emerged from a split in a great column of pale rock and spilled through natural basins worn smooth by time.

Generations had added what they needed: 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 beneath the waterline. Nobody remembered who.

That made Nymira love them more.

People gathered around the fountain regardless of what portion of their personal day they happened to be living. A smith washed black dust from both hands before going home to sleep. Two elderly Velyri argued quietly over a board game, throwing dice and moving pieces until one laughed triumphantly and the other cursed. A delivery porter filled three ceramic bottles before beginning another work period, while a parent attempted unsuccessfully to persuade a toddler that climbing into the fountain was unnecessary.

Above them, bridges crossed the open cavern. Beyond the bridges rose more homes, and beyond those homes, lights: thousands of little points spreading into the darkness until distance swallowed them.

Ilyr-Veyn had once been larger. Everyone knew that.

Whole districts remained empty. Old doors opened onto rooms nobody needed anymore, while streets that had once served crowded neighbourhoods now ended against sealed stone. The city had grown

again over the centuries, slowly filling spaces once abandoned, but the scars remained if one knew where to look.

Nymira knew, as did everyone who lived here.

The War had done that. People rarely needed to say more.

Not a vast kingdom. Not an empire. Their corner of the world.

Home.

The market gave way to a narrower street, and the city grew quieter. Workshops replaced food stalls. Hammers rang against anvils, and somewhere a saw rasped steadily through pale fungal wood harvested from the great 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 towards the upper terraces.

Calling it a shop had always seemed inadequate. It was part cartographer'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 contained one 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

She smiled as 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 or hung from wooden rollers, while others had been pinned directly to 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 appeared to be pointing at her.

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 for most of the cycle."

Nyrandel emerged.

Age had narrowed him without diminishing him. He remained tall for a Velyri, although the straight-backed scholar she remembered from childhood now leaned on a dark wooden staff when tired. His charcoal-grey skin had faded slightly with age, and the markings around his temples had softened until they resembled ancient ink left too long upon parchment.

His hair had once been silver-white like Nymira's. Now it was almost entirely white, worn in one long braid over his shoulder and 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.

She distinctly remembered a chair.

His eyes remained astonishingly sharp. Pale violet, considerably lighter than Nymira's, they possessed the unpleasant ability to make anyone caught in them suspect that 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, and there was ink on two fingers.

There was always ink on two fingers.

Few Velyri looked at Nyrandel without wondering how many grandcycles he had seen. Fewer were impolite enough to ask. He had outlived people everyone else remembered as ancient and had advised rulers whose names now appeared on plaques. Historians occasionally discovered that he remembered details their sources had omitted.

For Nymira, none of that had ever seemed particularly remarkable.

Nyrandel had simply always been there.

He looked at her, then towards 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, he was perhaps the only person entirely immune to her titles, reputation and attempts at charm.

For most of her childhood, Nyrandel had overseen the royal archives, though *overseen* hardly described what he actually did. He was her mother's elder brother and 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 remained part of its closest circle.

In Ilyr-Veyn, that distinction carried enormous significance 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 discovered that asking Nyrandel's opinion was considerably easier than ignoring it afterward.

He remembered things. Not merely facts. Things.

Roads abandoned before most living Velyri had been born. Names erased from public records. Agreements whose signatories had been dead for generations. The family that 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.

Ask Nyrandel how he knew something and the answer might be a book, an inscription or a document buried in the royal archives.

Occasionally, disconcertingly, the answer was simply:

I remember.

He possessed the peculiar mind of someone who never regarded the past as dead. To Nyrandel, history was a very long conversation, and most present problems were caused by people entering halfway through without bothering to discover what had already been said.

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

Unlike Nymira, he was exceptionally good at them.

He could settle a dispute between merchant families before either side realised it had conceded anything. He could guide a formal council through hours of argument and arrange matters so its members eventually arrived at the conclusion he had quietly suggested at the beginning. He knew when to invoke royal authority and, more importantly, when authority would 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 afterwards to this crowded shop, where maps covered the walls, instruments waited to be examined 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.

Nymira wandered towards his worktable, where an enormous map lay open across it.

"What is that?"

"Paper."

She gave him a look.

"Remarkable. Three hundred and forty grandcycles 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 recognised immediately, while others were unfamiliar, and several continued far beyond the borders found on modern maps.

"Where did you get this?"

Nyrandel's humour faded.

"Sit."

Nymira looked at him, then at the chair he indicated, and deliberately back at the considerable amount of Nymira that would not fit into it.

Nyrandel closed his eyes briefly.

"An expression, Nymira."

"Three centuries."

"Yes."

"And you still do it."

"Three centuries," he countered, "and you still find it amusing."

"I do."

That earned the faintest smile.

She lowered herself instead, four legs folding beneath the main body while the others found comfortable positions among the furniture. One crossed beneath the worktable, another settled beside a bookcase without touching it, and a third hovered dangerously close to a tray of ancient glass instruments.

Nyrandel moved the tray.

"You needn't do that."

"I do."

"I know exactly where my legs are."

"So does the tray. It remains concerned."

She smiled as Nyrandel carefully flattened one edge of the map.
"Do you remember the Ulren Road?"

She 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."

She looked at him, and he tapped a long finger against the map.

A thin line wandered northward through regions that modern maps left blank. Nymira leaned closer.

"That can't be right."

"It is."

"How old is this?"

"Old enough."

"Nyrandel."

"Older than the closure."

That silenced her.

His finger followed the faded line.

"Before the roads were sealed, traders travelled these passages."

Nymira studied the route.

"To the surface?"

"Yes."

She looked again at the thin line on the map. *The surface* had always belonged to stories. Spoken that plainly, it sounded uncomfortably like a destination.

She knew it existed. Intellectually.

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

She knew stories of surface cities, although they rarely agreed. In some, towers of white stone rose higher than the pillars of the deepest caverns. In others, people lived in fragile houses made of wood, completely exposed to wind and rain. Some accounts described cultivated fields extending beyond sight, while others insisted the surface was mostly frozen wilderness populated by fur-covered creatures large enough to carry a person on their backs.

The contradictions made the surface feel less like a place and more like hundreds of incompatible ideas forced beneath the same name.

There had been trade once. That much was certain. Things remained from it: timber cut from trees that had never grown beneath stone, fabrics whose original colours had faded long ago, seeds preserved in jars that would no longer germinate, bones belonging to animals no living Velyri had seen.

But that world belonged to before.

Before the War. Before the gates.

Before Ilyr-Veyn had reduced itself to survival and closed the roads behind it.

No traveller from the surface had entered the city since. No merchant arrived with recent news, and no royal messenger crossed the forgotten passes.

The population of Ilyr-Veyn had slowly recovered from the catastrophe, growing from the few thousand who survived to more than twice that number.

The world outside had receded in the opposite direction.

First into memory. Then history. Then stories.

For children born long after the closure, the surface might as well have been another realm.

Nymira understood what the sky was supposed to be: a vast open distance above the land. She understood *rain*, water falling from that open distance, and *sunlight*, a brightness so great it illuminated an entire landscape from impossibly far away.

Understanding these things did not make them believable.

A world with no stone overhead. No cavern roof.

Nothing.

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

She glanced towards Nyrandel's window. Beyond it waited the familiar street with its blue lamps, carved homes and stone archways. Rock above. Rock beneath.

Solid things.

Sensible things.

Home.

"Why are you showing me this?"

Nyrandel did not answer immediately.

That was unusual enough that she looked at him properly.

The years were visible then, not merely in the white hair or faded markings, but in the slight hollowness beneath his eyes and 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. He had been old when people now considered elderly had still been children.

Sometimes she found herself believing that Nyrandel had always existed.

But now she saw something subtly different.

Not old.

Aging.

“Nyrandel?”

He straightened, and 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, and Nymira rose, every leg unfolding at once.

Another note sounded.

Then another.

The noise outside changed. The saw stopped, the hammering ceased and voices died.

Even the children knew to stop playing.

From far across Ilyr-Veyn, another bell answered.
This was not the measured signal of the Timekeepers.
Nymira knew this pattern. Every child in the city knew it.
Not fire. Not collapse. Not flood.
The eastern tunnel.
Warning.
Nyrandel looked at her.
All amusement had vanished from his face.
Outside, someone shouted.
The bell rang again.
She moved towards the door, her clawed feet striking the stone.
Click. Clack. Click. Clack.
The same sound as before.
But the city had stopped laughing.