THE SCOURGE WARS

SIEGE

BOOK IV



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Siege

The Scourge Wars Book IV

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OceanofPDF.com

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1st Edition

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To my patrons and readers who held the line during the long silence.

Thank you for waiting through the dark, picking this story back up, and proving that a universe is never truly lost if people are still willing to read it. Welcome back to the trenches.

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F O R E W O R D

Welcome to Book Four.

If Book Three was the bridge to expanding this universe, Book Four is where we finally cross it. The rewrites are complete, the foundation is set, and from this page forward, we are stepping into entirely brand-new territory.

We are diving deeper into the evolution mechanics, pushing the boundaries of the world, and testing the limits of our characters like never before.

Whether you've been here since the beginning or just joined the during the rewrites, I'm incredibly grateful to have you. Let's get into it.

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PREVIOUSLY IN THE SCOURGE WARS

EVOLVE

Slate accepted Lucidus's offer of a second life knowing that the god had purposes of his own. In exchange, he committed himself to restoring a foothold for his divine patron.

First, he had to survive the Wyld. Learning to use his transformed body and heightened senses brought him into conflict with dangerous creatures and eventually led him toward civilization. As the Scourge grew, their ability to transform and develop specialized forms gave Slate the beginnings of an army.

Vindicia Shadowheart, known as Shale, became his partner and an independent commander. She helped transformed hunters master their new bodies, while Slate refused a council's attempt to make recognition of his claim conditional on restraining her.

The Scourge's capture of Wayward marked their emergence as a military power. Further advances met increasingly organized resistance: enemies adapted their escorts, threatened supply routes and launched counterattacks. The assassin Mordryn complicated Slate's preparations for the campaign west, and the expanding war forced him to rely on commanders who could act beyond his immediate supervision.

The campaign brought Slate to Bastion, where he fulfilled his bargain with Lucidus and began restoring the god's foothold. Possession of the city gave him a base from which to expand, along with the burdens of occupation and a closer involvement in his patron's ambitions.

ADAPT

Lucidus’s restored presence at Bastion threatened the surrounding powers. Slate sought to prevent a united response while securing the city against attacks and building the relationships needed to hold his territory. Cooperation with another wood-elf community brought local knowledge and access in exchange for a commitment to its defense.

The Collective prepared to recover Bastion. Its commanders, Bludtyr and Grievum, drew on Standur’s war industry, confronting the Scourge with organized armies, fortified approaches and monstrous troops. Slate’s forces had to overcome those defenses while keeping their own routes open and avoiding commitments that would derail the wider campaign.

The fighting exposed a soul anchor at the heart of the enemy’s war-making system. Reaching and disabling it demanded preparation, specialist knowledge and more than overwhelming force. Meanwhile, advances in the Scourge’s magical capabilities helped them establish protected positions, evacuate the wounded and reunite separated forces.

Securing their gains brought further problems. Bastion needed restoration and protection against threats operating beyond its established defenses. Fidem’s ministry became increasingly important to the city, extending Lucidus’s influence into the realm Slate was building. Military success had strengthened Slate’s position, but it had also deepened his dependence on his patron.

RESIST

The war widened as Bludtyr crushed resistance within the Collective and turned defeated populations into fresh troops. Slate continued his advance, relying on reconnaissance, intelligence and an increasingly experienced army.

At Koral, Matek’s information opened a route into the citadel. Slate confronted the high lords directing its defenses, killing one and capturing another. Imperial soldiers joined the Scourge in the assault, while enemy defenders used streets, captives and surviving wards to divide the allied forces.

The Collective was moving captives inland to fuel a replacement soul anchor. Captured information allowed the Scourge to intercept part of the convoy. A subsequent river victory gave Slate resources to restore a captured seat of power, evolve eligible specialists and secure the approach to Crownwatch.

Behind the advance, Merus strengthened Woodhaven, overseeing another cohort’s transformation and preparing it for combat. Northern elven visitors also shared techniques for growing living structures, opening new possibilities for the settlement.

Bludtyr continued to adapt. After the Devourer’s repair network was severed, she committed elite troops against the Mystic cadre supporting the Scourge advance. Despite the continuing resistance, Slate’s forces defeated Carrarn’s remaining defenders and secured Crownwatch’s seat.

By the end of the campaign, Slate ruled an expanding domain supported by seasoned commanders, specialized Scourge forms and outside allies. His victories had also advanced Lucidus’s restoration, while the surviving Collective continued to learn how to fight him.

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Prologue

The Victor’s Warning

THE FIFTH FLAME STILL BURNED AT DAWN.

Lucidus watched from the other side of the mortal world as its light found the pale stone above the western gate. The men assigned to guard the fire stepped back. One knelt before he caught himself; the other stayed upright and wept without making a sound. They had carried the oil up the stair by hand because the old lift had burned in the siege. Their palms were cut. Their uniforms belonged to two different armies.

Both wore her mark now. Neither could see her.

Across the dominion, four other seats answered. The light traveled from one to the next, following roads the Scourge had cleared and towns that could once more call for her judgment. She let herself enjoy the sight. Here, the flame lit the western gate and the old magistrate’s bench, then reached the jagged edges of the broken vault. Pale dust lay along the bench’s worn edge. She remembered it clean. The last time all five had burned together, their flames had been reflected in an intact ceiling. This one was open to the sky.

The difference didn't lessen the victory.

A woman in a borrowed coat came through the hall with a bucket of water. She paused beneath the white flame, then hurried toward the broken stair. A bronze-scaled guard followed her. Lucidus had come to enjoy a restored dominion. The people inside it were still digging out their dead.

Lucidus turned toward the flame and felt the faith gathering around five restored seats. For years, each abandoned shrine had left fewer people saying her name. She had grown weak enough to wonder which prayer would be the last.

Now the men carrying oil up the stair trusted her light to remain there tomorrow. That expectation reached her as strength. It was more than she had possessed in exile, and far less than Nocturnus drew from the living and the dead throughout his realm.

It had been a long exile. She had watched other powers divide these roads, price their harvests and make a trade of those who lived between their walls. Now her name stood over the gates again. Now a petition carried through any of the five seats could reach her.

A shadow gathered beside her.

It lay across a wall with nothing to cast it. A man’s silhouette rose beside her, beyond the perception of the soldiers passing the old magistrate’s bench. Within it, faint shapes moved beneath black glass, as if a crowd pressed against the far side of a window. When the face turned toward her, its eyes were black ringed with fuchsia.

“Nocturnus,” Lucidus said.

“Lucidus.” His voice had the warmth of someone greeting a guest who stayed long after their welcome. “You have rebuilt the hall.”

“My avatar seized it,” Lucidus said.

“And you made certain he knew whom to thank.”

She had not. That was the irritant. Slate knew what her gift had allowed him to do. He also knew who had fought for the five seats. He had thanked her once and left her no excuse to call in a favor. She could hardly demand more gratitude while his soldiers were still carrying oil up her broken stair. Nocturnus would have admired the phrasing if it had come from his own avatar.

“What do you want?” she asked.

“To see the spoils of victory.”

“The five seats remain mine.”

“Yes.” He moved along the broken wall without drawing nearer to the flame. “I have told my servants as much. Some withdrew. Others still claim the roads between your seats.”

“Then command them to stop.”

“Would you command Slate to give back what he has taken, if I asked you as courteously?”

She studied the souls moving beneath his ribs. Nocturnus had lost more than territory in the western campaign. He had lost men who collected souls and flesh for him, channels through which his servants fed, and the fear that had made households surrender people rather than resist. He could replace officers. He couldn't replace the ease with which he had once reached into her former dominion.

“The roads were never yours,” she said.

“Some households would disagree. They signed contracts under my protection. Others owe service to clans that survived your campaign. An army cannot erase a signature by standing on the paper.”

Stone scraped beneath the stair. Lucidus glanced toward the sound before answering him.

“An army can keep the signatory alive long enough to dispute it.”

For the first time, the shadow's expression hardened. Lucidus was pleased to have found the nerve.

“You mean to adjudicate every old claim?” he asked.

“If someone brings one before me,” Lucidus said.

Nocturnus watched her across the flame. “There are thousands.”

“Then I shall be occupied,” she replied.

The scraping stopped, then began again. The woman with the bucket had found help. Nocturnus turned toward the stair. Lucidus watched his face until his attention returned to her.

“While you hear petitions,” he said, “my captains will feed their garrisons. They will search for prisoners taken in the campaign. They will look for kin who did not return. A patrol crossing a disputed road can begin a battle before either of us has pronounced a judgment.”

“You are promising raids,” Lucidus said.

“I am telling you why they will come,” Nocturnus replied.

There was enough truth in his account to make it dangerous. The Vallyrian Collective had suffered a defeat, not ceased to exist. Its surviving clans would raid for supplies, take captives and kill enough people to make their enemies fear them again. Nocturnus could bless them without placing his name on every attack. The west would remain a war even after its conquest was complete.

Lucidus looked through the broken vault. The fifth flame stood high against a pale sky. Beyond it lay fields that had supplied both armies, many of them stripped to the roots. Her light revealed every roof in need of repair. It couldn't put seed into the soil.

“Your servants crossed into my dominion when I was weak,” she said. “They can learn to survive beside it now that I can answer.”

“They may learn a harsher lesson.”

“Then they should stop taking people from it.”

The shadow turned its face toward the western gate. Lucidus felt his attention move past the reclaimed roads to the country Slate meant to make secure. Farther east stood lands where another god's followers still held the labor of wood elves under ancient obligations. Slate had already begun asking what their freedom would cost. He wouldn’t wait for peace in the west before going east to ask.

“You have your avatar,” Nocturnus said. “I have the patience to see what he will pay for those elves. Ordan is more intractable than I.”

“Then go. You have delivered your warning.”

He smiled. The motion exposed no teeth. “Enjoy your hall, Lucidus.”

The shadow thinned. The fifth flame burned steadily through it until nothing remained against the wall.

Beneath the stair, voices rose. Lucidus watched three soldiers lever a fallen beam away from a pocket of stone. A fourth man breathed under it. He followed the woman’s lamp with his eyes while she knelt to wash the blood from his face.

One of the rescuers worked a brace beneath the beam. The timber creaked as the weight settled onto it. Another pulled the trapped man’s arm free. Lucidus could see every movement. None of them looked toward her. Without Communion, her presence would remain unknown to the people whose faith had brought her back to this hall.

At the gate, the white flame marked her restored dominion. The men below the stair had spent the morning keeping one another alive inside it. She let herself watch until the litter reached the door.

Nocturnus had surviving captains and centuries of worship behind him. She had five reclaimed seats and an avatar already asking what lay beyond them. Before Slate returned from his negotiation, she wanted to know how many of her enemies were gathering on her western roads.

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I

The Promised Passage

SLATE HAD ASKED FOR VOLUNTEERS. HE HAD NOT ASKED THEM TO tackle him into a tree.

Brace, the red-scaled Raider leading the attack, apparently considered the distinction unimportant.

Red shoulders struck him below the ribs. Slate let his heels leave the ground, caught the soldier behind the neck and twisted. They hit the trunk together, hard enough to shower the training ground with loose bark. The Raider took the impact across his back. Slate landed on his feet with one hand still gripping the Raider's shoulder.

A bronze-scaled Initiate drove a wooden spear at his eye.

He knocked it aside with his forearm, released the Raider and ducked beneath a second thrust. This one had been aimed where his throat would have been if he had tried to retreat. Sensible. The two spearmen had stopped following his hands.

His tail caught the nearer man's ankle. Slate pulled, stepped past him and put the flat of his tail blade against the second man's stomach. “Dead.”

The first spearman fell, rolled and came up inside the sweep of the blade. His spear was gone. Both hands closed around Slate's wrist.

Behind Slate, claws dug into the earth.

He grinned.

The Raider hit him again.

This time Slate went down beneath both of them, drove a knee under the larger soldier's chest and threw him over his head. The smaller man kept the

wrist. Slate turned with him rather than break the arm, planted his free hand and kicked himself upright. Gold wings snapped open to arrest the turn. The Initiate rose with him, feet swinging a good three feet above the ground.

Slate held him there for a moment. “And now?”

The soldier glanced down, then tightened his grip on Slate's wrist. “I keep you occupied.”

The discarded spear struck Slate's left shoulder from behind.

Someone at the edge of the training ground laughed.

Slate lowered the soldier and looked back. The Raider had recovered the spear. He took one careful breath, testing his bruised chest, but held the weapon steadily.

“Dead?” he asked.

Slate rubbed the place where the practice spear had struck. “Optimistic. You'd want something sharper.”

Brace lowered the wooden point. “We were told not to bring real weapons.”

“There were complaints about the last demonstration,” Slate said.

The man Slate had put down rubbed his wrist. The other spearman retrieved his weapon, bowed his head and stepped out of the marked ground. No resentment passed between them. They had fought together before, and all three understood what Slate had wanted to see.

Slate had plenty of soldiers brave enough to fight an enemy larger or more powerful than themselves. For this escort, he needed soldiers who kept thinking when bravery wasn’t enough. Brace had been thrown into a tree and still found a way to strike him. The other two had helped him do it.

“You three will do,” he said. “Have that chest looked at before you report.”

The Raider glanced down at himself. “Yes, my lord.”

“Those two will serve in your section,” Slate told Brace. “Keep them together when you assign the watches.”

Brace looked toward the spearmen and nodded.

Slate folded his wings. Loose bark lay bright against the trampled earth. Above him, the high galleries rose between living branches. Beyond the marked ground, Serevan stood beside Merus with a narrow wooden case under one arm. The gray-haired wood elf had led the six woodshapers who came to teach Woodhaven better ways of joining living branches. He had also brought Slate a problem: their families lived under Ordan's protection, bound to maintain the Confederacy's terraces and defensive works by obligations inherited from their ancestors.

Two weeks had passed since their conversation beside the orchard bridge. Serevan's companions had continued teaching while messengers carried their proposal to the people who could release those families. Slate had used the delay to settle the garrison arrangements for his recovered cities and make certain reports from Bastion could reach him after he left Woodhaven. He wanted his eastern journey finished before another western commander decided a damaged wall was an invitation.

Serevan lifted the case when Slate approached. He held it with both hands, as though the answer inside had changed its weight.

“Has Shen agreed to discuss releasing your households?” Slate asked.

“He's agreed to meet you,” Serevan said. “The messenger arrived while you were choosing your escort.”

Merus held out a folded letter. Slate brushed dirt from his claws before taking it. The seal had already been opened. Five square links crossed its pale impression, the emblem of the Oathbound Confederacy.

“From Shen himself?” Slate asked.

“His household, carrying his authority.” Serevan touched the seal. “Shen Kaizhen is the Surety of the Confederacy. An agreement with Ordan's avatar will carry more weight than permission from one of our wardens.”

Slate remembered that the dwarf had helped negotiate the original Covenant. An avatar who had lived long enough to watch temporary obligations become hereditary ought to understand what Slate wanted to

buy out. A meeting wasn’t a concession, but it would put Slate in a room with the man who could release them. That was enough to begin.

Slate looked past him. Under the trees, two of the northern visitors were helping a road-worn elf loosen the straps of a pack. Lynia had brought him a cup. He drank with both hands around it.

The messenger would have a story about the journey. Slate would hear it after the man had eaten.

Slate returned the letter to Merus. “Read it to me.”

The steward unfolded it, smoothing a crease beneath his thumb.

The Surety would receive Lucidus's avatar at Lianshi, a stronghold guarding the Confederacy's approaches from the Wyldwood. He would hear the proposal concerning the refuge households and the exchange of skilled workers. Serevan and his companions were permitted to return by that road with Slate's party. The necessary notice would be sent to the wardens along their route.

“Your escort is to be named before it enters the holdings,” Merus read. “The invitation does not extend to the movement of an army.”

Slate glanced at the three soldiers leaving the training ground. “A matter of opinion,” Slate said.

Serevan didn't smile. “He means numbers, my lord.”

“I know what he means.” Slate resisted the urge to roll his eyes.

The dwarf had left himself room to object if Slate arrived with enough men to take the place. That was reasonable. Slate would have done the same, although he might have expressed it less courteously.

“Anything else?” Slate asked Merus.

Merus read the last paragraph twice.

The visiting woodshapers remained subject to the conditions under which they had left their homes. Discussion of their release did not suspend those conditions. No household was to be advised that a transfer had been agreed.

Shen expected rumor to outrun permission. Slate approved of the precaution even while disliking how neatly the Surety had fenced the discussion.

Slate took the letter and folded it along its existing creases. “He doesn't want the village packed before we settle a price.”

“Neither do I,” Serevan said.

That earned the elf a closer look.

“Some of them will hear that you have agreed to come,” the elf continued. “They will imagine the rest. I would rather disappoint them now than bring them to a gate with their belongings and discover they cannot pass.”

“Then tell them exactly what I've agreed to,” Slate said.

Serevan kept his hands on the case. “I can't tell them that until you answer me. Will you come?”

Slate looked toward the high galleries. A silver figure stood on a platform above the training ground, one wing partly open behind her. Shale had watched enough of the fighting to know which soldiers he had selected. She closed the wing carefully when she saw him looking.

“I'll give you the escort list before supper,” he said.

Serevan bowed. This time the relief showed.

Merus remained when the elf went to join the messenger. “Twenty-four?” Merus asked, unfolding the escort roster.

“Including me,” Slate said.

Merus ran a finger down the names. “You had forty this morning.”

“I'm leaving the rest here. You'll need them if more refugees arrive while I'm away.”

“I thought perhaps you were still deciding what constituted an army,” Merus said.

Slate gave him a look. Merus's expression remained pleasantly helpful.

“Twenty-three soldiers and one extremely agreeable guest,” Slate said. “The civilians travel under their own permission. You and Lynia stay here.”

Merus watched the northern elves before answering. “Ilara has shown us enough to keep working. I would like her to see what we've accomplished through her lessons.”

“Then make something suitably impressive,” Slate suggested.

“I intend to.” He took the folded letter when Slate offered it and went to help Lynia find the messenger a place to sit.

Slate stayed long enough to watch the next group cross the training ground. A heavy coil of rope passed from hand to hand. One of the climbers slung it across his chest without impeding his arms. The Raider Slate had thrown was already arguing amiably with the man who had caught his wrist about which of them had actually won.

They would remember the demonstration differently by evening. By the time they reached the highlands, Slate expected to have been decisively defeated.

He could live with that. He had chosen them for the second attempt.

When Slate went to find Shale after the trials, he discovered she had moved the eggs out of their rooms.

Slate found her in a lower gallery with Willowmere, two Scourge women and stacks of clean bedding against the wall. The room smelled of fresh cloth and newly exposed wood. Warm recesses lined the inner wall. Seven eggs from Shale's first clutch rested together beneath a strip of clean cloth. Farther along, two smaller clutches occupied hollows still pale from the woodshapers' work.

One of the women was fitting a wooden divider between them. Bronze scales covered her hands. The other sat beside Willowmere, learning how to support a hatchling whose tail seemed determined to reach the floor.

Shale's first hatchling was awake.

He had caught the edge of Willowmere's sleeve and was pulling himself up it. His little silver claws made a steady clicking sound against her bracelet. When she lifted him away from the cloth, his mouth opened in protest.

“He's already eaten,” Shale told the woman beside her. “But he'll insist he hasn't.”

Slate caught the bowl rolling toward the edge of the bench and set it farther back. “I see you've expanded,” he drawled.

Shale glanced at the new eggs and shrugged. “They needed somewhere warm. We needed someone here while we ate. Willowmere suggested we put the clutches together so whoever was here could watch them all.”

The bronze-scaled woman ran a thumb along the divider’s rough edge and turned it toward the wall. She pressed the divider into place, then tested it with both hands. “Will this keep them apart?”

“Until they can climb,” Shale said. “After that, we'll need to watch them.”

Slate crouched beside the recesses. He’d grown used to finding one clutch when he came home. Apparently the rest of the Scourge could produce young too.

Lucidus hadn't mentioned the possibility, and he was starting to think she didn't particularly like him.

Regardless, the hatchery was in full production and neither woman looked as though she expected to do it alone. A soldier's belt lay beside the baskets; its owner had come off duty and gone straight to work preparing a nest.

At the room's entrance, a porter waited with another load of blankets. Shale pointed him toward the empty bench. He set them down, then held out his hands to Willowmere. She passed him the silver hatchling without ceremony.

The child settled against his bronze chest and began examining a buckle.

“He'll pull that loose,” Slate warned. The silver hatchling was cute, provided nobody told him how easily his claws could cut through a belt.

The porter tucked the strap out of reach. “He did yesterday.”

Slate looked at Shale. She smiled at the expression on his face.

He knew the hatchling as the small silver body that slept beside Shale's eggs. The porter knew which straps to hide. Willowmere could lift him out of a blanket without waking him.

Already, there were people in this room who had spent more of the morning with his offspring than Slate had. He searched for some paternal guilt. Nothing.

“What happens when you're all on duty?” he asked.

“We take turns,” Shale said. “Some of us feed them, some watch the eggs. There are volunteers for both. Once they can follow us, there will be plenty for them to learn outside this room.”

Willowmere passed the hatchling to the woman beside her. Shale checked the woman’s supporting hand, then led Slate to the open rail. Below them, Merus's workers were bending young branches toward the next gallery.

“Shen will meet me at Lianshi,” Slate said. “We leave tomorrow.”

She rested her forearms on the rail. “Then I'll still be here when you come back.”

“How's the wing?”

Shale opened it. The right joint moved farther than it had two weeks earlier, when he had watched her struggle to cross the orchard bridge. She held it steady, then folded it without the careful hitch he remembered.

“Improving. That's not why I'm staying.” She nodded toward the nursery. “I want to raise more clutches. So do they. I'd rather help them get this right than leave Willowmere to discover every problem by herself.”

“You'll miss the meeting,” Slate said.

“I'll survive.” Shale turned toward him. “Send for me when you need me in a fight. For now, I want to ensure our next generation is secure.”

Slate glanced back at the eggs. “How much room will you need?”

“More than this.” Her smile widened. “If you want an army, you'll need to get Merus to expand the hatcheries.”

He could picture it already: galleries with room for the young to climb, a yard below where they could learn to use their bodies without falling through someone's roof. Later, training grounds. Craftsmen teaching children born with claws how to hold tools. He would return from a campaign to find Scourge who had never known another body.

He would need craftsmen willing to teach them. Otherwise, every roof they couldn't mend would be another job for someone outside the Scourge.

The hatchling squealed behind them. His new caregiver had discovered that he liked being lifted high enough to see over her shoulder. Silver flashed between her bronze hands.

“Everyone notices his scales,” Slate said.

“Everyone notices yours.” Shale leaned against him. “Give him time to do something else.”

Visitors would draw their own conclusions about a silver child from the consort's clutch. Slate had lived among people who would build a dynasty on less. For now, the distinction chiefly meant he could find the little creature anywhere in a crowded room. The other children would need the same food, the same care and adults willing to teach them.

“I'll speak to Merus about the space,” he said.

Shale caught his hand before he could turn. “After you stay a little while.” She kissed him, warm and unhurried, then drew him back to the bench. The woman holding the hatchling moved over to make room. This time she passed him to Slate herself, supporting his tail as Shale had shown her.

He settled into Slate's palms and immediately reached for a gold knuckle.

“He has your persistence,” Slate told Shale.

“And your manners.” She sat close enough for her shoulder to touch his. “Keep your thumb out of his mouth.”

Across the room, Willowmere helped the other woman tuck cloth around her eggs. The porter returned with the last basket. Someone began talking about a low rail for the doorway before the first child discovered the stairs.

Slate stayed while they worked. When the small silver hands finally loosened, he laid the hatchling in the basket beside the bench. Shale drew the blanket over him and left his tail free.

There would be someone here when he woke.

By the evening meal, Lynia had two lists that should have matched and a problem she didn't bother softening. “They aren't the same names,” she said, laying the shorter page on top. “The wardens did more than copy the list.”

Slate glanced from her to Serevan. The older elf sat across the table, Ilara beside him. Merus had brought a lamp close enough for Lynia to read without leaning over the flame.

“The people who might come and the people you're allowed to discuss?” Slate asked.

Serevan nodded. “The second list names households whose service falls within the proposal as the wardens understand it. The first names people who asked us about Woodhaven before we left.”

Slate drew the pages alongside each other. The wardens had already narrowed his offer before he'd made it. He wanted to know which households they had left out.

He tapped the shorter list. “And the wardens have chosen the useful ones to keep.”

Serevan drew it closer. “Some have duties another household depends upon.”

“Some have daughters the wardens expect to learn the same duties,” Ilara said. Her crooked forefinger rested on one of the names. Serevan reached to

straighten the overlapping pages, then left them where they were. She hadn’t moved her finger.

Slate asked Lynia to read both lists aloud.

There were growers who had worked the same terraces for most of their lives. A family that tended the channels carrying water through an orchard. Two brothers who repaired the timber above a northern gate. A widow whose son had returned from patrol unable to manage the climb to their house.

He stopped Lynia there. “Does she want to leave?”

“She asked whether the houses here could be reached from the ground,” Ilara said.

Her name didn't appear on the wardens' shorter list. Her son's injury had made leaving more necessary and her household more difficult to replace.

Merus looked up. “Some can. We can make others.”

“Then Shen can explain why she's missing from the second.”

Slate pushed the wardens' selection back across the table. “I'm discussing the people who want to come. Shen can tell me what they owe.”

Serevan didn't take the page. “If you begin by rejecting the households they have already agreed to consider, you may make the rest harder.”

Serevan was protecting the families already within reach, not defending the wardens' choice. Slate respected the caution. He didn't intend to let it set the limit.

“I'm not rejecting them. I'm refusing to pretend they're the only ones who asked.”

The older elf considered that, then nodded to Lynia. “Put both before him.”

Slate waited while she marked the pages. Beside them lay the repair report brought by a messenger from Bastion earlier that day. Lynia had already read it to him. A stair had been closed before it collapsed. Another stretch of

street had subsided into a drain. Repair crews needed timber to support roofs while they worked on the walls beneath them.

Nobody had died in those particular failures. He suspected the people reporting them had selected that detail with some care.

He put a claw beside the description of the collapsed street. “Tell me about the stoneshapers.”

Serevan looked relieved. At last, a question that didn’t decide someone’s future. He leaned toward the report, becoming a craftsman again instead of a petitioner. “What work do you need done?”

“Foundations. Walls. Roads. Enough drains that rain stops trying to take my city apart.”

Ilara glanced at Merus. “Your city?”

“Bastion,” Slate said. “This one mostly holds itself up.”

“With assistance,” Merus murmured.

“Which I appreciate.”

Serevan drew the lamp a little closer. He shifted his plate aside to make room for the repair report and asked Lynia to read the description of the sunken street.

He listened without interrupting. When she finished, he asked whether the drain had been cleared, whether the street carried loaded carts and whether the subsidence had appeared after rain.

“I don't know,” Slate said. “The man who wrote that needs someone who knows which questions to ask.”

Serevan traced the edge of the page. “A stoneshaper would need the same answers. He could restore the paving and leave you with water eating the ground beneath it.”

“Could he open the drain?” Slate asked.

“A skilled one could. And close it again without leaving you a street full of loose blocks.” The elf set the report down. “You need someone who can examine the damage before he starts repairing it.”

Slate pictured the work. Stone lifted out of the road, the channel exposed, the paving settled back into place. No waiting for another cart of cut blocks. No crew spending half its time shifting rubble out of the way of the next crew.

Then he pictured a broken gate tower, and the soldiers he was keeping beside it because the wall no longer deserved to be called a wall.

“That's the sort of shaper I want,” Slate told Serevan.

“They have work at home,” Serevan said.

“I expect they do. I'd like to find out what it costs to persuade some of them to work elsewhere.”

“The Surety will know who could undertake it.”

“Good.”

Merus shifted the first list clear of the repair report before either could catch oil from the lamp. Slate watched his hand rest for a moment beside the names.

He wanted Ilara and her growers. He wanted the families who would make Woodhaven larger and more useful, and the recruits who would see Pelrin climb a trunk and imagine themselves doing the same. But there was no shortage of people seeking shelter under Lucidus. Every western lord who burned a rival's village sent Slate another argument for the scales.

He had won roads that still broke axles. He had conquered walls that he now had to defend with the holes his own men had made in them. More soldiers would help. So would letting some of the soldiers stop carrying masonry and return to being soldiers.

“What did the messenger say about the road?” he asked.

Serevan brought out a second, smaller sheet.

The news from the highland road was worse than the invitation suggested. A patrol had turned back after losing men above one of its guarded crossings. Traffic had been gathered into escorted parties. The messenger had waited for one rather than attempt the crossing alone.

“Did he say the Forsworn attacked them?” Slate asked.

The name could mean raiders, deserters or a household that had refused one obligation too many. He needed facts before the Confederacy's label became his enemy.

“That is what the patrol called them.” Serevan kept the sheet beside his plate. “He didn't see the attack himself.”

Ilara's mouth tightened. Slate remembered what she'd said: some families were called Forsworn simply because they said their children had paid enough.

“Tell me what happened to the patrol,” he said to Serevan.

“The survivors said they were attacked and their supplies taken. Two soldiers didn't return.”

Slate leaned forward. “Did they recognize anyone? Uniforms, banners, a face they'd seen before?”

“The messenger couldn't tell me.” Serevan spread his hands. “I asked him where he'd waited for the escort. We can speak to the wardens there.”

“Then that's where we start.” Slate drew the route Lynia had copied toward him. Serevan slid the household lists out from beneath it, keeping the marked names together.

Serevan pointed to the stopping place, then traced the climb where the road narrowed between the cliff and a drop. The wood elf settlements they had discussed lay to the north. To reach Lianshi, the party would leave that route and turn east into the Confederacy's highlands. Farther east lay Covenant, its capital. Covenant and Bastion lay roughly the same distance from the Wyldwood. Shen had chosen a frontier stronghold for the meeting; Slate wouldn’t have to cross the Confederacy to reach him.

Slate rested a claw beside the marked climb. “Can carts pass each other here?”

“No.” Serevan indicated a wider stretch below it. “Drivers wait there until the road is clear.”

Merus bent over the drawing. “Someone above them could hold the whole party.”

“And decide whether they continued or went home,” Slate said. He followed the narrow road toward Lianshi. “If Shen can't keep this open, every delivery to his stronghold needs an escort.”

The Surety had soldiers tied to vulnerable roads. Slate had soldiers who could climb the cliffs beside them. He wanted to see the terrain before offering a price, but he was beginning to understand what might interest Ordan's avatar.

They left after dawn.

The growers carried their seed, cuttings and tools. Lynia had wrapped their copies of the proposed agreement against rain. Ilara checked the bundle herself before handing it back to Serevan.

Pelrin waited with the escort. When Nethan struggled to settle a pack without crushing the cuttings tied above it, the Lurker took the weight and held it while the elf adjusted the straps.

“Still returning with us?” Nethan asked.

“To see you home,” Pelrin said, tightening the pack's lower strap.

Nethan looked up at him. “And after?”

Pelrin glanced toward Slate. “We haven't been told that part yet.”

Slate still had to hear Shen's terms. Until he did, he would promise Serevan an escort and a negotiation, nothing more.

Twenty-three Scourge waited beneath the branches. He had selected six Lurkers, including Pelrin; eight Raiders, with Brace among them; three Mystics; and six Initiates. Pelrin's Lurkers would scout. The Raiders gave

him the strength to hold a pass or force one. The Mystics brought magical support, while the Initiates could guard the elves and help wherever they were needed.

They carried rope, water and supplies for the elves. The biomass they would need traveled in their own bodies. No baggage wagons blocked the path behind them. No cooks, drovers or frightened pack animals waited to be coaxed across the first bad stretch of road.

Serevan looked over the party twice. “This is everyone?” he asked, checking the last name against the soldiers waiting beneath the branches.

Slate spread his hands. “You asked me not to bring an army.”

“I said the invitation didn't extend to one.” The elf checked the roster once more, then closed his case.

Above them, Shale stepped to the nursery rail with the silver hatchling in her arms. A bronze-scaled woman joined her, carrying the blanket he had kicked loose. Shale lifted one hand. Slate raised his own and held it there until she smiled.

He could have flown ahead. Instead he took his place beside Serevan, where the elf's neighbors would see who had come with him.

Merus clasped the older man's forearm before letting him go. “Tell them what it's like here.”

“I will.”

“All of it,” Slate added.

Serevan looked from the gold scales to the silver figure above them. “Yes,” he said. “All of it.”

The first climbers slipped ahead among the trunks. The rest followed at a pace the elves could keep. Slate felt the party settle into its order around him, each soldier leaving room for the next without needing to be directed.

At the turn beyond the last houses, the branches hid the nursery rail. The voices of the workers below it had faded behind the footfalls of the escort.

Serevan stopped to look back. “If the Surety agrees, we could bring families along this road.”

Slate watched Pelrin disappear up a trunk to examine the path ahead. “We could,” Slate said, stopping beside him.

Serevan looked toward the departing soldiers. “And if he asks more than you intend to pay?”

“I'll say no. Politely, the first time.” Slate looked toward the highland route. “Before that, I want to meet whoever thinks they own his crossing.”

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II

The Unfamiliar Ground

"*Off the road.*" Pelrin's warning reached Slate an instant before the sound of breaking stone. The Lurker had gone ahead to scout the eastern road to Lianshi, where Ordan's avatar had agreed to meet them.

Slate caught Serevan by the shoulder and pulled the wood elf behind the nearest outcrop. Four Initiates kept the other five woodshapers together as they disappeared into the brush. The rest of the escort moved toward the gorge. Ahead, a white cloud rose above the bend. Something heavy struck the bottom of the gorge. The next impact came sooner, followed by a long metallic rattle.

"Bridge," Pelrin sent. *"Soldiers on top. Four people hanging underneath."*

Slate was already moving. That was the fastest road to Lianshi, and whoever was tearing it apart knew enough stoneshaping to be worth capturing. He would save the repair crew and take their attacker alive.

The road beyond the bend had been drawn out of the mountainside. He had noticed the workmanship on the climb: a gutter without mortar joints, shallow steps where the grade steepened, passing places wide enough for a loaded cart. Even the retaining wall had grown from the rock beneath it. Someone had made this country easy to travel through.

Now someone was changing it back.

The bridge crossed a narrow gorge in a single pale arch. Its deck lay perhaps seventy feet above the river, with a carved parapet along either side. Near the far end, a strip of paving had risen across the road like a door lifting on its hinges. A cart stood against it, one wheel broken. Soldiers

crouched behind the cart and the parapets while crossbow bolts chipped the stone around them.

Beneath the right-hand parapet hung a wooden repair platform.

Two of its four chains had come loose. The platform tipped toward the river, tools and fragments of stone spilling from its low end. A man clung to one of the two remaining chains. Below him, a woman had caught another worker by the collar. The fourth lay against the lower rail with a broken board through his trouser leg.

Pelrin clung to the cliff a little below Slate. Beyond the bridge, movement flickered among the rocks above the road. *"Crossbows on the upper ledge,"* the Lurker told him. *"More behind the far parapet. I can't count them all."*

Slate counted eight crossbowmen on the upper ledge. The raised paving hid the attackers on the road below them. He would have to occupy both positions before the bridge gave way.

"Stay here," he told Serevan, who had followed him to the bend. "Keep your people behind the rock."

Serevan pointed to the soldiers crouching behind the cart. "Those are the crossing wardens."

Slate stepped between Serevan and the exposed bend. "Good. I'll try to make a favorable impression."

He opened the bond to the soldiers nearest him. *"Pelrin. Take the other five Lurkers below the road. Come up behind the crossbowmen and clear that ledge."*

The Lurker dropped out of sight. Five green bodies followed him, claws finding seams and narrow shelves in the cliff. The last passed beneath Slate's feet, face turned toward the rock, moving almost as quickly as he had on level ground.

"Brace. Take three Raiders and get ropes to that platform. The other four Raiders hold this end of the bridge. Mystics, cover them. The two spare Initiates handle the ropes from the road."

The Raider who had tackled him at Woodhaven stepped to the edge. Brace studied the hanging workers, then the arch beneath their feet. *“We can reach them.”* He went over backward.

Red claws caught the parapet. His tail wound around the stone rail while his feet found purchase below it. Then he uncoiled, transferred his weight and vanished beneath the bridge. The other three followed with the ropes they had carried from Woodhaven.

Slate stepped off after them and spread his wings.

Air struck the membranes, lifting him away from the cliff. He let it carry him down. Bolts passed above his head as he dropped below the parapet and swept beneath the arch.

The river filled the gorge with a continuous roar. Spray hung in the shade of the bridge, cold against Slate's face as he passed through it. Four red shapes were already working their way across its underside, following old tool marks and joints where repaired stone met the original arch.

Slate flew past them and rose beside the stranded soldiers.

A dwarf turned toward him with a crossbow raised.

“Point that the other way,” Slate said.

The dwarf hesitated just long enough for a bolt to strike the Scourgeshield over Slate's cheek. Pale light flashed against his scales.

He turned the crossbow.

Slate landed behind the broken cart. The paving beneath his feet trembled.

The officer beside the cart had a close-trimmed beard and a split running through the front plate of his armor. Dark blood marked the white cloth beneath it. He kept one hand against a wounded soldier's shoulder, holding him below the level of the parapet.

Slate crouched beside him. “Who's in command?”

The dwarf looked at Slate’s wings, the bolt on the road and the workers beneath the bridge. Then he got back to commanding his patrol. “I am.

Captain Ren Qiao.” He pushed the wounded soldier farther behind the cart.

“Slate. My people are bringing those four workers up. Is anyone else trapped underneath?”

Ren shook his head. “Just the repair crew. We were guarding them when the attack began.”

“Then keep your soldiers under cover.” Slate felt another tremor through the paving. “Who is moving the road?”

Ren pointed beyond the lifted paving.

At the far abutment, a dwarf woman knelt behind a stone barrier. One hand lay flat on the road. Her other arm moved slowly, elbow drawing back as though she were pulling something heavy toward her. Slate felt the paving shift again. The broken cart creaked against the raised slab.

Beside Ren, an older man knelt with both palms pressed to a crack in the bridge deck. Blood ran from his nose onto his beard. A pale ridge grew between his fingers, filling part of the widening split.

“Our bridgewarden is keeping the arch together,” Ren said. “If he lets go to defend himself, we lose the center.”

Slate watched the opposing stoneshaper's hand.

The slab rose another inch.

The woman was patient. Her crossbowmen kept the wardens under cover while she pulled their footing apart. Men who tried to rush her had to climb the lifted paving into a clear field of fire. Men who retreated would expose their backs and leave the workers beneath them.

Slate checked the cliff where Pelrin had disappeared. His Lurkers could reach the bowmen without using the road. He needed to keep the stoneshaper occupied until they were in position.

“Can you hold your side of that crack?” he asked the bridgewarden.

The older dwarf gave a short nod without lifting his head.

“Then keep doing it,” Slate told the bridgewarden.

Slate rose enough to see over the cart. Three crossbows turned toward him. He sent a brief wash of white fire along the top of the far barrier.

The bowmen ducked. One screamed when fire caught the exposed hand on his weapon. The stoneshaper lowered her head and remained where she was, protected by the wall she had made.

Slate let the flame die. Stone was a better answer to his fire than the wooden defenses his enemies had so often provided.

“Pelrin?” Slate sent.

“Below the upper ledge,” Pelrin replied. “Two *are watching the gorge. Give us a moment.”*

Slate crouched again. A bolt struck the cart beside his shoulder, punched through the plank and stopped against his scales. He plucked it free and dropped it.

Ren had watched the entire exchange. Now he studied Slate’s gold wings and white fire. Apparently they matched the description he’d received. “You came from the Wyldwood?” Ren asked.

Slate nodded toward the bend behind them. “Serevan is bringing us to Lianshi. I hadn't expected an introduction quite this public.”

The captain glanced at the Scion's claw-tipped hands, then toward the broken paving. “We received notice of your party. You are expected at Lianshi.”

“I'd prefer not to arrive at Lianshi carrying your entire patrol.”

Ren chuckled and pressed his hand against the blood soaking his armor. “So would I.”

A shout came from beneath the bridge. Ren moved before he could stop himself, starting toward the parapet. Slate caught his arm. “Let my men work.”

Slate saw the platform through Brace's eyes: slanted boards between the Raider's red hands. One rope had been passed beneath its lower end. Another Raider was working a second rope around the upper beam. A third chain tore free of the parapet. The woman who had caught her companion still held his collar, her arm trembling under the weight.

“Take the rope,” Brace shouted. Slate could just hear him over the river. “Around both of you. I'll hold you while you do it.”

Her free hand reached up.

The stone around the last intact chain anchor began to open.

Slate felt the platform drop before he heard the iron tear loose.

“Take the weight!” Brace shouted.

Brace's three companions hauled. Ropes snapped tight beneath the wooden frame. The platform swung out from the bridge, carrying four screaming workers toward the gorge wall.

Brace freed one hand from the arch and caught the man who had been clinging to the chain.

The Raider hung from one hand with the worker caught against his chest. His claws dragged through a shallow groove in the stone. Then his tail found the iron ring still fixed beneath the adjoining section. He wound it twice and locked his feet into a seam.

The platform struck the cliff below him.

Boards broke. The lower rail bent outward. The injured worker slid against the rope beneath it and stopped with his legs hanging over the river.

Brace held.

Brace turned and cradled the worker in the crook of his arm, shifting the load before it could tear his grip loose.

“I've got this one,” Brace said. *“We need that platform level.”*

“Initiates, take the ropes from above,” Slate sent to the pair waiting at the near parapet. *“Pull them toward our bank. Keep the platform clear of the cliff.”*

“We need hands on those ropes,” Slate told Ren. The captain shouted to his own men. Two crawled back along the parapet to help. The rest raised their shields over the bridgewarden.

Across the gap, the kneeling woman lifted her face.

She had seen the platform survive.

Her free hand pressed down.

The paving beneath Slate bulged.

He jumped as a stone tooth drove upward through the space between his feet. The point tore along his left forearm. He landed on the cart's axle and threw himself into the air before the next tooth reached it.

The cart overturned behind him.

For a heartbeat he was above both parapets, wings spread against the open sky. Every bow on the upper ledge had a clear view.

“Now,” Pelrin sent.

A green arm came over the edge behind the nearest bowman. Claws closed around his face and pulled him backward. Beside him, a second Lurker rose into a crossbow's path, seized the stock and drove its owner against the rock. The quarrel fired into empty air.

Slate folded his wings and dropped toward the far abutment.

He could hear the fight spreading across the upper ledge. Pelrin's Lurkers had caught the crossbowmen facing the gorge, leaving Slate a clear descent onto the road below.

The first defender met him with a spear braced against the stone barrier.

Slate struck the shaft with his tail blade. Wood parted. He landed inside the severed point, caught the man's coat and drove him into the bowman behind

him. Both hit the road hard enough that one didn't move again.

The other tried to reach for a knife.

Slate's claws opened his throat.

A third man lunged from the right. The sword slid across Slate's ribs with a shriek of metal on scales. Slate let him finish the stroke, trapped the wrist against his side and turned. The arm broke before the man hit the parapet.

The stoneshaper was getting up.

He went for her.

The road rose between them.

This barrier grew higher than the first, a thick gray fold that climbed toward his chest. Slate planted a foot against it and vaulted. As he cleared the top, the stone bent toward him.

He fed mana into his Scourgeshield.

The upper edge struck pale light instead of his knee. The impact threw him sideways, draining mana as the shield resisted the weight. He landed on one hand with a wing tip scraping the road. Stone closed over the place where his leg would have been.

He had seen a man draw a sword with less precision.

The stoneshaper backed toward the rock face. She wore a padded brown coat under a sleeveless leather apron, with a hammer hanging at her hip. Her right hand stayed against the stone as she moved.

Slate watched that hand.

She watched his wings.

He sprang straight at her.

The stone floor buckled. He beat his wings once, lifting over the ridge she pushed into his path. His tail swept ahead of him. She jerked away from the blade and raised her free arm.

He changed the angle.

The point cut into the outside of her forearm. A small wound, deliberately shallow. He delivered the paralytic and withdrew before she could close her hand around the blade.

She struck him across the face with a stone knob growing from the wall.

His teeth snapped together. Pain flashed through his jaw. One foot skidded toward the open edge of the road. He caught the parapet with his tail, pulled himself back and reached her before she could lower her palm again.

This time he caught both wrists. “Enough.”

She drove a knee into his stomach.

He lifted her clear of the ground.

Her boots kicked once, twice. Then the motion faltered. Fury remained in her eyes after her muscles stopped answering it.

Slate carried her away from the wall and laid her on an exposed patch of road. She was breathing. He had wanted an explanation more than another body, and had chosen the dose accordingly.

“Caster down,” he sent. *“Watch for another.”*

Pelrin's answer came with an image of the upper ledge. Two bowmen lay beneath the Lurkers. Others were fleeing through a cleft behind their position. A Lurker caught the last man's belt, pulled him off his feet and pinned him before he reached the turn.

“Hold there. Don't chase blind,” Slate sent Pelrin.

An attacker beside the far parapet heard the fighting above him stop. He looked up, saw the green figures and threw his crossbow over the edge.

“Down on your face,” Slate told him.

The man obeyed.

The others didn't all make the same choice. Two ran along the highland road. A third tried to follow and found a Lurker descending in front of him. Steel flashed. The Lurker slipped beneath it, opened the man's thigh and dragged him away from the drop as he fell.

Slate left the fugitives to the watchers on the ledge. He hadn't come to empty the highlands of everyone willing to carry a bow.

Below him, Brace was still hanging from the bridge.

Without the hostile stoneshaper pulling at it, the bridge settled.

It didn't become whole. The lifted paving remained across the road. A long crack ran from the overturned cart to the right parapet, and the bridgewarden could barely lift his head. His work had stopped the broken arch from opening farther. That was enough for Slate's men to finish the rescue.

They hauled the platform toward the near bank with ropes passed over the parapet. Its damaged rail caught against the stone. A Raider braced beneath it while another climbed onto the boards and freed the pinned worker's leg.

Slate flew down beside them.

Brace looked at him over the head of the man he held. “He won't let go.”

The worker had both fists locked in the ridges of Brace's shoulder plates. His eyes were shut. Blood darkened one sleeve, but his grip looked capable of surviving the end of the world.

Slate hovered long enough to put a hand on the man's back. “We're taking you up.”

The man shook his head.

“You can keep him,” Slate added. “For the climb.”

Brace snorted. He unwound his tail only after the worker had been secured to him with a loop of rope. Then he climbed, carrying his passenger against his chest. Slate rose alongside them, watching the damaged stone above the Raider's hands.

At the parapet, two soldiers reached down. Brace pushed the worker into their arms, swung over after him and sat heavily on the road.

For the first time, Slate saw the damage to his hands. Two claws were split. Blood filled the grooves between his scales where the stone had ground against them.

The Raider flexed his fingers. The smallest cuts were already drawing closed. Repair would take biomass, but he had reserves enough to begin it.

“You can stop volunteering now,” Slate said.

Brace showed his teeth. “I thought this counted as the meeting.”

Slate folded his wings to let two wardens pass. “Practice.”

The worker, still gripping a red forearm, opened his eyes. “What are you?”

Brace rested his scraped hands on his knees. “A Scourge Raider. And tired.”

His passenger laughed once, shakily, and finally let go.

Slate returned to the platform for the injured man. The board had torn through cloth and muscle without pinning him to the timber. They had bound the leg before moving him. Slate lifted him carefully, keeping the wounded limb supported while a soldier on the road guided the rising rope.

There was room beneath his wings for the weight. He felt the pull through his shoulders, corrected with his tail and rose past the broken rail. The man in his arms stared at the gorge, then at the gold scales beside his face.

“Look at the bridge,” Slate told him. “We're nearly there.” He set him down where the paving was sound.

All four workers were alive.

The woman came over the parapet with help from one of the wardens. The worker she had held by the collar followed in a Raider's arms, leaving the broken platform empty. Her hands had cramped around the rope. When the soldier tried to take it away, she swore at him until he left it beside her.

Beyond the bend, Serevan was already moving his companions toward the rescued workers. Nethan came with water. Ilara knelt beside the woman and began loosening her fingers one at a time, talking too quietly for Slate to hear over the river.

The four Scourge who had guarded them kept their places around the approach.

Slate looked across the bridge toward the prisoners.

The stoneshaper lay where he had left her, under guard. A soldier had turned her onto her side. Her eyes tracked him as he crossed the sound strip of paving along the left parapet.

He crouched where she could see his face without straining. “That will wear off.”

Her lips moved. No sound came out.

“Don't hurry. You've already made yourself interesting.”

Ren approached behind him. “She was trying to bring the arch down.”

Slate glanced toward the damaged parapet. “I noticed.”

“She knew where the repair crew would be,” Ren said. His eyes stayed on the prisoner.

Slate looked at the woman's apron, the worn hammer and the powder ground into her sleeve. She didn't look like someone who had discovered stonework because an officer needed a bridge destroyed. “Who is she?”

Ren shook his head. “I don't know her.”

“Then let's ask when she can answer,” Slate said.

Ren's gaze shifted toward the wounded along the near parapet. He had lost men. Two bodies lay beside the overturned cart, another on the far side of the raised paving. The captain didn't need Slate to point them out.

“She remains in my custody,” Slate said.

Ren looked back at him. “This is Confederacy ground.”

“And I'm here at your Surety's invitation. He can hear what she has to say.”

For a moment neither moved.

Then Ren nodded. “We will take her to him.”

Slate stood, leaving two Raiders beside the prisoner. Ren could accompany them and give Shen his own report.

He could argue with the captain about jurisdiction later. With one hand on the paving, she’d nearly killed him. He would have paid considerably more to learn how she did it.

The bridgewarden could lower the raised slab. He couldn't mend the entire arch before dark.

He told Ren that while sitting on an empty tool chest, with a bloody cloth pressed beneath his nose. His name was Gu Tan. Slate had asked his name once the man could hear the question without someone repeating it.

“People one at a time,” Gu said. “Along the left. No carts. Not until the supports below are replaced and I've seen the underside.”

“We'll get you down there,” Slate said.

Gu looked at Brace, who was helping haul up the last loose chain. “I believe you.”

Ren arranged a watch for the crossing. Two soldiers would carry word back along the road. The wounded and prisoners would go with the party heading toward the stronghold. He gave the orders without once asking whether Slate intended to remain and defend the bridge for him.

That improved Slate's opinion of the man.

On the far side, Pelrin brought down the crossbowman his Lurkers had captured on the ledge. He had a split lip and a rag tied around one wrist. He looked at the gold wings, then at the blood drying between Slate's claws.

“You weren't supposed to be here,” the prisoner said.

Slate stopped in front of him. “Who told you where I would be?”

The prisoner swallowed. “We weren't waiting for you.”

“Who were you waiting for, then?” Slate asked.

His eyes went to Ren and stopped there.

“We came to reopen the crossing,” the captain said. “They broke the parapet yesterday and drove away the keeper. We brought soldiers with the repair crew.”

“And they brought her.” Slate nodded toward the captive stoneshaper.

Ren's jaw tightened.

The prisoner spoke before the captain could answer. “We told them to leave it broken.”

“You warned the crew?” Slate asked.

The prisoner looked toward the ruined cart. “Everyone was warned.”

“That isn't what I asked,” Slate said.

The man looked away.

Slate left him with Pelrin. The attackers had prepared for soldiers escorting a repair crew. At Lianshi, he would ask whether other crossings had been attacked the same way.

Serevan stood beside the repaired approach. Dust had turned his brown coat almost gray. Ilara was helping the injured worker settle onto a litter fashioned from two spear shafts and a folded cloak.

“Do you know any of them?” Slate asked the older elf.

“The bridgewarden. Not the prisoners.”

“Are these your Forsworn?”

Serevan watched the bound crossbowman for a while. “They may call themselves Forsworn,” Serevan said. “So do families who have simply

refused another season of service.”

“Not sure that makes a difference in the Confederacy,” Slate said.

Serevan looked toward the confederate captain. “True.”

Slate followed his gaze. The captain was wrapping a dead soldier's personal belongings in the man's cloak. He paused over a small wooden comb, cleaned the blood from it with his thumb and put it inside.

“Then I'll ask Ren which group he means,” Slate said.

Serevan turned toward him. “You believe there's a difference?”

Slate nodded toward the captive. “I want to know who’s refusing work and who’s shooting at repair crews. Calling them all Forsworn doesn’t help.”

He had no objection to escaping inherited service. He’d come to negotiate that very thing for Serevan’s households. That didn’t make the Forsworn safe to ignore.

By the time they were ready to leave, the captured stoneshaper could move her fingers.

Slate had her carried on the timber remains of the repair platform, with folded cloth under her head. Her wrists were bound to the frame. She watched every turn of the path, testing her hands when she thought nobody was looking.

Slate walked beside the litter. “You can move your mouth now. What's your name?”

She ignored him.

“You can wait for the Surety, if you prefer.”

That brought her eyes back to his face. She’d ignored his questions and threats. Mentioning Shen got her attention. Whether she feared Shen or expected him to understand her, Slate wanted to know.

“Duan Suyin,” she said. The words came thickly, but clearly enough.

“Did you build that bridge?” Slate asked, glancing at the hammer a guard now carried.

Her gaze moved toward the broken span behind them. “My family maintained it.”

Slate waited.

She closed her mouth.

“Keep your secrets,” Slate said, showing his fangs. “We’ll talk later.”

Ren joined him where the road climbed out of sight of the river. The captain had surrendered his place on the litter to a soldier whose leg couldn't bear his weight.

The captain walked stiffly toward Slate, with one hand pressed to the split in his armor. “I have sent a runner ahead. There will be bearers from Lianshi to meet us.”

“Good,” Slate said.

Ren kept pace beside him. “I also sent my report of the attack.”

“An accurate one, I hope.” Slate glanced at the captain.

“Four workers alive. The bridge still passable. The enemy stoneshaper captured.” Ren glanced toward the prisoners. “I don't need to improve it.”

Slate smiled.

Hooves scraped overhead.

A rider was descending the cliff beside the next bend. His mount had the shaggy chest of a musk ox and a narrow, long-nosed head, its horns swept back clear of the rider's knees. The forelegs looked too long until it stretched them down the rock. Each divided hoof spread against the face and held. The hind feet followed, leaving the animal standing on a slope Slate would have climbed with his claws.

The rider leaned back against his saddle straps. He carried a message case and very little else.

“Cliffstrider,” Ren said, following Slate's gaze. “He's coming from Lianshi.”

The animal peeled one forehoof free with a dry click. Three more steps brought it onto a ledge, where it stopped and lowered its head. Its flanks worked beneath the shaggy coat. The rider loosened his reins and waited.

“Can't keep doing that?” Slate asked the rider.

The rider shook his head. “Not without resting. You plan the descent before you start.”

Slate studied the ledges above the road. He had been looking for bowmen. He would need to allow for mounted soldiers as well, though he doubted that beast could carry a Raider and still perform the same trick.

The rider raised a hand to Ren, then pointed back toward the bend. Moments later, the first litter bearers came around it on foot.

Beyond the next turn, the road widened. He could see the beginning of another gutter cut cleanly into the rock, carrying water past a row of terraces. Farther up, a retaining wall followed the mountainside in a curve so smooth that it might have been drawn with a finger through wet clay.

His forearm itched where the stone tooth had cut him. The bleeding had stopped. Repair continued beneath the scales, spending a little more of the reserves he had brought from Woodhaven.

He rested that hand against the wall as they passed.

Cold stone lay smooth beneath his palm. He could follow the curve of the wall without finding a joint. Bastion needed timber simply to hold its damaged roofs up. He wanted to know how much of that work a shaper could spare his crews.

“How many others can do what she did?” he asked.

Ren looked toward the captive stoneshaper. “In the highlands? Many can shape stone. Not many have the temperament to work the stone under pressure.”

“Among the Forsworn,” Slate clarified.

Ren slowed. “We don't know. They shelter in abandoned quarries and the tunnels beneath old causeways.” Ren gestured toward the cliffs above the road. “A patrol follows them through a cutting and finds a wall where there was an opening. Meanwhile, they've made another exit.”

Slate remembered the woman lifting the road beneath him, never taking her hand from the rock.

He wanted people who could do that building his walls.

He would have to think carefully about letting them touch the foundations.

Ahead, the terraces ended beneath a steep gray face. Lianshi Stronghold rose out of the rock. Layered roofs sheltered a gateway above a flight of broad steps. Towers emerged from the cliff without a visible seam. Soldiers waited on the outer landing beneath white banners marked with linked black squares.

Ren raised a hand in greeting. The men at the gate answered.

Shen Kaizhen waited inside.

Slate looked back at Duan Suyin. “You may have saved me a great deal of explanation,” he told her.

Her eyes narrowed. Even with her hands tied, she looked ready to try the bridge again.

At the top of the steps, an officer signaled for the gates to open. Slate sent the escort forward. Four workers alive, a captured stoneshaper, and Shen's road still standing. He was going to enjoy hearing the Surety's opening price.

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III

The Stone Avatar

THE GATES OF LIANSHI OPENED SIDEWAYS INTO THE MOUNTAIN.

Slate watched two slabs of gray stone withdraw into slots that hadn't been visible a moment before. There were no wheels, no chains, no men straining at a windlass.

A dwarf beside the entrance kept one palm against the wall until both slabs had settled. Then he took his hand away and waved the litter bearers through.

The passage beyond was wide enough for two carts. Light fell through narrow shafts cut into the ceiling. Between them, murder holes overlooked a floor without a single joint large enough to admit a knife.

Slate glanced down at his feet.

Being invited inside felt less reassuring now that he had seen someone turn a road into teeth.

"Keep the prisoners off the paving," he told the Raiders carrying Duan Suyin. *"And don't put your hands in any convenient holes."*

Brace looked up at a murder hole as he passed beneath it. *"My father used to warn me against the same thing."*

The gate passage opened onto a courtyard crowded with soldiers and arriving bearers. Water ran down a carved channel beside the steps. Above it, balconies followed the cliff in three tiers, their supporting brackets curling from the same gray rock as the walls. Blue roof tiles caught the evening light. A white banner hung from the highest balcony, its black square links heavy enough to read from the road below.

A woman in a stained apron met Ren beside the channel. “Sit down, Captain.”

“The soldier behind me has a broken leg,” the captain protested.

“I have seen him. Sit down.”

Ren looked as though he might argue. She put a stool behind his knees, and he sat.

That settled who was in charge. Slate approved.

Two attendants took the injured worker's litter. Another began cutting a soldier's boot away from his swollen ankle. Around the courtyard, wounded soldiers grunted and swore as the attendants worked. Boots scraped on wet stone beside the channel. Slate kept his wings close while another pair of bearers squeezed past him.

Slate sent four Initiates with Serevan and the other elves to a covered bench. Pelrin kept his Lurkers near the entrance. The remaining Scourge stood clear of the bearers, watching the balconies without pretending they weren't.

A low growl came from beneath the opposite balcony.

Two lions lay beside a seated officer, their tawny bodies half concealed behind the bench. One had raised its head toward the Raiders carrying Duan. Slabs of dark mineral overlapped through its mane, thickest above the shoulders. They clicked together as it stood. Behind that armored collar, its ribs moved under ordinary fur.

Slate had taken them for statues until one objected to his company.

A handler caught the standing lion's attention with two fingers against his own thigh. It looked at him, then back at the prisoner. Its companion remained down, one broad paw resting across the officer's boot.

“Stone-maned lions,” Ren explained. “Give them room.”

“Perhaps their handler should give the same advice.” Slate flicked his claws in the handler’s direction, and they made a satisfying click. “The weather is

growing cooler and I could always use a new coat.”

The handler heard him. He led the restless animal back toward the officer's bench, clearing the bearers' route. Its uneven mane shifted with each step, the largest plate hanging over one shoulder like a badly fitted pauldron. The neck might resist a spear. The belly would not.

Slate kept that observation to himself. Their handler had noticed his tail blade and was making an equally practical assessment.

A dwarf in white descended the steps from the inner hall.

He was perhaps five feet tall and nearly as broad through the shoulders as Ren was across his shield. Thin plates of pale stone overlapped beneath his open robe. His black beard reached his upper chest, gathered through a single engraved clasp. A carved pin held his hair above a square, composed face.

The hammer in his right hand had a long dark haft and a narrow head. Slate's eye went from that head to the dwarf's forearm.

Smooth mineral growth ran along the exposed skin. Fine green veins divided the gray surface, and characters had been cut into it with the care someone might give a monument.

The dwarf stopped beside Ren. “Captain Ren,” he greeted without preamble. “Three dead?”

“Yes, Surety.”

“Their names,” Shen said to Ren.

Ren gave them. Shen listened without interrupting, then asked where the bodies were and whether anyone still needed help at the bridge.

“Gu Tan is holding the crossing,” Ren reported. “He needs another shaper and timber for the lower supports. We left a watch.”

Shen turned to an officer following him. “Send both. Find Gu someone who can examine the arch while he rests.”

Only then did Ordan's avatar face Slate. Slate couldn’t tell whether Shen was being rude or always greeted visitors this way.

“Shen Kaizhen.” The avatar dipped his head a fraction. “You have brought more guests than I expected.”

Slate shrugged. “I heard there was a party.”

Shen's mouth drew a line. “Ren's runner said they tried to kill him. You objected.”

“I needed the bridge.”

Shen's gaze moved to Brace's damaged hands, then to the worker arguing with an attendant about whether he could walk. “Nevertheless, thank you.” He offered his ungloved hand.

Slate took it. The mineral ridges were cool, the grip firm without becoming a competition. Up close, he could see old chips worn smooth along the edge of Shen's wrist. The inscriptions passed over some and stopped before others.

“Ordan's avatar,” Slate said.

“And the Confederacy's Surety. I understand you speak for Lucidus.”

“As much as any man can.”

Shen chuckled. “I understand the sentiment. Still, we have several matters to settle. First, the woman on the litter.”

Duan watched them from between her guards. Her fingers had recovered enough to curl around the edge of the timber, but her wrists remained tied above it.

Shen crouched beside her. He rested the hammer across his knees, within easy reach. “Duan Suyin.”

Her mouth tightened.

“You know her?” Slate asked.

“I knew her grandfather. He worked on the south drainage galleries at Covenant.” Shen studied the captive's face. “I last saw you carrying his tools.”

“Someone had to,” she replied through gritted teeth.

“Was he unable to work?”

“He couldn't close his hand. They still sent for him.” Duan flexed her recovering fingers, then let them curl against her palms.

Shen remained crouched beside her. Behind him, an attendant pulled a length of bloody cloth out of Ren's armor. “Tell me who sent the demand,” the Surety said.

Duan gave a short, ugly laugh. “So you can correct the name on it?”

“So I can examine what happened.”

She turned her face away.

Slate watched the exchange with interest. Shen hadn't denied the possibility that someone had been treated badly. He had also asked about the failing hand as though the rest of the family's service needed no explanation.

“The paralytic I gave her should finish wearing off soon,” Slate said. “She'll need water. I'd appreciate the opportunity to speak to her before a sentence is passed.”

Shen stood. “You captured her. You may question her. She will remain here while the attack is investigated.”

“Alive?”

Shen looked directly at him. “Alive.”

Plain enough. Slate revised his opinion. Shen wasn't an asshole on purpose. That was just his personality.

Slate nodded to the Raiders. Shen's guards brought a wooden carrying chair, and together they transferred Duan into it without letting her touch the courtyard. She stared at Slate as they lifted her. “You’ll accept his terms.”

“I haven't heard them yet,” Slate replied.

“You will.” She said it with the certainty of someone who had watched every bargain end at her expense. Slate added that to what he knew about her grandfather's failing hand.

The guards carried her toward a side door. Slate watched until she was through it, then turned back to his host.

Shen had followed his glance. “There is a timber room prepared for her. You may place one of your people outside it.”

“Pelrin,” Slate sent.

The Lurker detached himself from the others and followed the chair.

Shen watched Pelrin cross the courtyard without waiting for a spoken order. “You can direct him without the people beside him hearing?”

“Yes.” Slate kept the reply brief. The dwarf had already watched the Lurker take his place outside Duan's door.

“Then our officers will need an agreed signal,” Shen said. “Unfortunately, they can’t read minds.”

Slate smiled. “We can arrange that.”

They crossed the courtyard to a long terrace overlooking the approach road. Serevan came with them, carrying his document case. An attendant set tea on a low table beneath the eaves, then withdrew far enough to give them privacy.

Slate remained standing. The terrace wall came to his waist. Beyond it, the road descended through cultivated shelves cut into the mountain. He could see the gutter they had passed below, carrying water around a retaining wall rather than allowing it to soak through the earth behind it.

No rubble pile marked the work. No mismatched patch showed where a mason had joined new stone to old.

“How long did that take?” Slate asked, pointing to the nearest shelf.

Shen looked down. “The retaining wall? Three days. The drainage took longer. There was a spring we didn't know about until the work started.”

“Could you raise another beside it?”

“With enough sound material and someone willing to pay the shapers.”

Slate thought of Bastion's broken streets and the approach to its damaged gates. Wood could close a breach. In the right hands, living timber could do much more. It still wouldn’t make Bastion’s ruined foundations withstand a siege.

He wanted to bring Merus here. Preferably with a notebook and several people he could persuade to come home with them.

Shen poured three cups. “Master Serevan, I have read the household petitions.”

Serevan set his case on the table. He had been quiet since the courtyard, but his hands were steady as he opened it. “There are two copies. One includes the wardens' objections.”

“I received that copy.”

“Then you know the families wish to leave together.”

“I know the people who signed wish to leave together. Several households include adults whose wishes have not been recorded.”

Serevan's fingers stopped on the first sheet. The proposal treated each household as if everyone in it wanted the same thing. Shen had noticed they might not. “Some would not sign while the warden was watching.”

“They can tell an officer separately.”

Slate was beginning to find the exchange tiring. The two sounded like accountants arguing a line item. “Your officer?” Slate asked.

Shen set a cup in front of him. “With one of yours present.”

Slate moved the cup aside to make room for Serevan’s petitions.

“No one gets dragged to Woodhaven because the head of a household signed for them,” Slate said. “And no one stays because a warden needs their hands. Let them choose. Then we can argue over what their work is worth.”

Shen inclined his head, not quite conceding. “The remaining difficulty is replacing their work.”

“Your wardens seem to think that difficulty belongs to the elves forever.”

“Their groves received defended land, water, refuge and assistance through years when they could not have survived alone. Their obligations are to the confederacy that sheltered them.”

“And the people who agreed to that are dead,” Slate said.

“Some are.”

Slate looked at the engraved forearm beside Shen's cup. “You aren't.”

“I helped negotiate the Covenant.”

Serevan knew that already. He gave no sign of surprise. Slate considered Shen again, revising a few assumptions about how long a disagreement with this government might last.

“You remember what the elves asked for.”

“I remember carrying people into unfinished refuge halls. I remember which valleys could feed them and which could not. Those arrangements kept them alive.” Shen turned the top sheet toward himself. “These families still occupy the land their ancestors received. Their neighbors still depend on their work. Leaving changes both.”

“I’m offering somewhere else to live.” Slate clapped his hands once. “Let’s discuss what replaces the work.”

Shen turned from Serevan to Slate. “Are you authorized to negotiate the terms of these households' release?”

“I'm authorized to negotiate,” Slate clarified. “They decide whether they like the result.”

The Surety considered them over the rim of his cup. “There is a quarry stronghold east of here. The old Heshan workings. The force occupying it has attacked repair crews, seized stores and closed the road beneath the western face. The people who struck Ren's patrol came from that force.”

“You can establish that?” Slate asked.

“Ren has identified two of the dead from earlier attacks. His reports and the surviving witnesses are available to you. You may also question your prisoners.”

“How many fighters?”

“Enough that I will give you my officers’ estimates with their maps rather than pretend I know the exact number.”

It was becoming inconvenient how often Slate approved of the man despite his personality approximating that of a boulder.

Shen placed his cup down. “Help me take Heshan,” Shen said. “Return the quarry road and its galleries to our forces. In exchange, the service owed by the households we agree upon will be discharged.”

Serevan drew a breath.

Slate held up one hand before the elf could answer.

Slate looked toward the courtyard, where another file of soldiers was crossing beneath the terrace. “You have soldiers. You have yourself. Why haven't you taken it?”

Shen followed his glance. The men below were carrying shields and a bundle of practice spears. He waited until they had passed the wounded gathered beside the channel before answering.

The Surety stood. “Come and let me show you part of the difficulty.”

The practice yard occupied the next terrace. Stone posts stood in rows along its outer edge. Soldiers were working in pairs between them, hammer hafts cracking against padded shields. Near the cliff, a shaper was lifting knee-high ridges across a runner's path.

The runner cleared the first two, struck the third and landed on both hands.

“You watched his face,” the shaper told him. “Watch where you are putting your feet.”

The runner spat dust, stood and went back to the starting point.

Shen led Slate to an empty square separated from the drills by a broad sand gutter. Slate glanced from the cliff to the open yard, then down at the gutter marking the edge of the paving. An officer called the nearest soldiers aside. Brace and two Raiders came up from the courtyard behind Serevan.

The Surety set his hammer on a rack and chose a practice weapon with a thick leather pad over its head. He offered Slate a straight wooden staff. “No edge, fire or poison. We stop when either of us asks.”

Slate took the staff. “You're proposing to negotiate by hitting me?”

“I have already proposed the compensation. I would prefer to know how you fight before I ask anyone to fight beside you.”

“And show me what waits at Heshan.”

“Some of it.”

Slate rolled the staff across his palms. Strong wood. Nearly his own height. He could break it with one hand if he forgot what he was holding. *“Watch the paving,”* he told Brace.

“I was going to watch you.”

“You'll get both.” He stepped into the square.

Shen faced him with the padded hammer held low. His white robe was tied back clear of his arms. Without it concealing the lamellar, the dwarf looked wider still, the overlapping stone moving easily as he shifted his grip.

Slate tested the ground with one foot. Solid paving. No raised lip, no visible gap.

He looked up in time to see Shen move.

The hammer came at his ribs with startling speed.

Slate stepped outside it and brought the staff down across the haft. The weapons struck. He turned his wrists, intending to carry the hammer past him and touch Shen's shoulder.

Shen did not move.

For an instant Slate had the absurd impression of trying to lever the mountain out of his way. The staff bent against Slate’s palms. Stone tightened around the soles of Shen's boots, and the dwarf drove forward through the pressure.

Slate let go with one hand and twisted away.

Slate brought his forearm across his ribs. The padded head struck the Scourgeshield covering it in a flash of pale light.

He skidded backward. The impact ate mana. A tingle ran down his left arm into his fingertips, though the hammer had never touched his scales. His heels reached the sand gutter before he stopped.

Brace made a pleased noise.

Slate spared him a look. *“Whose side are you on?”*

“Yours. Hit him back.”

Shen waited in the center of the square. The stone had released his boots.

Slate advanced again, slower this time. He feinted toward the dwarf's head and watched the hammer rise. Then he shortened his grip and struck for Shen's forward knee.

The paving lifted beneath his rear foot.

He had expected it. His wings opened before his balance went, one hard beat carrying him above the rising stone. He swept the staff toward Shen's shoulder as he passed.

Shen ducked. The practice hammer struck upward. Slate fed more mana into Scourgeshield, and the film flashed over his lower ribs as it took the

blow.

Slate climbed, turned and came down behind him.

Shen pivoted on one foot. A slab rose between them, high enough to take the blow meant for his back. Slate's staff slammed into stone.

He landed against the slab with both feet and sprang sideways before it could close around him.

The hammer passed through the space he had abandoned.

That would have hurt even with padding.

Slate landed, laughing now, and rushed him.

Shen gave ground. A low ridge forced Slate left. A second rose near his ankle. Slate vaulted it with the staff planted against the paving, tucked his wings and drove both feet toward the Surety's chest.

The hammer haft caught him across the soles.

For a moment they held there, Slate horizontal above the yard, Shen leaning into the weapon beneath him. Cracks ran from the dwarf's boots through the paving. Slate felt the resistance increase.

He flexed, kicked off and somersaulted clear.

The soldiers at the edge of the terrace had stopped drilling.

Slate landed in a crouch. A thin white mark showed along one of Shen's mineral ridges. Shen adjusted his right hand on the haft before settling back into his stance.

So holding that much force cost him something.

Good.

Slate circled toward the cliff. Shen moved with him, keeping the open yard behind his own shoulders. He wouldn't let Slate use the wall for another launch.

Slate sent Brace an impression of Shen's feet, the rising slabs, the way every solid landing gave him another chance to interfere. *"He wants me down."*

"Then stay up," the Raider answered.

Slate smiled and opened his wings.

The first rush brought him just above Shen's reach. He struck down with the end of the staff, forcing the hammer up, then beat backward before the dwarf could answer. He came again from the left, the staff held farther toward its butt.

Shen turned beneath him. A narrow stone post climbed out of the yard at Slate's back.

He banked around it and felt the tip of one wing brush cold rock.

Another post rose on his right. A third climbed behind Shen, shutting off the low approach from the cliff.

Shen was limiting the room available for his turns.

Slate went higher. From above, he could see the arrangement forming: three posts, the cliff behind them, a clear approach Shen had left open in front of his hammer.

He could keep climbing. In a real fight he could burn the dwarf from outside the yard and see how much stone the ward around his body could withstand before one of them ran out of mana. Neither would tell him how Shen fought up close.

He folded his wings and dropped between two posts.

Shen lifted the hammer.

Slate threw the staff.

Shen knocked it aside with the haft. Slate opened his wings to brake and caught the top of the left post with his free hand. His body swung around the stone. He came at Shen sideways, low enough that his feet nearly brushed the paving.

His tail wound around the hammer haft behind its padded head.

Shen pulled.

Slate let the pull bring him closer. He caught Shen's left wrist and reached for his shoulder with his other hand.

Stone rose against his shin.

He lifted that leg before the grip closed, but Shen had only needed to interrupt the lunge. He tore his wrist free and turned inside Slate's arms, driving a shoulder into his chest.

Slate's wings struck a post. He snarled, spread his claws against the lamellar and forced Shen back half a step.

The paving split beneath Shen's heel.

Slate's palm reached Shen's throat at the same instant the padded hammer head pressed beneath his jaw.

Both stopped.

He could feel the Surety breathing against his wrist. His own tail remained wrapped around the haft. It would take a small movement from either of them to make the next exchange unpleasant.

“Enough,” Shen said.

Slate loosened his tail.

The hammer withdrew. He lifted his hand and stepped away, folding the wing that had struck the post. It ached along the outer joint. He flexed it once, then again. Nothing torn.

“You could have stayed above me,” Shen said.

“You could have made those posts sharp.”

“Yes.”

Shen examined the white mark on his forearm. A bead of blood had formed beside the mineral growth. He wiped it away with his thumb.

Slate retrieved the staff from the gutter. Behind him, the posts sank into the yard one at a time. Shen kept his hand against each until it settled. He took longer repairing the cracks around his footprints, then returned the padded hammer and collected his own.

Slate watched the last seam close.

He was imagining this dwarf at the base of Bastion's wall.

He suspected Shen knew it.

The Surety took them into a room overlooking the practice yard. A map lay beneath stone weights on a broad table. An officer brought a second lamp and opened the shutters while Shen washed the dust from his hands. Gray streaks ran through the water. Slate eased his aching wing against his back.

“At Heshan,” the dwarf said, “they have galleries through the western face. I can open a passage. They can close another behind my soldiers, or bring down stone over them while I am occupied elsewhere. A passage wide enough for one fighter is easier to make than an entrance through which I can move a company.”

Slate set the practice staff beside the door. “And you can't fight every shaper at once.”

“No. Nor can they fight everywhere,” Shen said. “Your people scaled past the bridge defenders while you held their attention.”

Ren had given a useful report.

Shen pointed to the quarry on the map. A broad cut divided the contours of the hillside. The road passed beneath its western face before turning toward a cluster of smaller workings. “I can commit soldiers here and here. I need a force that can reach the upper works before the defenders seal the approach.”

Slate leaned over the table. “You need more than a force that can climb.”

“Hopefully, those claws and teeth are for more than climbing.”

That was the other payment. Shen wanted to see the Scourge work, and he was willing to spend soldiers of his own to obtain a useful victory while doing it.

Slate could live with that. He had learned a few things in the practice yard himself.

“I inspect the position before we settle the assault,” he said. “My people remain under my command. Your officers can ask for support; they can't order one of my Raiders into an ambush because he looks expendable.”

“Agreed.” Shen nodded. “The same applies to my soldiers.”

“And the objective is Heshan,” Slate continued. “The stronghold, the road beneath it and the connected galleries shown here. Taken from its armed defenders and handed over to your forces.”

“Yes.”

Slate started counting with his claws. “No condition that a particular man dies. No second quarry added afterward. No requirement to spend the next five years hunting anyone who once ate supper with a Forsworn.”

Shen looked up from the map. “The objective is Heshan,” he repeated. “If you assist in taking and securing it, the agreed service is discharged. I will provide the occupying garrison. You will not be required to remain.”

They worked through the boundaries with the map in front of them. Slate made one of Shen's officers mark the galleries known to connect to the quarry, then draw a line enclosing the ridge above it.

They would deal with unknown tunnels inside that boundary during the assault. Anything beyond it was Shen’s problem. Slate wasn’t signing up to follow the Forsworn wherever they dug next.

The Surety accepted the boundary. He refused to promise that every member of a released household would be forgiven an unrelated crime. Slate hadn't intended to ask for that. They wrote it down anyway.

Serevan read every term aloud before either avatar signed. Then he read the release provisions again, moving one finger beneath the line concerning

descendants and leaving it there for several breaths.

Slate pretended to be occupied with the map.

“I can send word to the settlements tonight?” the elf asked.

“Tell them what has been agreed,” Shen said. “Tell them the release depends on the campaign succeeding. I will instruct the wardens to prepare the departures and arrange replacements.”

“And while they're waiting?” Slate asked.

“No new service will be imposed to prevent them leaving.” Shen added that himself.

When the copies were ready, he pressed the seal from his belt into the wax. Slate signed beside it. Serevan witnessed both, his expression controlled until he gathered the papers into his case.

Then he smiled.

It changed his tired face enough that Slate looked away from the map again.

There would be households discussing this through the night. Wardens complaining. People who had spent years deciding what they could endure suddenly considering what they could take with them.

And if Slate delivered Heshan, they would remember who had made leaving possible.

He turned back to the Surety. “I'll speak to Duan before we leave. Then I want your officers, their reports and a look at those upper works.”

Shen nodded. “At first light.”

Slate put a claw on the narrow strip of cliff above the quarry road. “How close did the last party get?”

“They reached that shelf.” Shen indicated a line halfway up the face. “The defenders opened it beneath them.”

Slate studied the marked shelf, then the steep wall above it. His Lurkers had climbed worse surfaces. They would still need somewhere to put their claws. “Have someone show me exactly where.”

Slate kept his claw on the mark. Someone at Heshan could open a mountain beneath an army. He wanted to know where that person stood when they did it.

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IV

The Price Named

SLATE LAID HIS TAIL BLADE ACROSS HIS KNEES AND CONSIDERED HOW much trouble he could put on the end of it.

Shen had been very clear about fire in the practice yard. Slate had agreed before checking what he could afford. He hoped the System offered a way to make that promise unpleasant for the next stoneshaper.

He sat beneath an open window in the rooms assigned to his escort. Outside, a cart rattled toward the gate with timber for Gu Tan's bridge. The loose ends knocked together as its wheels crossed the yard. His left wing still ached when he extended it, although the soreness had diminished since supper. Brace was on watch. The elves occupied the adjoining room, where Serevan and Ilara were preparing messages to carry north. Their low voices carried through the partition, pausing over names Slate could not make out.

The mountain had stopped trying to kill him for the moment. Slate used the lull to shop for a nastier answer. He opened the available evolutions.

AVAILABLE
- **Ash Infusion I** | *Major evolution.* Carries white fire into a wound, draining mana and stamina while resisting healing. **Requirements:** LVL 34; Cleansing Fire. **Cost:** 1,200 biomass; 600 XP.
- **Harmonic Resonance I** | *Major evolution.* Links nearby Scourgeshields into a steadier defense for a fighting formation. **Requirements:** LVL 13; Scourgeshield. **Cost:** 300 biomass; 200 XP.

LOCKED
- **Calcifying Suffocation I** | Smothers multiple enemies in hardening ash that drains mana and stamina over time. **Requires:** LVL 38; Ash Infusion I.

Harmonic Resonance could wait until he needed to hold a line. The next stoneshaper he fought would be close enough to cut, and he wanted that cut to end the fight. He chose Ash Infusion.

Ash Infusion I
Major evolution
Coats claws, fangs or weapons, including the tail blade, in clinging white fire. Wounds inflicted by an infused weapon are cauterized and resist healing. Fire carried into the wound burns the target's stamina and mana and disrupts the pathways used to direct abilities.
Requirements: LVL 34; Cleansing Fire
Biomass cost: 1,200
XP cost: 600

Six hundred experience would leave eight hundred and sixty available, nowhere near his next personal level. Saving it would shorten a distant climb. Spending it might stop the next stoneshaper from lifting a road beneath him after he had opened her arm.

The paralytic had worked on Duan. It had also left her enough time to hit him in the face.

He touched the side of his jaw.

There was room for improvement.

Four Initiates had brought part of the escort's construction reserve inside their bodies. Slate asked for three hundred biomass from each, after confirming what they would retain for repairs. One by one they joined him beneath the window and transferred the allotted material through contact. No packs changed hands. The soldiers loading timber outside never saw a thing.

Slate watched the receipts accumulate to twelve hundred.

That reserve had been intended for whatever the journey demanded. He considered a weapon that could interrupt an enemy caster a reasonable purchase.

It was good to be king. He committed the purchase.

Evolution acquired: Ash Infusion I
Biomass spent: 1,200
XP spent: 600
XP available: 860

Heat gathered beneath his claws.

Slate spread his fingers. The sensation ran along the channels of his hands, a prickling pressure that reached each knuckle in turn. His tail stiffened across his lap. He could feel the new channels along the blade's edge. They would carry fire along it and keep the flame there.

He resisted the urge to try immediately.

The guest rooms contained bedding, wooden partitions and six elves who had only recently decided to trust him. Burning their accommodation would make tomorrow's conversation unnecessarily difficult.

He waited until the pressure subsided, flexed each hand and sent for Brace. *"Find out where we can burn something."*

"How large?" the Raider sent.

"Start small."

The garrison cook found them a bare patch of the lower yard and a goat's leg that had been broken too badly to serve neatly. He watched Slate set it on a butcher's block, then moved a little farther from the block. "We can cut that for you, Scion."

"I have no doubt you could," Slate said.

The cook looked at his tail. "You prepare your food with that?"

Slate flashed his fangs. "In a manner of speaking."

The cook decided he had other places to be.

Slate held his hand above the block and guided mana toward the claws.

White fire clung to their tips.

It didn't leap from his palm in the familiar stream. Five short flames followed the curves of his claws, bright enough to cast dark shadows onto the surrounding masonry. Slate turned his hand. The fire stayed with it.

He drew one claw through the goat's leg.

The meat opened beneath the edge. A hiss rose from the cut, and the exposed flesh darkened on both sides. He withdrew his hand. White light remained in the wound for a brief interval, consuming the little mana he had carried into it, then guttered out.

Brace bent closer, keeping his hands behind his back. “Wouldn't want to be on the receiving end.”

“Nor I.” Slate cut off the supply. The flames on his claws vanished.

He tried the tail next, feeding only the curved cutting edge. Light ran from the tip toward the base. When he let it spread across the wider surface, the pull on his mana increased sharply enough to make him stop and narrow it again.

The edge alone would do.

He cut the joint at the knee. Bone parted. Fat spat against the block, and Brace stepped clear before a drop reached his foot. The smell of scorched meat hung between them.

Slate watched the burned surfaces. Unfortunately, a dead goat was not an enemy caster. The difference was mostly how hard they fought back.

He would have better testing material tomorrow.

The cook returned and leaned toward the block after the last flame died. “Are you finished?”

“With the test.”

The cook considered the meat. “It's good you lead the Scourge, because I wouldn't invite you to help run the kitchens. You've made a mess of the joint.”

Slate looked at the blackened cut. “I typically do.”

“You'd want to stay away from food preparation then.”

Brace laughed all the way back to their rooms.

Duan was awake when Slate came to see her before dawn.

She sat on a bench in a room lined with thick planks. A lamp hung beyond her reach, its light catching the grain and knots in the planks. Someone had brought her water and bread; the water was nearly gone, the bread untouched. Her wrists remained tied, but she had been allowed to change the position of her hands.

Pelrin stood outside the door with a Confederacy guard. Slate asked them both to remain where they could hear, then took the stool opposite her. “Shen says the fighters who sent you to the bridge are at Heshan.”

Duan watched him lower himself onto the stool. She had drawn her feet back beneath the bench, well clear of his tail. “Then he has already told you what he wants you to believe.”

“I'd rather hear it from someone who was there.”

Her gaze fixed on his jaw, where most of the bruise had faded. She had hit him hard enough to turn his head. Now she sat bound on a bench and he scarcely bore a mark. “Did I even hurt you?”

Slate touched his jaw. “Only my pride.”

She looked away. Her breathing had quickened, and she pressed her lips together before anything else could escape.

Slate rested his forearms on his knees. “I saw where you put the first ridge,” Slate said. “You drove the soldiers toward the parapet. Then you cut beneath them.”

Duan drew her bound hands against her stomach. The rope had reddened the skin above one wrist. “We had already closed that road. They brought soldiers to force it open again.”

“And four workers to repair it. You could see where they were hanging.”

Her face tightened. She looked past him toward the guard, who had shifted closer to the doorway. Whatever she said here would leave the room with that man. “The wardens always bring someone who has to obey them,” she said. “Then they put spears around them and call it protection.”

Slate let her finish. She had defended the road closure. She still hadn't defended the cut.

“All four workers lived,” Slate told Duan.

Her eyes returned to his face. For a moment her hands stopped worrying at the rope. Then she tucked them out of sight beneath her forearms. “You want me to thank you?” Her voice rose. “You dragged me off my own road, handed me to Shen, and now you've come to tell me what a considerate man you are?”

“I'm here because I have an agreement to take Heshan. I'd like to know who's in it.”

She stared at him for a long moment. “Did he buy you cheaply?”

“Cheaply? Shen hasn't seen my bill.”

Duan leaned forward, her bound hands pressed between her knees. “Then, I hope the death of my people buys what you seek.” She had lowered her voice, but angled her face toward the doorway so the Confederacy guard would hear every word.

Slate didn’t argue. He hadn’t come to persuade her that he’d made a good bargain.

“Are there families in the quarry?” he asked.

She hesitated. “Some.”

“I need to know where they're housed.”

Duan shook her head and pressed herself back against the planks. She had already told him more than she intended.

“Duan, you can make this difficult for me.” He shrugged. “You can also make it difficult for one of my Raiders to tell a sleeping room from a position full of combatants.”

Her gaze hardened. “They aren't targets because your scaled monsters can't tell the difference.”

“Then help.”

She looked at the lamp. He waited. Duan looked toward the guard twice before she answered. “The old cutting sheds had shutters when I left,” she said eventually. “Below the east wall. There were children there. Don't take that as a promise they'll still be there when you arrive.”

“Who commands the fighters?” Slate asked.

The answer closed her face again. “Shen has his spies and their reports. Ask him.”

“I've heard their account. I'd like yours.” Slate stayed on the stool, leaving her the distance between them.

She turned the nearly empty cup between her bound palms, keeping her eyes on its rim. “Wei Zhen. You'll like him. He knows what everyone ought to sacrifice.”

Slate studied her face. There was anger in that answer which seemed to have very little to do with him. “He ordered the repair crew killed?” Slate pressed.

“He ordered the road closed.”

She set the cup down hard enough to slop a few remaining drops across the bench. “I chose where to cut it.”

Slate stood. He had no need to tell her how he would use that admission. The Confederacy guard had heard it too.

“I'll have them bring you more water,” Slate said.

“That's all?”

“For now.”

He paused at the door. “If you think of another place they keep children, tell Serevan. He'll let me know before the Scourge march to battle.”

Duan said nothing. As Slate stepped over the threshold, the bench creaked behind him. She had picked up the bread, but held it unbroken between her tied hands, watching him leave.

At the gate that morning, Slate met Captain Lin Ruo, who had survived the last attempt to examine Heshan from above.

She gave him the account while they waited for Shen's column to clear Lianshi's gate. A scar crossed the dwarf's scalp above her left ear. Her helmet sat squarely over it, with no ornament beyond the black links painted across the brow.

“I was at the rear,” she said. “When the shelf opened, I was still on the path.”

“How many got back?”

“Seven of the twelve.” The captain’s eyes held a faraway look Slate remembered from the battlefield.

“Did they see a shaper?”

“One. At a window cut into the face above us. I think there was another inside the gallery. The collapse started behind the first man's reach.”

An inference, offered as one. Slate asked her to point out both positions when they arrived.

Behind them, Serevan stood beneath the gate arch with the other elves. Two messengers had already left carrying copies of the agreement. He and Ilara would remain at Lianshi to receive the households' replies and interview anyone who wanted to leave a family group behind.

Shen had given them access to the prisoners' depositions as well as the campaign reports. Serevan could visit Duan and send Slate a message

through any member of his escort. The older elf couldn't speak through the Scourgemind himself.

Pelrin took his place with the other five Lurkers. Duan was now watched by Shen's guards alone. Slate disliked surrendering the extra eyes, but the Surety had kept the first promises he made. Leaving Pelrin in a corridor would cost Slate the Lurker he most wanted on the cliff.

He raised a hand to Serevan and followed the column out.

Shen was bringing one hundred and twenty soldiers and six stoneshapers. Slate's twenty-four Scourge moved beside them without carts, their living weapons visible and their supplies carried internally. Lin's soldiers tried not to stare at the Raiders' red armor. They had less success with the tails.

“Keep the points clear of the men behind you,” Brace told his Raiders aloud.

One flexed his tail higher, where every nearby soldier could see the blade.

Brace waited until he had lowered it again.

Slate caught the exchange and let it pass. Shen's soldiers would judge all twenty-four Scourge by the one Raider showing off. Brace had understood that without being told. A little discipline would do as much for their assessment as the blades themselves.

The first miles took them along a road wide enough for wagons. Beyond the last occupied terrace, the paving narrowed between pale spoil heaps. Old quarry cuts opened above the track. Rain had filled some, leaving green pools beneath sheer walls. Pale chips lay submerged at the edges; farther out, the water hid the bottoms of the cuts.

By midmorning, they reached a refuge hall screened from Heshan by a wooded spur. Shen left most of the soldiers there to establish the forward camp. A column of a hundred soldiers would only tell the defenders where to prepare their next collapse.

Slate took Pelrin's six Lurkers, Brace and another Raider. Shen came with Lin, twelve soldiers and two of the stoneshapers. The rest of the Scourge remained at the hall, watching the approaches with the Confederacy troops.

Before they left, Shen spread the reports beside the map and read their estimates aloud for Slate.

Between ninety and one hundred and forty armed defenders. At least six practiced combat shapers, based on attacks in separate places, with more workers capable of moving stone slowly. Wei Zhen led the largest group. Food and quarrels were entering by routes east of the quarry.

“Not everyone there follows him,” Shen said. “Several service houses have people inside.”

“And their relatives outside.”

“Yes,” Shen said.

Slate gave him Duan's warning about the cutting sheds.

Lin marked them before folding the map.

When the quarry came into view, Heshan looked as though someone had cut an enormous staircase into the side of the mountain and stopped after the third step.

Each quarry bench was broad enough to hold buildings. A retaining wall faced the lowest. Timber sheds occupied the next, their patched roofs visible above stacks of squared blocks. Higher still, galleries opened into the cliff as black rectangles.

The road passed beneath the western face, exactly where anyone above it could drop stone onto a column.

Slate lay on his stomach behind a low bank while Lin indicated the collapsed scouting shelf. Rubble streaked the slope beneath it. A narrow surviving section ended in open air.

“That window,” she said.

He followed her finger. The opening was little more than a dark slit above the break. Something moved behind it, too far inside for him to identify.

Shen rested his hand against an exposed patch of bedrock. He stayed that way for a while. “Recent stone shapings below the road,” he said. “I cannot

tell their full extent from here.”

“Holes?” Slate asked.

“Or galleries enlarged toward the surface. I would not put a formed body of troops over that section.”

Slate was more interested in the old hoist above the second bench.

Two immense timbers projected from a platform fixed to the cliff. Iron chains hung from their ends, passing through wheels to a hauling shed. The lower chains had been drawn up out of reach. Beneath the hoist, decades of waste stone had formed a steep fan that touched the road.

One of the chains moved.

Slate narrowed his eyes. A load was descending behind the retaining wall, hidden until the last few feet of its travel.

The quarry still needed to move heavy supplies between its levels. Whatever its defenders had done to the road, they were using that hoist.

“Pelrin. Take two. See where the hauling shed opens onto the bench. Don't go inside.”

The three Lurkers slid backward from the bank and disappeared into the scrub.

Slate sent the remaining Lurkers left to watch the road. Brace and the other Raider stayed with him. Lin moved her soldiers into cover beneath the trees, then crawled back beside Shen.

“Their midday watch changes soon,” she said. “We may see movement at the upper galleries.”

They saw it sooner than that.

A stone block tipped out of the window above the broken shelf.

Slate followed its fall for a heartbeat, wondering why anyone would drop it when no one was on the path.

It struck the rock below the opening and burst.

Shards sprayed across the bank.

Slate brought up his forearm and fed mana into Scourgeshield. Its pale film tightened against his scales. A chip as long as his forearm struck his protected arm and spun away, wrenching his shoulder back. Beside him, Lin rolled downslope with both arms over her head.

The second block was already falling.

“Back from the road,” Slate sent to his Lurkers. *“They've seen us.”*

Shen drove his hammer into the exposed bedrock.

A lip of stone rose from the bank. Slate caught Lin's shoulder and pulled her behind it as the next burst struck. Fragments rattled down the new barrier, filling the space between them with dust. Grit rasped between Slate’s teeth when he turned toward the trees.

An iron quarrel passed through the trees where Lin's head had been.

The attackers weren't all in the quarry. They had let the inspection party settle against the bank before closing both routes away from it.

Slate looked toward the wooded spur. Three crossbowmen had risen behind a fallen trunk above the soldiers. They were close enough that he could see one fumbling to seat another quarrel.

“Brace. The trunk.”

The Raiders charged uphill.

Lin shouted her soldiers into a turn. Shields swung toward the bowmen. One man dropped to his knees, clutching a quarrel through his thigh. The soldier beside him dragged him behind a tree while the rest advanced in pairs.

Slate rose above the bank with a hard wingbeat.

The ache in his left joint tugged, then eased as he extended fully. He crossed the gap before the nearest bowman had finished winding his

weapon.

The man looked up.

Slate caught the crossbow and drove it back into his teeth. He hit the ground behind the trunk, tail sweeping low. A second attacker fell with both legs cut out from beneath him.

The third ran.

Brace came over the trunk and caught him before he reached the next tree.

Stone shifted below them with a grinding roar.

Slate turned.

The bank that had sheltered Shen was peeling outward from the hillside. An opening widened beneath it, exposing a dark passage. A man crouched inside with both hands pressed to the floor.

Lin's rearmost soldiers stood directly above him.

“Move!” Slate shouted.

Shen had already reached them. He caught the nearer soldier by the collar and hurled him toward the trees. The second jumped as the earth dropped beneath his feet.

For an instant Shen remained on a tongue of rock narrowing under his boots.

He brought the hammer down.

The stone stopped moving. A crack opened along the Surety's forearm, bright against the darker mineral growth.

Slate launched himself downhill.

The hostile shaper saw him coming and withdrew into the passage. Rock began to close across its mouth.

Slate landed beneath the descending lip and braced both forearms against it. Scourgeshield flared where the rock met his scales. The pressure drove his

feet into the loose earth. He could hold it briefly. He didn't intend to remain there long enough to discover how briefly.

He thrust his hand through the gap and released Cleansing Fire.

White flame filled the opening. Someone shouted inside. The closing stone faltered, and Slate sprang clear as the lip broke loose.

The passage disappeared under fallen earth.

He had seen no body. No death notice came. Whoever had opened the ambush might have escaped through the gallery before the collapse, and Slate wasn't going to dig after him with crossbows above his head.

“Pelrin, withdraw.”

“At the hoist,” the Lurker answered. *“Coming down.”* An impression followed: iron links, a hand hooked through one, a timber wheel turning inches from his face.

Slate looked up.

Three green bodies were descending the outside of the hoist, using its hanging chains. A defender leaned over the railing above them with a stone-headed mallet.

Pelrin kicked away from the cliff.

The chain swung. The mallet struck an iron link where his hand had been. He let the swing carry him under the projecting beam, then dropped to the waste slope with the other Lurkers following.

A second defender appeared at the railing.

Slate climbed toward the projecting beams. One defender leaned out to strike the next descending Lurker. Slate swerved beneath the beam and drove white fire across the railing. Both defenders fell back, giving the Lurkers time to reach the nearest blocks of discarded stone.

“Keep going. Trees below you,” Slate sent Pelrin.

Pelrin's answer carried a fierce flash of satisfaction. *“He couldn't move the chain.”*

Slate stayed between the quarry and the withdrawing scouts, wings spread to slow his descent. A quarrel struck the ward over his chest, draining mana before it dropped into the rubble beneath him. Then Shen's raised bank hid the upper gallery, and he landed beside Lin.

She was helping bind the wounded soldier's thigh. Both of Shen's shapers were watching the ground, palms pressed against the exposed rock.

“Another passage?” Slate asked.

“Nothing moving toward us,” one said. “That is all I can promise.”

“Then we'll use the time.”

Slate put the injured soldier into Brace's arms. The Raider settled the man's weight against his chest and followed Lin toward the trees. His companion brought the surviving crossbowman, wrists tied with his own belt. The rest withdrew in short bounds, covering each other until the quarry walls disappeared behind the spur.

The three Lurkers who had watched the road fell in last. They had seen no movement around the lower retaining wall. The defenders had attacked from positions they already held, without coming down to pursue.

Slate kept the Lurkers watching behind them anyway. Let Shen decide who had won the exchange. Slate wanted to know whether another ambush waited on the way back.

At the refuge hall, Slate checked his status. The infusion had cost six hundred experience. He hadn’t tested it on a living caster yet. Cleansing Fire had been enough to get his Lurkers clear.

Name	**Slate**
Faction	**The Scourge**
Form	**Scion**
LVL	**34**
XP invested in self	**280,500**

XP available	**860**
Next LVL investment	**17,000**

BIOWEAPONS
- **Acid Gland II** *(Etching Acid)*
- **Active Duotoxin Control** *(Paralytic Neurotoxin II, Hallucinogenic Psychotoxin)*
- **Prehensile Tongue** *(Anticoagulant Saliva)*
- **Claws and expanding jaws**
- **Tail Blade** *(Monomolecular Edge, toxin delivery, Vampiric Blade)*

BIOLOGICAL SYSTEMS
- **Skeletal System II** *(Crystalline Osteo-Remodeling, Mana-Forged Osteo-Matrix)*
- **Muscular System I** *(Mana-Forged Musculature)*
- **Integumentary System IV** *(Chromatophoric Sheathing, Mana-Forged Hide II, Phase-Shift Cloaking)*
- **Sensory System I** *(Combined Vision)*
- **Nervous System II** *(Mana-Forged Synapses, Directed Mana Conduction)*
- **Immune System III** *(battle regeneration, rapid wound sealing)*

UTILITY & SPELLCRAFT
- **Communion**
- **Cleansing Fire**
- **Ash Infusion I**
- **Scourgemind** *(concurrent exchanges)*
- **Scourgeshield II**

Satisfied with his progress, Slate closed the sheet. Pelrin had reached the refuge hall ahead of them.

The Lurker had torn scales along one calf and a length of frayed rope wound around his forearm. The wound had sealed, leaving a dark patch that would consume more of his stored biomass as the scales regrew. He put the rope on the table beside Lin's map.

“From the hauling shed,” Pelrin said, spreading the coil beside the map. Loose fibers caught beneath his claws. “They use it to pull the empty hook back.”

Slate stopped reaching for the rope. “I told you not to go inside.”

“I didn't.” Pelrin laid the cut end beside the map. “It hangs below the platform. I took it on the way down.”

Slate examined the end. Fibers had been cut cleanly where Pelrin's claws passed through them. “Show me.”

The Lurker shared what he had seen: the chains rising into the shed, a wide drum, two timber beams supporting the floor. Three armed guards. A short stair leading down from the shed to the middle bench.

Slate placed each on the map as Pelrin explained aloud for Shen and Lin.

The Surety watched his finger move. “You reached the platform?”

“The underside,” Pelrin said. “The shaper above us kept lifting the wall. We stayed on the iron.”

“He could have pulled the anchors free.”

“He tried,” Pelrin said. “The timber moved, but we were already dropping.”

Slate turned to Shen. “Could he have brought the whole hoist down?”

“Yes.” Shen nodded. “Quickly, if he ignored the people and supplies beneath it.”

“Then let's give him something to worry about.”

Lin studied the hauling shed on the map. “You would go back the same way after they watched you retreat?”

“They're expecting us to climb the cliff,” Slate said. “We can give them that too. I want the shed, its stair and the landing where the loads come down. The rest of my force comes up on the hoist.”

Shen laid his hammer on the bench beside the table. “Once they see you hauling soldiers, every shaper above that landing will try to destroy it.”

“That's why you start opening the road when the first load leaves the ground.”

The Surety looked from the marked landing to the western face.

Slate let him consider it. The stone barrier had protected the inspection party. The torn bank had nearly swallowed it. Shen could stop those attacks, but he couldn’t defend one position and open another at the same time. Neither could the enemy shapers.

Twenty-four Scourge wouldn't have to occupy the whole quarry. They only had to get enough fighters onto the middle bench to make the next decision difficult.

Lin touched the hauling shed. “We cannot see the back of it from the road.”

“My Lurkers can,” Slate said. “Once they're in it.”

Shen lifted his hand from the map. “Tell me how you intend to keep them there.”

Slate drew Pelrin's length of rope across the middle bench on Lin's map, separating the upper galleries from the landing below. He put one claw on the narrow stair leading from the hauling shed. “They'll try to cut the chains once they see what's coming up. I need you close enough to hold the anchors while I kill whoever reaches that stair.”

Shen considered the distance from the road to the landing. Then he pulled the map closer. “I can get closer than that.”

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V

The Veiled Assessment

By dusk, Shen had put his soldiers beneath the road they had been warned not to cross.

Slate crouched beside him in a low cutting, watching one of the stoneshapers close the opening behind the last pair of shield bearers. The dwarf didn't seal it. He left a passage wide enough for a man to run through, with daylight visible at the far end.

Beyond Shen, the other shapers worked along a seam of darker rock. They had started from an old drainage gallery below the western approach. Lin had known where its outlet lay. The captured crossbowman had confirmed that Wei's men watched it from above, expecting anyone who entered to emerge on the road.

Shen intended to give them a different exit.

“How much farther?” Slate asked.

The Surety kept his hand against the wall. Fine grains of stone gathered below his fingers and slipped onto Slate’s boots. “Far enough that we will be beneath the lower retaining wall when we turn upward.”

Slate leaned to look past Shen's shoulder into the dark beyond the soldiers. “You can tell where their new galleries run?”

“Where they approach this one,” Shen said. “Beyond that, I would need to examine the rock from closer quarters.”

He moved his hand higher. A section of the wall softened into a deep fold, widening the turn ahead of his soldiers. The displaced rock thickened the support behind him. No loose spoil choked the passage.

Slate could have watched that for an hour.

He had other people to place first.

“When I signal, we take the hauling shed,” Slate told Shen. “You reach the anchors before the first lift.”

“I will reach them,” Shen said. “Keep the upper landing clear.”

Lin stood behind him with her helmet under one arm. She was taking forty soldiers through the drainage gallery. The rest would advance along the road after Shen opened it, with a rear guard at the refuge hall and the wounded left under watch.

She studied Slate's folded wings in the narrow space. “If your hunters are discovered before you are ready?”

“They'll tell me. You'll hear a signal from the Mystics at the lower landing.”

“One white flare,” Lin said. “Two if you need us to stop.”

“And if you see either from somewhere else, assume somebody's being set on fire.”

She gave him a brief, unwilling smile.

Shen had already returned to the stone.

A hollow booming reached them through the gallery mouth. Several higher cries followed it, overlapping until Slate could no longer tell how many animals were calling.

Lin tipped her head toward the sound. “Bell-throated apes. Something's disturbed them.”

“Us?”

“Possibly. Don't go looking for whoever's shouting. The wild ones will keep you walking all night.”

“And the tame ones?”

“Answer a whistle. Useful when you need a warning to cross a valley.”

Slate left them beneath the road and climbed out into the last of the evening light. Across the cutting, a dark ape clung to a stunted pine with one long arm. A pale ruff framed its face. The folds beneath its jaw swelled into a pouch, and another boom rolled across the quarry. Something farther uphill answered.

He marked the perch before moving on. A man with a whistle up there could make approaching a fortress considerably more irritating.

Outside the gallery, the Scourge had divided into three groups.

Pelrin's six Lurkers were moving toward the hoist, spread in pairs across the waste slope. Four would climb its chains and supports. Two would continue along the base of the middle bench to watch the stair and the adjoining sheds.

Brace waited below with all eight Raiders. The three Mystics and six Initiates remained behind the western bank until the hauling shed was taken. They would cross to the lower loading ground when Slate called them.

He passed through the groups on his way to the quarry face, checking the routes each would use.

One Mystic had a strip of pale cloth knotted around her left wrist so Lin's soldiers could recognize her at the landing. She kept the knot against the inside of her arm, hiding the pale marker from the quarry until she needed to show it. “You want the signal as soon as the shed is clear?”

“As soon as Pelrin has the drum secured,” Slate replied. “A dead guard won't stop the load falling.”

She nodded and repeated it to the other two.

Brace stood a little farther uphill, flexing his hands. His damaged claws had begun growing back. He kept their new tips clear of his palms as he closed his fists.

“First lift?” he asked.

“You and three Raiders. Stay inside the sling until it reaches the upper landing.”

Brace looked toward the dark beams projecting from the cliff. “How much stone have they been lifting with it?”

“More than four of you weigh.”

“I meant whether they look after the chains.”

Slate glanced upward. He had been concerned with the men who might pull the anchors out of the cliff. Brace was thinking about the iron that would hold him over it.

“Pelrin. Check the lifting chain before we load it,” Slate sent.

The reply came as pressure against his attention, followed by a glimpse of green fingers closing around a link.

“Already doing it.”

Slate smiled at Brace. “We'll have a report.” He moved on before the Raider could suggest testing the hoist with someone less important.

At the base of the waste slope, a slab of broken shale turned its head.

Slate stopped with one foot raised.

The triangular head was wider than his chest. Below it, what he had mistaken for overlapping fragments of rock unfolded into a flattened body, four braced legs and two hooked forelimbs. Dark, faceted eyes fixed on him.

He lowered his foot away from it.

One hooked limb snapped around his forearm.

Slate drove that arm forward before the hook could close behind his elbow. Its point scraped along his scales. He caught the joint with his other hand, shoved it against a buried block and planted his foot between the creature's walking legs. The second hook swept past his shoulder. He kept his wings folded and pressed harder.

His attacker was nearly as large as a horse. It still couldn't pull its foreleg out of his grip.

“Scree mantis,” Pelrin sent. *“We passed another below the stair.”*

“This one has become ambitious,” Slate replied through the link.

Slate could kill it. He could also spend the next minute wrestling a dying insect through a pile of loose quarry waste while the guards above looked for the source of the noise.

He turned its trapped limb until the hook opened, thrust the creature away from him and released it. Its chipped-looking wing cases lifted. Thin, smoky wings rattled underneath, carrying it in a short, awkward flight into the lower cutting.

Slate stayed still until it folded itself among the rocks again. *“Warn the others. Leave it alone unless it tries that twice.”*

He checked the empty gaps between the nearer blocks, then spread his wings just far enough to feel the evening wind. The quarry face sheltered him from its strongest gusts. Above him, a lantern burned behind the hauling shed's open shutters.

Even with his scales darkened to match the timbers, movement across that light would betray him.

He could stay below it until the Lurkers reached the floor.

He climbed the discarded blocks on hands and feet, choosing holds that didn't shift beneath his weight. The last stretch rose almost vertically. He jumped from a broad slab, beat his wings twice and caught a timber brace beneath the hoist platform.

Above his head, someone dragged a stool across the floor.

Slate folded his wings against his back and listened.

“Bring the empty down before you tie that,” a man said above him.

“I was told to leave it,” another answered.

“Then he can haul the damn thing himself.”

A chain scraped through its wheel.

Slate moved his hand along the timber and found the broad iron strap fastening it to the platform. He hung beneath it with his tail wound around the adjoining brace, feet planted against the cliff.

For the moment, the stone remained still.

“Four at the shed,” Pelrin sent. *“Three armed. One on the brake.”*

“Positions?”

Pelrin gave them in short impressions: a crossbow leaning beside the shutter, a spear against a post, the keeper's hands resting on a long wooden lever. A third guard stood at the outer railing looking toward the road.

Slate sent the signal to attack.

The guard at the railing saw Slate's hand first.

He stepped back and reached for his sword. Slate pulled himself over the edge, drove a shoulder into him and caught his mouth before he could shout. His tail blade passed between the man's ribs.

The body went slack.

Inside, a crossbow discharged into the roof.

Pelrin came through the shutter beneath it, seized the bowman's arm and drove him face-first into the drum housing. Another Lurker caught the spearman as he turned. They struck the floor together. The spear skittered beneath the hauling chain.

The keeper lifted both hands from the brake lever.

“Keep your hands on the brake,” Slate said.

She froze.

Slate stepped into the shed. The drum filled most of its center, thick timber wound with lifting chain. A geared shaft connected it to a capstan near the

rear wall. The keeper stood at the brake, a broad woman in a leather apron. Her eyes followed the blood running from Slate's tail to the dead guard at his feet.

“Keep the load where it is,” Slate told her. “Do that and keep your hands away from a weapon, and you'll live.”

She put both hands back on the lever.

One of the Lurkers forced the spearman's wrists behind him. Pelrin's bowman lay motionless beside the drum. Outside, the two Lurkers assigned to the middle bench reached the stair and settled behind stacks of cut stone overlooking its approach.

“Lower ground?” Slate asked.

“Three guards coming toward the hoist,” the nearer watcher replied. *“They heard the bow.”*

Slate looked through the front opening. A broad rope sling hung just below the platform, its four corners attached to an iron lifting ring. The quarry workers had lashed planks across the bottom to keep smaller loads from slipping through.

He pointed to the sling. “Can you lower it empty?”

The keeper nodded.

“Do it.”

She eased the lever. The drum turned, rattling chain through the wheel outside. The sound traveled through the timber under Slate’s feet. One Lurker watched her hands while Pelrin examined the capstan and its turning bars.

“Two of us can turn that,” he said.

“Can two of you stop it?”

Pelrin looked at the brake. “With her.”

“Then she stays.”

Slate went to the outer railing. The three guards below had stopped in the open loading ground, looking up at the descending sling. Beyond them, Brace's Raiders were moving down the waste slope.

One guard shouted.

Slate dropped from the platform.

He opened his wings above their heads, caught the nearest spear on his tail and drove the point into the ground. His feet struck the spearman's shoulders. They went down together, Slate already reaching for the next weapon.

Brace hit the other two before they could turn their spears toward Slate.

The Raider's tail broke a shield across its middle. His companion drove past him, shoulder plates taking the edge of a sword while his tail swept behind the swordsman's legs. The man struck the ground. Brace brought his heel down on his throat and looked toward the stair climbing along the retaining wall.

“Clear above?” Brace asked Slate.

“For now. Get in,” Slate said.

The sling settled on the loading ground. Four Raiders stepped onto its planked bottom, tails drawn close to their legs. Brace grasped one of the corner ropes and looked up. “If it breaks, I'm blaming you.”

Slate gave Pelrin the command to lift.

The ropes tightened, creaking at the corners of the sling. The planks rose clear of the ground.

The marked Mystic crossed from the western bank to the cleared loading ground. A white flare rose from her hand.

The quarry answered with a horn.

Stone moved beneath the lower retaining wall.

Slate saw it as a change in the long straight line above the road. A square section pushed outward, tilted and settled against the slope. Soldiers poured through the opening behind it, shields raised over their heads.

Shen came with them.

He stopped at the foot of the cliff beneath the hoist, planted his hammer haft against the rock and put his free hand flat beside it. Above him, iron straps fastened the timber braces into the same face of stone. One of his shapers took position farther along the wall. The other five spread behind Lin's soldiers, closing the worst gaps in their cover as the first quarrels struck.

The Surety had brought his people out within yards of the loading ground.

Slate looked up at the ascending Raiders.

They were halfway to the platform when the chain jerked sideways.

An anchor above Shen bulged out of the cliff. Stone cracked around the iron. The lifting sling swung toward the retaining wall, four red bodies shifting together to keep it level.

Shen lowered his shoulder against the cliff, both hands pressed to the rock beneath the shifting anchor.

The iron stopped moving.

Slate felt a savage pleasure at the sight. There was the cooperation he had wanted. The dwarf could hold a piece of mountain in place while Slate removed the man trying to move it.

He rose toward the hauling shed.

The hostile shaper stood on the stair above it, one hand pressed against the quarry face. He wore layered gray armor and a short mantle pinned clear of his arms. Pale seams of mana thickened around his wrist as he leaned into the cast.

Slate's mana sight laid the bright channels over the man's flesh. The current went from his chest through the arm to his palm. The hand stayed in contact with the wall.

Slate gathered fire along his tail's cutting edge.

The mana draw began at once, a steady pull he would have to maintain until the weapon reached flesh. He narrowed the coat, keeping the flame tight against the blade.

The shaper looked up.

Stone struck Slate from the left. It was starting to become an irritating tactic.

Scourgeshield flashed over his left side as the stone hit him, driving him away from the stair. His tail missed the man's shoulder, scoring the edge of a step instead. White fire splashed across the rock and faded without breaking the spell anchoring his opponent to the wall.

He needed to draw blood.

The shaper lifted his other hand. Chips rose from the stair and gathered into a jagged bar across his forearm.

Slate came in lower.

This time the stone weapon met his tail blade. The impact knocked his aim aside. He landed on the step below the shaper with his wings spread over the open drop and his claws against the stair's outer edge.

The step began to fold around his fingers.

Slate pulled one hand free. The other held for an instant too long. The ward strained around his trapped hand, consuming mana as the pressure ground two claws against the stone.

The shaper struck down with the jagged bar.

Slate caught it across his forearm. Pain ran toward his elbow. He drove upward anyway, forcing the man to lean back, and brought his burning tail around the outside of the stair.

The tip entered the shaper's upper arm just above the elbow.

White flame followed the cut.

The current through the wounded arm broke into bright fragments. The man's fingers dragged across the wall without moving the stone. Below them, the hoist anchor settled back into its bed.

He cried out and slammed his other palm against the step.

The paving rose beneath Slate's knee.

Slate wrenched his trapped hand free and jumped. The ridge hit his shin hard enough to spin him, but his wings caught the air before he went over the rail. He landed above the shaper, tail still burning.

The wound had interrupted one arm. It hadn't made the rest of him harmless.

The man drew a knife.

Slate kicked his wrist against the wall, caught the mantle at his throat and pulled him off balance. He cut through the outside of the man's raised thigh with the infused blade. The leg failed beneath him.

Slate shut off the fire before its continued draw emptied the mana he needed to sustain Scourgeshield. He drove his claws under the shaper's jaw and held him against the stair until the struggle ended.

LVL 28 Stoneshaper defeated.
XP gained: 4,200
XP available: 5,060

He let the body settle against the wall.

Below him, Brace came over the platform rail with three Raiders behind him.

The first load was up.

Slate flexed his scraped fingers. Blood welled beside a broken claw. The deeper tear had begun to seal. Repair consumed his remaining biomass as new tissue formed beneath it.

“Brace. Hold the stair above me. Nobody touches this anchor from up here.”

“Understood.” The Raider climbed past him, claws spread.

The second load carried the remaining four Raiders.

Slate flew beside it while the Mystics covered the lower loading ground. A quarrel struck one corner rope and hung there, trembling. The Raider nearest it plucked the shaft free and threw it toward the wall.

“Leave the rope alone,” Slate told him. “It has enough to carry.”

The Raider tightened his grip on the uninjured strands.

At the platform, Pelrin and another Lurker leaned into the capstan bars. The keeper held the brake lever with both hands. Sweat darkened the collar of her apron. She shifted one hand along the lever without releasing her grip.

“What happens if you release that?” Slate asked as he landed.

“The drum unwinds. The load drops.”

“Then keep your hands on it.” Slate’s tail shifted behind him. “I can catch you. I can’t catch that.”

She looked toward the prisoner against the wall. The captured spearman sat with a Lurker beside him, hands tied and head lowered.

The keeper swallowed. “My brother works the lower hooks.”

Slate glanced at the blood drying on the floor. “What does he look like?”

The answer came in a rush. “Blue cap. Burn down his neck. He doesn't carry a weapon.”

Slate passed the description to the Mystics below. The one with the wrist cloth answered that she had a man matching it behind a stack of blocks, on his knees with his hands raised.

“He's alive,” Slate told the keeper. “If he stays there, he will remain alive.”

Her shoulders lowered a little. She watched the drum and kept her hands on the lever.

Outside, the stair shook under Brace's feet.

Slate went through the doorway.

A dozen defenders were advancing along the middle bench toward the shed, using the stacked stone to cover their approach. Two carried thick planks in front of their bodies. Crossbowmen moved behind them. Another stoneshaper followed with one hand brushing the cliff.

Brace's four Raiders held the upper stair. The second group was still stepping off the sling.

Slate sent that group down the short stair to the middle bench. *"Past the first stack. Stay out of the open in front of the bows."*

Red bodies vaulted the last steps. They reached the stone blocks as quarrels chipped the edges above them. One Raider hooked his tail around the far end of a plank and pulled it sideways. Its bearer stumbled into view. Another Raider caught his shoulder and dragged him behind the stack.

Slate flew over their heads, drawing the bowmen's eyes upward.

The hostile shaper looked up and took his hand from the wall. The first stone spear came out of the cliff at chest height.

Slate folded one wing and dropped below it.

The second spear followed lower.

He landed behind a stack of rough blocks before it reached him. The point burst against the topmost stone. Dust covered his shoulders and the membrane of his wing.

"Caster at the wall," he sent. *"Don't crowd the cliff."* He peered around the block.

The man had withdrawn behind his bowmen. He was watching Slate's cover, waiting for another flight. Ash Infusion would be useful once Slate

reached him. It would do very little for the intervening twenty feet and the loaded crossbows.

Slate called the two Lurkers watching the middle bench. *“The roof behind the bows. Can you reach it?”*

An image answered: a Lurker's hand already closing on the edge of a shutter.

Slate gathered Cleansing Fire and rose far enough for the bowmen to see his head.

Two weapons snapped toward him.

He dropped back. Quarrels struck the block, one splintering where its head failed to penetrate.

The Lurkers came off the roof.

One landed on a bowman's back, drove him into the paving with a sickening crunch and rolled away from the next weapon. The other seized the shaper's mantle and pulled him clear of the wall.

The man twisted free, leaving the cloth in the Lurker's hands. He ran toward the next stack, boots throwing dust. Slate's fire cut across his path and forced him away from the cliff again.

He didn't try to stand against the Raiders coming around his flank. “Back!” he shouted. “Upper passage!”

The surviving defenders broke toward a narrow opening beyond the cutting sheds. Two threw their crossbows down to run faster. A Raider reached one before he made the turn. The rest vanished through the opening, and stone closed behind them.

Slate called the pursuit off.

The upper galleries were still full of enemies. He had a platform, a stair and a strip of quarry floor. Getting his men sealed inside a tunnel would be a poor way to celebrate.

“Prisoners against that stack,” he told the nearest Raider. “Face them away from the cliff.” He pointed the Lurker with the torn mantle toward the closed passage. “Watch that. Tell me if it starts to open.”

The Lurker touched the cloth still hanging from his claws. *“I nearly had him,” he* grumbled.

“Keep the cloth,” Slate ordered. “You may get another chance.”

By the time the Mystics reached the middle bench, Lin had the lower road.

Slate watched her soldiers enter the loading ground in files, shields angled toward the gallery windows. The rest of Shen's column had come through the opened approach. A pair of shapers worked behind them, replacing enough of the damaged paving to let stretcher bearers cross without stumbling into a hole.

Shen remained below the anchor until the final Scourge load reached the platform.

Only then did he take his hand away.

He came up on the next lift with Lin and six soldiers, the sling swaying slightly as they shifted their shields to pass beneath the platform rail. Slate met him beside the hauling shed. Below them, another squad waited for the empty sling.

Dust had turned the hem of the white robe gray. A line of dried blood ran from the mineral growth at his wrist to the edge of his hand.

“Your anchor held,” Slate said, looking at the blood on Shen's hand.

Shen took a cloth from inside his robe and pressed it against the split. “And your assault force reached the landing. Captain Lin can begin bringing up the garrison.”

“All twenty-four of us,” Slate said. He allowed himself a glance at the Raiders occupying the stair. They had given the dwarf a fairly persuasive demonstration.

Shen looked toward the stair. The dead shaper still lay against its wall, one arm blackened around the wound. “I saw his shaping stop mid-flow,” the Surety noted.

Slate followed his gaze. “The fire interferes with his casting,” Slate supplied.

Shen's eyes moved from the burned arm to Slate's tail. “I saw you use flame below the road yesterday. The fire remained in the wound. I would have wanted Captain Lin warned before she fought beside it.”

“Yesterday's fire didn't do this. I acquired the infusion before we left.” Slate let the dwarf look at the blade. “It needs a wound. Touching the stair accomplished very little.”

The cloth had darkened in Shen's hand. He folded it over without looking down. “Your people evolve quickly. How many of your soldiers have acquired it?”

Shen had seen one cut and wanted to know how many blades could do it. Slate wasn't about to count them for him. “None, so far.”

Shen watched a Raider pass them carrying a wounded soldier. “Then I need to know whether that is likely to change during this campaign.”

Slate turned as a Mystic came out of the shed, the pale cloth still tied around her wrist. She was checking the men who had fought on the stair, asking which wounds had sealed and which still limited movement.

“Very few of them could acquire it,” he lied. “It takes the right development and enough resources. It's not the type of weapon that can spawn in mid-campaign.”

The Surety looked at the dead shaper again.

Shen's objection was fair as far as Lin was concerned. That didn't mean Slate cared for it. Shen was considering what happened when every Scourge soldier could change his weapons between one march and the next. The Scourge’s secrets weren’t for sale.

Along the middle bench, Lin was placing soldiers at the corners of the cutting sheds. The roof from which the Lurkers had attacked overlooked both the hoist and the retreating defenders' closed passage. Slate sent two Initiates up to relieve them and ordered the Lurkers to examine the back of the captured buildings.

Two more Initiates took over the capstan. Pelrin showed them where to stand clear of the turning bars and made them lower the sling with the keeper before he stepped away. His partner stayed for the next lift. There would be time to teach the soldiers once nobody was shooting at the lesson.

The old cutting sheds farther east remained beyond their position. No one had fired into them.

Brace came down the upper stair, rolling one shoulder. “They've stopped throwing things.”

Slate listened.

The horn had fallen silent. There were still voices in the upper galleries, but no quarrels struck the platform. The hoist chain clicked as the keeper settled the empty sling onto the lower loading ground.

“Look behind the sheds,” Slate told Pelrin. *“Don't open any closed doors alone.”*

Before the Lurker answered, the paving lifted beneath Slate's right heel. He shifted his weight onto the other foot and felt the stone move there too.

Shen's head turned.

On the far side of Lin's nearest shield line, dust sifted from a straight seam in the quarry floor.

Slate looked from that seam to the passage the defenders had closed.

They had withdrawn into the mountain.

Now they were opening a way out behind him.

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VI

The Enemy Answers

The seam beside Lin's shield line widened before Slate could move his foot off the rising paving. “Away from the seam!” he shouted.

Lin turned at his voice. The paving between her soldiers and the hauling shed tipped upward, shedding dust from its joints. One end rose to the height of a man's knee. The other remained attached to the quarry floor.

It was a lid.

A crossbow appeared beneath it.

Slate turned into the first quarrel. It struck the Scourgeshield film over his shoulder, flashing pale against his scales. The soldier beside Lin caught the second in his throat.

The man fell without making a sound. Lin seized the shield of the soldier next to him and shoved it toward the opening. “Face inward! Second rank, watch the sheds!”

Shen stepped onto the rising slab.

His weight should not have mattered. The stone beneath him was thicker than Slate's chest, driven upward by a caster somewhere below. It lifted another handspan before the Surety brought his hammer down against its edge.

The slab stopped.

Shen's boots sank into the surface. White dust spurted around his soles. Beneath him, someone shouted an order, and spearheads pushed through the gap.

Slate sprang clear of the tilting paving and landed beside the opening, tail already sweeping low. He cut the nearest spear shaft and drove his foot against the broken end, sending it back into the hands holding it. A sword followed. He caught its flat on his forearm scales and reached past it.

His claws closed on a leather collar.

He pulled the man out from beneath the lid and threw him toward Lin's soldiers. A shield rim struck the attacker's face before he could regain his feet.

“Can you close it?” Slate asked.

“Not while he holds the lower hinge.” The Surety's voice was level. His hands were not. The head of his hammer trembled against the slab.

Slate looked at the narrow gap beneath the stone. Fire would drive the men inside back. It might also give their shaper time to open a second exit while Shen stood here pinning the first.

“Pelrin, the rear of the hauling shed. Now,” Slate sent.

“Already there. A door below the platform, covered with boards. They have oil jars. One has a torch,” Pelrin sent.

Slate looked toward the hoist.

The keeper was taking the weight of another load. Two Initiates leaned into the capstan, winding the chain onto its drum. Below the platform, hidden from the soldiers facing the lifted paving, orange flame caught along a timber brace.

Slate looked back at the lifted slab. It had turned Lin's entire front rank away from the hoist. Burn that support and Wei could strand them on the bench, with the rest of Shen's force watching from below.

The bastards had waited until the sling was loaded.

“Brace, leave two on the upper stair,” Slate sent. *“Bring the others to Lin.”*

Slate drew enough Cleansing Fire to fill the gap under Shen's slab. He sent a short burst along the exposed spearheads, stopping when the men beneath

them recoiled. The flame flashed across a shield and caught its leather covering.

Shen pushed down.

The slab fell several inches. A broken spear crunched beneath its edge. The Surety stepped clear as Lin's first rank closed around the remaining opening.

“Keep them inside,” Slate sent to Brace as the Raider came down from the upper stair. *“Don't follow them.”* He was airborne before the answer reached him.

Pelrin hung from the underside of the platform with one hand. The other held an attacker by his belt. A clay jar tumbled past both of them and burst on the loading ground below.

Burning oil spread across the paving.

The sling hung above it, two soldiers inside.

“Stop the hoist. Hold that load,” Slate ordered.

Slate folded his wings and dropped between the sling and the cliff. Pelrin let go of the man's belt at the same moment. The attacker struck the slope beneath the platform, rolled through spilled oil and disappeared behind a stack of blocks.

Slate saw the doorway behind the brace.

Three men crowded its mouth. One carried a burning twist of cloth. Another had a jar hugged against his stomach. The third pointed a spear past them toward Pelrin's exposed legs.

Slate hit the spearman first.

There was barely room to spread one wing between the cliff and the supporting timbers. He used the other as a brake, caught the spear against the brace and drove his tail through the man's belly. The body blocked the opening.

The man with the jar tried to get around it.

Slate caught his wrist, twisted and lifted. The jar fell inside the doorway.

It broke.

The torch bearer stared at the oil spreading around his boots.

“Into the yard,” Slate said, pointing past the timber. “Throw it.”

The man flung the torch clear of the platform and spread his empty hand.

Pelrin caught his sleeve before he could retreat. Slate pulled the second man over the threshold, dragged both clear of the oil and left them clinging to the timber with the Lurker above them.

“Bind them. Away from the fire,” Slate told Pelrin.

A quarrel struck the brace beside Slate's head.

He turned his protected shoulder toward the upper gallery. Another shaft struck the film over his scales and broke. The defenders had waited for him to stop beneath the hoist.

He could kill bowmen or keep the platform standing. He couldn't do both from here.

“Shen!” Slate called.

The Surety appeared at the railing above. Slate pointed toward the burning timber. “Can you reach that from up there?”

Shen looked once at the oil below, once at the upper windows. “Keep the load still.”

“Working on it.”

Slate landed on the edge of the sling. Both soldiers pressed against the opposite ropes, leaving him barely enough room for his feet. Heat rose beneath the planks.

He crouched over the soldiers, keeping his back toward the upper windows. Both men ducked beneath his shoulders. The next quarrel struck the ward over his spine; he felt the cost in mana as it glanced away.

Shen knelt where the platform joined the quarry face. Stone swelled beneath his hands and flowed down around the base of the burning brace. It thickened into a pale collar, squeezing flames out through narrowing cracks.

Oily smoke poured upward, stinging Slate’s eyes. The timber gave a sharp report.

The sling dropped a foot.

One soldier cried out. Slate caught the lifting ring with one hand, although he knew perfectly well he couldn't hold the weight of the hoist in the air.

Above him, the keeper screamed for the men at the capstan to brace the bars. They had stopped winding at Slate's order, but the sudden slack had jolted the drum against its brake.

Both Initiates put their shoulders into the bars.

The chain held.

Shen forced more stone beneath the brace. Slate saw the difference at once: a support now, carrying the charred timber from below. The fire vanished inside the collar. A final thread of smoke curled from the top.

“Lift them,” the Surety called.

Slate stayed with the soldiers until the sling reached the platform. One had both eyes shut. The other watched the pale film flicker against Slate's scales each time a quarrel struck. He kept his head beneath Slate's shoulder until the platform rail hid them from the bows.

“Out,” Slate told them. “She's still charging us by the trip.”

The keeper gave him a look that suggested the rate had increased.

Brace's Raiders had reached Lin before the enemy forced the lid higher.

Two red bodies stood astride its ends, cleaving tails poised above the gap. The rest fought beside the Confederacy shields. An attacker thrust a spear through the gap. A Raider's tail sheared off the spearhead. Another tried to crawl between the soldiers' feet and met Brace's heel.

The enemy shaper changed his approach.

Instead of lifting the entire slab, he broke its center.

A crack shot between the Raiders. Stone erupted upward, throwing one against a stack of dressed blocks. A brief, furious burst of pain reached Slate through the Scourgemind. The Raider cut it off before Slate could ask, then sent a clipped report.

“Leg broken. I'm clear of the hatch.”

Brace hauled the other Raider clear.

Defenders surged out of the opening.

They came under heavy timber shields, their spears reaching past the edges. The first rank took Lin's soldiers in the chest before they could recover their formation. A dwarf went down beneath three sets of boots. Behind him, a woman staggered backward with a spear through her upper arm.

Slate crossed the bench at a run.

He could have flown. The gallery bows were waiting for that too.

“Mystics, cover the windows. Short casts. Make them duck.”

White fire struck the upper openings from three different positions. A crossbowman jerked back, leaving his weapon resting on the sill. The next shot went wide.

Slate drove between Lin and the nearest enemy shield.

His claws bit into the timber. He pulled down, making its bearer lean forward, and drove a knee beneath the shield's edge. The man's breath left him. Slate shoved him backward into the next rank and followed with his tail.

Brace came through on his right.

The Raider swept his tail across a spear shaft, snapped it and struck the man behind it with the same blow. Lin's soldiers advanced into the space they

made. Shield rims slammed together. The blows rang between the shed walls. Boots scraped for purchase on powdered stone.

“Three steps!” Lin shouted. “Keep the left joined!”

Slate understood what she wanted. If the line bent toward the opening, the defenders would pour around its end and reach the hauling shed again.

He took the left.

A broad-shouldered swordsman came at him from behind a shield. Slate let the sword strike his raised forearm, turned its edge along the scales and pushed inward. His tail went around the shield. The point emerged below the man's breastbone.

Slate pulled it free and looked for the caster.

He saw hands first, pressed against the broken paving at the opening's rim. The shaper stayed below the floor, using the men above to hide him. Pale mana ran through his fingers into the stone beneath Lin's line.

“He's going under us,” Slate told Shen.

“I see him.” The Surety planted his hammer head on the paving.

The ridge forming beneath Slate's feet stopped rising. Across the bench, the enemy's fingers curled against the rim.

Slate had expected Shen to hold the floor while he reached the man.

Instead, the Surety drew his hammer toward himself.

A strip of paving slid with it.

The shaper's hands came forward. His elbows struck the broken edge, followed by his shoulders. The stone he had been gripping carried him out of his own cover.

Shen struck the man's wrist with the hammer haft.

Bone broke. The caster cried out and tried to roll toward the opening.

Slate pinned his uninjured arm beneath one foot. “This arm seems functional.” Slate pointed at the pinned limb.

“Not if he moves it,” Shen said.

The man went still.

Shen looked past him. The fresh ridge beneath Lin's soldiers settled, its surface no longer moving. “Take him away from the opening.”

Slate caught the captive by his collar and dragged him toward the sheds.

An Initiate took hold of the man's good arm.

Slate pointed to a timber post. “Tie his good hand above his head and keep his feet off the stone. Bring me something he can draw on.”

When he turned back, the defenders were trying to retreat into their broken hatch.

Lin gave them no room to turn their shields. Her soldiers drove them against the rim, while Brace's Raiders cut around both ends of the line. Two attackers threw their weapons down. A third jumped into the opening and landed badly enough that Slate heard the impact above the fighting.

Then a man inside shouted for the hatch to close.

The men still outside heard him.

One dropped his spear and reached for Lin's shield. “Take me. Take me!”

She stepped aside. He stumbled through the gap she made and fell to his knees behind her.

Rock dragged across the opening from below. An attacker tried to force his way into the shrinking space. Brace caught his belt and hauled him backward just before the gap vanished.

The Raider threw him down beside the others. “You're welcome,” he said.

Slate sent the Lurkers around the sheds in pairs and put the two reserve Initiates on prisoner watch. The Initiates working the capstan stayed there.

Their companions remained on the roof, watching the windows above Lin's soldiers.

Twenty-four of the Confederacy's soldiers had reached the bench before the counterattack, with Lin in command. Three were dead now. Six more needed treatment. Down on the road, eighty held the loading ground and the opened western approach. Sixteen remained at the refuge hall, including the man wounded during reconnaissance.

That left most of their strength beneath a hoist the enemy had nearly burned out from under them.

The Raider with the broken leg sat behind a stack of blocks. His lower limb had bent in a direction Slate disliked. Brace crouched beside him, holding the ankle while a Mystic checked that the broken ends were aligned.

The injured Raider looked up. “I can hold a corner.”

“You can sit in one,” Brace said. “Hold it from there.”

He passed biomass through their joined hands. The transfer did nothing visible until the injured Raider committed it to the damaged tissue. Then muscle tightened around the break. A slow tremor ran through his thigh.

Slate left him with a captured spear and a view of the prisoners.

The captured shaper sat on a crate with his back against a timber post and his boots clear of the paving. An Initiate had tied his uninjured hand above his head, where he couldn't reach the paving. The broken wrist rested in a sling made from his own coat.

Slate crouched in front of him. “Who closed the hatch?”

The man stared past him at the place where the opening had been. A discarded boot lay there, its heel caught beneath the new seam. “You dragged me out,” the captive snarled. “How would I see?”

Slate smiled. “With your eyeballs. If those don't work, try your ears. You heard the order. Who gave it?”

The prisoner looked back at the boot.

The prisoner's mouth tightened. He had been breathing through his nose, keeping the injured arm as still as possible.

Slate leaned closer. “Then perhaps I should start with your other wrist.”

“Tao,” the prisoner said. He swallowed, eyes still on the trapped boot. “He was supposed to hold the lower passage for us while I opened the floor.”

Slate shifted to bring himself back into the man's line of sight. “How many ways could he bring men out under this bench?”

The prisoner looked along the sheds, counting under his breath. His tied hand twitched toward each place before the rope checked it. “Six that reach the face. There are other passages farther in.”

“Does that include the hatch you opened?” Slate asked.

The man nodded, then winced as the movement pulled at his injured wrist.

Slate had expected two or three. Six meant they could spend the rest of the night driving people into holes and still miss the hole that mattered.

“Can you draw them?”

The man raised his broken wrist a fraction, then stopped with his teeth clenched.

Slate pointed at the captive's other hand. “That one works. You'll draw on a plank, with one of my Scourge watching over you.”

The prisoner glanced at the Initiate standing behind Slate. “And what happens to me when you've got your drawing?”

“You stay here under guard while my Lurkers check it. If it matches what they find, I won't have to keep asking you questions.” Slate indicated the broken wrist. “The Mystic can see to that while we wait.”

The man looked toward Shen. “Will the Surety know I gave it to you?”

“He's standing thirty feet away. Yes.”

Slate could promise the prisoner protection from the next spear. He couldn't promise that the Surety would forget which side of the broken hatch he had come out of.

The Initiate brought the plank and a stub of charcoal. Her partner held the captive's good wrist while she loosened the rope. The captive drank the water they brought and began marking the passages. Charcoal skipped over the plank’s grain, leaving broken lines he had to go over again.

The man used the hoist and the closed hatch to place the other exits. Slate sent Pelrin an image of the marks as they appeared. The prisoner could earn a looser rope. He wasn't going to send a Lurker through an unchecked door.

Slate stood. His mana was running low. Each time he strengthened Scourgeshield to take another blow, he felt the reserve shrink. He dismissed the thin film he had kept around his body and let his scales do their job. The next cast would wait until something was actually trying to kill him.

Across the bench, one of Lin's wounded soldiers was asking whether his fingers were still attached. The Mystic tending him held his hand where he could see it.

Slate went to find a way to get them all off this exposed shelf.

He found Shen beside the hauling shed, holding his right wrist in his left hand.

Slate stopped beside him. “How badly is the wrist hurt?”

Shen lowered the hand supporting it and tried closing his injured fingers. The last two moved reluctantly. “I can still shape stone. I cannot sustain another load like that hoist without making the damage worse.”

“Then we need to stop asking you to.” Slate flexed the fingers he had hooked through the lifting ring. He had felt the sling drop beneath his feet. Knowing how badly Shen had hurt himself holding it didn’t make Slate eager for the next ride.

The keeper had come outside. She waited until both looked at her, then pointed to the collar around the brace. “That stone is carrying the burned end,” the keeper said. “I need to see whether the bolt at the top tore loose

when the sling dropped. Put another load on before I check it and we may lose the whole brace.”

Slate looked at Shen. “Can we give her the time?”

“If we stop using the hoist.”

From the upper gallery, a bowstring snapped. A quarrel struck the roof where an Initiate had been crouching a moment earlier.

Slate moved the keeper inside.

He had taken a platform and expected it to let him separate the quarry's defenders. They could travel beneath his feet. Every building he occupied could have a door into a gallery he had never seen. His flying body gave him the fastest route between emergencies, and Wei's bowmen had already learned where to aim when he used it.

The next attack would cost more than the first.

He had offered Shen troops capable of taking this quarry. They had seized the landing, and now the defenders were making him spend those troops protecting it. Slate resented how readily he had let them choose his next problem.

He needed a second route onto the bench. One the Confederacy could reinforce on foot while he took the fight into the galleries.

“There's a stair below the east sheds,” the keeper said when he asked. “For the stone carts. Wide bends. It reaches the lower road.”

“How many buildings between us and it?”

“Four.”

Slate looked at the line of patched roofs beyond their position.

Four buildings. Two possible family shelters farther east. Enemy galleries above them all.

“Show me where the turns are.”

The keeper pointed them out from the shed's doorway. Slate called Lin over and traced the route for her, then sent Brace's Raiders toward the first roof. Lin gathered the soldiers who could leave the hatch without uncovering it.

Shen raised low ridges along the bench, angling them toward the gallery windows. Lin's men crouched between the ridges with their shields overhead. They moved when the Mystics sent fire into the nearest opening, stopped when a bowman found a new angle, and advanced again as soon as the caster shifted her aim.

The Raiders went over the sheds.

Slate watched Brace climb the first wall, claws finding purchase in the timber posts. His weight made the eaves sag. He stepped onto the beam beneath the roof instead, balancing there while another Raider took the opposite side.

“Don't all use the same beam,” Slate warned.

“I know what I weigh,” the Raider quipped.

“I'd like the roof to learn gradually.”

Pelrin's Lurkers had already crossed to the next building. They moved along its rear wall, below the windows through which the defenders expected another aerial assault.

Slate stayed beside Shen.

That attracted the enemy's attention. A section of wall bulged outward ahead of them, narrowing the space between the new ridge and the shed. Shen touched it and stopped the movement long enough for Lin's first pair to pass.

He didn't try to make the wall straighten.

They left it bulging behind them and kept moving.

At the second building, a crossbowman opened a shutter at arm's length.

Slate thrust his forearm across the opening before the bow fired, feeding mana back into Scourgeshield. The quarrel shattered against the film over

his arm. He hooked his tail over the sill and pulled the shutter off its hinge.

Brace dropped through the roof.

Timbers snapped. Someone inside yelled, followed by the crash of a bench against a wall. A moment later the Raider kicked the door outward and stepped into the lane with a crossbow held in one hand.

“Three,” he said. “No caster.”

“Next time use the door.”

Brace glanced up at the broken roof. “They were watching it.”

Slate sent two soldiers inside to hold the room and continued.

Before they reached the fourth shed, Pelrin sent back the first result from the prisoner's drawing. He had found the boarded door beneath the hoist and another passage mouth behind the second shed, both where the charcoal marks placed them. The other exits hadn’t been checked yet. Slate ordered the two soldiers in Brace’s captured room to watch its rear wall as well as the lane.

The cart stair began behind the fourth shed, exactly where the keeper had said. Wide ramps folded back on themselves along the retaining wall, shallow steps cut across them for boots and hooves. The lower turn had been blocked with two loaded stone carts.

Six defenders waited above the obstruction.

They saw Lin's helmets first. Spears lowered over the cart beds. A man with a hatchet shouted toward the upper galleries.

Then Pelrin came over the wall behind him.

The hatchet flew sideways. A second Lurker seized the nearest spear and hauled its owner away from the carts. The remaining defenders turned, giving Lin's soldiers the few steps they needed.

One of the defenders kicked the brake loose on the downhill cart. Its wheels turned, opening a gap between the two loads.

Beyond the bend, Confederacy helmets appeared on the next flight. The soldiers from the lower road were coming up toward the fighting. They couldn't see the cart.

Slate vaulted the retaining wall, opened his wings to check the short drop and landed on the ramp below the moving load. He drove his shoulder against the cart's downhill end and braced his palms against its timber bed. Scourgeshield took the grinding contact; his body took the load. The impact emptied the air from his lungs. His feet slid down a step.

The men below stopped when they saw him. Their shields would do nothing against this much stone.

“Shen! The front wheels!”

The Surety struck the ramp with his hammer. A wedge rose beneath the cart's front wheels. Wood cracked as the axle hit it. The load stopped so abruptly that a block slid from the top and struck the ward over Slate's back.

He held himself against the cart until Shen's wedge had taken the weight, then drew his hands clear and let the ward fade.

For a moment neither of them spoke.

Then Shen put a hand against the cart bed and tested its movement. “You may stand up.”

Slate drew a breath. “I was enjoying the view.”

Above them, Lin accepted the surrender of the last two defenders.

Sixteen soldiers came up the cleared stair before Slate allowed anyone to carry a wounded man down it. Two of Shen's assistant shapers followed them, leaving four below to hold the road and inspect the drainage route.

They had a second way off the bench.

Shen put his assistants to work along its outer edge, building cover where the gallery windows overlooked the turns. The keeper went back to inspect her hoist. Her brother joined her under escort, still wearing the blue cap, and swore loudly when he saw what had happened to the brace.

Slate decided that counted as a professional assessment.

He walked the newly occupied sheds with Lin. Two had been empty. The third held broken tools and sacks of grain. Brace's building contained three dead fighters and a hole through which the last of the evening light fell across the wreckage. Splintered roof boards lay among the broken bench legs.

No families.

The old shuttered sheds stood farther east, beyond a cross passage leading uphill. Slate kept his people short of it until the Lurkers had looked inside.

Shen joined him at the corner. “You were under the cart before I reached the turn,” Shen said. He was watching the soldiers pass the new stone wedge, carrying one of Lin's wounded between them. “Another step and I might have wedged you beneath it. I only had one hand free to shape.”

Slate looked at the injured wrist. He had seen Shen hold the load, and he had seen the men below it. “If I waited, the cart would have gone through your soldiers. I called the front wheels as soon as I had it.”

“I heard you.” Shen flexed his injured wrist. “The retaining wall blocks my shapers’ view. Call before you take the weight so they know where to raise a support.”

“Then we set the calls before we advance,” Slate said. “My people climb where yours cannot, and yours can stop a loaded cart. I would rather not discover our timing by accident twice.”

Shen set his gaze on Brace, who was helping the injured Raider settle onto a litter. The Raider objected until Brace told him he could either ride downstairs now or explain to Slate why he had broken the leg twice.

“That will spare us both another rescue,” the Surety said.

Pelrin appeared at the far end of the lane. *“Families in the east sheds. I can hear children. Guards outside, watching the uphill passage.”*

“Can you get to the doors?” Slate sent.

“Not without being seen.”

Slate asked for the positions. He repeated them aloud for Shen and Lin, indicating the passage as Pelrin described it.

Men were bringing packs down from the upper galleries. Others were collecting the guards around the family shelters. Wei Zhen was moving people, although Slate couldn't yet tell whether he meant to evacuate them or take them deeper into the stronghold.

Either way, Slate had little time left to get the families clear of the fighters.

Shen set his hammer against the wall. “The inner galleries connect above that passage. If we take the junction, we can separate the eastern gate from the barracks.”

“Can you open it here?”

The Surety touched the rock beside the shed, then moved his palm several inches and tried again. “Yes. They will feel the stone moving as soon as I begin.”

Slate turned to Lin before calling the Raiders. “We go through first. Bring your men in behind us and hold the passage back to this bench. Pelrin's taking the families toward the cart stair.”

“Keep your tails clear of my first rank,” Lin said. She moved her nearest soldiers out of the path Shen was about to open. “I can hold an entrance if I can get through it.”

Slate passed the warning to Brace. The Raider drew his soldiers into a staggered file, leaving room for the sweep of their tails. Slate sent the Lurkers toward the family shelters, with orders to wait until the guards turned uphill.

Lin formed her soldiers behind him.

“Then make enough noise to get their attention,” Slate said.

Shen drove both hands into the quarry wall.

Stone folded inward. Lamplight spilled through the opening, exposing a stair and the startled faces of the men guarding it.

Slate went through before they could lower their spears.

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VII

The Broken Hold

THE FIRST SPEAR STRUCK THE WALL WHERE SLATE'S CHEST HAD BEEN.

He turned sideways through Shen's opening, caught the shaft under his arm and kept moving. Its owner had braced for an impact from the front. Slate pulled him across the stair instead, into the second guard's legs.

Both went down.

Slate stepped over them, tail cutting across the third man's raised sword. The blade broke near the hilt. He struck the guard against the passage wall and looked up the stairs.

A Forsworn with a crossbow waited at the top, an annoyingly familiar presence.

He dropped behind the fallen men. The quarrel struck the step beside his foot. Brace came through the breach with a roar that shook dust from the passage ceiling. The Forsworn fled.

“Up,” Slate ordered. “Keep him running.”

The Raider bounded over the guards. Two of his soldiers followed, their tails lifted clear of the confined steps. Slate let Lin's first pair enter before climbing after them.

Behind him, Shen widened the breach.

The stair ended at a square junction lit by mineral lamps. One passage ran toward the eastern gate. Another led into the barracks. The third climbed deeper into the mountain, its steps polished by years of boots carrying stone dust.

Brace had caught the Forsworn at the barracks door.

He held him upright by the back of his coat. The Raider's nose wrinkled. “This one wants to surrender.”

Slate's gaze dropped to the dark stain spreading down the man's trousers. “His bladder beat you to it.”

“I said I'd tell you where they went!” the man protested.

“See?” Brace said.

Slate pointed him toward Lin's soldiers and put Raiders at the other two passages.

For the first time since entering Heshan, they stood beneath a roof that hid them from the incoming fire. Enemy shapers remained a problem, but at least Slate could stop watching every window.

He stopped long enough to breathe and count the passages. Dust whitened the soldiers’ boots as they crossed the lamplight.

Lin called for surrender, and the barracks began to empty.

Three wounded men came first. One leaned on a crutch fashioned from a spear shaft. Behind them came two women carrying rolled blankets and a boy who was old enough to be furious about being told to leave his knife on the floor.

Lin counted them through the junction and sent them down to the captured bench under guard.

Nobody from the Confederacy promised they could go home yet.

If they let everyone walk home, some would be back with Wei before dawn. Lin would have to sort fighters from the people who had sheltered them.

Pelrin reported from the eastern sheds. The guards had left their posts when the inner wall opened, hurrying toward a bell being rung above the gate. The families were still inside. Some wanted to come out. Others were holding the doors shut against the Lurkers.

“Tell them there is a cleared stair to the lower road,” Slate sent. *“They can come down with their own people. Stay where they can see you.”*

“One woman says you burn people,” Pelrin sent.

“Only if they deserve it.” Slate smirked.

That might amuse Pelrin. A mother holding a door shut against him would hear a threat. Slate could spare her a better answer.

“Tell her Lin holds the road. She can take the children to the Confederacy soldiers. You're there to keep anyone from stopping her.”

“She wants the confederates to come to the door.” The Lurker sounded frustrated through the Scourgemind.

Slate passed the request to Lin. She sent a soldier down with a lamp, calling the other families out as he went. Pelrin could guard an open doorway just as well as a closed one.

Across the junction, Shen examined a strip of fresh stone along the climbing passage. Pale stone filled part of the original cut; Lin's map showed no obstruction there. His assistants joined him, palms spread beside his, working slowly enough that Slate could see the original cut emerging beneath the alterations.

They had a little time now. Lin used it to bring twelve of her fit soldiers into the junction and leave nineteen holding the captured sheds and cart stair. Slate recalled the two Raiders from the old upper stair, replacing them with a Confederacy pair. He had seven fit Raiders, including Brace. The eighth was already below with his leg supported on the litter.

Two Mystics came inside. The third remained on the bench, watching the evacuation route. The six Initiates kept the prisoners, hoist and roof positions until Lin could relieve them.

It seemed a waste of seven-foot-tall murder lizards, but the Scion wasn't going to complain about his forces getting a break. Slate sat on a step while the passage widened.

He wanted more mana than the brief rest would give. Wanting didn't fill the reserve. He could still fight. Stop another loaded cart with his body, though, and he might have no mana left for the next attack.

Shen had wrapped a strip torn from his robe around his wrist. Blood spotted it as he pressed his hand against the rock.

Slate watched the dwarf work.

He had seen men keep fighting because they were too angry or frightened to stop. Shen was taking his time, using his assistants and avoiding the movements that hurt him. Shen knew when to stop forcing an injured wrist. Slate preferred that to men who needed to prove they could do everything themselves.

“What do we need to hold for your forces to stay here?” Slate broke the silence.

“The gate, the junction and the water galleries,” Shen answered. “The quarry floor can be watched from those.”

“Not every room?” Slate asked. He looked toward the passage where the retreating defenders had disappeared.

Shen eased his injured hand away from the stone. “Once we hold the water and the exits, we can offer the remaining defenders terms. Captain Lin will still have to search the galleries before families return to them.”

Slate looked down the eastern passage. A heavy door stood at its far end, closed behind a row of stone teeth that had grown out of the floor. He didn't envy the Confederacy captain. House-to-house clearing was more perilous than it seemed.

“Their commander is going to disagree.” Slate tested one wing, then folded it against the ache.

“He has lost the junction,” Shen said. “If he stays, we can divide his fighters. If he leaves, we will have the ground we came to take.”

Slate looked at the three passages under their guard. For the first time since taking the hoist, the defenders had fewer useful choices than he did.

While Lin dealt with the prisoners, Slate questioned the surrendered Forsworn. The captive knew where Tao fought. “Above the gate hall,” he

told them. “The stair turns twice. He'll hear you before you get to the second turn.”

He pointed toward the ceiling when Slate asked about the galleries linking it to the upper barracks. Tao had closed one that afternoon. The other contained a wooden ladder. Wei had gone toward the storage court wearing a gray coat and the iron guard that covered the left side of his face.

“Show me the ladder and the way into that court,” Slate said.

The man knelt beside Lin's map and showed them. He did it with his finger, keeping both hands well clear of Slate's claws.

Shen compared it to the charcoal drawing sent up by the captured shaper. The two accounts agreed on the junction and the water gallery. Beyond that, the older quarry map showed a storage court open to the sky, enclosed by a thick eastern wall.

“The carts leave through here,” Lin said, touching its gate.

“So do the remaining bowmen,” Slate said. “If we let them.”

He sent two Lurkers to the ladder, leaving Pelrin and three others to bring the families down from the sheds. The Lurkers would examine the upper approach and wait. He wasn't sending them through a hole into Tao's hands.

Then he and Shen climbed the stair.

Brace came behind them with two Raiders. Lin followed with six soldiers, leaving the rest at the junction with the two Mystics and Shen's assistants. Their own troops held the junction behind them if they had to retreat.

At the first turn, Slate found a dead defender propped against the wall.

His crossbow lay beside his hand. A narrow gap had been cut through the corner at head height, just large enough for the bow's stock. The corpse's neck had been broken.

Slate stopped.

Shen knelt on the step below. “Don't touch him.”

There were fresh chips beneath the dead man's boots. A line ran across the stair, too straight to be a natural crack.

“A release cut,” the Surety said. “The body hides its end.”

Slate looked up. A lintel protruded from the ceiling beyond the turn, its underside streaked with newly exposed pale stone.

They had left their compatriot where an advancing enemy would kick him out of the way. Devious.

Slate applauded the effort.

Shen pressed his hammer head against the side wall. The lintel settled a fraction, then stopped. His assistants weren't here to take part of the strain. “Go beneath it. Do not climb over the body.”

Slate crouched, passed the corpse and waited until Brace and the soldiers had crossed. Shen came last, easing his hammer away as he stepped through.

The lintel crashed behind him.

Dust burst up the stairs, drying Slate’s mouth as he drew breath.

From above, someone laughed. “Kaizhen. Still risking your neck for your soldiers?”

Shen stood with his shoulder against the wall until the dust thinned. “Come down, Tao.”

“To stand trial in my grandfather's place?”

“Your debts are your own,” Shen said.

Slate watched Shen rather than the turn. The Surety had offered Tao a trial after seeing the men he had sealed outside the hatch. In Shen's place, Slate would have taken Tao alive if the opportunity came. The Forsworn leader provided valuable intelligence.

A grinding sound came from the second turn.

Slate pulled Shen backward.

A cylinder of stone rolled into view, filling the width of the stair.

Slate jumped toward the wall, claws catching a lamp bracket. His wings snapped shut along his back.

Shen struck the step in front of him.

Its outer edge lifted. The cylinder hit the raised lip, bounced and drove into the opposite wall hard enough to fill the stair with fragments. A shard cut Slate's cheek. Another rang against Brace's shoulder plate.

The cylinder jammed across the passage.

Slate dropped onto its curved surface and scrambled over before Tao could free it.

The stoneshaper waited beyond the second turn, a compact dwarf with a shaved head and a heavy leather apron buckled over mail. Both forearms rested on the stair wall. He had already begun to fold the steps together beneath Slate's feet.

Slate sprang from the last flat tread.

His tail swept across Tao's chest and struck mail. Rings parted, but the blade slid along a stone plate beneath them. Tao staggered into the wall, keeping one forearm in contact.

The landing tilted.

Slate caught the doorway above it with both hands. His boots skidded into empty air as the last step fell away.

Tao looked up at him. “No room for those wings.”

Slate kept his wings folded. The doorpost under his left hand was sound, and Tao stood within reach of his feet. Let him watch the wings.

Tao's attention stayed on the disappearing steps.

Slate dropped one hand, swung against the doorpost and kicked him in the face.

The dwarf's head struck the wall.

Shen came over the cylinder below them. He planted his hammer against the sloping wall and forced a narrow ledge out beneath his boots. Tao spat blood and thrust his palm toward it.

The ledge began to crumble.

Slate hauled himself into the doorway. He could hear Brace working behind Shen, dragging loose stone out from under the jammed cylinder so the others could follow.

There was no room here for a long duel. No safe place to spend mana correcting a mistake.

He fed Ash Infusion into two claws.

Tao saw the white fire and drew his elbows close. Stone rose over the backs of his hands, closing them in thick knuckles. He’d protected his hands, exactly as Slate wanted. His throat was still bare above the mail.

Slate went for his face again.

The dwarf raised an armored hand. Slate stopped short of it and caught the apron strap instead, pulling with his whole weight. Leather tightened across Tao's shoulders. His other hand came away from the wall.

“Now!” Slate shouted.

Shen drove the end of his hammer haft into Tao's knee.

The dwarf buckled. Slate pulled him farther forward, exposing the flesh between the mail collar and his jaw. Both burning claws went into the side of his neck.

Tao's next spell broke apart before it reached the floor.

He tried to bite Slate's wrist. Slate forced his head down, and Shen's hammer struck the base of his skull.

The fight ended.

LVL 30 Stoneshaper defeated.
XP gained: 2,250
XP available: 7,310

Slate extinguished the claws at once.

He and Shen shared the experience from the kill. Slate could have used the rest. He was much happier with the dwarf standing beside him than he would have been collecting it alone at the bottom of the stair.

Shen knelt to restore the fallen tread.

“You have another way out?” Slate asked.

“There is a door ahead.”

“Then use it. Let your shapers fix the stairs.”

Shen looked at the blood soaking through the cloth around his wrist.

He stood.

The Lurkers reported a clear route from the loft to the junction by the wooden ladder. Slate sent Lin and her six soldiers back that way, with Brace and the two Raiders following them. They could bypass the fallen lintel while Shen’s assistants cleared the stairs. One of Shen's assistants would open the passage toward the gate hall. Brace would take one more Raider from the junction guard and advance with Lin while Slate and Shen entered above. The remaining three Raiders would hold the junction with the other six soldiers.

They would reach the courtyard from two directions.

The two Lurkers reached the upper doorway before them.

They had used the ladder while Tao watched the stair, crossed a narrow loft and come down into a room full of folded harness. One Lurker held up a leather strap wider than his palm.

“Too large for horses,” the Lurker said.

Slate took it.

The buckle was iron, scored by repeated strain. Pale grit clung to the stitching. Through the next doorway came a smell of dung, dry earth and something sharper, like a reptile enclosure left too long in the sun.

He returned the strap and went to the opening.

The storage court lay below.

Lanterns burned along its walls. Men were loading two carts near the eastern gate. At the far side, a broad ramp led into a roofed cutting that had been widened recently enough for its edges to show pale against the older stone.

Something moved inside it.

Slate saw a jagged armored ridge scrape the entrance.

Then a head emerged, low and broad, with hooked teeth overlapping the lower jaw. Two more peaks swept sideways from the armored shell. A stone ridge rose from the armored neck, higher than the men standing beside it.

The creature came forward on forelegs as thick as tree trunks.

Its claws sank into the paving without cracking it.

Stone folded around each foot, then hardened again as the weight passed. Rocky protrusions rose from its back in a shell of jagged peaks. A narrow saddle hollow lay between its shoulders. Its heavy tail dragged behind, armored spines cutting furrows through the surface without a spray of broken rock.

It was longer than either cart. Much wider.

Shen stopped beside Slate. “Cragback,” he answered the unspoken question.

Slate looked at the thick eastern wall, then at the grooves appearing beneath the beast's feet. “Tell me it can't do that to fortifications.”

“That is what it was meant for.”

Slate revised his estimate of the Confederacy's siege weapons. “Of course it is.”

A man in a gray coat climbed into the saddle hollow. An iron cheek guard covered the left side of his face. He took a length of chain from a handler and wrapped it once around his forearm.

The surrendered Forsworn's description had been quite specific about that guard.

Wei Zhen.

Slate watched him point toward the eastern gate. The cart drivers started forward. A handler struck a hanging iron ring twice with a short mallet, then hurried away from the Cragback's forefeet.

The beast followed the sound.

Below Slate, Lin's soldiers entered the court through the gate hall. They had pushed past its last defenders while he and Shen examined the upper loft. Brace came with them, leading three Raiders around a stack of quarried blocks.

They were between the Cragback and the eastern wall.

“Brace. Back into the hall. It can shape the paving.”

Brace shouted the warning to Lin and waved his Raiders back. The soldiers nearest the gate hall turned at once; the others had to come around the stack of blocks.

Wei saw them moving.

He pulled the chain and shouted to the handler.

The iron ring sounded again.

The Cragback hit the stack of blocks with its shoulder.

Slate expected them to scatter.

Instead, the stack slumped around the creature's chest. Squared corners rounded. Blocks fused into a single heaving mass that spilled across the paving toward Lin's soldiers.

Brace leaped onto the nearest cart and kicked off its side. The Raider behind him caught a soldier under each arm and sprang toward the gate hall. Two soldiers farther from the gate hall were slower to turn.

Stone swallowed their boots.

“Back to the hall!” Lin shouted.

Slate jumped from the overlooking doorway.

This time there was room for his wings. He crossed the court above the Cragback's head, tail drawn to strike Wei out of the saddle.

The beast swung its horn toward him.

He veered. The horn passed beneath his feet, close enough to scratch a line along his heel. Wei ducked into the hollow between the armored ridges.

Slate could still reach him.

Then the eastern wall began to fall.

The Cragback had pressed one forefoot against its base. Courses of stone slid downward as though the mortar had become grease. The upper parapet leaned into the court, directly above the soldiers caught in the flowing paving.

Slate turned away from Wei.

He landed beside the nearer soldier and drove his claws around the trapped man's ankle. Stone clung to the boot. Slate cut the leather open, tore the upper away and pulled the bare foot free.

The second soldier was trapped above the knee.

A horn sounded from the wall behind them. Wei's surviving fighters were running after the carts, using the break the beast had made. Slate saw the gray coat rise above the Cragback's shoulders again.

He could reach him in two wingbeats.

The trapped soldier grabbed Slate's arm. “Don't pull. Don't pull it off.”

Slate looked down at the leg disappearing into stone.

Lin's men had followed his Raiders into this court. Now one of them was begging him not to tear his leg off. Shen was crossing from the far side, too far away to free him before the parapet fell.

Wei would have to wait. Besides, chasing fleeing combatants hadn't been part of his deal with Shen.

“Shen! Here!”

The Surety lengthened his stride.

Slate straddled the trapped soldier and bent over him as the first blocks fell. Scourgeshield brightened across his back and shoulders. He kept his wings folded close, taking the falling fragments on his protected body.

The impacts drove him to one knee beside the man's hip.

Shen struck the paving beside the man's leg.

The surrounding stone pulled back in ridges, exposing a crushed greave. The soldier screamed as pressure changed against the metal.

“Hold him,” Shen said.

Slate held the man's shoulders. Brace knelt at his feet, cutting the straps that kept the greave closed. The Raider peeled one side away, taking care not to drag it across the exposed flesh.

Another block struck Slate between the shoulders.

The ward flickered over his scales. He hunched lower, keeping the soldier beneath him. “Faster,” he managed.

Shen planted his hammer upright beneath the leaning parapet. Stone rose around the haft, thickening into a column that reached the wall above. He held both hands against it while Brace lifted the wounded man clear.

“Go!” Shen shouted.

With the soldier clear, Slate let Scourgeshield fade. He caught Shen by the back of his robe and pulled.

For an instant the dwarf did not move. His feet were anchored to the court, sunk into the surface while he supported the column.

“Let it fall,” Slate said.

The stone released the Surety's boots.

They ran together. Behind them, the new column cracked, and the parapet came down across the place where the soldier had been sitting.

Dust hid the eastern gate.

Slate found himself laughing, one harsh breath that hurt his ribs.

Shen leaned against the gate hall, his hammer left inside the fallen column.

Shen looked from Slate's face to the collapsed parapet. “I intended to bring the hammer with me.”

Slate tried to straighten, found he was still short of breath and stayed bent over his knees. “Next time, write that into our agreement.”

Brace carried the injured soldier past them. The man's ruined greave dangled from one strap, leaving a trail through the dust.

Beyond the collapsed wall, the Cragback was still moving.

Slate climbed the nearest stack of intact blocks and looked over the wreckage. The beast had reached the spoil slope outside. Its feet sank through loose rock, making a broad descending track. Wei rode low between the shoulders. The two carts followed farther north on the existing road, with armed men running beside them.

Pelrin was on the outer wall above the family sheds. *“I can follow the carts.”*

Slate watched a section of the slope fold inward behind the Cragback. The creature's tail dragged a new berm across its own tracks.

They wouldn't catch Wei before the next piece of altered ground. Shen could barely close his hand. Slate no longer had enough mana to trust Scourgeshield against another collapse. Following Wei meant landing within reach of a beast that could move the ground beneath him.

“Watch where they go. Don't follow them into the cuttings,” Slate sent his scouts.

He hated saying it. Wei had escaped in front of him, and the terms of their agreement did little for his wounded pride.

Being annoyed wouldn’t refill his mana.

They took the water galleries without another fight.

The men inside had heard the wall fall. When Lin called through the doorway, they asked whether Wei was still in the quarry. She told them he had left.

Five weapons came out first. Then their owners.

Shen sat on an overturned cart while his assistants inspected the remaining pillars. Slate stood beside him, watching soldiers carry lamps into the rooms above the gate hall. The passages they had already searched were marked with charcoal crosses. Doors that remained closed had guards outside them.

The hoist keeper's brother came into the court carrying a lamp. He stopped beside the furrows, lifted one foot over a ridge and stared at the way the paving had hardened around a discarded wheel.

“We laid that court in my father's time.”

Slate looked at the wheel buried in stone. The court had outlasted the keeper's father. Wei had undone it in moments.

Shen walked around the damaged paving to join a group carrying blankets toward the wounded. Nobody asked him to help. He took one end of a litter when a soldier stood to stretch his back.

One of the assistant shapers had reached the broken column. She looked to the Surety before touching the rubble around his hammer.

“Leave the stones supporting the parapet,” he told her. “Open the side facing the court.”

She worked on her knees, drawing loose material away in shallow layers. When the hammer came free, its haft was scored along one side. She brought it to him with both hands.

Shen tested the wood, turned the head to examine its socket and set it beside his foot.

Slate had watched the same dwarf hold a cliff anchor against a hostile caster. A few feet of paving beneath the Cragback had moved faster than Shen could protect the men standing on it. Whatever else the Surety knew about those animals, Slate intended to hear it before he left.

While the confederacy picked up the pieces of their assault, he pictured Bastion's damaged walls under that broad, shelled monster.

Repairing them would be necessary. He would also need something outside them capable of killing what had just walked out of Heshan.

Slate kept his Raiders together until the search reached the upper barracks.

Pelrin returned with the last families from the eastern sheds. A girl walked beside him carrying a cage with two brown hens inside. She kept the cage between herself and his tail.

Pelrin slowed to match her steps and kept his tail on the other side.

Slate watched them pass, then looked toward the broken eastern wall.

He knew Shen wanted the Forsworn leader. Wei knew routes, allies and whatever arrangement had brought a living siege engine into this quarry. Killing him would have removed a capable opponent. Taking him alive would have been better still.

Instead, Shen inherited a stronghold with part of its wall on the floor and three dead Confederacy soldiers to add to the price of reaching it. The man

pulled from the paving might still lose his leg.

Meanwhile, Slate had all twenty-four of his Scourge, an agreement to free the wood elves, and insight into the confederacy's abilities. He was rather pleased with the final tally.

Lin came out of the water gallery carrying the defenders' gate keys. “The cistern is intact. Both valves open. The lower road is clear to the refuge hall, and I have men at the eastern breach.”

She laid the keys on the cart beside Shen. “We can hold it.”

Shen nodded, then turned to Slate. “Heshan is taken.”

Slate smiled and waited for the words that actually mattered to him.

The Surety looked toward the family column descending to the middle bench. “I will have the release documents brought from Lianshi,” he acknowledged with a nod in the Scion's direction.

Slate had been ready to argue that Wei's escape changed nothing in their bargain. Shen had saved him the trouble. No demand for another pursuit, no extra service to make good the broken wall. The elves would get the release Slate had bought for them.

Some of the tension left his shoulders. “Send for Serevan with them.”

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VIII

The Debt Discharged

Slate slept for a few hours in the captured barracks. When he woke, his cheek had healed and his mana had recovered enough that he could cast without worrying about every spell. His injured Raider had begun putting weight on the repaired leg under Brace's supervision, without being allowed to prove anything on the stairs.

There were worse mornings after an assault.

Serevan arrived before midday with a clerk, an armed escort and a leather case sealed in Lianshi.

Slate met him on the middle bench. Serevan followed his glance up to the missing section of eastern wall, then halted beside a fallen block. “That was standing yesterday?”

“Most of it,” Slate said.

The elf held his document case closer. He looked past the rubble toward Shen's soldiers. “Has the Surety accepted you've fulfilled your side of the arrangement?”

Slate nodded. “He's sent for the release papers. We're waiting for you.”

Serevan closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them, he stepped around the block and followed Slate inside without another look at the damage.

Shen used the quarry payroom because it contained a table large enough for the documents.

Nobody had bothered to wash the blood from his sleeve. His clerk placed clean paper over a patch of spilled lamp oil, opened the leather case and

arranged the copies side by side.

Slate stayed beside Serevan while the elf read each provision aloud. Only when he had heard the terms did he sit down.

The terms matched the agreement. Heshan, its western road and the galleries within the mapped ridge had been taken. The elven households identified in the attached register would be released from the listed service obligations, including the claims carried through their descendants. Adults who wished to remain could do so. Those who chose departure would be given their own copies.

Shen signed the statement confirming the military objective.

He didn’t make Wei’s escape an exception.

Serevan touched one name in the register. “His mother has not reached Lianshi. She cannot travel alone. Her son went north to bring her.”

“Then her copy will wait for her,” Shen said.

“There is a repair levy due before they can return,” Serevan said.

“The release takes effect today,” Shen replied.

The clerk added the date beside the entry.

Serevan kept his finger on the name until the ink had dried. Then he moved to the next household.

Slate watched the Surety through Serevan's recitation. A man who intended to cheat them had been given several opportunities already. Shen answered questions, corrected one misspelled name and had the clerk prepare an extra copy for a family that would travel in two groups.

The cost would fall on someone. Other crews would maintain the roads and refuge halls these families had served. Shen had accepted that cost when he signed, and now he was paying it.

Slate could respect him without agreeing that the children should ever have owed it.

When the last entry was checked, Shen placed his seal beneath the signatures.

Serevan drew the sealed register toward him and checked the page containing the absent mother's name once more. This time his finger moved straight to the dated release. “I need to send this north.”

“Take the fastest messenger you have,” Slate said.

The elf gathered the copies with both hands. At the door he stopped and looked back at Shen. “Thank you for keeping it.”

“You should expect me to,” the Surety responded with a quizzical look.

Serevan considered that, then nodded.

After he left, Slate stood. “I'll have my escort ready to return once Lin has the road.”

“She has it,” Shen confirmed before broaching the next topic. “I would like to discuss where you intend to take them afterward.”

They walked into the storage court, where two of the shapers were reopening a drain buried under the Cragback's passage.

The older of the pair had a white braid tucked through the back of her collar. She crouched with both palms beside a shallow groove. Her companion, a younger dwarf with his sleeves rolled to the elbow, moved a wooden gauge along its length.

Water began to flow, carrying a milky wash of stone grit out of the groove.

The younger man held up two fingers. She deepened the far end slightly, and the water picked up speed.

“Bastion, eventually,” Slate answered. “I'm sure many will call Woodhaven their home, but I need shapers to help restore the capital to its former strength.”

“Defenses?” Shen asked.

Slate counted off with his claws. “Defenses. Roads. Water. Houses with walls people can trust.” He watched the pair clear the drain without lifting a shovel.

“I'm sure I don't need to tell you, but gods don't like when their places of power are destroyed or taken.” Slate looked at Shen. “We’ve recovered parts of the city. There are still streets my people have to go around, and rooms we don't open because we can't tell if the structure will hold when they do.”

Shen nodded and called the older shaper over. “Han Meilin,” Shen said. “She supervised the lower gallery repairs last night.”

Her companion handed her the wooden gauge as she passed. Han tucked it beneath her arm, wiped her right hand on her trousers and offered it to Slate. He kept his claws clear of her wrist.

“You are rebuilding Bastion?” she asked.

“Yes. Beginning with the foundations,” Slate said.

“Do you have access to the old engrams?”

Slate considered how much to reveal to the Confederacy. “Some survived Vallyrian occupation. We haven't made sense of all of them.”

She looked at Shen. “Then they need someone who knows what to look for.”

Slate caught the exchange, his attention fixed on Han. “You know the city?”

“I know the records our houses kept,” Han said. “Several of the founding crews came from the same stone schools we teach in now. They built the deep foundations and the channels that carried water beneath the early districts.”

“Your people built Bastion.”

“Some of it,” Shen clarified. “Lucidus did not forbid her followers from employing ours.”

Slate thought of the preserved rooms beneath the eastern wing. Bastion’s intelligence could tell him which engrams survived and where the connections had failed. His people had spent months trying to repair them.

Han’s teachers might have preserved the methods used to build those rooms.

“How much of it can you restore?” he asked Han.

Han turned the gauge in her hands, studying its stone-stained edge. “I haven't seen the damage. The condition of the deep foundations will decide how much of the original work we can keep.”

“You've seen or at least heard secondhand the way the Scourge wage war. Assume a great deal of it needs repairing.”

“Then let me inspect it.” She looked directly at him. “I can tell you which walls are worth saving once I have stood beneath them. Until then, I cannot give you an honest estimate.”

Slate smiled. He had heard too many estimates from people who intended to be elsewhere when the work began. “I'll arrange the inspection.”

Shen offered a survey party first.

Six shapers, led by Han. They would inspect the surviving foundations, identify work that could begin immediately and teach selected local crews enough to continue it. More specialists could follow once they knew which districts and materials required attention.

“They will need access to the supports beneath the damaged streets and buildings,” the Surety said. “A room may be safe while the chamber holding it up is failing.”

“With my people present,” Slate said. He glanced at Han to make certain the woman undertaking the work had heard the condition.

She nodded. “They can carry lamps and keep others out while we inspect. I would want an escort in an unfamiliar ruin.”

Shen inclined his head. “Then include that in the commission.”

Slate looked at the drain Han had just reopened.

He could rebuild Bastion with timber braces and thousands of ordinary hands. He could also spend the next year sending soldiers to hold gaps that trained stoneshapers could close before the next attack reached them.

Every report Han sent home would describe part of his city. Its foundations, defenses and inhabitants. Shen had watched twenty-four Scourge take a quarry. Now he wanted to see what thousands of them could do with a capital.

Whatever Shen learned, Slate wanted him to find a city he couldn’t easily take.

“How often will they report to you?” Slate directed the question toward the Surety.

Shen didn't pretend to misunderstand. He clasped his uninjured hand behind his back and considered Han's survey party rather than Slate. “On their arrival, once the survey is complete, and afterward whenever the work warrants a report.”

“I receive a copy of anything concerning Bastion,” Slate said. “Their private letters are their own. Plans of my foundations, defenses or waterworks aren't.”

Shen turned his attention back to him. “Then we understand one another. You will receive the same reports I do.”

Han tapped the wooden gauge against her palm. “If either of you expects a report every time we move a stone, find another crew. I intend to rebuild the city while I am there.”

Slate smiled. “Report when the work warrants it.”

“That is what the Surety said.”

They could still learn plenty while buying bread. But if someone sent his gate plans home without telling him, he could point to the agreement they’d broken.

He could work with that too.

Han wasn't finished. “I will also need a place to sleep, a yard for material and permission to stop work when someone is about to put a wagon over a roof.”

“You'll have them,” Slate said.

Han held Slate’s gaze. “And payment.”

“Naturally,” Slate said. “You’ll be compensated for your efforts.”

She asked for the rates of skilled labor in Bastion. Slate told her what he knew and admitted that Serena handled much of the administrative work. Han named an advance to cover the work they’d miss at home. They would agree a price for the longer commission after inspecting Bastion.

The visit would count toward the shapers’ existing service, Shen added. Their houses would send replacement crews where needed. Sending them to Bastion didn’t release them from their obligations.

Slate turned to Han, already feeling like the negotiation had grown tiresome. “Well, do you want it?”

She looked at him more sharply. “I have been asking to see those foundations for twenty years.”

There was a hint of excitement to her tone that Slate appreciated. “Then I'd hate to disappoint you.”

Her younger companion left the drain and approached, rubbing stone grit from his palms. “The drain reaches the old channel,” he told her. “It needs clearing farther down. I can finish before we leave.”

Han introduced him as Lu Wen.

There was a narrow callus along the inside of his forefinger where a line had worn against it. A brass plumb bob hung from his belt beside a short knife and a roll of measuring cord.

He looked at Slate's hands, then at the channel he had helped open. “Can your people lift dressed blocks without slings?”

Slate considered the question. “How large?”

Lu spread his hands, then extended one arm to indicate the length.

Slate called Brace over.

The stone Lu chose had formed part of the collapsed parapet.

It lay clear of the supporting rubble, a pale block longer than Brace's forearm and thick enough that four men would have wanted poles under it. Han checked both sides before allowing anyone to touch it.

Brace squatted, hooked his claws beneath the lower edge and lifted.

The block rose against his chest.

Lu moved closer, watching the Raider's feet. “There. Beside the drain. Set the short end down first.”

Brace carried it over and lowered it onto the narrow end without chipping the edge. Lu crouched beside him to watch the last inch. Slate had called the Raider over to demonstrate strength; the shaper seemed just as interested in how precisely he could use it.

Lu put his palm against the stone once it was standing securely. Han passed him the gauge and touched the other side.

The block broadened at its base. Its top thinned and curved, drawing a smooth arch over the exposed drain. Lu used the gauge twice while Han thickened the sides. When they stepped away, the former parapet stone had become a low crossing wide enough for the wounded wagons.

Brace put a foot on it.

Han held up one hand. “Wait until I have checked it.”

He took his foot away.

She inspected the underside, pressed her palm to each support and nodded. Brace crossed.

Nothing shifted.

Slate looked at the drain, the new crossing and the marks Brace's claws had left on the transported stone.

He had soldiers who could move building material without cranes or teams of oxen. These people could turn that material into something worth defending. The same cooperation that had put Raiders on the quarry bench could put walls around the roads feeding his cities.

“Six,” he said to Shen. “Send the six.”

They returned to Lianshi the following day.

Lin stayed to command Heshan's garrison. Her casualty report listed three dead and eight wounded from the campaign, including the reconnaissance wound and the man with the crushed leg. The latter had survived the journey to the refuge hall. He would travel to Lianshi once the surgeon considered it safe.

Slate's injured Raider could walk by then. Brace kept him near the center of the escort and carried the hammer himself, ignoring the other's suggestion that a little extra weight would test the repair properly.

Serevan rode ahead with the release copies.

At Lianshi, Ilara had assembled the first departing households. Others were still coming from the northern settlements. Slate had promised release to everyone covered by the agreement, not that every family would reach the same gate on the same morning.

The first column would contain forty-two elves, including the six who had accompanied him from Woodhaven.

He walked through their preparations while Han chose her party. Four shapers from Lianshi's workshops would join her and Lu, bringing the skills she wanted for channels, roadbeds and occupied buildings. The other four members of Shen's campaign crew would remain with the garrison or return to their previous work.

Bundles of bedding lay beside tool chests, their corners pinched beneath tight carrying ropes. One family had brought a dismantled loom. Another

was arguing about whether a cracked cooking pot was worth carrying when there were three sound ones already on the wagon.

Ilara caught him looking. “Her mother made it. It is the last piece of her old kitchen.”

Slate watched the husband try to wedge the cracked pot between two chests without admitting he had lost the argument. “Then he can decide which of the sound pots stays behind.”

“His wife reached that conclusion first.” Ilara went to help rearrange the load before the dispute cost them a tool chest.

Beside the builders’ wagon, Han packed a cloudmoth-silk quilt under waxed cloth. “Warmer than wool for half the weight,” she said when Slate tested the thread. “Twice the trouble to replace if you tear it.”

Slate said Serena would want a price. Han tucked the last edge of waxed cloth inside and closed the chest before he could ask to see the quilt again.

Serevan was still helping families match their release copies to the register. Slate left him to it and went to find Duan. She had given him the children's location. Now he wanted to know what else she knew about Wei's escape. He could show her the release papers. She’d see that the fighting had bought the elves their freedom.

He found her in the timber-lined room.

Her wrists were free now. Two guards stood outside, and the furniture had been moved far enough from the walls that she couldn't reach stone without passing them.

Duan half rose from the bench when he entered, before the guard at the door moved. She sat again, hands flat against her knees. “Did you get Wei?”

“No. We took the quarry.” He pulled the stool closer. “Who got him out?”

Her eyes went to the healed cut on his cheek. “There were children in those sheds. Did your people find them?”

“They're out. Those who surrendered are alive. Shen has the prisoners.”

Duan looked down. One hand had tightened in the cloth over her knee. “And he has his road open again.”

“That's what I agreed to give him.” Slate kept his claws clear of her feet.

She leaned back against the timber partition. “Was it enough?”

Slate took a folded release copy from beneath his belt and opened it where she could see Shen's seal.

Duan read for a long time. “Their children too,” she said. Her thumb rested beside the provision, holding the paper flat.

Slate nodded. “That was part of the price.”

“And what service will you expect from them?” She looked up before he could answer. “The children, Slate. What did they agree to give you?”

“Nothing. They weren't part of the agreement.”

Duan pushed the paper back toward him. “Remember that when they're old enough to be useful.”

Slate folded the paper along its existing crease and set it beside her hand. “The children's terms are on that page. Who got Wei out?”

“I want to know what you'll charge them when they decide to leave.”

“Elves who don't take the scales owe me no service,” Slate said. “Those who do become mine while they serve. I feed them, arm them, and send them where I need them.”

Duan's mouth tightened at the word mine. “Yours.”

“Mine.” Slate let the word stand. “The choice is theirs. The command is mine.”

“And if one of them chooses differently afterward?”

“Then they leave. I lose a soldier, not a claim on their children.”

Duan looked down at Shen's seal. Her jaw stayed tight. “See that you remember the difference.”

Duan had dodged both questions about Wei. Fine. Slate left the signed release within her reach. She could decide for herself whether the man who fled the quarry was worth protecting once the released families had gone.

Outside in the departure yard, Han checked the survey party's tools while Lu Wen counted the wagons. Four carried the elves' belongings and those unable to walk all day. A fifth held the shapers' chests, instruments and provisions. Twelve Confederacy soldiers, including Captain Ren Qiao, would accompany them to Bastion and return with the first reports. Ren had recovered enough to lead them, though his wound remained dressed beneath his coat.

Han handed Lu a tool roll. “Check the small gauges. If we have to make replacements on the road, I will remember who packed them.”

Lu unrolled the cloth and tested every recess before placing the roll in the smallest chest. He added his brass plumb bob, checked its cord and secured the lid. Whatever else Shen's builders intended to learn in Bastion, they had brought the tools to begin earning their place there.

At the gate, Serevan read the release aloud to a family that had arrived too late for the first explanation. He slowed over the provision ending their descendants' obligations. The father made him read that sentence again.

Slate waited until the man understood it before ordering the column onto the western road. Freed households moved through the gate first. Han's survey wagon followed, with Ren's soldiers around it and Slate's escort spread along both sides.

Shen had sent builders, guards and observers into Slate's lands. Slate was taking forty-two people who had just learned that an inherited obligation could end. The same road carried all of them.

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IX

The Broken Road

Lu Wen knew the road had been altered before the first Lurker found the bowman.

The gutter was wrong.

Three days west of Lianshi, the old road crossed a steep hillside on a retaining wall built in seven courses. Rainwater ran along the inner edge, beneath fitted covers wherever carts needed to cross it. The masons who laid those covers had given the channel a steady fall toward an outlet below the next bend.

Water lay motionless ahead of the survey wagon.

Lu counted the things he was supposed to notice. One sunken cover. Silt gathered against its uphill lip. A pale scrape where a wheel had struck the curb. Any competent shaper might have seen those.

He wasn't supposed to notice the pressure moving through the wall below them.

That pressure came in short, patient pushes. Someone hidden inside the hillside was testing the joints between the outer courses, touching each one lightly enough that the road wouldn't answer aloud. The technique had been taught to Lu over bowls of millet in closed kitchens and abandoned refuge halls. It was how the Forsworn found the weak place in a wall without telling the household above that they had come.

He put a hand on the driver's arm. “Stop here.”

The driver pulled the reins. The survey wagon halted hard enough to make the gauges knock together inside their chest. Lu caught the bench edge as the driver leaned back against the reins.

Han Meilin looked back from the lead bench. “What did you feel?”

Too direct. She had watched him too closely since Heshan.

Lu pointed at the pool. “The outlet is blocked.”

That was true. It was also the smallest part of the truth.

Behind them, Captain Ren Qiao raised a fist. His eleven soldiers closed around the wagon, shields turning toward the slopes. Ahead, four elven wagons continued for several lengths before their drivers noticed the halt. Children peered over bundles. Serevan walked back along the column with Slate beside him.

The Scourge didn't ask why they had stopped.

One green Lurker went over the uphill bank. A second vanished below the outer edge. Two red Raiders moved between the wagons, taking positions where they could reach either the horses or the passengers. Brace sent three short gestures to the Initiates, and the smaller Scourge spread without speaking.

Lu had spent the journey trying not to stare at them. Soldiers who moved without shouted orders made that difficult.

He climbed down and knelt beside the gutter.

Han was already there. She pressed both hands to the paving and closed her eyes.

Lu used one.

The road opened inside his thoughts.

He felt the shallow channel and the bed beneath it. He felt the seven courses of the retaining wall, each laid with its long axis turned against the one below. Iron cramps joined the oldest stones. Three had rusted through. Farther down, someone had shaved away the fill behind the facing until a broad section of road rested on a shell no thicker than Lu's hand.

The hidden shaper touched the lowest course again.

Lu knew the rhythm.

Yan Bo always counted twice before committing his strength.

“Get your hand against the wall,” Han said.

Lu obeyed, careful to let his fingers search before they settled. Han believed he needed contact near the damaged section. Most shapers did. She didn't need to learn that Lu could have mapped the break from the wagon.

The first quarrels came from below.

One struck the survey wagon, deep enough to throw a splinter into the driver's cheek. Another rang against a soldier's shield. The horses lunged in their traces.

Children screamed ahead.

Ren shouted for shields along the lower side. Slate crossed Lu's vision at a run and leaped onto the retaining wall. Pale light flashed against his scales as a quarrel broke across his raised forearm. He turned his shoulder into the next shot and dropped from sight.

Lu kept his attention inside the stone.

Yan gave the wall his second push.

The facing began to peel away.

“They want the rear wagon off the road,” Han said.

She caught the obvious failure and drove her shaping beneath it. Lu felt her power spread through the upper bed, broad and disciplined. Han was stronger than most house masters and far less wasteful. She tried to hold the outer courses in place.

The Forsworn had already cut away what supported them.

“Don't hold the facing,” Lu said. “It has nothing behind it.”

Her eyes opened.

For one dangerous moment, she looked at him instead of the road.

Then three blocks tore free and crashed down the slope.

Han released them. “Give me the bed underneath.”

Lu placed his palm flat.

He could have lifted the failing section. Doing so would tell Han exactly how much he had concealed when she assessed him for the survey party. It would tell Ren that an unremarkable repair shaper possessed the reach of a military specialist. If the report reached Covenant, the House of Measured Stone would reclaim him before he ever saw Bastion.

He gave Han less.

Enough stone thickened beneath the wagon's rear wheels to keep them level. Han tied that new support into the sound inner bed. A Raider caught the back rail while another lifted the front wheel. The team strained, harness leather creaking, and dragged the wagon beyond the hollowed section.

The paving settled a finger's width.

It held.

Han breathed once through her nose. “You found the cut quickly.”

“You told me where to work.”

She didn't answer.

Below them, white fire crossed the brush. Men shouted. A bowman broke from cover and ran into a green shape rising from the weeds. The Lurker took his ankle, folded him facedown and dragged him clear of his own crossbow.

Lu had heard the Heshan defenders call the Scourge beasts. Beasts did not leave a loaded bow untouched because their commander might want to inspect it. They did not pull an enemy into cover before questioning him. They did not put their armored bodies between frightened horses and the arrows meant to panic them.

One of the red Raiders braced the survey wagon with his shoulder while the driver cut a tangled rein free. A quarrel struck the scales along his back. He

flinched, turned his head to make certain the passengers were still down, and stayed where he was.

The Lurker had caught an ankle instead of opening a throat. Lu could admire the restraint without forgetting how easily the same claws could have killed the man.

He pushed deeper into the road.

Yan had abandoned the outer facing. His shaping traveled inward through a narrow passage behind the wall, drawing material away from its foot and feeding it toward the lower slope. He wasn't trying to drop one wagon anymore. He was opening a route beneath Ren's shields.

Lu knew the route because he had shown it to him.

They had repaired this culvert together the previous spring. Yan had complained that the service house claimed every sound road and assigned every collapse to the hands sent to fix it. Lu had laughed. By then, Yan had already brought him to three Forsworn suppers.

There had been no altar and no oath. The Forsworn distrusted both.

At the first supper, an old woman had asked Lu whether his grandfather's promise should own his hands. At the second, a quarryman had given him the true tally of men killed in a collapse the house record called an unavoidable loss. At the third, Yan had placed two maps on the table. One showed the refuge halls and patrol roads maintained by the Confederacy. The other showed shepherds' caves, dry cisterns and forgotten cuts where a family could hide between obligations.

Lu had added three routes to the second map.

That had become his place among them. He did not burn storehouses or cut bridges. He found ways through stone. He opened sealed wells, strengthened hiding places and marked tunnels that could carry people beyond a house patrol. When other Forsworn spoke of him, they called him a repairman. Only the route keepers knew how much of the highland bed he could feel.

Yan knew.

Yan was counting on him to remember which side of the wall had fed him.

A quarrel struck the wagon rail where the driver had been sitting.

Lu shifted his palm closer to the gutter.

There was an old signal. Two strikes through the cover, a pause, then one more. It meant a friend stood above. It meant wait.

His finger curled against the stone.

Ahead of him, an elven child crawled beneath a wagon while his mother tried to pull him back without raising her head above the wheel. One of Brace's Initiates lay along the outer side of the wheel, placing his scaled back between the bowmen and the two elves. He drew his tail against his legs to leave the mother room to reach her son.

Lu did not send the signal.

He bent the gutter downward and opened a hole no wider than his thumb. The trapped water plunged into Yan's passage.

The pressure below paused.

Yan would think the neglected culvert had failed. He would search for the leak before committing more stone.

Lu used those heartbeats to do what Han had asked.

Then he did more.

He reached beneath her broad support and found the untouched shelf of bedrock below it. He drew six narrow ribs upward, persuading the existing grain to carry weight along the lines it already preferred. He joined each rib to the road bed with a seam fine enough to look old.

Han's head turned sharply.

She could feel the load leaving her hands.

“Lu,” Han said.

“The outlet was blocked,” he said.

It was a foolish answer. They both knew it.

Yan struck the support from beneath.

The impact numbed Lu's left arm to the shoulder. The outer paving burst upward. A broken gutter cover cut through his sleeve and opened the flesh above his elbow.

He did not release the ribs.

Han lost her footing. Ren caught the back of her coat and dragged her away from the opening as three men climbed through it.

Lu knew two of them.

The first carried a halberd with a backward-curving hook beneath the blade. Lu recognized the iron collar where its head joined the haft. He had repaired it behind a refuge hall while Peng Rui held the hot metal steady with tongs and talked about a daughter learning to walk. Lu had filed a burr from that collar so it wouldn't catch Peng's fingers. He knew exactly where his own repair ended and the old iron began.

Peng swung the halberd at Ren's neck.

The captain caught the blade on his shield. The hook bit into the rim. Ren stepped inside the trapped weapon and drove his shield into Peng's chest.

The second man came around him with a knife.

“Chen,” Lu shouted.

Chen Huo looked at him.

Recognition stopped the knife for less than a breath. Chen's mouth twisted. Lu had missed two suppers, then left Lianshi with a house survey party and the creatures who had taken Heshan. Seen from Chen's side of the blade, he could hardly have arranged a clearer betrayal.

A Raider came over the wagon rail.

His tail blade cut through Chen's knife hand. One claw closed over the man's jaw. The Raider drove him onto the paving, shifted his grip and

pinned him alive.

Peng tore his halberd free and turned to help.

Ren's sword entered beneath his raised arm.

Lu felt the impact through Peng's boots.

For an instant, every line inside the road stood distinct. Ren's weight pitched forward. Peng's knees failed. Chen thrashed beneath the Raider. Han crawled toward the broken edge, trying to reach Lu without crossing the unstable section.

Lu could have released the support and caught Peng before he fell.

The wagon stood above him.

Lu held the road.

Peng struck the paving and didn't move again.

The third attacker dropped into the opening. A Lurker followed as far as the rim, then sprang back when the passage began to close around him.

Yan was sealing the route.

Lu drove his awareness after the retreating pressure. He felt Yan withdraw along the flooded culvert, one hand against the ceiling, pulling loose stone down behind him. He could have stopped the collapse. That would have shown everyone on the road how far his reach extended.

He let Yan go.

Ren stood over Peng, blood darkening the dressing beneath his coat. He looked at Lu's open arm. “Can you move?”

Lu nodded.

“Then take Master Han across,” Ren told Lu. “We hold this.”

Lu could do that. For once, he was grateful for an order.

He helped Han stand. They crossed together while the Raider guarded Chen and another Scourge watched the sealed passage. Lu didn't look directly at Peng again. Through the paving he could still feel the weight that had been balanced on two boots, now spread along the stones. He kept finding it when he tried to judge the next step.

The next bend had become a fort.

The elves had brought their wagons against the inner bank. Serevan and Ilara knelt beside a tailboard with their hands spread against its planks. Wood flowed beneath their fingers, closing gaps and extending along cut branches until the wagons shared a continuous breastwork. Two Initiates braced the new wall. A Mystic watched over it, pale light gathered between his claws.

Lu had known why the service houses valued elven craft. He had never seen elves use it for themselves.

Han pulled him toward the survey wagon. “Sit.”

“Yan is in the lower culvert,” Lu told Han.

Her hands stopped on his torn sleeve. “You knew who was shaping.”

There was no safe lie left. Lu chose a narrow truth.

“I worked this road with him,” Lu said.

“That is not what I asked,” Han replied.

“No.”

Han cut the cloth away from his wound, peeling the blood-stiffened sleeve clear of the skin. Her knife moved carefully even after her mouth tightened. “How far can you feel him?”

“Far enough to know he is leaving.”

“And those ribs under the road?”

Lu looked toward the wagons. “Far enough to keep them from falling.”

She pressed folded linen over his arm harder than the wound required. “You let me assess you as a third-rank repair shaper.”

“A third-rank repair shaper is permitted to go home.”

Han eased her fingers from the bandage. Her mouth remained set, but she no longer pulled the linen tight. Lu couldn't tell whether she resented the lie or understood why he had needed it.

“You should have told me what you could feel before I trusted that road with six people and a wagon.”

“Yes.”

Han waited for an excuse. Lu gave her none. She tied the bandage and sat back. “You will tell me the rest before we reach Bastion.”

Across the road, Brace counted the Scourge. No names were spoken. Heads turned, paused and settled. A Lurker emerged from the lower brush. Brace knew who was missing before the hunter reached him.

Lu wondered what it would be like to belong to something that could find him without a route mark hidden beneath a table.

Slate climbed over the outer bank. A quarrel stood from the scales above his hip. He pulled it free, glanced at the head and dropped it. His eyes moved over the wounded, the wagons, Chen beneath the Raider and the split road.

They stopped on Lu.

“One shaper escaped through the culvert,” Lu said before Han could speak. “Yan Bo. He knows the lower tracks.”

Slate came closer. “You know where he exits?”

“Beneath a hawthorn on the face of the next cutting.”

Ren shifted his grip on his sword. “How do you know his name?”

Lu looked at Peng's halberd lying on the paving. “Because I know all three men who came through that road.”

Nobody spoke for a moment.

The Raider holding Chen adjusted one claw when the prisoner tried to turn toward Lu. Chen's severed hand lay near the gutter. The Mystic had stopped the bleeding at his wrist.

Slate didn't ask Lu whether he was Forsworn. Not yet.

“Can Yan bring the road down from the outlet?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Show me.”

Han objected to Lu climbing with an injured arm. Slate listened, then told a Raider to carry him over the worst ground. Lu expected mockery from the creature. The Raider crouched with his back toward him and waited.

Lu climbed on.

The scales were warmer than stone and shifted over dense muscle as the Raider descended. He moved with greater care than most men used while carrying a full bucket. Slate went ahead on his own claws. Another Raider followed behind. Pelrin paralleled them through the scrub, visible only when sunlight found a green ridge along his back.

Lu kept one hand on the hillside.

Yan had reached the outlet. Mud moved around his knees. He was widening the mouth beneath the hawthorn, preparing to leave and collapse it after him.

Lu felt another, fainter line extending uphill.

Yan hadn't abandoned the attack. He had shaped a thin fault back toward the road, narrow enough to escape Han's broad inspection. One hard pull at its end would open beneath the lead wagon.

“Faster,” Lu said.

The Raider didn't ask why. He bounded across the slope.

They reached the hawthorn as Yan pushed a leather satchel from the culvert. His patched coat was soaked to the waist. Red cloth bound his hair away from his face.

He looked at Lu on the Raider's back. “You opened the drain.” The words were not a question. Once, each had trusted the other to hold a mountain above his head.

Lu slid down and put his good hand against the bank. “Leave the road alone, Yan.”

Yan's gaze moved to Slate. “You brought him to our exits.”

“There are children above it.”

“There are always children above something the houses want protected.” Yan planted both palms in the mud. “That is why they put the wagons there.”

Stone rose beneath Slate in two narrow spikes.

He jumped between them, wings opening once to carry him over the hawthorn. Yan twisted the slope beneath his landing. Slate caught a root instead of falling and pulled himself clear as the two Raiders closed from either side.

Yan widened the culvert behind him.

Lu knew the escape. One step backward, a turn beneath the root, then the opening drawn closed. Yan had used it during a flood while Lu held the roof.

“Come with me,” Yan said.

For one breath, the old promise returned. No house ledger. No inherited duty. Work chosen and given to people who needed it. A place where Lu's hands belonged to him.

Then Lu felt Yan reach along the fault toward the wagons.

He stopped hiding.

Lu seized every line of load in the cutting at once.

The hillside answered from the culvert floor to the road above. He locked the fault shut, fused its edges and drove the excess pressure downward into bedrock. Yan tried to tear it open. Lu caught the force, turned it through the ribs he had raised beneath the road and returned it around Yan's ankles.

Stone closed over both boots.

Yan stared at him. “You said you couldn't do that.”

“I said the house had never taught me.”

Yan dragged both hands through the mud. The culvert mouth began to close, but Lu held that too. He was done pretending he could touch only the stone beneath his palm.

Slate crossed the distance. His tail blade cut across Yan's forearm and drove the sleeve into the bank. Yan's fingers spasmed open. The pressure against Lu's locked fault fell away.

Slate caught him by the collar before he could wrench free. The point of the blade settled beneath Yan's ribs.

Yan looked at Lu, not at the creature holding him. “They'll own it now.”

“No,” Lu said. “They won't.”

He kept the road shut and eased the stone from Yan's boots. Slate glanced at the opening, then at Lu. “We need the road,” Slate said. “Let him take the culvert.”

Yan pulled his sleeve from the blade. He left his satchel in the mud and backed into the water, holding his wounded arm against his chest.

“If you come after the wagons again,” Slate said, “I won't ask him to spare you.”

Yan vanished beneath the root. Lu narrowed the passage behind him, leaving enough room for the water and nothing larger. The hillside stayed still.

For several breaths, the only sound was water running over newly joined stone.

Lu's knees shook. Not from the effort. Han would know what he was. Ren would report it. Covenant would receive the report eventually, however many copies Slate demanded first.

He had spent twelve years making certain no one could prove he was more useful than the life he wanted.

Yan had destroyed that concealment with one fault aimed at a wagon.

Slate looked uphill, then back at Lu. “Is the road safe?”

Lu tested every rib, seam and old iron cramp between them and the wagons. “It is now.”

“Good. Can you open this enough for my Lurkers without weakening it?”

The request was so ordinary that Lu almost laughed.

“Yes,” Lu told Slate.

He reshaped the outlet while Pelrin watched. Lu made a shoulder-wide passage, keyed its roof into the natural grain and opened two finger holes through which trapped water could drain. He showed the Lurker which pale seam marked the edge of the new support.

Pelrin touched it once, then looked at him. “You build better holes than most people build roads.”

“Most people should not build roads.”

The Lurker's narrow mouth opened in what might have been a smile.

Yan's satchel contained bread, cord and marked tally slats. Lu recognized the route keeper's cipher before Slate picked one up.

Third patrol circuit. Relief at the lower refuge hall. Two wagons expected.

The Forsworn had known Ren's route. The mark for the wagons had been added in different charcoal.

Someone inside Lianshi had reported the departure after Shen sealed the releases.

Lu handed the slat to Slate. “They knew about the patrol first. This mark was added later. It means two burden wagons, but there are five.”

“So the message left before we finished loading.”

“Or the watcher left before the count was complete.”

Slate passed the slats to Ren when they returned to the road. Lu watched the captain read the patrol marks and reach the same conclusion. A soldier departed east with a charcoal copy and orders to warn the other circuits.

Han said nothing while the wagons crossed the repaired section.

She didn't need to. Lu felt her inspecting his six hidden ribs one by one. At the last, she stopped and reinforced the join by a fraction. It was the correction a master gave an apprentice whose work deserved to remain.

Only after the final wagon reached sound road did she look at him. “Third rank.”

Lu flexed his bandaged arm. “The examiner asked me to raise a wall.”

“And?”

“I raised a third-rank wall.”

Her expression threatened anger again. Then one corner of her mouth moved. “Before Bastion,” she reminded him.

He nodded.

They made camp at the next refuge hall. Brace chose the wagon positions after hearing Ren's concerns about the lower path and Han's need for clean water. Two Initiates carried buckets uphill without being asked twice. The Scourge placed their wounded where the Mystic could reach them, posted watchers and ate only after the travelers had water.

Lu sat with his back against the survey wagon and watched them divide work.

The Forsworn had offered freedom from duties chosen by the dead. The Confederacy offered safety by making every household responsible for the next. Lu had lived between those promises long enough to know how cruel either side could be.

The Scourge claimed to offer choice, then called every scaled creature Slate's.

Lu had distrusted that from the moment he heard it.

He still did.

But when Chen woke, alive with his wounded wrist bandaged and his arms secured in rope, Brace brought him water. Folded cloth kept the bindings off the stump. When the prisoner spat at him, the Raider wiped his scales and offered the cup again.

No one asked Lu to pretend Peng hadn't been his friend.

Two days later, a Lurker messenger found the column at a run. She carried no pack and showed no sign of having slept. Pelrin acknowledged her with a nod, and she gave Slate a sealed letter.

Serevan read it aloud because Slate couldn't read the imperial hand.

Troops were gathering beyond Bastion's western frontier. Grain, quarrels and spare harness were moving toward the crossing used by recent Vallyrian raids. Serena had begun pulling vulnerable stores inside the city. She wanted to know which commanders would hold the roads while Slate faced trouble elsewhere.

Lu listened from the survey wagon.

An army might be approaching from the west. The Forsworn had attacked from the east. Between them stood a ruined city whose walls Han expected to inspect with six shapers and a chest of gauges.

Han walked beside Slate after Serevan finished reading. “How much time?” she asked.

“My scouts are finding out.”

She looked back at Lu and the tools piled around him. “Then tell your quartermasters we need dressed stone, lime and every surviving foundation plan waiting when we arrive.”

Slate added the request to his reply.

Lu rested his good hand on the wagon bed, its worn grain pressing against his palm. Beneath the wheels, the road stretched west through layers of stone he had been trained to maintain, taught to betray and ordered to leave unchanged.

For the first time on the journey, he stopped making his reach smaller than it was. He felt each wheel press against the road and traced the strain through the buried courses, out to the next bend. There was no examiner to satisfy with a third-rank answer. Han had already felt what he could do.

Beyond the reach of his senses lay Bastion and its buried foundations. He pictured the joints from his teachers' drawings, then wondered how many had survived. Those shapers had left stone other people still studied centuries later. He wanted to put his hands against it and learn what the drawings had missed.

If Slate kept his word, Lu would be permitted to touch them without surrendering his hands to a house ledger.

If Slate lied, Lu now knew enough about the Scourge to understand what kind of enemy would own the city around him.

Either way, hiding would no longer protect him.

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X

The Bastion Beneath

Han stopped her wagon beneath Bastion's eastern gate and struck the road with her heel. “Close it.”

Slate sent Harl the order. Initiates turned traffic toward the northern gate while Han knelt beside a rain-filled rut.

“A later crew buried the drains,” she said. “The fill beneath us has been drinking storms ever since.”

Slate focused on the only thing he cared about. “Can the wagon cross?”

Han pointed at Lu. “Ask him. He felt the broken span before I did.”

Lu sat beside the survey chests with his injured arm bound against his ribs. Han's accusation pulled every eye toward him.

“Three chambers,” he said after placing his good hand against the gate pier. “The nearest is full of silt. Its roof has cracked beneath the left wheel track. The second still carries water west. A loaded cart is crossing the third.”

Metal knocked against stone somewhere inside the city.

“Right wheel has an iron patch,” Lu added.

The cart appeared at the end of the street. Its patched wheel struck another rut with the same sharp note.

Han stared at Lu. “Third-rank shaper,” she scoffed.

Lu hedged. “That was the work I agreed to perform.”

“That was the lie you arranged for me to certify.”

Lu kept his hand against the pier. “I promised an explanation before Bastion.”

Han swept a hand toward the arch overhead. “We are under Bastion.”

“Then I kept my word with several feet to spare.”

Slate stepped between them before Han found a structural use for Lu's skull. “Enough.” Slate looked from one to the other. “Lu, give Han a full account. Han, decide where the wagon goes. Continue the argument where I don't have to hear it.”

Han looked up at the fitted blocks. Anger gave way to reluctant awe. “My teachers used drawings of this joint. I always thought the copyists exaggerated the fit.”

“Every seventh block is cut against the grain,” Lu said. “A fracture can't run the length of the inner course.”

He lifted his injured arm to point out the line. Han caught his wrist before he could hurt himself. “Admire it after you account for the piers.”

They left the wagon outside. Lu marked a safe path through the arch, and Han followed it with two shapers while Ren brought the escort through on foot.

Serena met them in the receiving yard with three marked boards and a clerk. Wagons creaked beyond her, their drivers waiting to learn which gate they could use.

Slate could tell by the set of her shoulders that she had a whole list of things to tell him. He made the introductions before she began. “Master Han Meilin leads the stoneshapers. Lu Wen is the shaper with the injured arm. Captain Ren Qiao commands the escort.”

Serena repeated each name to her clerk, who added their room assignments beside them. “The western grain convoy left at dawn with sixteen Initiates,” she said. “Harl objected. I sent them anyway.”

“Why sixteen?”

“Because twelve were available and the convoy master threatened to leave without them. I reassigned four from Harl's wall crew.” She glanced toward the blocked gate road. “If he wants them back, he may explain which district eats stone this week.”

“Matek's scouts found the enemy supply depot. He returned before dawn and intends to burn it tomorrow night. I sent him the latest positions and told him not to wait for your approval if the target moves.”

“Good.”

“I thought so.” Serena didn't sound relieved. “The force behind that depot has hired infantry, twelve supply wagons and officers who can keep them moving. If Matek fails, they will reach the western approaches before Han finishes inspecting this gate.”

Han looked away from the arch. “I was identifying the load path. Admiration does not require a plumb line.”

“Well, let me know where to point the labor before noon,” Serena said. “Three crews are holding dressed stone, and every idle wagon costs us another trip before dark.”

“No wall receives another course until I sound its foundation,” Han said. “New weight on a washed pier gives you more wall to bury when it fails.”

Serena's attention moved to the closed road. “That closes the eastern gate, delays the wall crews and leaves twenty-seven carts using the northern lane.”

“A buried cart delays them longer,” Han dryly noted.

Serena gave the empty board to Han. “First column for materials needed before sunset. Second for supplies that can wait. If you write merely ‘stone,’ I will send you the rubble already here.”

Han passed the board to Lu. “List dimensions, grain and quantity. If the source matters, name the quarry.”

It wasn't forgiveness. Lu accepted the board as though it might become some.

Serena raised her final report. “Brenn, Harl and Sumnu have each claimed the same thirty-two rested Initiates. I assigned today's shifts. As amazing as the Scourge are, you would let me know if they can make three copies of themselves before tomorrow?”

Slate chuckled. “Lucidus hasn't seen fit to grant us that ability. Summon them after breakfast tomorrow and we'll go over manpower.”

“A pity,” Serena drawled. “I have already called them for the morning. Sumnu is bringing his section leaders. He wants an army with a clear chain of command. With your time split between here, Woodhaven, and Lucidus knows where else, we need to know who makes decisions while you're gone.”

Slate nodded. Evidently there was more news. “Kegan?” Slate asked.

Serena's expression sharpened. “He says the rocs have stopped making lightning. But claims that may actually be better.”

Slate raised an eyebrow. “How does losing their one unusual weapon help?”

“He has a drawing. He tried to explain it while I was auditing our stores. I pawned him off to someone who might be able to help him and actually understand the scribbles he calls schematics.”

Slate sighed and left the group in the receiving yard. He wanted to see the plan before Kegan spent one of their five birds on it. He found Kegan in the scholasticum court.

Kegan had brought pieces of egg shell, shed down, three jars and a charcoal drawing pinned to the wall with two knives. A few strands of down clung to the mouth of one jar. The drawing showed a hooked beak, broad wings and four legs arranged around a rider.

Kegan pointed at the drawing before Slate reached the table. “They are not getting the lightning back,” he declared.

“Serena said you thought that was useful.”

“Serena was carrying grain tallies and threatened to put me in one of the sacks.”

Slate shrugged. “She was busy.”

“She was unreceptive,” Kegan complained, pushing a scorched glove toward him. “The difference matters to scholarship.”

The five young rocs remained at Woodhaven. All had hatched. The broodkeepers kept them fed and exercising while the chicks treated every approaching bucket as their next meal.

None had produced a spark for days. Kegan had changed their feed, nesting stone and exercise. Willowmere had stopped him from leaving them in a thunderstorm after he exhausted the safer tests.

“They're healthy?” Slate asked, weighing whether he still had a use for Rocs beyond their biomass.

Kegan bristled. “They are gaining weight, hunting rats and field mice, and biting me with enthusiasm. Willowmere checks them twice a day. I stopped testing the lightning when the third chick began avoiding my gloves.”

Slate looked at the jars. “What is in those?”

“Breast and wing-root tissue from the adult carcasses. I removed none from the chicks.”

He tapped a piece of shell. “They hatched with a charge they cannot replenish. The adults had channels through the breast and wing roots. The chicks do not. Perhaps the nesting cliffs supplied charged minerals. Perhaps the parents induced the channels before hatching. I could spend a year trying to prove which loss killed the trait and still give you five large birds that look pretty but won't help you against the Collective.”

“You don't want the year,” Slate stated.

“I want a result.” Kegan sighed before pulling the drawing from the wall and laying it across the table. “If they cannot develop the electrical channels, we may be able to direct their growth elsewhere. They still have magic, even without the channels that made lightning.”

The new forelegs sat beneath the wing roots, supported by an altered breastbone. Heavy feline haunches supported a saddle cradle behind the

wings.

“The first design would likely tear the flight muscles,” Kegan said. “The second could probably run or launch, not both.”

Kegan tapped the drawing. “This one distributes the landing impact through four limbs. The hind legs take the first impact. The foreclaws hold ground while the wings fold. I need a Mystic to tell me whether the growth can be staged without crippling the bird.”

Slate traced the space between the shoulder and saddle, thinking aloud. “We haven't tried to force evolution on another creature besides the graft. Besides, the rider's knees still interfere here.”

“Only if the rider insists on having knees where humans usually keep them.”

Slate looked up.

Kegan held his expression for two breaths. “A different saddle is probably simpler.” The researcher paused. “Hopefully a Mystic can make the other evolutions a reality.”

Slate considered the drawing. If Kegan could make it work, the Concord of Light could train riders to reinforce settlements along the western frontier. Fidem would have another reason to keep the project supplied. First, Kegan needed to produce a mount capable of carrying a rider.

“What do you call it?” Slate asked.

“The third proposal.”

Slate rolled his eyes. Academic types lacked imagination. “That's terrible.”

“It is accurate.”

Slate considered a mythical creature from his own world. “Gryphon.”

Kegan tested the word aloud, frowned as though Slate had changed a measurement, then wrote it beneath the drawing. “Fine. Gryphon proposal. It remains my idea.”

Slate imagined a rider landing inside a threatened district while the road below remained full of carts. Scouts reaching the western fields before an enemy's outriders. A reserve that could cross the city without fighting its way through its own inhabitants.

“One bird,” Slate said. “Begin with measurements and a staged plan. Shale or a Mystic reviews every transformation. If the animal stops eating, flying or trusting its keepers, the work stops.”

Kegan didn't gather his papers. “No.”

Slate waited but lifted a palm and admired the golden sheen of his claws.

Kegan gulped and quickly explained. “One bird gives me no way to distinguish the transformation from the animal. Three. One receives only the structural changes required for the forelimbs. One receives the full pattern after we know the first can fly. The third remains unchanged for comparison.”

“You have five.”

“Willowmere has five,” Kegan corrected. “She has informed me of that distinction repeatedly.”

“Then she chooses whether you get three.”

Kegan considered the concession. “And the Mystic?”

“You can have access to one after the western defenses and Shale's nursery are covered. Put the plan in writing before you touch a bird.”

“It is in writing.” He indicated three crowded sheets beneath the drawing.

“Put it in writing Serena can read without a translator.”

That offended him more than the restrictions. It also ended the argument.

At the door, he remembered a message. “Shale says the nursery needs more washable bedding. Not more opinions about where she ought to put the nests.”

Slate smiled. “I'll send the bedding.”

The next morning, Slate found twelve people arguing around a table meant for eight.

Sumnu pinned four unit counters against the table. Beside him, Harl held the garrison roll open with both hands. Serena stood between them with three boards and the look of a woman considering whether murder would simplify her filing system.

Matek occupied the chair nearest the window, travel dust caught between his scales. Edrin sat on the sill. Lynia waited beside the cold hearth. Brenn, Fidem and Merus crowded the far side with Han and Lu. Ren remained by the door as an observer.

Everyone Slate needed was in the room. That explained why nothing could move.

“Those sixty-four hold the city,” Harl said.

“They are my best field detachment,” Sumnu replied. “Standing on your gates does not make them yours.”

Serena struck a board against the table. “Sixteen are escorting grain. Eight came off night watch. Eighteen are hauling stone. All three of you have assigned the same thirty-two rested Initiates.”

“I said the lintels require forty hands,” Han said.

Serena tapped her assignment board. “Those hands are attached to people. I account for the rest of them too.”

Slate took the board from Serena and marked four boxes on its empty side. “Headquarters,” he said, drawing a larger box above them for himself.

“Enough. We keep letting the loudest problem borrow whoever is closest. That stops today. Headquarters advises me and coordinates the army. Line commanders command troops. The other boxes are Operating Forces, Supporting Establishment and Forces Reserve. We'll place every unit before we leave.”

Harl frowned. “Line?”

“The people who lead them into battle. First the staff. Section one, personnel and administration. Serena.”

She looked at the other boards. “Temporarily.”

“Section four, logistics. Also Serena, for now.”

“Two deputies,” she said. “One who can count, and one who can tell Harl that ‘more’ is not a quantity.”

“Approved. Section two, intelligence. Matek.”

Matek inclined his head. “I guessed when you placed me closest to the window.”

“You run sources, scouts and threat estimates. Tell commanders what the enemy can do and what you think they'll do next.”

“A welcome distinction. Some commanders confuse the two.”

“Teach them better.” Slate tapped the western edge of the map. “You also plan the destabilization campaign. Orrik takes field command after the depot raid.”

Matek's amusement thinned. “Orrik is an effective hammer. Hammers do not write reports.”

Edrin stretched one leg along the sill. “I can give him a Lurker who does.”

Matek had spent too long being the clever man Slate sent beyond the border whenever a situation needed delicate handling. Every western plan now lived inside one skull.

“Pick Orrik's intelligence lead before you leave for the depot,” Slate said. “You built the depot strike, so finish it. After that, your place is in Bastion. Design the campaign, brief the commander and replace plans that fail. Stop climbing through every window yourself.”

Matek showed the tips of his teeth. “A punishing promotion. I accept.”

Slate wrote the next line. “Section three, operations, planning and training. Brenn.”

Brenn folded his arms. “I decide who is ready?”

“You set standards, build training schedules and turn objectives into plans the branch commanders can execute,” Slate confirmed.

“If Sumnu decides enthusiasm is a substitute for formation drill?”

“I meet your tedious standard,” Sumnu said. “While complaining.”

“Good,” Brenn said.

Slate drew a line beneath the staff. “I command the armed forces. Sumnu commands the Raiders. Edrin commands the Lurkers. Lynia commands the Mystics. They provide trained units. Section three makes sure those units work together.”

Lynia studied the chart like a spell diagram. “Mystics assigned to healing wards?”

“Remain under your standards. The ward decides who they treat. You decide whether they are competent and how many can be spared for the front lines.”

“Good,” Lynia said. “A healer divided between three masters eventually disappoints four.”

Sumnu pushed two red counters forward. “Two Raider detachments are ready, sixty-four each. The next two exist mostly in Serena's imagination and the recruits' confidence.”

“Thirty-one can hold formation,” Brenn said. “Seventeen can do it after running.”

“Sumnu gets the ready detachments,” Slate said. “Harl commands the Bastion garrison under him. Edrin keeps thirty-two Lurkers on reconnaissance. Lynia?”

“Twenty-six Mystics. Twenty-five if Kegan receives his specialist. Twenty-three if Shale requests two more in Woodhaven.”

Serena recorded the number before anyone could spend the same Mystic twice.

Slate turned to Merus and Fidem. “The army does not govern the cities. Merus remains governor of Woodhaven. Fidem becomes governor of Bastion.”

Fidem's brows rose. “Titles attract people who wish to be heard.”

“You've been doing that work too.”

Merus rubbed the bark along one wrist. “Woodhaven keeps a garrison?”

“Yes. You decide when an emergency begins until you reach me. Then local defense falls under the field commander I name.”

Merus nodded. “Woodhaven can live with it.”

“Bastion can as well,” Fidem said. “My office controls shelter, food distribution and the Concord's volunteers?”

“Yes. Serena tells you what exists before you promise it.”

“A sound spiritual discipline.”

Slate faced Han and Lu. Han had spent the discussion marking cracks in the tabletop. Lu had said nothing. Matek kept his eyes on Lu.

“Restoring Bastion cannot remain a collection of borrowed labor details. We are forming an Engineering Corps.” Slate let the room settle. “I’m appointing Lu to command it.”

The room stilled.

Han spoke first. “He can feel a buried seam through twenty feet of fill. That doesn't mean he should be placed in charge of an entire corps.”

“True,” Lu acknowledged. “But it means I can tell which six crews are about to die because someone scheduled them badly.”

Han's mouth tightened. It was close to approval.

“Han keeps command of the contracted stoneshapers and sets restoration standards,” Slate said. “Lu commands our permanent builders. Brenn handles emergency drills. Serena supplies them.”

“And when their commander disappears?” Matek asked.

Lu looked across the table. “You mean again.”

“I mean whenever the Forsworn decide they own more of your loyalty than we do.”

“They never owned it.”

“Yet you hid your skill for them.”

“I hid it from every oath that would have made it useful to someone else. Your Avatar offered work, pay and the freedom to leave. That is rarer than you think.”

Matek's tail curled around the chair leg. “Freedom makes departure easier.”

“Chains make betrayal easier.”

Slate let Matek press Lu. He wanted to hear an answer, not another joke. He put a claw on the table between them. “Matek's job is to distrust you. Give him no useful reason. You report personnel to Serena, projects to section three and structural risks to Han. An emergency comes straight to me. Can you command the corps?”

Lu sighed. “It appears no one else wants it.”

Slate pinned the dwarf with his gaze. “That wasn't the question.”

Lu met his eyes. “Yes. I can command it.”

Slate wrote his name.

Serena read the assignments back, required deputies and demanded written rolls by sunset. When every soldier appeared on one roll, Sumnu remained standing. “One command is missing.”

Slate checked the page. “Which one?”

“Yours. You command us, but no one is assigned to keep you alive.”

“I have managed so far,” Slate scoffed.

“At Heshan you went beneath a falling building. Before that, you entered a Vallyrian city through a breach no one else could see.” Sumnu counted on his claws. “Your growing domain relies heavily on you actually surviving.”

Sumnu continued with a conciliatory gesture. “Appoint Brace to lead a royal guard. Twenty-four. Eight Raiders, eight Lurkers, eight Mystics. Enough to rotate watches and put a mixed squad beside you in the field.”

Royal guard made Slate picture the Secret Service shadowing him and deciding which doors he could use. Protection had value; someone else controlling his movements did not.

Slate considered. “Fine.”

Slate lowered his hand to the board. “Brace commands twenty-four. Protection, communication and recovery. They do not choose my route, prevent me from fighting or command another unit. If I fall, they get me out without collapsing the army around me.”

“Reasonable,” Sumnu said.

“You had already chosen him.” Slate arched a brow.

“Of course.”

“Brace does not know yet,” Edrin said. “This is the only part of the meeting I expect to enjoy twice.”

Slate wrote the assignment beside Brace's name. “He'll hear it from me.”

Serena moved eight names from each branch's assignments into the guard column, including Brace among the Raiders. “Those names come off your duty rolls,” she told the three branch commanders. “If Brace needs to borrow anyone else, he comes through me. I will not discover an empty watch post because its sentry acquired a better title.”

The chart looked cleaner than the army would ever be. It still gave every argument a place to go and someone responsible for ending it.

Han waited while the others collected their rolls. Lu paused beside the new Engineering Corps entry until Matek passed him, then followed Han to the

door.

“Slate,” Han said. “Before your new commander recruits anyone, I need you beneath the western terrace.”

Slate nodded and Han led them to the entrance beneath the terrace. A ward-flame there let Bastion see them.

Beyond the first turn, his sight ended.

“The original conduit continues beneath the retaining terrace,” the city intelligence told Slate. “Its present condition is not recorded. The surface repairs have not restored that connection.”

Slate stood over an opened stair with Han, Lu and two of the other shapers. Pelrin waited below, where the smell of stagnant water rose past his shoulders. Harl had cleared carts from the street overhead and placed a guard at either end.

Han handed Slate a lamp. “Your Lurkers found the lower passage. They heard a repeating iron strike behind the channel wall and smelled stagnant water. I want to locate the source before we cut an inspection hole.”

Slate looked at the old paving.

He had spent enough of the last campaign waiting for stone to crack beneath his feet. Lu had felt the attack while Slate was still looking for a caster's hands.

There was a sensory development he had passed over when examining the branches available to his existing body. He could keep the biomass and send Pelrin ahead, but a Lurker in a flooded tunnel could only report what he reached. Lu could read the stone while he held the damaged conduit. Slate needed to know what moved beyond it before either of them went through.

The sensory menu gave him three useful branches. Lucidum Pit would track body heat for 180 biomass, but it couldn't show him a pier failing beneath the street. Electro-Reception would find living bodies through stone for 600, twice the Otolithic Matrix’s biomass cost, and still miss a shifting support. Sonar Pharynx Gland remained locked behind Sound Channels and would map an open tunnel rather than the weight moving through its walls.

Otolithic Matrix offered less detail about a person, but it could warn him of movement in the stone itself. The Matrix would cost 300 biomass and 200 XP. He chose it.

Otolithic Matrix I
Major evolution
Specialized acoustic structures link the inner ear to the feet and jaw, allowing transmitted ground tremors to be mapped into the distance, direction and weight of moving targets.
Requirements: LVL 12
Biomass cost: 300
XP cost: 200

He sent an Initiate to the stores keeper for the three hundred biomass. Serena had authorized the survey's resource account that morning. The courier returned, transferred the measured amount through contact and waited while Slate committed it.

Evolution acquired: Otolithic Matrix I
Biomass spent: 300
XP spent: 200
XP available: 7,110

Pressure gathered behind his ears.

He lowered himself onto the stair while new tissue formed along his jaw and through the bones of his feet. The sensation resembled a grain of stone grinding between every tooth at once. He waited until it passed before standing.

The city struck him from below.

A hammer in the next yard. Feet on the street. The heavy, uneven pulse of a loaded barrow beyond Harl's guard. None made a clear picture until he stopped trying to take all of it at once.

He chose Pelrin.

The Lurker climbed the stairs, crossed the paving and went behind the wall of a roofless storehouse. Slate closed his eyes and followed the alternating contacts through the soles of his feet.

“Stop,” Slate sent Pelrin.

Pelrin stopped.

The movement vanished. Slate still knew where he had last felt it. The ability didn't keep showing him a motionless body through stone.

“Again. Farther,” Slate sent.

Han measured the route with her cord. Twenty feet, then forty, then sixty. Slate followed the Lurker's steps through the intact paving. Beyond that, a damaged joint blurred them until he could no longer separate Pelrin from the handcart moving on the next street.

Slate called Brace over to hear about his appointment and help with the test. The Raider repeated the nearer part of Pelrin's walk. His heavier impacts were unmistakable. Afterward, Slate sent him to Serena for the guard's transfer rolls and told him to have the first watch ready that evening.

Slate opened his eyes, smiling. “That would have been useful at the quarry.”

Han wound her cord. “The test tells me range, not discrimination,” Han said. “Can you separate flowing water from footsteps?”

“Let's find out.”

The passage beneath the western terrace had been built for people shorter than Slate. He folded his wings and followed Pelrin into the cramped, waterlogged channel while Han and Lu examined the piers carrying the street above.

Slate put a foot against the nearest support and sorted the tremors: running water, the uneven knock of iron, then the heavier rhythm of a loaded cart overhead. Han opened an inspection gap. A jammed grating was hammering against its stone seat, and the current had eaten a hollow beneath the next

pier. One broken lug sent water rising around the shaper holding that pier in place.

Han ordered the others back.

Slate went through the gap. Cold water pressed his folded wings against his back. He cut the grating free with his tailblade. The current caught the iron at once; its edge scraped across his shoulder as it swung past him. He turned with the pull before Pelrin hauled him out.

The water began to fall. Han's crew reset the support and shored the channel, but she kept the road closed until she could sound every neighboring pier. Slate gave her the crews she needed. A wall was no defense if its road collapsed beneath the garrison.

The channel also fed the old muster hall. Bastion reported a ten-percent improvement in stamina recovery if its rest chambers were restored, but the roof and conduits still needed inspection. Slate put it after the terrace and water repairs. The Starlight Arcanum’s eight practice positions and Fidem’s Hall of Light would stay open during the work.

By evening, Harl's workers had cleared a yard beside the terrace. Raiders and local masons sorted stone under Han's direction. Blocks settled onto the cleared ground with dull knocks, leaving pale dust on the carriers’ scales. The shapers showed the crews which joints they could open and which must stay untouched.

Lu worked at a table under the arcade, drawing with his good hand.

Slate stopped beside him. The dwarf had sketched the broken grating, its surviving stone seat and the blade cuts that had freed it. “Planning to improve it?” Slate asked.

Lu moved the drawing into the light. He had marked a space above the grating, wide enough for a worker to kneel. “An inspection opening here. We could clear the iron from the passage instead of entering the flooded channel.”

Slate looked at the mud drying along his forearm. “I'd appreciate that.”

Lu looked at the torn scales on Slate's shoulder. The deeper wound had closed. New tissue was still replacing what the iron had scraped away. “How long until that arm works properly?”

Slate flexed it. The wound pulled, but he could move the arm. “It works now.”

Lu glanced down at his own bandage. “Mine works now too,” Lu said. “Han still treats me like I'm a bird with a broken wing.”

“Han sees six supports hidden beneath a road and wants to know what else her survey missed.”

Lu's pencil stopped. “She told you.”

“Han told me the assistant she brought from Lianshi turned out to be a master shaper. Ren told Harl you knew the men who attacked us. Neither has asked me to arrest you.”

“Yet,” the dwarf muttered.

Slate cocked his head. “Do I need to?”

Lu looked across the yard. Raiders carried stone under a local mason's direction. One slowed when the mason slapped the wrong block, then moved to the piece she indicated without taking offense.

“I gave the Forsworn routes,” Lu said. “Caves, cisterns, cuts through abandoned workings. Places patrols did not search. I thought they were moving families.”

“Were they?”

“Some.” Lu rotated the sketch so its straight edge aligned with the table. “Yan began moving weapons on the same paths. He said a route did not become wicked just because the burden changed.”

“What did you say?”

“I stopped attending their meetings. It was easier than discovering whether anyone would let me leave.”

Lu's knowledge could keep attackers from slipping beneath Bastion's walls. His old routes could also show attackers a way in. Slate had put Lu in command because no one else could feel a buried failure before it cracked the street. Matek would check the access. Han would check the stone.

“Han needs your skill,” Slate said. “I need it. Finish the survey you agreed to. After that, stay for wages, take the scales, or leave.”

“And the routes?”

“Matek gets every route you gave Yan and the names of anyone who can still use them. If Yan contacts you, Matek hears from you first. That's part of commanding the Corps.”

Lu studied him for long enough that the sounds of the work yard filled the space between them. “Yan said power always learns to call a chain an offer.”

“Then take your pay and leave. If you stay in command, those terms stand. Hide a route or a message, and I'll put someone else over the Corps.”

Lu set his pencil beside the drawing. “You don't trust me.”

“Not yet. I trust your hands. Give Matek what he needs to check the routes.” Slate left him with the drawing and went to find Sumnu.

The field commander stood beneath the western gate with his two detachment leaders. They had the scouts' map spread over a grain chest. Serena's latest courier had added another supply movement at the crossing.

“There you are,” Sumnu greeted him.

The Raider gestured to the document in front of him. “Matek will burn what he can. If that doesn't stop the leeches, where do you want the first line?”

Slate put a claw on the map, marking the stretch of road outside the terrace where their crews had begun repairs. “Here. Far enough out that they have to fight us before they can touch the damaged wall.”

Sumnu moved one red counter to the marked position and the second behind it.

The Raider grinned, displaying a mouthful of fangs. “Then we’d better see what you’ve given us to defend.” He called his detachment leaders over and walked out through the gate.

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XI

The Western Knife

By sunrise the next morning, the first Crusader struck Slate's Scourgeshield hard enough to lose his sword.

The wooden blade bounced off the pale film around Slate's ribs, spun across the training yard and stopped beneath Fidem's white boot. The priest looked down at it, then at the twenty-three soldiers waiting in two ranks behind its owner.

“I believe this remains yours, Tomas,” Fidem said.

The young man stared at Slate's claws. “For the moment.”

Fidem bent, retrieved the sword and returned it hilt first. “That is the spirit. Perhaps keep it in your hand this time.”

Tomas accepted it with both cheeks burning.

Slate decided he might be worth training.

The Concord's first Crusaders had assembled in the yard below Bastion's western wall. Their equipment didn't match. Half carried round shields and half carried taller boards cut from wagon beds. Iron helmets stood beside boiled leather caps, and three different patterns of mail showed beneath their new surcoats. The surcoats tied them together. Each was undyed wool edged in gold thread, with Lucidus's mark worked across the chest in the same gold. Morning light caught the symbol whenever a soldier moved.

Fidem had found enough matching cloth to create a unit. Brenn had given them battered weapons and a drill they weren't ready for.

Slate pointed Tomas back to the scuff his boots had left in the dirt. “Why did you hit the ward?”

“You told me to attack.”

“I told you to get past me.”

Tomas looked toward the practice gate behind Slate. Two posts stood a wagon's width apart, their inward faces painted white. “You were in front of it.”

“And you tried to go through me.” Slate set his feet as they had been before the strike, leaving a narrow path beside his left knee. “You watched my chest. The gate was over there.”

Tomas lowered his sword and saw the gap. “I could have gone around.”

“You could have tried.”

“Would it have worked?”

“Probably not. But I would have had to stop you instead of standing here while you disarmed yourself.”

Brenn barked a laugh from the edge of the yard. The Raider carried a padded spear under one arm and had wrapped both horns in strips of red cloth so the humans would stop forgetting them. “Again,” he said. “And this time, Crusader Vale, remember the enemy owns every part of his body.”

Tomas shifted right. Slate let him see the opening, waited for the commitment and turned his hip. His tail swept low. Tomas jumped it, caught the gatepost with one hand and drove the wooden sword toward Slate's flank.

Slate caught him by the back of his surcoat and set him on the other side.

Tomas twisted, planted both feet and put the sword between them before Slate could tap his shoulder.

“Better,” Slate said.

The recruit's fear became a grin.

“Do not encourage him too quickly,” Fidem said. “His mother has spent years trying to persuade him that good judgment is a virtue.”

“You told my mother?” Tomas asked.

“She sewed that mark on your chest.”

Tomas looked down as though the regalia had acquired another witness.

Fidem had done more than bring recruits for inspection. Before the drill, he had thanked the women who sewed the surcoats, found a missed buckle for a child determined to polish them all, and coaxed Tomas into admitting he had skipped breakfast. Slate could read a company by spacing, posture and where its veterans chose to stand. Fidem read it by families.

Slate waved Tomas back into line and walked along the front rank. Farmers, tradesmen, former caravan guards and three refugees who had fought in town militias stood beneath Lucidus's mark. The broad-shouldered cooper near the center had an old sword cut beside his ear. A woman with gray woven through her dark hair carried a shield polished by years of use. Two younger men tried to stand taller whenever Slate looked their way.

None knelt.

Fidem had apparently won that argument before bringing them.

“They are the first sworn company of the Concord,” the priest said. He didn't raise his voice. The yard quieted for him anyway. “They have made their vows in the Hall of Light. They will keep their own officers and remain under Concord authority. They will learn the signals used by Bastion's garrison and the Scourge field command, because confusion serves no god worth following.”

The last sentence sounded like Fidem. The limits on their command sounded like Serena.

“Who leads them?” Slate asked.

The gray-haired woman stepped forward. “I do. Anwen Pell.”

Her shield bore three repaired cuts and a faded black bird beneath the new gold mark. She hadn't hidden the older emblem.

“Prior service?” Slate asked Anwen.

“North road militia. Nine years,” Anwen replied. “Two raids and one levy war. I left when the reeve asked us to collect grain from families who had none.”

“What did you do after you left?”

“Guarded caravans badly enough to end up here.”

Slate looked at the shield again. “That bird belonged to the militia?”

“My brother. The shield was his.” She offered no further explanation. Slate didn't ask for one in front of her company.

“Your mission?”

Anwen answered without looking at Fidem. “Hold the western routes, protect the Hall and its people, and keep a withdrawal from becoming a rout.”

“Good. You are not here to fight like Scourge. You don't have our armor, speed or healing. You are here to make sure humans can survive on a field built around troops who do.”

One of the younger recruits glanced toward Fidem. The priest's expression stayed warm, but he didn't soften Slate's answer for them.

“Brenn oversees your training. Two of his instructors will work with you each day,” Slate continued. “In battle, you follow your own officers until Sumnu or Harl gives an order covering your position. If a Scourge runs past you without speaking, do not follow unless your officer tells you to. He may be scouting, or using a route that would kill you.”

“And when the Scourge order conflicts with mine?” Fidem asked.

Slate turned to him. Fidem wanted that settled before the first battle. “If the order is tactical, your officer follows it. If Sumnu orders these soldiers onto

a wall, they go. If he orders them to change their oath, appoint their priest or arrest a citizen, he gets told to find me.”

Fidem held his gaze for a moment, then inclined his head. “Clear limits make cooperation easier.”

“They also make it easier to tell when a commander crossed one.”

Anwen faced her company. “You heard him. Pair off.”

The ranks broke into practiced groups. They didn't move like soldiers who had trained together for years, but they knew who stood beside them and who gave the next order.

Brenn approached the first pair with both hands visible around his padded spear. The recruit on the left fixed on the weapon. Brenn's tail hooked the top of his shield and pulled. The man held on, so Brenn used the shield to drag him out of line and touched the spear to the second recruit's ribs.

“Dead,” Brenn said.

The second man swore.

“Probably,” Brenn agreed. “Reset.”

A Lurker waited on the wall above them, scales matching the weathered stone. The recruits knew she was there. They had watched her climb.

They still lost track of her.

On the next attempt, the Lurker descended behind the line, touched the blanket that represented their wounded and reached the wall again before anyone called the threat.

“Your enemy can come from above,” Brenn said. “He can come through a window, over a roof or down the face of the wall you thought protected you. One person in every group watches high. If you all watch high, I kill you from the ground. Decide who owns the direction.”

Anwen assigned sectors. Brenn changed the attack. He drove the front rank backward while the Lurker crossed above them. A recruit called the

movement without turning. Another stepped over the blanket and kept his shield toward Brenn.

They reached the white posts.

“Now put a man on it,” Brenn said.

The broad-shouldered cooper removed his helmet and lay on the blanket. Four Crusaders took the corners.

“Name?” Slate asked.

“Cooper Dain, milord.”

“That a rank?”

“An occupation,” Dain said. “It pays better than recruit.”

Anwen looked over her shoulder. “Only when he makes barrels instead of occupying blankets.”

Dain settled his helmet on his stomach and pulled a folded edge of the blanket from beneath his shoulder. “I serve where the Light places me.”

Fidem covered a smile with one hand.

The added weight exposed every weakness in the formation. The litter team slowed. The shields ahead spread too far apart. When Brenn struck the left side, two soldiers turned toward him and left the right open. The Lurker dropped into the gap.

Slate intercepted her.

Their shoulders met. She twisted around him, but he caught her tail and put her on the ground beside the blanket.

Anwen kept her eyes on the Lurker. “If you hadn't been there, she would have reached Dain.”

“That's why I stepped in.” Slate released the Lurker's tail and gave her room to rise. “You need to see how close that was. Next time, stopping her is your job.”

Anwen called two shields back toward the blanket. “Again.”

“And your bearers won't last the length of the western road,” Slate told her.

“Then we change them before they fail.”

She moved two rested recruits beside the blanket and assigned another pair to take the second rotation. On the next attempt, she called the exchange while the formation still held. The Crusaders closed around the litter team. The transfer cost them six paces, not the wounded man.

Dain reached the gate without being dropped.

“How was the ride?” Fidem asked.

“Better than walking home from the last one.” He sat up and rubbed the back of his head.

“Why join this?” Slate asked. “The garrison needs people.”

Dain looked toward the gold mark on his shield. “My wife works in the Hall. They fed us when we arrived. I can keep taking bowls, or I can help protect the road that brings the grain.”

“You expect the road to need protection?”

“Every road does eventually.”

That sounded like a cooper who had spent years waiting for carts that arrived lighter than promised.

Fidem crouched beside him. “Your wife asked me to remind you that your left knee locks after a long march.”

Dain's mouth tightened. “My wife shares too much with the priesthood.”

“Only the details that keep you alive.”

Anwen heard the exchange. “Vale carries on the next run,” she said. “Dain, stay on the blanket for now. When I put you back in line, you watch the right. Tell me when the knee starts hurting.”

No embarrassment. No permission offered for him to hide it. Slate approved.

He assigned Brenn's two veteran instructors without touching Sumnu's ready companies. The Crusaders would need months before Slate trusted them to hold a flank without Scourge support. They didn't have months before the west tested them. He needed to know what they could actually do, however good they looked in the yard.

“One more exercise,” Slate said. “Mixed formation. Live wards, padded weapons.”

Brace stepped through the yard gate with seven members of the Avatar's Guard behind him.

Slate had expected the new commander to complain about the schedule. Instead, Brace stopped close enough to force Slate to acknowledge the entire watch.

Two Raiders stood behind him, followed by three Lurkers and two Mystics. Dessa watched the roofline. Corren watched Slate. The other five divided the yard entrances between them without waiting for orders. Slate had agreed to give Brace soldiers, not escorts who needed him to tell them where to stand. At least that part was going well.

“You left the western gate without notifying the watch,” Brace said.

“I crossed one yard,” Slate corrected.

“Through a gate.”

Slate arched an eyebrow. “I can still see the gate.”

“The wall blocks its guards from seeing you.” Brace pointed at the northern arch. “A cart entered there while Fidem presented the company. The driver came within thirty feet before a Lurker checked it.”

Slate looked toward the cart. It carried practice beams and three barrels of sand. A familiar mason sat on the bench. He studied his reins rather than meet Slate's eye. “You sent him through?” Slate asked.

“I asked Harl to send the practice equipment by that arch. I wanted to see who checked it.”

Of course he had. Slate could almost hear Sumnu recommending Brace again.

That made it irritating. It did not make him wrong.

“Who cleared the cart?” Slate asked.

“Harl's gate watch. They cleared it for the yard, not for your position.”

“And your people?”

“The outgoing watch kept you in sight. They sent a Lurker for us when the cart arrived. Until then, we were waiting at the western gate to relieve them.”

Brenn planted the padded spear against his shoulder. “You appointed him yesterday. He has already learned how to be unpleasant in public.”

“I chose an experienced teacher,” Brace said.

The Crusaders had stopped adjusting straps and trading practice weapons. Slate could have taken Brace aside. That would leave two dozen recruits remembering only that their avatar had needed chasing across a yard. Better to settle the rule where they could hear it.

Slate folded his arms. He had imagined the guard as a circle of bodies preventing him from moving freely. Brace had attacked the actual weakness instead. Twenty-four soldiers meant three watches of eight. If Slate disappeared between them, the next group would spend its first minutes locating the person it was meant to protect.

“New procedure,” Slate said. “The active watch keeps one Lurker ahead, one behind and a Mystic close enough to reach me through the mind. The rest cover the route. You do not need my permission to inspect a cart, rider or visitor entering my immediate position.”

“And when you fly?” Brace asked.

“You tell Sumnu where I went. If I don't come back when expected, you send Lurkers. You do not chase me into the air.”

“If you fall?”

“Sumnu retains field command. Harl retains Bastion. Your job is protection, communication and recovery. You get me out without stripping troops from the line or overruling either commander.”

Brace's attention shifted to the first watch. Slate understood. The Raider hadn't needed the answer. He'd needed the seven soldiers behind him to hear it from Slate.

“You do not stop me from fighting,” Slate added. “You keep my fighting from creating an avoidable hole in another commander's line.”

Brace looked over the seven guards behind him. “First watch, secure the yard exits. The next rotation takes over at noon. Serena gets all three rosters.”

“Run the first watch now,” Slate said. “Brenn, reset the Crusaders while they do it. I want them practicing with the gate covered.”

Brace issued the order. Two Raiders took the entrance, the roofline Lurker shifted to the northern arch, and the Mystics moved within range of Slate and the gate.

Slate pointed to the sand cart. “Since you brought equipment, use it.”

Brenn organized the final exercise around a retreat through the practice gate. The Crusaders had to carry Dain while Slate, Dessa and Corren held three approaches under controlled attack.

Brace's Raiders slung two practice beams from the crossbars of the yard's timber climbing frame. They could draw either beam back on a restraining rope and release it toward the defenders.

The Lurkers would strike from the walls. The remaining guard members would watch the boundaries and keep the exercise from injuring anyone who had come to observe.

Slate took the center. Dessa held the left approach and Corren the right. Their Scourgeshields appeared as thin distortions around their bodies, pale surfaces fed from three separate reserves of mana.

“Move,” Anwen ordered.

The Crusaders closed around Dain and began withdrawing.

The first beam swung toward Slate's chest. He braced, caught the impact on his ward and stopped it. The blow traveled through the mana-fed film and into his stance. He gave one step, then recovered.

The second beam struck Corren from the right.

The Mystic stopped it against his warded shoulder, turning with the blow. The film stayed against his scales, but his body no longer blocked the space beside Slate. A Lurker came down between them, touched the nearest Crusader's back and escaped before Slate could close the gap.

“Casualty,” Brenn called.

Anwen swore and put the tagged soldier beside Dain. The retreat slowed.

Dessa turned to watch the wall above her. A beam caught her hip as she shifted her stance and spun her half around. Slate moved to cover her. His own lane opened. Tomas stepped into it with his shield raised, caught a padded spear against the boards and nearly lost his feet.

Their hides and wards could take the blows. The trouble was keeping a solid front while taking them. Every turn opened a path to the Crusaders. Slate could plant himself against a timber all morning, but he needed the formation to protect people while it moved.

“Reset,” Slate said.

The beams stopped. Dain stood from the blanket, and Anwen returned the tagged Crusader to the line.

Slate placed Dessa and Corren shoulder to shoulder with him. “We can concentrate on one defense. We've done that before. That does not solve three attacks from three directions.”

Corren set his feet again. “I can stay square to the beam, or turn far enough to reach the Lurker. I cannot do both without opening a gap beside you.”

Slate pressed his warded forearm against Corren's and turned. The two films slid apart without resistance.

Dessa tried the same contact on his other side. “Can we make them catch? Here, where they touch?”

If they could, a blow that turned one defender would not leave the line open before his neighbor could move with him. Slate held his arm against hers and considered what the ward would need.

Slate opened the adaptation he had passed over before the quarry fight. He could keep the experience toward his next level, or spend it making the formation harder to break.

AVAILABLE
- Harmonic Resonance I | *Major evolution.* Anchors nearby Scourgeshields so a moving formation keeps its line intact. **Cost:** 300 biomass; 200 XP.

Lucidus had already made his shield cheaper to sustain. That did nothing for the gaps between its edge and the next bearer’s. He chose Harmonic Resonance.

Harmonic Resonance I
Major evolution
Individual wards cross-brace and anchor together when adapted bearers maintain compatible contact within ten feet of one another.
Requirements: LVL 13; Scourgeshield
Biomass cost: 300
XP cost: 200

Slate watched Dessa and Corren turn their still separate wards. If the System meant what it said, the new structure would hold those seams

closed.

Slate pictured the three of them protecting a bend in the road while a casualty team passed behind them. They would still have to take the blows. With the evolution, they could keep their protection joined while they did it.

It would also fail the moment one bearer moved beyond ten feet.

“I found an evolution we can use,” Slate told them. “Harmonic Resonance. It anchors separate wards together. Each of us still supplies our own ward and takes our own impact. No shared mana. No divided damage.”

“Check your requirements before you agree,” Slate told them. “Mine won't tell me whether you qualify.”

Corren let his ward fade and stood silent. Dessa kept hers raised, studying the film over her palm while she waited.

“I meet it,” Dessa said.

“So do I,” Corren answered. “Two hundred experience.”

“Three hundred biomass each,” Slate said.

Three hundred biomass each. Nine hundred total. The cost would delay repair work, but a broken formation could take three Scourge and the humans behind them. Slate made the choice. “Corren, send a runner for three measured allotments. Put the expense in Serena's ledger. We test the defense now.”

While the runner went to the stores, Brenn had the Crusaders drink and loosen their shield straps. Fidem stopped Tomas trying to repeat his lunge alone and put a cup in his hand. By the time the stores keeper arrived with three sealed skins, the young man had managed to spill only half of it. Each skin held a measured allotment. Dessa and Corren accepted theirs and confirmed the expense separately.

Slate committed his own.

Evolution acquired: Harmonic Resonance I

Biomass spent: 300
XP spent: 200
XP available: 6,910

Heat spread beneath the scales along his forearms and crossed his chest in two narrow bands. It didn't hurt enough to require restraint, but his muscles tightened as new channels formed beside those feeding his Scourgeshield. Dessa worked her fingers open and shut. Corren held still and counted breaths.

The Crusaders waited without speaking. They had seen Scourge repair wounds and change flesh. Tomas leaned forward, following the movement of Dessa's fingers. Dain had stopped rubbing his knee. He watched Slate's forearms, then checked the other two Scourge for the same change. Slate remembered having no idea what his own body would become. At least these people could watch from outside it.

Anwen watched Slate. “Does Lucidus choose the change?” she asked.

Slate shook his head.

“You do?” Anwen asked.

“The system offers developments when we meet the requirements,” Slate said. “We choose whether the ability is worth the cost.”

“And this one is?”

Slate looked at the two dozen people depending on the answer. “We're about to find out.”

He raised his ward and set his feet between the suspended beams. Dessa braced her forearm against his left arm. Corren completed the right. At each point of contact, the films caught. When Slate eased his arm away, the wards stayed joined. Slate felt their positions as pressure through the new channels, not their mana and not their bodies.

He could feel where each join resisted his movement. He still had to watch Dessa and Corren to judge their footing.

“Release the center beam,” he said.

Brace released the restraining rope. The beam swung down on its suspension ropes.

The timber struck Slate's ward. He paid the impact. His feet cut two grooves through the dirt, piling earth against his heels, but the joined edges kept his defense from twisting. Dessa and Corren held their positions without sharing the force.

“Right,” Slate said.

The second beam hit Corren. The Mystic grunted and spent his own mana to stop it. Slate felt the joined face try to rotate and leaned into the connection. He did not absorb Corren's impact. He gave the neighboring ward a fixed edge to brace against.

It held.

Dessa laughed once. “Again.”

Brenn sent both beams. The wards took them from different directions. The Crusaders passed through the corner behind Slate, carrying Dain between them.

A Lurker descended toward their rear. Tomas called the threat. Anwen rotated the last shield pair without slowing the bearers.

They reached the gate together.

“Now separate,” Slate said.

Dessa moved left. At ten feet, the resistance between their wards vanished. Her Scourgeshield remained around her, fully hers and fully active. The joined corner opened.

Brenn drove through it at once.

His padded spear caught Tomas in the chest. The young Crusader fell backward and took one of the bearers with him. Dain rolled off the blanket and came up on his good knee. His shield stood against the gatepost. He caught the padded spear below its head and shoved it aside.

“Dead men do not rescue themselves,” Brenn said.

“Then stop putting me on the blanket,” Dain answered.

Anwen hauled Tomas upright by his new surcoat. “You watched the ward instead of your sector.”

“It was new.”

“So is your uniform,” Anwen said. “I don’t see you staring at your chest.”

Fidem walked over to inspect the torn gold stitching where Anwen had grabbed him. “His mother will.”

Tomas looked more frightened by that prospect than he had by Slate.

Slate ran the exercise twice more. The joined wards gave the Crusaders a protected lane, but only while the three Scourge maintained distance and compatible angles. When Corren spent too much mana stopping a direct hit, nobody else paid the cost for him. When Dessa moved wide to catch a Lurker, the left join released.

On the road, Slate could replace an exhausted bearer or call the defenders closer before the formation opened. He needed to know the warning signs before an enemy found them for him.

By the final attempt, Anwen treated the wards as terrain rather than a miracle. She kept her formation close enough to use the protected corner and far enough back to clear a Scourge forced to step or turn. Her sector calls became shorter. Tomas watched high when assigned high. Anwen put Dain back on the right for the final withdrawal and sent a lighter recruit to the blanket. He kept pace with the litter team, his shield covering their exposed side.

Slate dismissed his ward. “Eat and rest,” he told Dessa and Corren. “One short practice before evening. After that, you train other eligible Mystics only when Serena approves the biomass and Brenn approves the soldier.”

“Why Brenn?” Dessa asked.

“Because Brenn has to trust them to hold their position. I'm not spending biomass on a ward nobody can count on.”

Brenn tapped the red cloth around one horn. “I may have that put on a wall.”

“Spell it correctly.”

“I'll ask Serena.”

Brace studied the grooves Slate's feet had left in the ground. “The guard needs three prepared positions at every command post. One for you and two for compatible wards.”

“Plan for four,” Slate said. “Three faces and a replacement. Mark the distances.”

“And your route?” Brace asked.

“Western terrace after we eat.”

Brace nodded once. This time the gesture ended an argument rather than postponing it.

The Lurker at the northern arch turned toward the passage. Slate heard running feet a moment later.

She dropped from the wall and stopped the runner beneath the arch. He wore the gray sash of Serena's courier relay. Mud covered him to the waist, and one sleeve had been tied around a shallow cut on his forearm. He carried an oilskin packet against his chest.

“Message for the Heritor,” he said.

Brace intercepted the packet, checked the ties and handed it to Fidem.

Slate could recognize map marks and the numbers used on their rosters. He couldn't read a western officer's dispatch quickly enough to bet Bastion on it. Fidem broke the seal and unfolded two pages over the sand cart.

“From Evara,” the priest said. He flattened a crease in the page, keeping its dry corners clear of the muddy oilskin, and read the next lines more slowly.

“Matek entered a supply depot west of the crossing. Captain Veyr left the previous night by the old cattle road. Three hundred and sixty soldiers, two wheeled ballistae and two ward casters.”

The training yard went silent.

“Destination?” Slate asked.

Fidem opened the map beneath the dispatch. A black line curved south of the watched crossing, then turned toward the frontier fort on the old cattle track.

The fort at the crossing had been circled. The sight stripped the satisfaction from Slate's morning. The old cattle track carried the western supply wagons through the frontier. If Veyr held its gate and stores, he could cut the garrison off and charge every cart moving east.

“They believe you are in the east,” Fidem said. “They mean to seize the fort's lower gate and stores, then demand payment for every wagon that needs the crossing.”

Slate followed the line back to the depot. Veyr had left before Matek arrived. Destroying the supplies would hurt him later, but the troops and ballistae were already on the road. The warning gave Sumnu time to put troops in front of them. Slate needed to know how much.

“Have the scouts find his lead troops,” Slate ordered. “I need their distance from the fort, not from the depot.”

Brace sent a Lurker to carry the order.

“What did Matek do?” Slate asked Fidem.

Fidem read the note at the bottom. “Sent Evara with the dispatch. Stayed with thirteen Scourge to destroy the depot, then follow the ballistae.”

Matek would finish the raid. Slate would have preferred those thirteen Scourge beside the western road, but he could use an enemy with no depot to retreat to. First, he had to keep Veyr from taking the crossing.

Slate looked from the circled fort to the Crusaders in their new regalia. At the start of the inspection they had been proof that Fidem could build an institution. Now they were twenty-four soldiers standing beside the road Veyr intended to take.

“Anwen, get your people fed and issue real weapons. You are not taking the forward line. You will rehearse casualty movement between the weighhouse and the western gate until Harl gives you another assignment.”

She didn't argue for a more impressive duty. “Yes, my Lord.”

“Brenn, find Sumnu. Brace, first watch with me. Send the second to sleep and the third to eat. Wake both when we know the enemy's distance.”

Brace was already assigning runners.

Slate put one claw on the black line where the old cattle track met the frontier fort's approach.

The enemy had chosen the weakest wall they knew about.

They were coming to find out how quickly it could change.

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XII

The Chosen Shape

At the western border fort on the old cattle track, Lu could close three fingers of his left hand around the measuring cord before his injured arm began to shake.

He let go before Han looked over.

The cord slipped across the stone, leaving a chalk mark short of the joint he needed to measure. He put his right hand on it, drew it taut and finished the line. Chalk dust caught in the creases of his knuckles.

Outside the western gate, Scourge were clearing the old weighhouse. Two carried a roof beam that had required a six-man hauling team when his own people built such places. They set it down where Han pointed and returned for the next.

Neither stopped to rub a shoulder.

Lu had spent yesterday afternoon with Serena, showing her what his hands did when he shaped stone. She had watched the movement of mana, asked him to repeat a small join and declined to promise that any of it would survive a conversion unchanged.

He trusted that answer more than an assurance that everything would be better.

Now he watched a Raider carry the broken end of the beam away with one hand.

Han set a cup beside his chalk board. “Drink before you decide that watching them counts as rest.”

Lu took it with his good hand. “I've asked to speak with Slate.”

Han's gaze went to the bandage. “Has the pain come back?”

“No.” Lu set the cup down before she could see how hard he was gripping it. “I want him to examine whether I could take the scales.”

She looked toward the Scourge in the yard, then back at him. “You have spent most of your life learning to use those hands. Has anyone told you what becoming one of them would do to your craft?”

Lu spread his good hand beside the chalk board. He knew every white scar on its fingers. “That's what I'm going to ask. I want the stronger body. I want to keep my work too.”

Han pulled a stool beside his table.

For a moment he thought she meant to sit. Instead she put her foot on it and tightened the strap of her work shoe. “Then make him show you how.”

By the time Lu reached the council room, preparing the defenses had taken priority over his examination.

He passed a Lurker coming down the stair and heard Sumnu giving orders through the open doorway. The field commander had a map pinned beneath his broad hands. Slate stood beside him with Serena and Brace. The Raider had taken a position beside the door, leaving room for messengers to pass while he watched the stair.

Lu waited until the commander finished.

“Both companies outside,” Sumnu said. “One on the approach, one behind the weighhouse. Harl keeps the gate and the terrace above it.”

“They'll have ballistae,” Slate said.

“Then I won't give them a packed road to shoot down.” Sumnu grinned. The commander gathered his officers and left.

Serena came to the door. “We may have to postpone the study.”

“How long?” Lu asked.

“Their advance troops could reach us tomorrow. The heavier weapons are behind them. Veyr's dispatch named the gate and stores at this frontier fort as his objectives. Take the cattle crossing and the Collective could charge every wagon sent along the road.”

He pictured the unfinished work outside the gate. Han had five usable pairs of hands and his right one. The wall they were raising beside the weighhouse still ended six feet short of its intended support.

Lu could shape that last section if someone carried and braced the stone for him. Yesterday he would have hidden how much help his arm needed. Today he had watched men who could move the beam, set it and go straight back for another. He wanted to know whether he could join them before the archers arrived.

“I asked yesterday,” he said. “I'm asking now.”

Slate heard him and turned. “Come in.”

Lu laid his plumb bob on the table.

The brass point had worn slightly to one side. His father had used it, and his father's sister before him. Lu could remember being small enough to stand beneath a measuring cord without bending his head.

His first useful task had been holding that weight still.

“I need to know whether I'll still be able to shape stone,” he said.

Slate didn't touch the tool. “You may keep the developed channels. You won't necessarily use them the same way. People who came from the forest had to learn what their new bodies could do with the magic they retained.”

“And what they lost.”

“Yes.”

Serena placed yesterday's test pieces beside the plumb bob. A joined seam, a drawn-out ridge and a small hole Lu had bored without breaking the stone around it.

“We can see how you direct it,” she said. “That gives us something to preserve. It doesn't give us Ordan's blessing to put into another body.”

Lu rubbed the cord between his right thumb and forefinger. “The Surety will say my house still owes its service.”

“Changing your hands doesn't erase an agreement,” Slate said. “We'll have to deal with that separately.”

“Will you send me back?”

“If you take my scales, you are mine,” Slate said. “No service house, warden or Forsworn cell gets to reclaim you. If you choose to leave, I will not stop you.” He paused, looking at the cord in his hands. “I cannot promise Lucidus will feel the same. She gave you to me, after all.”

Mine. Lu had heard enough owners use that word. He kept hold of the cord, waiting for the condition that would take back the promise of leaving. Slate added none.

He would be trusting an avatar to keep his word against the Surety. If he refused, his arm would still shake and the service house would still have his name. He knew what the service house would demand. He had to decide whether Slate's promise was worth trusting.

Slate had not promised to abolish every obligation east of the forest. He had made a bargain for the elves and fulfilled his part. Lu had watched the Surety fulfill the other half. The Forsworn letters he had carried made bargains with the Surety sound much simpler.

Yan Bo had escaped through the culvert with a wounded arm. Even then, he had reached through stone toward the wagons above him.

Lu still wanted his people free.

He would have to decide what that required without Yan telling him.

“I agreed to this mission,” he said. “I will finish the work I came to do.”

Slate nodded. “Then let's find out what you can become.”

From the council room, Lu went to the examination room to prepare for the graft. Han came to join him. So did Captain Ren.

Lu had asked for both.

Ren stood beside the window while Serena explained the first change. The captain's wound still made him careful when he turned. Lu wondered whether he had looked at the Scourge healing their injuries and had the same thought.

If he had, he kept it to himself.

“I am here as a witness,” Ren said. “Not to give permission I do not possess.”

“That's why I asked you.”

Han placed the plumb bob on a shelf where Lu could see it from the bed.

Slate described the foundation graft. Bronze scales, reconstructed tissue, a place in the Scourgemind. A body that could use processed biomass to repair damage. His existing development would remain; the change would not make him an untrained child or instantly give him the skill of a Scourge veteran.

Nor could Slate promise to return him safely to his old form afterward.

Lu asked him to explain the Scourgemind again.

“You choose what you send,” Slate said. “Words, an image, what you're seeing. I won't wake up knowing everything you've ever done.”

Lu kept his eyes on the gold scales. “And if I disagree with you?”

“You'll be in familiar company.”

Brace made a low sound from the doorway that might have been amusement.

Serena asked Lu to raise a ridge in the test stone one last time. He did it with his right palm flat against the surface, holding the shape while she and Slate examined the movement within his arm.

Serena described the path she could see through his wrist. Lu corrected her where the flow turned back beneath his thumb; that was where he steadied the ridge.

“More capacity there?” she asked Slate.

“Through the turn, maybe. Not across it. He would lose the control he just showed us.”

They compared the foundation graft with the casting organs available to a Mystic while Lu kept his palm on the stone. When Serena asked him to release the ridge, he lowered it slowly enough for them to follow the returning flow.

Han watched the stone, not the golden hands above it. “That return is where he steadies a fine join,” she said. “Lose it and he'll still move rock. He won't set a hinge seat worth using.”

Serena repeated the observation aloud. Slate returned to the channels through Lu's wrist.

Lu lay back only when they had finished.

The stores keeper supplied four hundred and eighty biomass for the foundation graft. Slate confirmed the transfer, explained where the material would go and waited for Lu's answer.

Lu looked at his wrapped arm. “Do it.”

The worst part was knowing where every finger was while none of them felt like his.

He could see them against the sheet. The nails darkened, thickened and extended. Beneath them, the bones seemed to pull against one another as the new tissue settled around old joints.

His injured arm burned.

Lu tried to draw it against his chest. Serena stopped him gently and put a rolled cloth beneath the elbow. “Leave room for it.”

Sweat ran into his eyes. He blinked it away and found Han still beside the bed.

She was turning his plumb bob in her fingers, checking the worn point. “The point is bent,” she said, turning the weight so he could see it. “Have you been allowing for that?”

Lu tried to answer. A fresh pressure ran through his wrist, and he waited for it to ease before trusting his voice. “Since my aunt dropped it down a stair.”

“You could have made another.” Han held it still between them, giving him something familiar to watch.

“I know how far this one leans.” His breathing steadied as he followed the worn brass point. “The cord falls true. I measure from that.”

Han nodded and let the weight hang over her palm. She kept it there through the next contraction of his fingers.

By the time the afternoon light reached the other wall, bronze scales covered his hands and forearms. His left arm lay free of the old bandage. New tissue had closed the wound, though the muscles beneath it ached when he tried to lift it.

He was hungry enough to resent the time it took someone to bring food.

Then Serena spoke without moving her mouth. *“Lu. Can you hear me?”*

He jerked upright.

Her hand steadied his shoulder. *“Only me. Try answering.”*

He thought the word yes so fiercely that he said it aloud.

Brace smiled.

Lu tried again. This time he felt the answer leave him, separate from the memory of Yan that he kept to himself. Serena answered his yes and waited for another question. Lu let his shoulders ease.

He sat very still with that discovery.

When Lu was ready to try his changed hands, they brought him the test block. The stone resisted him.

Lu had expected it. Expecting didn't make the sensation easier to bear.

He set his right palm on the test block and reached for the familiar response. Mana gathered, but the movement arrived late and unevenly. A lump rose where he wanted a narrow ridge.

He flattened it before Han could comment.

She commented anyway. “Again. Slower.”

Lu drew a breath and guided the flow through the route Serena had shown him. He could still feel Ordan's stone, but faintly. The channels in his body remained, altered by the graft, waiting for directions his hands no longer gave in quite the same way.

This time the ridge rose cleanly.

He held it, lowered it and made a small square recess beside it.

Han put a finger into the recess. “That would hold a hinge.”

Lu laughed before he could stop himself.

The sound came out deeper than he expected.

Slate moved closer to see the join. He had left twice when Brace brought messages from the defenses and returned each time without telling Lu to hurry.

“What if you had more room for those channels?” he asked.

Lu lifted his hand from the block. “Where?”

Slate offered him an image through the Scourgemind: a body he could examine from the outside, then follow inward to the channels beneath its scales. Lu accepted it cautiously. The image waited for his attention. It didn't replace the room or move his hands.

“Show me the wrists first,” he said.

They worked until the lamps were lit.

Lu showed them how he passed strain through one palm and steadied it with the other. Han made him demonstrate the difference between holding a load temporarily and giving it a foundation that would carry it after he left.

More strength applied badly could break a wall faster.

In the shared design, Slate retained the graft's connection to the Scourgemind and altered the casting organs as Lu demonstrated each motion. Lu asked for a clearer return through the wrist, then showed why the other hand needed to steady it independently. Watching a wall rise would never have told Slate where its shaper felt it beginning to fail.

The first shape they examined kept him near a dwarf's height.

Lu rejected it. “If the body is being rebuilt, give me reach,” he said. “I have spent forty years asking other people to hold the high end of my line.”

Slate lengthened the legs and spine until the proposed body stood near a man's height. He did not narrow it to match. The chest remained deep, the waist thick and the shoulders heavy. The legs were short in proportion to the torso, built to carry weight rather than cover ground quickly.

“That will feel wrong,” Han said.

“For a while,” Lu answered.

He refused the next version because it stiffened his fingers too far. “I'm not a shovel.”

Slate shortened the claws and restored the small joints in each finger. They would not open armor or hold a fighting edge. They would close around a measuring cord, a chisel or the head of a pin.

Lu accepted that trade without hesitation.

The tail required more discussion. Slate first offered one thick enough to counterbalance Lu's upper body. Lu asked for enough length to reach the ground well behind his heels. Han placed three pieces of charcoal on the table to mark two feet and a third point of contact.

“A brace,” she said. “Not another tool you have to wave around.”

The final tail could plant against stone or earth and turn Lu's body into a tripod beneath a load. Its underside carried broad gripping scales. It had no blade, club or chisel.

Slate removed the long claws, venom structures and the tongue adaptations other Scourge used to seize an enemy. Lu's tongue remained dexterous enough for speech and feeding, but it offered no reach worth using in a fight. The Builder would not have a Raider's weapons, a Lurker's speed or a Mystic's range.

In their place, Serena found room for a denser sensory web. It ran through the hands, feet, tail, eyes and the deep joints of his body.

“What does that do?” Slate asked.

Lu followed the proposed connections through the image Slate shared. The detail was beyond anything he could have drawn, but he recognized what the signals were meant to tell him.

“It measures,” Lu said.

Length. Angle. Force. Heat. The body would know the position of every joint and the pressure passing through every contact point. It could judge a line without laying cord against it, though Lu had no intention of throwing his cord away. Combined Vision would be part of the form rather than a later addition. Ordinary sight and visible mana would occupy the same image, with enough control to lower the overlay when it became distracting.

There was another adjustment behind the eyes. Lu followed it from the broad shape of the room down to the imagined grain of a wooden beam, the edge of a weld and the narrow channels carrying mana through worked stone. It would not let him see through a wall or understand a circuit he had never studied. It would let him inspect the part in front of him without a lens.

“Can I use tools?” he asked.

“Try the grip,” Serena said.

He followed the movement through the engram. Five fingers closed around the remembered cord.

His cord.

The new metabolism diverted little toward weapons and less toward sleep. It would still need food, mana and biomass for repair, but the body could work through most nights before fatigue demanded rest.

“Yes,” Lu said.

Engram discovered: Builder
A specialized Scourge form supporting sustained construction through reinforced contact structures, a load-bearing brace tail and integrated metrology.
Stock expression includes Combined Vision, adjustable near-to-far inspection, perfect proprioception, short precision claws and an efficient work metabolism.
Requirements: LVL 15; Scourge race; compatible material shaping
Biomass cost: 900
XP cost: 600

Lu's twenty-four levels of existing development were sufficient. They would not increase because Slate gave the new channels the energy they needed to take form.

Slate read out the expense before committing it. Six hundred from his own available experience, leaving six thousand three hundred and ten. The city stores supplied the nine hundred biomass for reconstruction and a separate two hundred for Lu's subsequent repairs.

“I have no way to repay that tonight,” Lu said.

Slate glanced at the test stone with its straight, square hinge seat. “I expect you'll find work.”

Lu woke before dawn with his feet on the floor.

He had fallen asleep sitting against the bed's raised end, too uncomfortable to lie flat while his spine changed. Now a long, heavy tail rested beside his leg. He moved it cautiously around the empty food bowl without touching it.

Serena looked up from the chair by the door. “Leave the bowl. Start with standing.”

He stood.

The ceiling came too close.

Lu bent his knees before remembering he no longer needed to. He was near Serena's height now, perhaps a little taller, and the room had been built for people who had always occupied this much of it. The bed looked too low. The shelf with his plumb bob looked too near. His eyes insisted he was standing on a stool.

His body disagreed.

He knew the exact bend of both knees, the angle of his ankles and how far his weight had shifted toward his left heel. His tail moved behind him without sweeping the bowl or striking the bedframe. When he planted its broad underside against the floor, pressure divided across three points. The unfamiliar height remained disorienting. His balance did not.

The body had kept a dwarf's breadth. His chest was deep, his waist thick and his shoulders heavy above legs that looked short only in proportion to the rest of him. Stone-gray scales covered him, with glints of bronze appearing at the edges when he moved beneath the lamp. His hands had broadened, but each finger moved separately. The claws were short enough that he could press thumb to fingertip without scratching either scale.

He could still see the small notch in his right ear when Serena gave him a polished metal mirror. His face had changed. It had not become a stranger's.

“How long did I sleep?” he asked.

“A little over three hours.”

He searched for the heaviness that should have followed a night spent rebuilding his spine. His mana was low and his hunger had returned. Fatigue had not.

Serena watched him take that in. “Slate says the form can postpone sleep. He did not say it could replace food.”

“Then I need breakfast.”

Han brought the plumb bob after breakfast.

Lu pinched the cord and let the brass weight hang.

It leaned by the familiar amount.

Before he adjusted, his new senses supplied the error. The point hung a fraction left of true. The cord measured the same length it had yesterday. The brass was cooler than his palm and warmer along the side Han had carried against her body.

He adjusted for the lean without thinking.

“Good,” Han said. “Now come and do something harder.”

They began with a fallen lintel in the repair yard.

Lu stopped beside it and stared.

The lintel remained clear beneath the visible currents of mana. He lowered the overlay until he could pick out the chipped corners without losing the pale channels through the stone. When he looked at the whole block, its shape and bearing surfaces told him where the weight would travel, as they always had. When he concentrated on one chipped corner, his sight narrowed until individual grains stood distinct around a crack.

Han waited beside him.

“I can see the flaw,” he said.

“You could see it yesterday,” Han noted.

“Yesterday I needed a lens.”

That earned her attention.

Two Scourge lifted one end while Lu fitted a support beneath it. His palm settled into the stone. The new contact pads spread the pressure across his palm, sparing his finger joints.

He felt the load reach his feet.

For a moment he only held it, delighted by the clarity. He could feel the force against his palm, its direction through his elbow and the exact pressure his planted tail returned to the ground. The pressure drew toward the outer edge of his palm. He shifted the support inward before the lintel could tip.

Then Han tapped his shoulder. “Give it somewhere to stand.”

Lu drew material from the broken base into a wider footing. He formed the bearing surfaces, lowered the lintel carefully and released his hold.

The stone remained.

Nothing rested on his body now.

“Again,” he said.

Han pointed to the timber frame that had carried the lintel into the yard. “Check that first. The right upright has opened along the grain.”

Lu set his hand against the wood.

Mana entered it.

He snatched his hand back.

The upright retained the faint impression of his palm. Around it, the split had drawn closed.

Han crouched and ran a nail across the seam. “Do that again.”

“I don't know what I did.”

“Then do it slowly.”

Lu touched the timber with two fingers. He felt the fibers beneath them, some crushed, some separated, all arranged along a grain he could inspect from the width of the post down to a single ragged strand. He guided the broken edges together. The fibers resisted along their length and yielded across it. He eased the pressure and followed the grain instead of forcing it straight. The split closed beneath his fingers.

He had worked beside carpenters all his life. Not once had he been able to do that.

For several breaths, he forgot the enemy on the far side of the fort.

“Silvys,” Serena said behind him.

Lu looked over his shoulder.

She had come into the yard with Slate. Her attention remained on the repaired split. “The graft came through Scourge flesh shaped by Lucidus and Silvys,” she said. “We preserved what you brought from Ordan. We may have preserved some of what she put into the foundation.”

Slate looked from the timber to the lintel. “Can you control both?”

Lu put one hand on wood and the other on stone. The stone resisted as a mass beneath his palm; the wood pulled along its grain. He kept both currents separate, nudging a ridge into the lintel while drawing a matching groove through the timber. For once, the stone would not have to wait for someone else to fit the wood.

He laughed again, deeper in the new chest and loud enough to turn heads across the yard. “Han, look at the fit.” He lifted his hands so she could inspect both surfaces. “I can make both sides of the joint.”

After two more attempts, his palms were hot and he could feel the effort consuming mana. He had more useful control, not an endless reserve. Han stopped him while he could still release the work cleanly.

He ate, rested and returned to the weighhouse in the afternoon.

That was where the archers found them.

The first arrow struck the upright holding Han's measuring cord.

The second hit the man carrying the basket of stone chips beside Lu.

He dropped the basket and staggered against the weighhouse wall, one hand pressed to his upper arm.

“Archers. North bank,” Lu sent. He had practiced the words in the yard. They came more easily when he needed them.

The nearest Scourge turned before anyone shouted aloud. The road guards raised their wooden shields toward the bank, covering the workers beside them. The workers left their barrows and went behind the finished section of traverse wall.

Lu caught the injured laborer by his belt and hauled him after them.

The man's knees folded as Lu lifted him. Lu caught him under the uninjured arm, shifted his grip away from the wound and lowered him against the stone.

Lu counted twenty soldiers along the bank above the cattle track. Some shot into the repair yard while others drove short stakes into the ground. Strips of pale cloth fluttered from the stakes.

Han saw those and swore. “Ranges. For the ballistae.”

The traverse wall curved along the cut bank beside the road, ending just short of the weighhouse. The gap had been left for loaded barrows until they could join its last section to the building's foundation. Now every worker crossing it offered the archers a clear shot.

Sumnu's forward company was already moving to answer the attack. A section advanced with shields toward the bank while hunters climbed the broken retaining stones farther north.

They would reach the archers.

Lu had people to move before they did.

He knelt beside the unfinished footing and put both hands against the stone. “Han. Bring that rubble here.”

He drew the first rubble together and felt its weight bear on the thin outer lip of the footing.

The fragments grated against one another. He kept them low while he checked the footing. He needed a longer stone beneath the outer edge to carry the weight back into the buried foundation. Without it, the whole section would peel away from the weighhouse when struck.

“Under my left hand,” he told Han. “The long piece.”

She guided it into place. A Raider pushed the heavier end through the gap and ducked as an arrow struck the wall above him.

Lu planted the broad underside of his tail in the earth and passed the load through all three supports.

The stone rose.

He had shaped larger pieces before. He had never supported that much weight through one arm while the other hand formed the small, exact joint that would keep it there.

The new body let him do both.

He joined the outer footing, drew the rubble into the curve and left an opening low enough for a crouching person to pass beneath it. A roof over the gap first. The higher protection could follow.

“Through,” he said.

Han called the workers. They crossed beneath the unfinished arch in pairs, carrying the wounded man between them.

An arrow struck Lu's forearm.

It broke a scale and lodged shallowly in the thick tissue beneath. His left hand clenched. Stone shifted overhead.

He stopped the movement before it reached the joint. *“I need the north side covered.”*

Brace reached him with a captured wooden shield. He planted its lower edge in the dirt beside Lu and leaned the boards over the Builder's exposed shoulder. The north bank disappeared behind them. Another arrow struck the boards.

“Keep working,” the Raider said.

Lu did.

The last worker cleared the opening. Han stayed to finish the outer curve while he formed its seat against the weighhouse. She left exactly enough stone for his bearing and no more. He had admired that economy long before she knew how much he concealed. His new senses told him the angle she had chosen; her experience had chosen it without them.

Lu matched the seat to her curve. He had no reason to hold back now.

A burning bundle landed beside the scaffolding.

Oil spread across the lower plank. Flame climbed the dry rope holding the next platform. Heat pressed against Lu's face. He could judge it with a precision he had never possessed, but he didn't need a measurement to recognize the danger. The rope above the opening had begun to part.

He caught the timber through the shaping current. The burning section bent away from the opening and tore free along the line he chose. It fell into the road instead of across the workers' escape.

Brace stamped out the flaming rope before it could roll beneath the arch.

Lu could hear fighting on the bank now. Scourge cries, human orders, the sharp sound of a blade striking a shield rim. He kept his eyes on the last joint.

It would hold if he gave the load a straight path into the foundation.

He flattened the bearing, corrected the outer edge and let the weight settle.

“Take your hands off,” Han said.

He hesitated.

“It stands, Lu,” Han said.

He released it and the arch held.

Brace pulled him backward as another burning strip of scaffold dropped where his head had been. Lu landed on his side, rolled against the weighhouse wall and found himself laughing with no breath to support it.

His palms hurt. The arrow in his arm looked absurdly small.

Above the bank, a golden shape crossed the pale sky.

Slate landed behind the archers. His wings folded as his tail struck their sergeant's spear aside. Two men turned to run and found Lurkers coming up the retaining stones behind them.

The advance party broke.

The soldiers who could still move fled toward the cattle track. Sumnu's order reached Lu through the Scourgemind before the pursuing section crossed the rise. *“Hold at the bank. Their main force is beyond it. Keep the road covered.”*

The Scourge stopped at the crest. Lu had seen what the archers could do with a few moments of open ground. He was glad the commander meant to deny them another.

Then Han put a hand beneath his elbow. “Stop grinning. Let me see that arm.”

The laborer sat just inside the arch while one of Fidem's attendants bound his upper arm. The arrow had passed through the flesh. He kept trying to help with his injured hand until the attendant caught his wrist.

“Leave it down,” the healer told the injured laborer. “Someone else can carry the basket.”

Two soldiers in white surcoats edged with gold came through the arch. One kept his shield toward the bank while the other helped the laborer to his feet. Lu watched them guide him toward the gate, then looked at his own

arm. Soon he would be able to use it again. The man he had dragged to cover would need longer.

Lu sat on the finished footing and drew his own arrow free.

Blood ran over the gray scales. He used part of the repair reserve he had been given and watched the small opening begin to close.

Han watched with him.

Neither spoke until Captain Ren came through the new arch.

The captain examined the join to the weighhouse. Then he looked at the field beyond it, where Scourge were pulling down the enemy's cloth markers and carrying the abandoned bows to the gate. “You built this while they were shooting?”

“We built it,” Lu said.

Han brushed dust from her sleeve. “And it still needs its upper courses. Don't start telling anyone we've finished the defenses.”

Ren nodded. Beyond him, his fit soldiers helped clear the carrying lane. The captain told Han he had kept the two men still recovering from the road ambush inside, on duties they could manage. None of his soldiers wore Scourge scales. Lu wondered how many had watched his arm heal.

Lu thought of the report the captain would send east.

He had wanted to learn what the Scourge could give the Forsworn. He still thought of the hiding places he had strengthened, the families whose only way out ran through stone. These hands could do more for them.

But he had chosen the body for himself too. He would not spend another twelve years pretending otherwise. He could tell the route keepers what he chose. Ren would tell the Surety what he had seen.

Slate came down from the bank and stopped beside the arch. “Will it take a heavy impact?”

“Better after we finish the top,” Han said.

“Then finish it. Sumnu will give you cover.”

Lu stood and reached for his plumb bob.

Slate looked at the blood drying on his forearm. “You can rest.”

“After I set the height,” Lu said.

He passed the cord over the new stone and let the brass weight fall. The point steadied above the footing, leaning the small, familiar amount he knew how to correct.

Beyond it, the first enemy wagon appeared on the far rise.

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XIII

The Living Bulwark

AT FIRST LIGHT THE FOLLOWING MORNING, THE FIRST BOLT PASSED through an empty cart and buried itself in the road behind it.

Slate watched the iron head disappear beneath the paving. The shaft quivered once, then stood still.

Sumnu had moved his front rank out of that section ten breaths earlier.

“They've found the range,” Slate said.

“Let them spend it on carts.”

The field commander stood behind the weighhouse, where he could see both company leaders without presenting himself to the ballista on the western rise. His soldiers occupied the broken ground beside the approach road. The humans advancing toward them would have to climb it, cross it or come down the narrow frontage Sumnu had left apparently open.

Slate hoped their captain appreciated the invitation.

A second bolt struck higher, smashing the weighhouse's old roof tiles. Fragments fell across the new stone arch. Lu ducked, waited for the pieces to stop and resumed checking the joint beneath his palm.

Han pulled him farther under cover by the back of his coat. “Leave the roof, Lu. Get your head below the wall before the next bolt.”

Slate turned toward the rise.

Veyr had placed one ballista above the road and the other farther north, where the cattle track came around a ridge of abandoned garden walls. Both crews worked beneath wards. Crossbowmen stood between the weapons, keeping watch on the sky as well as the ground.

Yesterday's survivors had apparently given their captain a useful account of Slate's wings. The casters protected the weapons, and the crossbowmen had room to shoot at anything coming over the walls.

Sensible.

Slate intended to make it insufficient.

Evara had reached Bastion during the night with the original dispatches.

Matek's warning had arrived before her. The documents supplied the details that made it useful: how many reserve bolts Veyr expected, which wagons carried his food and where he meant to hold after forcing the western entrance.

Slate had listened while Serena read the orders aloud.

Now Evara crouched beside him beneath the weighhouse's surviving window. She had slept while another Lurker took the pre-dawn watch. She looked considerably happier with a real enemy in front of her than she had carrying papers through the gate.

“Matek's behind them,” she said. *“The nearest relay had him following the northern wheel marks.”*

“Find me a link when he's close enough. Don't cross their line alone to do it.”

She nodded and slipped along the bank.

The three guard Lurkers had separate tasks. One watched the route to the city. Another kept the path between Slate and Sumnu clear. The third stayed with Brace, Dessa and Corren, who waited behind the repaired arch.

Slate would have preferred all eight attacking the ballistae.

He could also see exactly where a wounded man could be carried if he stopped pretending that none of his plans would ever require it.

Behind the weighhouse, the Crusader volunteers had formed beside the protected carrying lane. Anwen Pell checked straps and stretcher poles while Brenn's instructor placed the teams where the road widened. Dain

stood at the near end of a stretcher; Tomas kept his shield between the bearers and the orchard. Fidem stood with the people receiving the wounded farther back.

They would carry, guard the casualties and keep the passage open. They would not be sent up the hill to prove their faith against crossbows.

The enemy drums sounded.

Sumnu raised one hand.

Scourge settled behind shields and low walls.

The first Vallyrian line came behind broad wooden mantlets.

The men carrying them had wrapped wet hides over the fronts. Water dripped from their lower edges as the bearers climbed. Their rear rank pushed hooked poles ahead through gaps between the mantlets, feeling for holes and loose stones before the shield bearers stepped onto them. Officers kept the formation aligned, calling measured corrections as it climbed. This was a drilled assault, not a mob with stolen axes.

A second rank of Poppers pushed between their boots and shields. Wax-pale flesh hung loose around swollen skulls and chests. Violet growths beat beneath their skin. The Vallyrians goaded the creatures forward with spear hafts and stayed behind the mantlets. Slate had seen what happened when a Popper died. Veyr meant to spend them against Bastion's walls.

Slate counted their pace with the beats of the drum.

Veyr wanted them close enough to throw their mantlets down across the ditch and rush the traverse wall together. More soldiers followed on either side, ready to widen whatever opening the first rank made.

The road ballista fired again.

Its bolt struck the lower corner of the traverse wall. Stone burst outward. A Scourge behind it staggered and fell, one claw scraping across the paving before his arm stopped moving.

Slate felt the sudden absence in the nearby mind.

For an instant he reached for the Scourgemind again. Nothing answered. Slate fixed the broken corner in his memory and forced his attention back to the men advancing toward it. He could get more of his people killed by looking away now.

“Wait,” Sumnu told his company.

The mantlets reached the ditch.

The first fell forward.

Raiders came up behind the wall.

They didn't try to stop the entire advance at once. Each took the nearest edge of a mantlet and lifted it while the men behind were still stepping onto it. Boots slipped. Poles jammed across shields. One mantlet turned almost upright, throwing its bearers back into the rank behind them.

Lurkers crossed its upper edge.

Slate saw green bodies pass above raised spears, land behind the first rank and cut toward the men carrying the spare shafts. The humans turned to defend themselves. Sumnu's Raiders struck the front again before they could settle.

The neat line became six separate knots of fighting. Sumnu's soldiers kept partners within reach. When a Lurker landed among three spearmen, a Raider lifted the mantlet behind them and drove it forward, trapping their shafts while she cut herself a path out. Slate had wanted an army that could do more than follow him into a charge. Here it was.

The Poppers had reached the ditch. One Raider hooked a claw behind a swollen skull and dragged a creature clear of the line. Another cut it down before it could reach the wall.

Violet light swelled through the Popper's chest.

“Back!” Slate sent.

The blast tore through the old garden wall. Blocks shot inward across the lower path. A stone trough split down the middle, and the debris smashed

into the carrying lane. Two Poppers close behind it ruptured in turn. The last blast shook loose the arch stones above them.

The Vallyrians surged toward the breach. Their crossbowmen fired over the fallen wall, and axemen ran behind the shots. Slate saw the stretcher teams falter as the lane filled with dust and broken masonry. The Scourge had cut down the Popper wave before it reached the carrying lane. The blasts had still cost Bastion a wall, a trough and the only covered route between the road and the weighhouse.

A human officer climbed onto a fallen mantlet and shouted his men toward the damaged corner.

Slate sent Brace its position.

Then he stepped into the road.

The officer saw the gold scales and lowered his spear.

Slate caught the shaft behind its head, pulled the man forward and struck him with his other hand. He fell beneath the mantlet. Slate used the captured spear to drive the next shield aside and sent his tail through the opening.

Two more men tried to pin him against the broken cart.

He climbed it.

His claws found the axle housing. He vaulted over their spear points, landed behind them and drove both toward the Raiders coming down from the wall. Then he faced the western rise and braced, drawing mana into the Scourgeshield film around his body.

The next heavy bolt struck his protected chest before he finished planting his feet.

Mana tore through the channels in his arms. The barrier turned the head enough to send it past his ribs, but the shaft grazed his forearm and knocked him sideways.

He let the ruined spear go.

The ballista crew was already winding again.

Slate could fly to the ballista crew. He could also see the crossbows turning to meet him and the Vallyrian caster waiting beneath the frame, hands spread against its shielded supports.

He needed that caster looking somewhere else.

“South of the weighhouse,” a Lurker warned. *“Crossbows and axes through the lower gardens. Vallyrians at the breach.”*

Slate saw them through the image she sent. Veyr had sent a second assault through the low orchard walls, keeping it out of sight until the Popper blasts opened the way. Crossbowmen had a clear shot through the breach; axemen were already picking their way over the collapsed stone.

Sumnu's reserve company could stop them. It would also have to turn away from the force it was waiting to strike.

“Harl. The carrying lane,” Slate sent. “Keep *Sumnu's reserve where it is.”*

The answer came from the gate.

“Coming,” Harl replied.

Slate sent the Lurker's view to the instructor with the Crusaders and ran to the weighhouse corner. From there he could see the carrying lane. The first team had just lifted a wounded Scourge onto a stretcher. Anwen spotted the Vallyrians over its bearer's shoulder.

“Shields across the lane,” she ordered. “Bearers keep moving.”

The humans formed at the lane's narrowest point, behind a low retaining wall that still stood between the orchard and the weighhouse. Brenn's instructor took the exposed end. Nobody tried to cover the entire orchard; the Vallyrians were forcing the fight through the opening they had made.

The first axe struck a volunteer's shield hard enough to split its upper board.

He recoiled. The woman beside him thrust past his shoulder and forced the attacker back before the next blow fell.

Behind them, the stretcher kept moving.

Dain backed through the gap with the stretcher. His jaw was clenched hard enough to show the muscle beside his ear. He kept checking the shield bearer's feet, making room for the man to step without catching the stretcher. He had listened in the yard. Slate wanted him to live long enough to be told so.

A Vallyrian crossbowman climbed onto the orchard wall.

The Scourge instructor's tail took him behind the ankle and pulled him down into the lane. He landed badly and lost his bow. Two volunteers dragged him behind the trough while the others held their places.

Then Harl's first section reached them.

The garrison Scourge crossed the low wall on the attackers' flank. Raiders drove the axemen away from the human line while Lurkers went after the crossbows. Harl's Scourge took the firing lane back before the next volley. The assault lasted only a few breaths after that.

Slate sent Harl a brief acknowledgment.

The Crusaders had held long enough for help to arrive. They had not needed to win the battle themselves.

Behind him, stone cracked.

The damaged corner of the traverse wall sagged toward the ditch. Its lower blocks had lost their seating under the repeated impacts. Men who had failed to cross the mantlets began pushing toward the opening.

“Lu. Han. Can you close that?”

Han couldn't hear the question. Lu repeated it aloud before answering. *“With cover. We need to rebuild its foot.”*

Slate moved back toward the arch. *“Brace. Wards.”*

Dessa pressed her warded forearm against Slate's left arm. Corren made contact on the right. The films caught at the joins, and Slate felt Harmonic

Resonance brace them together. They came out shoulder to shoulder, turning as a unit to face the rise.

A quarrel struck Dessa's protection and spun away. The join tightened against Slate's left arm as she adjusted her stance. His mana didn't fall with hers; he could feel the brace holding, not the blow. They kept moving.

They advanced across the gap in the defenders' cover.

Brace and the other two guard Raiders came behind them. Han followed with Lu and a barrow of broken stone. One of her other shapers remained beneath the arch, feeding sound material forward while the remaining three helped the second company secure the weighhouse's southern side.

Slate checked the path back to the arch before he committed them. Brace could cover Corren's outside, and the other Raiders had room to pull the barrow clear. Beyond them, Sumnu's reserve still waited. If this repair failed, that company would have to plug the hole instead of ending the battle.

“Here,” Han said.

Lu knelt beside the broken footing and planted the underside of his tail in the churned earth. Bronze glinted between the gray scales as his shoulders settled over the brace. He put his palms against two separate blocks and drew them into contact. The stone between them moved slowly, forming a seat beneath the part of the wall still standing.

Slate heard the ballista release. *“Hold.”* Slate crossed his forearms in its path.

The bolt struck the magic protecting his scales and drove his arms against his chest. His heels dug into the road. He poured mana into the impact while the joined wards resisted the turn that would have opened the line beside him. Dessa and Corren stayed with him. The front held.

The iron head scraped along his warded forearm and stopped. Behind him, Lu kept shaping.

The bolt dropped.

Corren grunted. A smaller quarrel struck his right side. His ward flared at the impact, then failed beneath his ribs. The point entered the blue scales.

“Can't sustain that side,” he sent. The join against Slate's arm flickered.

“Keep it narrow,” Slate told him. *“Brace has your outside.”*

The Raider stepped beside Corren with a captured wooden shield covering the Mystic's wounded side. Dessa closed against Slate. They narrowed the front to the width Lu and Han needed, keeping the joins firm while Brace took the exposed flank. Another quarrel buried itself in his boards. The builders stayed at the footing.

“Foot's seated,” Lu said.

“Then let the wall stand on it,” Han answered.

Lu released one hand and formed the joint above it.

The weight left his body. His shoulders lowered.

The grinding beneath Slate's feet stopped. Otolithic Matrix could tell him that the blocks were no longer shifting, but he couldn't see the joint from where he stood. He waited for Lu's word.

“Done,” Lu said.

“Back under cover.”

They retreated together until stone protected the workers. Corren let his ward fall and sat against the arch, breathing carefully around the wound.

Slate dismissed his own protection.

He had held the opening. He could not hold it all morning against the ballista.

Then Evara's thought reached him. *“Matek has eyes on the northern ballista. His party is in position behind it.”*

An image followed Evara's message. Through a gap between old garden stones, Slate saw the northern ballista's rear wheels and a narrow lane

beyond them. The ward covered its front and the sides facing Bastion. The back remained open for the loaders.

“Ten fit beside me,” Matek sent through the Scourgemind. *“Orrik has the Raiders. Our injured Raider and his escort hold the return path. The Lurker with the burned hand is watching the lane.”*

Slate studied the view long enough to locate the caster. The man kept his back close to the carriage, with the winding crew between him and Matek. A rush from the rear would drive those men straight into his protection.

“Can you take him before he turns?”

“If he looks south. Otherwise Orrik gets to find out how thick his ward is.”

Slate looked toward the road ballista. Its crew had another bolt ready. He had spent enough mana buying Lu time; if he made another standing target of himself, the next shot might finish the argument.

But Veyr's casters had placed their protection to meet an attack from the city. Slate could make both of them follow an attack from above, then reach the road crew from below its ward.

“Watch the road ballista,” he sent. *“I'll turn him.”*

He told Sumnu where he intended to land. Brace received the same position and moved the guard's nearest Lurker toward the foot of the bank. This time nobody would have to search for him if the wing failed.

Slate opened his wings and climbed low over the nearest fighting, using the weighhouse to hide the first part of his approach.

Crossbows turned.

He fed mana into the film over his chest and shoulders, keeping his hands free for the landing. A quarrel clipped the trailing edge of one membrane. Pain flashed along the tear, but the wing still held air.

The road ballista's caster angled his ward upward.

Slate let him.

He folded his wings, dropped below the raised face and hit the bank beneath the weapon on his hands and feet. Earth tore under his claws. He drove upward along the slope while the crew struggled to depress the ballista's frame far enough to reach him.

The caster abandoned the high shield and thrust a fresh ward across the bank.

Slate's first strike stopped against it.

The second came from his tail, below the man's sight, cutting through the wooden prop beside his leg.

The ballista shifted on its wheels.

One crewman fell against the caster. The ward moved with his involuntary turn, and Slate came through the exposed side.

The caster struck him across the jaw with a weighted staff. Slate's ward flashed at the contact and gave way.

He tasted blood. He drove forward anyway, trying to pin the staff against the ballista's wheel.

The man changed his grip and raised a ward between them, so close that its surface trapped Slate's reaching hand against the carriage. Pain shot through the compressed fingers.

Slate could break his own hand pulling free.

He broke the wooden spoke instead.

His fingers came through with the splinters. He struck the caster's knee with his tail's thick base, making him shift his weight, and threw the broken spoke at his face.

The staff came up to knock it aside.

Slate caught the next blow on his forearm. He let the staff strike his arm and seized the man's sleeve.

He drove Ash Infusion into two claws. White fire gathered along their edges.

He cut into the casting arm and left the ash in the wound.

The ward flickered.

The man transferred his staff to his other hand. He was good enough to keep fighting, and angry enough to put everything he had into the next barrier.

Slate stepped onto the tilted wheel, put his body above the staff's reach and cut down with his tail.

The caster fell beneath the ballista.

LVL 32 Vallyrian Caster defeated.
XP gained: 4,800
XP available: 11,110

Slate landed beside the winding gear and cut through the exposed rope bundle.

The tension released with a crack that sent the nearest crewman diving to the ground.

Slate stayed crouched behind the carriage while the surviving crossbowmen fired over it. He let the weapon's thick timber take their shots, gathered himself and came out on the side they weren't watching.

One dropped his bow. Another reached for a short sword and stopped when Slate's tail touched the front of his coat.

“Down the hill,” Slate said. “Hands empty.”

They went. He sent the nearest Lurker to watch them and flexed the fingers he had nearly left in the wheel. Blood filled the broken scales. The repair would take biomass he could afford; the mana he had spent holding the road wouldn't return just because the caster was dead.

From the road ballista's bank, Slate could see across the broken garden wall. The northern caster faced him, one hand lifted from the carriage. The front of the man's ward had angled south to meet the threat at the wrecked weapon.

Matek came over the wall behind him.

He caught a loader by the collar and hauled him away from the wheels. Orrik entered through the rear lane with three Raiders. One dragged the chocks clear. Another hit the carriage with his shoulder while Orrik cut the line running through the winding gear.

The ballista rolled backward down the sloping bed.

Its caster stumbled after it, trying to keep his hands against the moving frame. Matek landed behind him and hooked his tail around the staff. Slate saw the staff come free and the man reach toward his belt.

Matek caught that hand and drove it against the wall.

The caster folded over his wrist. His hand never reached the belt.

“Second caster alive,” Matek sent. *“He has agreed to stop helping.”*

“Keep him away from the carriage.”

Orrik and the Raiders heaved together, turning the moving weapon toward the ruined stair. A wheel shattered against the stone. The ballista dropped with its shooting arm buried in the soil.

Slate exhaled. Neither crew would get another shot at the weighhouse. He could use his army to take the road instead of surviving the next bolt.

Beyond the garden, two wagons blocked the retreat lane. A driver tried to turn across the one behind him. Soldiers pressed between their wheels, looking back toward the fighting instead of helping move the obstruction.

“Keep that lane closed,” Slate told Matek. *“Our companies are coming through.”*

Back on the western road, Sumnu didn't wait for Slate to tell him the ballistae were silent.

His second company came around the southern side of the weighhouse and struck the men still pressing the damaged corner. The first held them in place long enough for the flank attack to bite.

Then both companies advanced.

“Passage open beneath the arch,” Lu sent. *“Han has the roof. Two abreast.”*

From the slope, Slate saw the nearer section turn toward the opening. Lu had given them a protected route onto the road, clear of the broken mantlets.

Raiders came through two abreast.

Lurkers crossed above them.

The enemy officer at the ditch tried to pull his line back in order. He almost succeeded. His shields closed around the wounded, and the rear rank presented spears while the first recovered its footing.

Then the men beside him saw their northern ballista fall.

Someone shouted that Scourge were behind the wagons.

The officer's command disappeared beneath a dozen contradictory warnings.

Slate sent Sumnu the captain's position, identified by the yellow company cloths gathering beside a riding horse. *“Take him alive if you can. Keep the companies moving.”*

“Stay out of my front,” Sumnu answered.

Slate looked down at the blood running over his damaged forearm. *“I was considering it.”* He folded the injured wing and went down the slope toward the retreating command group.

Veyr had put four spearmen between himself and the city.

He needed them facing the other way.

Matek reached the horse first. He took the bridle, turned its head toward the garden wall and stepped beneath the rider's drawn sword. Orrik struck the nearest spearman hard enough to drive him into the man behind.

Veyr tried to get down on the far side. Slate caught his coat and hauled him into the lane. The captain hit the mud on his back, hand flying to his sword. Slate pinned his wrist with one foot and laid his tail point against the seam beneath the breastplate. “Order them to stop,” Slate told Veyr.

Veyr’s eyes went to the broken ballista, then to Sumnu’s companies closing around the retreat. “Our scouts said you were east. We were told Bastion had no commander.”

Slate kept the point at the seam beneath Veyr’s armor. “They were right about the first. Wrong about the second. Order your men down before mine finish theirs.”

Veyr looked at the blade against his chest, then at the Raiders tightening around the road. He called to the nearest standard bearer.

Veyr's surrender took time to reach his scattered troops. Some men dropped their weapons at once. Others kept fighting until a familiar officer reached them or a Scourge took the choice away.

Sumnu held his companies together. The Lurkers followed fleeing groups far enough to separate them from their officers and collect the weapons they abandoned. Nobody chased a single frightened man into an unseen ravine merely to add another body to the road.

By midday, there was no enemy line left.

Fidem had taken over the weighhouse's cleared lower room. Muddy shields leaned against the wall beside the entrance; damp wool and blood had displaced the smell of the old stores.

Dain carried one end of a stretcher through its door. A Mystic gripped the pole beside him. Corren lay between the bearers, conscious and glaring at the threshold as they eased him across it.

“There's a step,” Dain told him.

“I can see it.”

“Then you can tell me when we've passed it.”

Slate stayed out of their way. “You kept the lane open,” he told Dain as the stretcher passed.

The cooper gave him a tight nod without shifting his grip. “I'd like a lighter one next time.”

“Ask Anwen.”

“I did. She said to ask the enemy.”

Slate stepped aside before they had to turn the stretcher around him. He was still smiling when he went to find Sumnu.

Two Scourge had died: the Initiate behind the corner and a Lurker struck while clearing the northern bank. Seven others still needed treatment or help moving. Some injuries would close with biomass and rest. That did not make the missing minds return.

He went to each of the dead before returning to the prisoners.

There were a hundred and forty-seven under guard when Serena's clerk finished the first count, including the wounded and both Veyr and his surviving Vallyrian caster. More small groups were still coming in from the fields. The scattered men who had escaped had left their ballistae, stores and commander behind them.

Matek had kept the captured dispatch pouch. “No reserve train,” he told Slate. “No second force at the crossing. We watched the other roads before coming after him.”

“The depot?”

“You'll want a new roof if you keep it.”

Slate glanced toward Sumnu. “A watched post on that road. Rotating patrols until we know which settlements will trade without being robbed by their own toll guards.”

Matek smiled. “I know several people who'll find the change agreeable.”

Slate left Matek to secure the captured road and went to the arch. A stretcher passed beneath it without slowing. That passage had saved their wounded, but the shattered garden wall left the gate exposed. He would need an outer berm and a second protected route before the next army came.

Han had already begun inspecting the upper courses. She held out a hand for Lu without looking away from the nearest joint. “Here. Feel the bearing before you touch the top.”

He planted his tail, set both palms on the stone and paused. “The seat's sound,” he said. “We can reset the upper course.”

“Without taking the roof down?” Slate asked.

“If your soldiers stop piling broken mantlets against the wall I need to reach,” Han said.

Slate sent a Raider to clear Han’s access. Captain Ren arrived with his record board and asked her to describe the repair. She showed him the join to the weighhouse while Lu kept his palms on the footing.

“Could you repeat it?” Ren asked Lu.

“After I eat and recover some mana. I can hold this steady, but the fine corrections are getting slow.”

Ren wrote that down too.

Slate watched the marks fill the board. The captain had seen a Confederacy shaper become Scourge and do the work under fire. If Ordan's people had sent these craftsmen to learn what Bastion could build, they had their answer. Slate needed to know how soon it would reach them.

“When does your report leave?” Slate asked Ren.

“With one of my own men, once the western road is secure enough to release him from duty here.” Ren kept his board level. “The Surety will expect an account of our service.”

“Then include the two dead.”

Ren stopped writing. “And the protection your soldiers gave the shapers,” he said. “I saw both.”

Slate let him return to the report. He wanted Shen to know that Bastion could defend itself, but Lu was the part that could change what the Surety asked next. A repaired wall stayed where it was built. A Builder could train, travel and choose whom to work for.

One of Han's younger assistants waited behind Ren with a covered cup and a piece of bread. She offered both to Lu, then remained beside him while he drank.

“When you've eaten,” she said, “will you show me what you chose?”

Lu looked at Han.

The master shaper was watching the repaired arch. “Answer her,” she said. “I would like to hear it too.”

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XIV

The Tempered Strength

Four weeks after the battle, Slate found Lu lowering the salvaged ballista carriage onto a wagon in Bastion's market.

The Builder had raised a stone support beneath the wreck while three human workers pushed their cart under it. Now he eased the timber down, using his tail to brace himself against the slope. Bronze flashed between the gray scales of his shoulders. His short claws rested against the carriage as gently as a carpenter's fingers against a finished tabletop.

Orrik watched from the road. “Still say we should have kept it.”

“You broke its axle,” Lu said.

“You could have made another.”

“I could have repaired six roofs. I did.”

Slate stopped beside the wagon. The wreck had spent a month waiting for a merchant with room to carry it. Yesterday, six families had moved into the houses above the western drain. He knew which use of Lu's time he preferred.

“What are we getting for it?” Slate asked Lu.

“Iron straps, two boxes of nails and coin for the timber,” Lu said. “Serena approved the exchange.”

Orrik tapped the carriage. “I'd have asked for more nails.”

“She did.” Lu's mouth drew back enough to show his small teeth. “The merchant found another box.”

Slate remembered the names of the two Scourge buried after that battle. The next morning Han had shown him a blocked drain beneath six occupied houses. He had ordered it opened before anyone proposed a monument.

Now water ran beneath the repaired grating, the houses stood, and the street carried wagons without a wheel dropping into the ruts. He felt the satisfaction of a city becoming useful again. A good road carried food, soldiers and stone where he needed them.

“No statues yet,” Han said beside him.

Slate glanced at her inspection board. “Did someone ask again?”

“Three people. I sent them to Serena for a date. They seem to think finished paving means the crews have nothing left to do.”

“It does look good.”

“It should. I had it laid properly.” She indicated the wagon turning ahead of them. Its wheels crossed the grating without jarring the load. “Let them use it for a while before they put something in the middle.”

Slate grinned. “You can have that in writing.”

“I'd rather have the south conduit cleared.”

She left him with that request and went to check the next crew. Slate continued toward the smell of hot kaj. The caravans coming inland from Koral had brought ironwork, rolls of dyed cloth and enough mushroom drink to give the market a scent of its own. Cloth the color of ripe plums hung beside a stall selling hinges. A trader was trying to explain the merit of a lock to a Raider whose claws could have removed the whole door.

Slate wanted more caravans coming through Bastion. A city supplied by merchants could feed people who had never learned to live on biomass, and every sound wagon reduced the loads his soldiers had to carry themselves.

Fidem had found an Imperial woman heating a pot above a brazier. She passed her hand over the coals. Heat shimmered above the rim, and steam lifted before Slate reached the stall.

“Could you heat a wash kettle with that?” Fidem asked, keeping clear of her customers.

“If you bring it here. I can't abandon the stall every time someone wants hot water.”

“We can bring the kettle. Our kitchen is cooking for sixty people, and the women washing the bedding have been waiting all morning.”

She glanced from the chalk on his sleeve to the gold symbol on his brow. “The Hall?”

“Yes.”

“After the morning trade. I charge for my time.”

“Of course.” Fidem set coins beside her cups. “And two kaj, please.” He handed one to Slate. The woman looked up far enough to notice whom she had been negotiating in front of. Her hand paused over the coins.

“He pays too,” Slate said.

“I just did,” Fidem told him.

They took their drinks across the square. Slate let the hot, earthy liquid sit on his tongue while Fidem explained that the latest caravan had brought three families looking for homes. The receiving table stood beneath the Hall's arcade, where two clerks were arguing over a name. A little girl slept against her father's leg. Her mother held their travel paper out to a clerk who had stopped reaching for it.

Fidem set his cup down and sat opposite her. “Tell me how you say it.”

Fidem repeated the name until she nodded. Only then did he ask the clerk to mark its sound beside the spelling. Slate stayed at the table’s end, where he could hear without dominating the exchange. A family that chose Bastion would settle faster and work more willingly than one that felt compelled by his presence. The difference was worth preserving.

The family needed beds together and work for the father, a cooper who had apprenticed as a smith. His skill with barrel hoops and wagon bands would

serve the city well; Serena already had damaged armor waiting for hands that knew how iron should bend. Their grandmother had brought a small brazier and wanted somewhere she could light it safely. Fidem asked which doorway she could manage, then sent a volunteer to find rooms behind the Hall.

“Have him see Serena after they've eaten,” Slate said. “She was threatening to put a roof over the grain if she couldn't find enough barrels.”

The father straightened. “I've tools. I'll fetch them.”

“Eat first,” Slate said. “The grain will still be there.”

The mother hadn't moved. “We aren't of your faith.”

“You told me,” Fidem said. “There is room tonight.”

“And after tonight?”

The mother’s fingers tightened around the paper. A bed from the avatar’s Hall could become a debt. Slate wanted them to know the bed came without obligations. Let them stay long enough to want to defend it. He let Fidem answer.

“We'll find somewhere you can stay together. Your mother should have a hearth of her own. The Hall gets noisy in the morning.”

Her grip eased on the paper. She thanked him and followed her family.

The next man lowered himself onto the bench with both hands. His left knee barely bent. He looked at a bronze-scaled worker carrying a stone trough. “Can the scales give me a working leg?”

Slate set down his cup. “The Mystic will examine your knee and tell you what the body can take before you decide.”

“Do I have to swear to Lucidus first?” He nodded toward the mark above the doorway.

“No,” Fidem said. “You can learn the teachings if you want. The examination is open either way.”

They walked behind the Hall afterward. Washing waited in baskets along the wall; children from the caravan had already found the shallow trough and were being persuaded to leave its water clean.

“You're making yourself useful,” Slate said.

Fidem looked toward the baskets. “I should hope so.”

“I meant the Concord.”

“So did I.” He stopped beside a doorway crowded with bedding. “People will listen to us here. I want them to have a reason to come back when they no longer need a bed.”

Slate liked that answer. Food, work and somewhere safe for a family would hold the city together more reliably than another speech from him. Fidem was building the kind of loyalty an enemy would have to do more than frighten.

By midday, the Imperial woman had her kettle steaming behind the Hall. She rested between heatings while her assistant fed coal beneath it. Slate approved Han's next allocation at the adjacent table and listened to Fidem arrange payment for the woman's next visit. A useful magical talent had arrived with the trade, and they had found a use for it within hours.

The same carts kept coming through the following weeks. Slate measured their effect in full storehouses and roofs that no longer leaked, while Brenn measured new arrivals by how many were ready to obey an order under pressure.

The third company earned its place on Sumnu's field roll in the ninth week.

Slate watched the final exercise from the repaired terrace. Sixty-four Scourge crossed the broken practice ground below, changing frontage when the horn sounded and leaving a protected passage for their wounded.

They had been recruits, experienced patrolmen and converts who wanted military service. Brenn had refused the first proposed date for their muster. He had also refused to accept three soldiers whose enthusiasm remained several lessons ahead of their judgment.

Now he stood beside Sumnu and named the sections he considered ready.

The field force had three companies ready for service. The fourth had thirty-two in training and would stay off the ready roll until its officers could lead it properly. New recruits had filled the losses from the battle and the vacancies left when Harl and Edrin supplied the guard. More arrived with each caravan. As they qualified, Brenn would build each company to three platoons of forty and a commander.

Ren received the muster roll for his next report east. Slate did not ask him to soften it.

Slate could send those companies out without emptying the walls. A fourth would give Sumnu a reserve large enough to keep one unit resting while the others held the roads. He wanted it badly enough that he had nearly overruled Brenn on the muster date. Watching the recruits now, he was glad he had waited.

Below the terrace, Dessa and Corren withdrew behind Raiders carrying practice shields. His rib had healed. The two Mystics kept their warded forearms together until a pair of shield bearers covered the turn, then separated to clear the passage. Neither looked toward Slate for the next order.

Brace watched with him. “Better than the quarry.”

“We won at the quarry.”

“And I spent half of it trying to keep a landing place clear for you.”

Slate glanced at the broad road behind them. Han had reopened the formerly damaged street after examining every support beneath it. The return channel now ran cleanly through an accessible grating. Lu had made certain a person could reach the iron without climbing into the current.

“You keep score now?” Slate asked.

“Only when it supports my complaint,” Brace replied.

The city changed by sections.

Water reached the fountains before the statues surrounding them had faces again. Its splash carried across the newly cleared paving beneath the scrape of masons' tools. Carts crossed new paving while scaffolds still covered the houses above it. The western wall acquired a continuous fighting platform and stairs wide enough for troops to pass people carrying supplies.

Han's people taught local crews rather than placing every stone themselves. Woodshapers set roof members where grown timber served better than an arch. Smiths made the ironwork no stone shaper could wish into being. Scourge carried, cut, surveyed and learned.

The old city began to show through the damage.

Slate saw it most clearly from above: streets leading somewhere again, water running beneath pale bridges, repaired roofs following the rise toward the central towers. He could follow a cart from the western gate to the stores without losing it behind rubble. Patrols moved along the wall above it. Those had been lines on Serena's maps when the shapers arrived.

The muster hall opened after its roof and water supply were restored.

Bastion spoke through the connected flame while Serena checked the first occupants. *"The rest chambers are functioning at their recorded rate. One tenth above ordinary resting stamina recovery while the chambers remain supplied."*

Slate watched a tired laborer settle onto a bench beside two Crusaders. "And when the charge fails?" he asked.

"The benefit ceases. The building remains a place to rest."

Fidem's clergy and the Mystics had arranged a charging roster for the repaired conduits. Serena had placed the labor and materials on the same schedule as the hall's cleaning, water checks and ordinary repairs.

Serena read him the charging hours. He approved them before she could reach the list of ornamental repairs still waiting for the same labor.

It did not mend a severed limb or give a recruit a veteran's skill. It gave people back some of the effort they spent keeping the city alive.

Slate wanted every bench used.

The Arcanum retained its eight working practice positions beneath a sounder roof. Its unopened wings stayed closed until the damaged conduits there could be understood. Several grand buildings still had only restored outer walls. Han could give Bastion streets and defenses fit for a capital without pretending she could replace every lost art in a season.

He asked for the next repair list anyway.

Alongside the repair lists came letters from Woodhaven. Kegan's became shorter when his experiments began working.

The early ones had occupied several sheets and included drawings Slate made Serena describe twice. The later reports gave measurements, feeding records and a list of failures they had stopped repeating.

By the tenth week, he was ready for Slate to return to Woodhaven.

The guards traveled with him along the secured road. Sumnu kept command of the field companies and Harl of the garrison. Fidem remained responsible for Bastion's civil affairs, with Matek directing intelligence from the city and Serena controlling stores and expenditure. Slate left Brenn to finish preparing the joint muster. None of those duties required everyone to follow him to a flight enclosure.

Slate had left those people in charge before. This time the soldiers beneath them knew exactly what the orders meant.

At Woodhaven, Kegan met him outside the flight enclosure with both gloves on. “Before you look,” he said, “it is still one animal.”

“I was hoping you'd kept count.”

“I mean we are not doing the other four because the first one stands up.”

Willowmere, behind him, folded her arms. “He practiced saying that.”

Slate smiled and followed them inside.

The oldest roc had grown large enough to make its perch creak.

It watched Slate with the fixed attention of an animal deciding whether a visitor might have food. Its beak remained hooked and hard. Its developing flight feathers covered wings that looked too large while folded and entirely reasonable when it spread them.

No sparks moved along them.

Kegan had stopped trying to bring the lightning back.

He showed Slate what he had studied instead: the roc's living movements, preserved adult tissue, the muscles around the existing wing roots and the way a cat's hind legs gathered beneath its body before a jump.

“That one,” Kegan said, pointing to the deepest set of haunches in his drawings, “belongs to a cat that stole my lunch while I was measuring it.”

“Promising,” Slate said.

“For you, perhaps.”

Slates of measurements recorded what drawings alone had failed to explain.

“A wyvern uses its wings as its front limbs,” Kegan said. “This can't. We need the forefeet beneath it while the wings are moving. The new hindquarters have to join behind the flight muscles, not interfere with them.”

He had worked through the arrangements with Slate through the studies sent back to Bastion. Serena had arranged transport for specimens and supplies, and read the accompanying measurements aloud when Slate needed them. They could borrow traits from those animals, but the roc's body had to support them together.

They had rejected more than one attractive shape because it would have torn itself apart on landing.

The usable evolutionary engram was less elegant on the page. Its back was stronger, its hindquarters deeper, and the place intended for a future rider left the wings room to move.

Slate preferred it.

“What does it need?” Slate asked Kegan.

Kegan brought the prepared cost sheet, then remembered whom he was speaking to and read it aloud.

Eighteen hundred biomass. Twenty-four hundred experience invested in the new channels and their development. Four days for reconstruction, with the keepers feeding, watching and supporting the animal through the changes. Recovery and training afterward.

The recipient needed the developed capacity the oldest roc already possessed. Its sixth level would remain its own. It would not become a creature of Slate's level merely because he paid to change it.

“And it listens to whom?” Slate asked.

Kegan lifted a short whistle. “The person who teaches it what this means. And the person with the food, until we teach it better.”

“No place in the Scourgemind?”

“We are changing its body. It isn't becoming one of your soldiers. If you want it to carry someone, we'll have to train both of them.”

Slate considered the animal's weight, the shape of the proposed saddle space and the route a flying reserve could take above Bastion's crowded streets. “One,” he said. “Then we see what we've bought.”

Since the battle, Slate had spent sixty hours hunting isolated Vallyrian soldiers and small Collective patrols around the heartlands. The ordinary soldiers yielded nothing. Two invested patrol leaders had earned him three thousand one hundred and fifty experience.

Three short practice sessions each week had taught him to distinguish footsteps through different stone and move joined wards around an obstacle. Practice sharpened the skill; killing enemies paid for the levels. Neither came close to the progress a fight with someone powerful enough to kill him could force.

His available balance stood at fourteen thousand two hundred and sixty.

The gryphon investment brought it down to eleven thousand eight hundred and sixty.

He remained level thirty-four.

Willowmere had agreed to the oldest bird's trial, keeping the other four out of Kegan's reach. The assigned Mystic had reviewed the staged changes before Slate authorized the expenditure and received the required biomass from Woodhaven's stores through a recorded transfer. Kegan handled the enclosure and the people who would care for the roc. Slate handled the living graft and the channels carrying the committed development.

Slate stayed beside the enclosure after the first transfer. He had changed people who could tell him what hurt. This animal could only pull away from a keeper or cry out, and Kegan needed him close enough to inspect the graft when it did.

It ate, struggled, slept and required someone beside it when its changed balance frightened it awake. The keepers divided the watches. On the second night Willowmere took the observation slate out of Kegan's hands and told him she would wake him if his notes began contradicting themselves. He objected until Slate offered to read them back. Then he went to bed.

On the fourth morning, the gryphon stood on four legs.

Its foreclaws gripped the bedding while the new hind feet found the floor. The bedding bunched beneath the claws as it shifted its weight. Tawny hair covered the deeper haunches. Feathers lay along the shoulders and breast, and the wings remained separate from all four supporting limbs.

It took three steps, stopped and looked back at its own hindquarters.

Then it bit the edge of Kegan's apron.

“That,” the researcher said, “is familiar.”

Slate laughed hard enough to bring Shale to the doorway.

She watched the gryphon drag Kegan half a step before the keeper distracted it with food.

Shale stopped beside him, following his gaze to the gryphon's new hindquarters. “Is that the animal you've been sending all those drawings about?”

“I expect it to be useful.”

“You sounded certain in the letters.” She tucked her hand beneath his arm. “Kegan showed me where a rider would sit. He made me promise not to volunteer yet.”

Slate looked down at her. “Did you need to be asked?”

“Apparently I had the same expression you do.” She smiled and leaned against his shoulder.

He had spent weeks studying Kegan’s diagrams for speed, weight and launch angles. Now the gryphon stood in front of him, flight feathers lifting in the draft while Shale’s hand rested against his arm. One day it might carry riders over Bastion’s walls. Today it had stolen Kegan’s apron and made Shale laugh. He liked both prospects.

She took his hand and led him toward the nursery before he could improve his defense.

The shared rooms had expanded into another gallery. The woodshapers who had come from Ordan's lands had helped grow new partitions and open ventilation above the nests. The new branches curved around the older gallery without blocking the air moving through it. Slate ran his hand along one joint and couldn't find where the old timber ended.

Slate found the bedding he had sent folded on a shelf beside older cloth, softened and creased by use.

There were twenty-four young now, with more eggs in the warm recesses beyond them. Shale's first eight had all hatched. The eldest silver male was trying to climb the lowest shelf while another young Scourge held the back of his tail.

The eldest pulled harder. The other young Scourge planted both feet and held on, plainly delighted by the resistance.

A woman beside the shelf separated them, set both on the floor and offered a strip of wood they could pull without dragging one another down.

Shale watched long enough to be sure they had accepted the exchange. “Three family rotations,” she said. “Parents take turns. The broodkeepers cover the hours the rest of us need to sleep or do something that isn't cleaning.”

“And you?”

“Today? Inspecting the northern watch after you finish admiring your son.”

He looked at her wing. She spread it far enough to show him that the old injury no longer shortened the movement. “Merus has the patrols arranged. I still want to see the new post.”

“I'll come,” Slate said.

“After the nursery.”

He sat where she pointed.

The eldest approached, placed both hands on his knee and began climbing.

Slate held still until the small claws found a secure grip.

Across the room, two parents were arguing quietly over whose child had taken a feeding bowl. The broodkeeper beside them lifted a blanket, uncovered the bowl and held it up until both stopped. Shale pressed her mouth against Slate's shoulder to hide a laugh.

“Your northern watch can wait another minute,” he said.

“It can. Our son is trying to eat your ear.”

Slate caught the small hand reaching for it and offered a finger instead. His son closed both hands around it, determined to keep what he had caught.

The young would need food, space, teachers and a world large enough for lives Slate couldn't yet imagine.

He remained seated until his son tired of trying to climb him.

Two weeks of recovery and practice followed the gryphon's first steps.

Slate remained at Woodhaven for those two weeks, letting messages carry routine matters back to Bastion. He fitted twelve hours of training around the keepers' work and hunted small Vallyrian patrols along the secured roads. Those kills earned two hundred and forty experience. After the evolution cost, his available reserve stood at twelve thousand one hundred when Kegan judged the gryphon ready for its first weighted flight.

Kegan had hung bags from a fitted harness. “Eighty pounds,” he said. “Distributed where a rider's weight would sit.”

“And where is the rider?”

“Watching. For several more trials.”

A young woman from the Concord stood beside Willowmere with a slate covered in flight observations. Fidem had sent her because she had worked with large riding birds before coming west. Kegan had accepted help after testing whether she could recognize an animal too tired to obey safely.

She checked the girth, stepped clear of the wings and sounded the whistle.

The gryphon ran.

Its hind legs gathered beneath the body and drove it upward while the foreclaws cleared the ground. Wings beat down through the space Kegan had fought to preserve. Dust lifted around the empty launch patch.

The animal crossed the enclosure with the weighted harness on its back.

For six wingbeats, Slate saw exactly what a mounted reserve might become.

At the end of the straight, the keeper sounded the turning whistle.

The gryphon banked as sharply as it had without the load. The weight carried its hindquarters farther outward than Slate expected.

The left wing dipped. The keeper changed the whistle and moved toward the open landing strip, holding the feed glove where the animal could see it.

“Give it room,” Kegan called.

Slate had already stepped forward. He stopped himself.

The gryphon spread its wings, found the landing strip and struck the ground hard enough to tear two furrows through the dirt. Its new hind legs folded under the weight, then extended.

It stayed upright.

Kegan reached it only after the keeper had its attention on the glove.

He checked the legs, back and harness before saying anything else. “The legs took it,” he said at last. He made the gryphon step forward and watched each hind foot leave the ground. “No favoring either side.”

The young woman let out her breath. “I called the turn too late.”

“You used the same marker as yesterday. It needs more room with the weight.” Kegan pointed toward the far end of the enclosure. “Move the landing cue nearer. We'll teach the wider turn before we add another pound.”

Slate looked at the furrows. The animal had recovered with the body Kegan had designed, even when the turn went wrong. He had seen mounts break legs in gentler landings.

Slate watched the gryphon take its reward with a beak large enough to remove the glove and the hand inside it. “Would it have landed like that before?”

Kegan shook his head. “Not with the load. Not that hard.”

Slate looked toward the roofs visible through the trees. “Keep testing. No rider until you agree it's ready. When it is, I want to know how long it can carry someone and how often it needs to eat.”

The keeper touched the gryphon's neck and praised it softly.

It leaned toward her voice.

By the time Slate returned to Bastion, two more stoneshapers had made formal requests to learn about conversion.

Neither had changed.

Han had insisted they write down whom they owed service to, what those duties were, and which they had chosen themselves. Serena had them read the documents aloud in Slate's presence. The answers were less alike than the marks on their mission papers suggested.

One had agreed to a fixed period of service and wanted to finish it. The other had inherited a household obligation whose end no one could name.

Both wanted to know whether they could do what Lu did.

Slate agreed to examinations and explanations. He promised neither an identical body nor a settlement Shen hadn't accepted.

Ren's first report had gone east with one of his soldiers soon after the battle. The visiting escort now numbered ten, including Ren, with the two dispatched messengers still away from Bastion. More reports had followed by ordinary couriers as the city changed.

Shen had answered those reports.

He had asked what Lu retained, whether the work continued, and what had become of the obligations attached to his house. Han sent the results of her own tests. Slate sent his offer to discuss the obligations when their terms could be stated.

Now the new requests were ready to go east as well.

Slate stayed in the receiving room after Serena took the applications away. Through its open window he could hear a company forming in the yard. The section leaders were correcting their own intervals now. He hadn't spoken to any of them that morning.

Lu stood beside the door with a folded letter between his short claws.

“You're sending news too?” Slate asked.

“About the scales. There are people who knew what my arm was like.”

He turned the page over before setting it on the table. Slate could see the seal, but the writing told him nothing. He didn't reach for it.

“They'll ask to see for themselves,” Slate said.

“I hope they will.” Lu's tail settled against the leg of his chair. “I would like them to hear from me before someone tells them I can't hold a chisel anymore.”

“You could send them a carving.”

“I'm building your city.”

Slate laughed. Lu blinked at him, then glanced toward the door. Lu's shoulders eased, although he kept one hand beside the letter.

“Send your news,” Slate said. “They should know what you can do.”

Han reached the doorway before Lu could answer. She carried another opened letter. Ren followed in his travel coat, dust still on his boots, the folded dispatch clenched in one fist. Slate rose.

“The Surety?”

Ren confirmed it. “He is coming to inspect the mission and speak with Lu.”

“Does he know about the other two?”

“This answers the earlier reports. We will send the applications to meet him on the road.”

Han laid the reply where Serena could find it. Her inspection board rested against her hip. “I will take him through the western works and the muster hall. He will want to see the weighhouse footing.”

Slate heard what she had chosen. Work that remained sound after its shaper walked away. Crews that could maintain it. People sheltered by what Lu had done. She was giving Shen reasons to keep the mission here.

“Start with the muster,” he said. “Brenn can bring the three companies together. Let him see the soldiers before he inspects their walls.”

Ren studied him. “He will.”

There was enough warning in the captain's voice to make Slate look back toward the yard. He had built the companies to hold what he owned. From the east, those same companies would look like an army gaining the means to march farther.

Concealing them would do little good. Ren had spent months watching them train.

“Then we'll show him what his people helped us accomplish,” Slate said. “And hear what he has to say.”

Lu picked up his letter. Han waited for him at the door, leaving Slate with the sound of the muster below.

He called Serena through the Scourgemind. *“Find me the original mission agreement. I want to hear the terms again before Shen arrives.”*

In the yard, Sumnu ordered the first company through the gate. The other two followed without a word from Slate.

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XV

The Avatar Returns

Shen stopped outside Bastion's gate astride a Kirin-Shi. The creature lowered its head, antlered brow sweeping back above a lion's broad muzzle. Stone-gray scales armored its shoulders; split hooves clicked against the paving as it shifted its weight. It stood calm beneath the Surety's hand, tall enough to look over the gate guards.

Slate watched Shen dismount, hand the reins to one of the twelve soldiers accompanying him and crouch beside the new drain. The Surety ran two fingers along the stone lip. Water passed beneath them without pooling against the paving.

He looked up at Han. “You found the old drainage fall,” Shen said, following the slope with two fingers.

Han pointed to the exposed edge beside the gutter. “It was buried under three repairs. Each crew had raised the surface to get above the water.”

Shen tested the shallow channel where those repairs had ended. “You removed all three?”

“Down to the original bed. Then we reopened the outlet.” Han watched the water pass his hand. “It has kept clear through the last two rains.”

Shen stood. His white robe settled over the pale lamellar at his knees. The black square links on his escort's banner shifted in a light wind.

Slate came down from the gate. “Welcome to Bastion.”

“Thank you for receiving us,” Shen said.

They shook hands.

The mineral ridges on Shen's wrist felt as hard as Slate remembered. His hammer hung beside the saddle. A shallow score remained in the dark haft where it had supported stone above trapped men at Heshan.

Shen's gaze moved to the repaired membrane of Slate's wing. Slate glanced at the dwarf's wrist, bare of the bloodied strip he had worn at Heshan. Both had healed. He was glad of it, although the folded papers in Ren's hand made him suspect they would have fewer reasons to agree today.

Ren came forward with his nine remaining soldiers, the two messengers still absent from the mission escort. Shen greeted the captain and asked after the recovered wounds. Ren gave the absent messengers' names, then confirmed that the two later applications had reached the Surety on his journey.

Then Shen faced the gate.

Traffic was passing through it in both directions. A grain wagon came out while a pair of Scourge carried a replacement door uphill. Beyond them, people moved along a street that no longer ended in a heap of fallen masonry.

“You have used the time,” Shen said.

“We had help,” Slate said.

“I have read their reports,” Shen replied.

Slate let his gaze rest on the column of arriving soldiers. “You'll find more comfortable rooms than we could have offered when the mission came.”

“I would like to see the work before I rest.”

Han was already holding the inspection board.

Slate stepped aside.

Han led them through the gate to the practice ground below the western terrace. Three Scourge companies stood in separate blocks; recruits from the fourth watched behind Brenn's boundary ropes. The first Crusaders waited beside a loaded supply wagon, their shields marked with Lucidus's

sign. Sergeant Anwen Pell checked each strap before she joined Fidem at the terrace steps.

Shen studied the human soldiers. “Who commands them?”

“The Concord's Sergeant Pell,” Fidem said. “They take field assignments through the agreed command and answer to our instructors for training.”

“And their oath?”

“To Lucidus and the service the Concord has undertaken.”

“Then the responsibilities should be written plainly.”

“They are,” Fidem said. “They know whom to obey in the field and whom to come to afterward.”

Sumnu had arranged an exercise: move the wagon through a dry ditch and between two defended walls, then establish a supply point inside the marked yard. Brenn explained the limits. The cargo stood in for food, tools and biomass; the draft team and Crusaders had to reach the far side intact. Shen could alter the unoccupied practice stone, but no one was to stand beneath a moved course.

“May I alter the crossing?” Shen asked.

“Before the wagon reaches it,” Brenn said. “No occupied stone moves without the stop signal.”

Shen agreed. He reshaped the causeway into a steep central ridge, leaving two narrow strips for people but no safe width for the wagon. Sumnu halted the team. Harl's defenders took the rear wall while Lurkers climbed over the first, forcing the defenders to watch both approaches. A blunt bolt struck the wagon board. Crusaders raised their shields over the driver and draft animals.

Lu came to inspect the crossing. He didn't try to undo Shen's work. Instead, he used the stacked blocks to build a ramp down the near bank and another up the far side. His crew set a level run between them, giving the wagon a route beside the causeway. The Builder checked each bearing with a tap of

his mallet; the other shapers followed his marks while Scourge held Harl's defenders away from the workers.

Anwen divided her unit. Tomas led a rope team along the narrow stone strip while the others protected the wagon. As the front wheels descended the ramp, one barrel slipped against its strap. Dain caught it with help from another Crusader, and someone wedged the rear wheel before the load could pull the cart backward. The rope team hauled together. Lu corrected a bearing beneath the leading wheel, then lifted his palm when the draft animals turned too soon and swung the rear corner toward the stone.

Sumnu stopped the team, repositioned two Raiders at the wagon's corners and had the driver straighten the animals. They moved again. One worn strap snapped. The barrel dropped into the ditch with a hollow thud. Brenn called the loss and ordered the exercise to continue. Anwen left the barrel, had Dain inspect the other lashings and brought the rope team back into position. Sumnu committed his reserve to cover both exits. The wagon reached the yard, though one barrel remained behind.

Shen turned to Slate. “You left decisions to Sumnu, even after the wagon lost part of its load.”

“I set the task and the limits. Sumnu chose how to finish it.” Slate watched Anwen count the surviving barrels, then met the Surety’s gaze.

Shen looked back at the companies. “Then he has made good use of the authority you gave him.”

Brenn gathered Anwen, Lu and the company leaders around the broken strap. Shen asked what she had inspected. Anwen named the buckle and holes. The leather had worn thin on the underside where it crossed the barrel hoop. She ordered the remaining cargo unloaded and checked before the wagon returned to service.

Shen then asked Lu why he had built a second crossing instead of changing the original. Lu explained how the weight traveled into the dry ditch bed, and that the added ramps could be removed without damaging the causeway. The Surety told him to show the crew which blocks to take out first.

Slate watched them work together. Shen hadn't come merely to refuse him.

Shen could see exactly how useful Lu had become.

They walked back through the repaired western works before the meal.

Han took Shen down to the inspection passage beneath the terrace. The stairs were broad enough now that Slate no longer had to turn sideways at the lower bend. Lamps showed the rebuilt pier, the cleared channel and the new access beside the iron grating.

Shen put his hand against the pier.

Water ran behind the wall, audible in the pause between their footsteps. Nothing shifted above them.

“This was failing when they arrived?” he asked.

“The channel had washed out its bed,” Slate said.

Han showed him the remaining marks from the old water level. Lu identified the bearing he had helped finish after the flow was released.

The Surety examined the work long enough that the others stopped speaking.

At last he removed his hand. “It is sound.”

Han nodded as though she had expected no other answer.

They climbed back to the street, where a cart passed over the pier carrying barrels for the kitchens. The driver waved to Han and kept going. Slate remembered standing below that same street while the old pier came apart. Now he could watch a cart pass over it without listening for the next crack.

Shen watched it go. “Can you make this form in someone who has never shaped stone?”

Slate had expected the question sooner.

“Not from what we've done with Lu. We needed the channels he already had and his knowledge of how to use them.”

Shen kept his attention on Lu, who was answering a worker's question beside the reopened channel. “You intend to continue developing the form with shapers from our houses.”

“With people who want to work with us,” Slate said.

The Surety's jaw tightened. Slate let the distinction stand.

Shen looked at the crew clearing the far end of the street. A human foreman called a measurement to a green-scaled Lurker on the scaffold. The Lurker passed it to the workers below before climbing higher with a coil of rope.

“Humans. Wood elves. Vallyr,” the Surety said. “Now a dwarf. You have made my reports sound incomplete.”

Slate followed Shen’s gaze to the crew. “I thought you would prefer a demonstration to a report.”

“I met soldiers. Lu brings something else.”

“Then you understand why I wanted him here.”

“You wanted the city repaired badly enough to let me see what he could do.”

“I was counting on an honest report.”

For the first time that morning, Shen almost smiled. “And now?”

Slate looked along the street at the carts passing one another without either having to stop. “I still want the work. I want the people who know how to do it as well.”

The expression left the Surety’s face. “Then we should be careful about what the next agreement permits.” He continued toward the muster hall, and Slate walked beside him.

Off-duty soldiers had taken the outer benches. A group of laborers rested near the water channel, their boots leaving pale dust beneath them. At another table, two Crusaders practiced reading a delivery list with one of Fidem's clerks.

Shen watched a woman in an Imperial sash refill their cups. “Your trade continues.”

“Through Koral. More ships, more caravans inland.”

“Has the recent fighting interrupted it?”

“The western road lost a few days. The port kept working.”

Han showed him where the hall's original conduits had survived. Bastion answered questions through the connected flame, distinguishing the repaired chambers from the wings that still lacked power.

Shen asked Bastion to repeat the number of restored chambers. Slate watched his gaze follow a pair of exhausted laborers toward the benches.

Shen had sent six craftspeople to inspect a damaged city. Now they had restored a hall that sustained its soldiers and civilians, and his master shaper wanted to stay.

Slate could have given him a tour designed to conceal the growth.

It would have been insulting. It would also have wasted the opportunity to show what continued cooperation could buy them.

“Your people have done good work,” he said.

“They have.” Shen’s gaze stayed on Lu. He traced the rim of his cup once with a thumb, then set it down. “I would like to speak with you after the meal.”

“Of course,” Lu said. His tail shifted beneath the bench, scraping once against the stone.

Shen nodded once.

After the meal, Han took them to a room overlooking the receiving yard.

Slate sat where he could see both its doors. Brace remained outside with the guard. Han and Ren took the chairs beside Shen. Serena brought the mission agreement and the copies of the conversion requests.

Lu stood until Shen asked him to sit.

The Surety placed a folded document on the table. “Your house maintains the lower channels serving the eastern terraces at Lianshi.”

“Our assigned section of them.”

“Your father sent word that you had not answered his last letter.”

Lu's fingers closed against his knees. “I answered before the battle. I haven't had another.”

Ren made a note.

“We will find where it stopped,” Shen said. “That is not why I have come.”

He moved the document nearer. “Your skill was taught within that service. The mission counted toward it. Do you consider yourself released because you have changed your body?”

“No.”

Slate watched the Surety absorb the answer.

Lu continued. “I consider myself entitled to ask when it ends.”

“The channels must continue.”

“I know. I have repaired them.” Lu flattened his hands against his knees, then deliberately lifted them onto the table where Shen could see them. “So has my father. So did his father. I would like to know what I can finish that they could not.”

The Surety left the house record between them. For several breaths he looked at the changed fingers beside it without speaking. “When a terrace floods, it does not distinguish between the household that kept its promise and the household that did not. Someone must maintain the whole course.”

“Then employ someone,” Lu said.

“With what funds, under whose authority, and what happens when the shaper leaves before the floods?”

Lu opened his mouth, then stopped.

The questions were practical. Slate had faced similar questions in Bastion, from crews who needed stone and officers who needed soldiers on the walls.

But Shen had asked the questions after deciding the answer. Slate knew the maneuver: dress a refusal in costs and obligations until the person asking for change had to solve the whole valley. Lu needed a clear end to his service, and Slate wanted his skill in Bastion. The next offer should give them both a way forward.

“Set the work,” he said. “Set the period. Let him decide whether to take it.”

Shen turned toward him. “You would offer that to every household?”

“I'd offer it to the people doing the work.”

Serena read the relevant mission terms aloud.

Han's party had come to survey, repair and teach. Slate supplied their lodging, materials and agreed compensation. Reports went to the Surety. The terms said nothing about conversion. Neither avatar mistook that omission for permission.

Shen placed the two newer requests beside Lu's house record. “He was one man. Now two more of the six wish to follow him.”

“They've asked to learn what it would mean,” Slate said. “Neither has been converted.”

Shen separated the two requests, placing each beside the record of the house it named. “I understand their present condition. I am asking what you intend to do if they decide to follow Lu.”

“Examine whether it's possible. The same thing we did for him.” Slate drew the nearer application back toward the middle of the table. Lu had come to ask for a body he could use. Slate wanted to know what these two could make of the same opportunity.

Shen rested his hands on the table. “Until their obligations are settled, accept no further applicants from this mission or the specialist households under our covenant.”

The room became very quiet.

Slate had expected a demand.

He hadn't expected Shen to extend it to every specialist household.

“You sent them here to work with us,” he said.

“Yes.”

“They've worked. We paid what we agreed. Lu saved people while your soldiers watched him do it.”

“I have thanked him. None of that answers the service still owed elsewhere.”

“Then tell us what work remains. I'll discuss paying for it, training replacements or arranging for him to finish a defined term.”

“Coin does not make a shaper,” Shen said. “Nor does a promise to teach someone place trained hands beside a failing channel.”

“Neither does keeping the same family there forever.”

Shen's expression didn't change, but the fingers on his right hand settled against the table as though he had become conscious of their weight. “You need their skill badly enough to spend your own development on it,” he said. “Do not ask me to believe that losing it costs us nothing.”

Slate held his gaze. “I know what it is worth.” Slate kept his hands on the table. He had wanted the shapers before he knew what Lu might become. Now he had watched them put Bastion back together. He would pay dearly to keep their hands here, training crews and raising the city. Shen was right about their value. That was precisely why Slate would not let an old claim decide where Lu worked next.

Shen rose and went to the window.

Below, the crew from the exercise was unloading the supply wagon. Scourge passed sacks to human store workers. Lu's ramp had already begun coming apart under the hands of the engineering detail.

“When we first made the covenant,” the Surety said, “a failure in one valley could send people into the next with nothing but what they carried. We agreed to keep the roads, the refuge halls and the watercourses together. We agreed that no household would be left to bear an attack alone.”

“I don't object to mutual defense,” Slate said.

“It is more than agreement when danger arrives,” Shen replied. “They are bound before it comes.”

“I understand.”

Shen turned. “Do you? Today I watched three companies act without you speaking. Your human allies brought supplies beneath their shields. One of our shapers made a new road while the others held the ground. In little more than three months, a damaged city has become a place that can sustain more of all three.”

Slate felt a small, fierce satisfaction.

He did not bother concealing it.

“That's what I intended,” Slate said.

“I know,” Shen replied.

Shen looked at Lu's hands. “A man may come here with the craft his house spent generations preserving. He may leave with a stronger body, a longer useful life and a new allegiance. The work he supported remains behind.”

“He might stay here,” Slate said.

“That is the same absence to the people who depend on him.”

“And the same choice to him.”

Slate turned to Lu. “You are free to leave Scourge service whenever you choose. I won't hold you to a debt you never agreed to.”

Lu studied him. “And Lucidus?”

“She gave you that body. I can't tell you what she'll think if you take it elsewhere.” Slate let that settle. “I'd prefer you stay. Bastion has work worthy of your hands. But the choice is yours.”

Lu looked from Shen's house record to his short claws. “Then I had better decide what I want.”

“Do that before Serena starts making plans for you.”

Han shifted in her chair. The corner of her inspection board tapped once against her knee. Shen turned at the sound.

Han set the board on the table. “The teaching here is working. I have crews who can expose a damaged footing safely now. Six weeks ago, I would not have left them beside one. They can keep learning if Lu stays long enough to teach them what he knows.”

Shen studied the chalk marks. “Then the instruction should continue.”

“It will,” Han said. “The question is whether I’m allowed to keep the teacher who made it work.”

Slate waited. Han had spent the morning showing Shen what Lu’s work had bought the city. The Surety hadn't come to discover whether the mission was useful. He had come because it was.

Slate considered Shen’s restriction.

He could agree and keep the shapers working. He could call it an administrative pause, let Serena make a list and leave the two applicants waiting for a decision made somewhere east of the forest.

Then every later applicant would come with the same unfinished condition.

The restriction had no date because the obligations had no end.

“I'll promise that nobody will be converted without understanding what changes,” he said. “I'll promise that we won't tell them their old work has vanished. I won't promise to turn them away because you haven't agreed to let them ask.”

“They may ask,” Shen said. “I am requiring you to withhold the transformation until their service has been provided for.”

Slate touched the house record Serena had read to him. “And who decides when that has happened?”

“The houses responsible for maintaining the channels, with my office settling any dispute.” Shen kept his hand beside the document. “I will not leave those households without the skill their neighbors have promised them.”

Lu looked down at his hands.

Slate leaned forward. “If you want a replacement at the Lianshi channels, let's discuss one. If you want their wages returned for a period they haven't served, show Serena the figures. If you want me to recognize an inherited claim over everyone who might become useful here, the answer is no.”

Shen stood at the end of the table. “Then I cannot leave the mission under its present terms.”

Han drew a slow breath.

Ren's pen stopped.

Slate wanted Shen to offer a term they could accept. A defined service, a replacement, a price. Anything Slate could turn into stone shapers for Bastion. He would not bargain against himself to get it.

The Surety gathered his documents in the same careful order in which he had laid them out. “I will examine the remaining work with Master Han,” he said. “No occupied support will be abandoned. Any task requiring continued maintenance will be identified before the mission moves.”

“You're recalling them,” Slate said.

“I am preparing to,” Shen replied. “We will speak again when the duties and the cost of ending this arrangement are before us.”

Slate stood. “Bring those terms.”

Shen inclined his head.

Ren gathered the mission papers and waited at the open door. Slate remembered the Surety kneeling in the dust at Heshan, using his own hammer to keep a wall off a trapped soldier. This was the same man. That made the prospect of facing him across a battlefield worse, not easier.

They could still salvage the bargain. Shen's shapers could stay, and both cities could benefit.

That did not make the price acceptable.

Han collected her inspection board.

Lu stayed in his chair until she touched his shoulder. “The south conduit first,” she said. “Show the local crew where your last join takes the load.”

He looked at Shen.

The Surety nodded.

Lu left with her.

From the window, Slate watched the receiving yard.

The two stoneshapers who had asked about conversion were sorting tools beneath the arcade. Han spoke to them. One set down the hammer she was cleaning and looked up toward the room.

Ren crossed the yard toward his men. They brought the mission wagon out from the covered bay and lifted the first tool chest onto it. Its iron fittings knocked against the tailboard.

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XVI

The Price Demanded

Shen had barely cleared the eastern gate when the road began to sink. Lu drove his foreclaws into the unfinished approach and forced a brace beneath the paving before the outer edge could shear away. Han barked for the ground crew to clear the cut. Slate was already moving.

By breakfast, Han had closed the eastern wagon approach. Harl's soldiers turned traffic around the lower bend while Lu stood in pale dust beside a row of stone supports. Three human workers waited with wooden wedges and an iron lever.

Han turned her inspection board toward him. Beneath the road, her cross-section showed a broad empty gallery. Chalk had gathered in a thick white line where she had marked the temporary bearing. "Four days with the mission to finish the permanent bearing. Longer with Lu and an ordinary crew."

"How much longer?"

"That depends which other four jobs you stop." Serena made a note behind him. The repair would delay every other stone crew he needed.

"Can we keep using it until you leave?"

"No."

Han said it without apology. She pointed beneath the paving. "We left an inspection gallery so we could join the new approach to the older foundation. The temporary supports carry it safely. They also prevent us from closing the gallery. I will not leave your people using an unfinished road because it happened to stand while I was here."

Slate ducked under the rope.

Brace came with him. The other guards spread along the closed approach, keeping the waiting workers clear of the edge.

At the lower bend, a cart driver began shouting about the turn. Serena went to explain his options. Slate caught the words “unload half” before distance swallowed the rest.

Lu laid his palm against the nearest support. The timber groaned as the load shifted. “Han wants the road lowered onto the bed until we can finish it.”

“How far?”

Lu held one hand beside his knee and the other near his shoulder. “The center will settle evenly. The ends need new slopes before wagons cross.”

Slate looked along the paving. The stretch they meant to lower was longer than the mission wagon, wide enough for two loads to pass. Even empty, it weighed more than he cared to estimate.

“That's your safe option?” Slate asked Lu and Han.

“Leaving the supports inside would hide the unfinished bearing,” Han said. “Sooner or later, someone would decide this rope was unnecessary.” She looked at him.

Slate grinned despite himself. “I'd ask first.”

“You just did.”

Lu's mouth opened slightly. He concealed whatever expression followed by crouching to inspect the base of the support.

Shen came back from the gate while Han explained the lowering sequence. Ren carried the mission papers. The Surety had left his hammer with the horses; his hands were bare.

He listened without interrupting, then examined the old wall at the approach's inner end. “Separate it here,” he told Han, touching a seam above the foundation. “The older courses will resist the descent.”

“I intended to.”

“Let me take that end.”

Han studied him for a moment. Then she moved her chalk mark two feet outward.

Slate watched them divide the road between them. He had invited Shen's people because Bastion needed this skill. Now Ordan's avatar was about to show him how quickly the same skill could close an entrance.

The Surety noticed where he was looking. “The old foundation will remain intact.”

“I'd appreciate that.”

“You should watch from the upper side.”

“I can get clear.”

Shen looked at Brace. “So can men who are struck by the second falling stone.”

Brace stepped beside the wall at the safe end and waited.

Slate went with him. He refused to make an argument out of where he stood while three experts lowered a road.

Han sent the human crew behind the rope, leaving their wedges within Lu’s reach. One of Harl's soldiers stayed at the marked line with a measuring rod. Shen rested both palms against the old wall, and a thin line opened through the pale paving below him.

There was no burst of dust. No dramatic crack. The seam simply appeared, straight enough that Slate could follow it from one edge to the other.

Lu braced his tail behind him.

The temporary supports widened at their bases. Stone spread over the exposed bed like thick clay pressed beneath a thumb. Each column shortened a fraction, stopped, then shortened again.

The road descended.

Slate heard a grinding murmur under the paving. A pebble rolled along the new seam and dropped out of sight. Han stood with her head slightly tilted, following the movement through her fingertips. Lu's short claws rested on a support that was becoming a squat block.

A sharp crack ran through the outer corner. One wedge kicked free. The soldier at the measuring line lunged for his rod. Slate caught the back of his belt and hauled him clear as the road dropped another handspan. Dust burst through the seam. “Clear the cut,” Slate ordered. Harl’s soldiers pulled the man behind the rope.

The far edge hung crooked. Lu held the whole section in place, muscles locked along his back. “Old rubble under the corner,” he said. His voice stayed level, though his tail had dug a groove in the dust. Han slid beneath the lip only after Shen pressed a palm to the old foundation and stopped it moving.

“Hold there,” Shen said.

“I can clear the rubble,” Lu said.

“Keep the load,” Han replied. “I’ll take the obstruction.” She knelt.

A fist-sized lump slid out beside the road. Another followed, then a stone as broad as Han’s chest. She guided it onto the spoil heap while Shen kept the old wall still and Lu held the road overhead.

Lu resumed the descent.

Slate tracked the three shapers at work. He could have smashed the rubble into gravel; he couldn't have kept the road above it. The gap narrowed. Daylight disappeared beneath the paving.

“Bearing,” Lu said.

Shen removed one hand, then the other.

Han walked the length of the lowered section. She tested both ends and called the crew forward. The wooden wedges went into the open seams while Lu drew short stone stops against them. No one hurried. When they

finished, the road lay solidly on the bed, too low for the old entrances to meet it.

A wagon couldn't cross. Neither could an enemy roll a ram straight up to the inner gate. Infantry could manage the drop.

Slate looked at the exposed gallery on the left, where the unfinished retaining wall ended against the hillside.

Lu followed his attention. “I'll close that opening before dark.”

“With stone?”

“Timber first. An earth bank behind it. We need access when we finish the bearing.”

“Show Harl exactly where.”

Shen brushed pale dust from his fingers. “Keep a watch above the gallery as well. A man beneath that wall is difficult to see from your gate.”

Slate met his gaze. “I will.”

The warning was useful. So was knowing which weakness Shen had noticed.

By the time they returned to the receiving room, Serena had added the eastern road to three other interrupted projects and persuaded the cart driver that shouting wouldn't widen the lower bend.

She spread her list beside Ren's papers. “We can finish the south conduit handover today,” she said. “The shapers have already taught the local crew its maintenance. The eastern approach is closed. Two building surveys can wait. Han says the old healing house has enough sound walls for Lu to continue the repair, provided he doesn't try to open the damaged upper floor.”

“Which he won't,” Han said.

Lu, seated beside her, made no objection.

Slate took his chair. Matek stood near the window, leaving the seats opposite Shen empty. Slate had asked him to attend after seeing the road lowered. The intelligence officer had spent too long studying enemies to let a departing inspection party become someone else's problem.

Shen opened the mission agreement. “I will withdraw the remaining specialists when the handover is complete. Captain Ren and his escort will return with us.”

“Tomorrow morning,” Han said. “If the south crew can repeat the shutoff without my help.”

Shen accepted the condition.

Slate leaned back. “And the cost?”

Ren read the completed duties first. Surveying, repairs, instruction, the days of service already paid. Serena stopped him twice to compare a delivery with her own record. The second time she pushed a receipt across the table. “We supplied that iron.”

Ren read it and amended his total.

Slate let them continue. Neither disputed that the mission had earned its pay. There was still something to negotiate.

When they finished, Serena tapped the smaller of the two totals. “This is what we owe for completed service. We can pay it before departure. This,” she tapped the other column, “is the advance for the period they won't remain. I propose leaving it against the next agreement.”

“There may be no next agreement,” Shen said.

“Then we can recover it against the settlement you're asking us to make.”

The Surety considered her. “That would recognize a debt beyond this mission.”

“It would recognize that we're willing to discuss one. I haven't written you a blank account.”

Slate almost smiled. Serena had spent enough time finding supplies for an army to distrust any bill without a final number.

“Lu's household first,” he said. “What replaces the work he would have done?”

Shen drew the Lianshi record from beneath the mission papers. “A qualified shaper must take responsibility for his share of the channel maintenance. The neighboring houses can cover the immediate absence. That cannot become a permanent demand upon them.”

“How long to train a replacement?” Slate asked Shen.

“That depends upon the apprentice,” Shen said.

“Then name an existing shaper who can cover the gap, and let us pay for the apprentice.”

Lu shifted beside Han. “I can prepare the instruction,” he said. “The lower sluice is where they lose the most time. Its bed was repaired across the grain. Whoever takes it needs to see why.”

Shen looked at him. “Will you return to teach them?”

Lu's tail pressed against the floor.

Slate stayed silent. He wanted Lu in Bastion. He also wanted the answer to belong to Lu.

“If I agree to a visit, can I leave when the teaching is finished?” the Builder asked.

“Your household's responsibilities must be settled.”

“That wasn't what I asked.”

Han rested both hands on the edge of the table. “His drawings would help whoever you send. I have seen him teach the crews here.”

“Drawings do not inspect a channel after the first flood,” Shen replied.

Lu's claws curled, then relaxed. “I know what floods do.”

“I have never doubted that.”

“Then please stop answering me as though I have forgotten.”

Lu drew his elbows close after speaking, though he left his broad hands on the table.

Shen didn't rebuke him.

He studied the old house record before folding its lower edge inward. “I can arrange temporary maintenance. I cannot tell the houses that every obligation they share is now a sum another ruler may pay to remove their strongest people.”

“Start with one,” Slate said. “You don't have to settle the entire Confederacy before we can settle Lu.”

“If I give him a release on these terms, the next house is entitled to ask why its service should be valued differently.”

“Then give them an answer.”

Matek moved away from the window. “And make certain the payment reaches the channels,” he said. “If we're paying to maintain them, we should know who does it.”

Shen's attention sharpened. “You would inspect our use of the funds.”

“I would ask for the same evidence you receive from your people here.”

Ren looked down at the stack of reports beside his elbow.

Slate had no intention of sending Matek to inspect irrigation. Letting Shen think through that possibility was useful anyway.

He pushed the payment sheet toward the Surety. “We'll cover an agreed replacement. Han and Lu can describe the work. You name the person who can do it, Serena checks the price, and we put an end date on our share. That's an offer.”

“And until it is accepted?”

“Nobody leaves here in chains.”

Shen's eyes moved to Lu. “Even to answer an obligation he acknowledges?”

“If Lu agrees to go, he goes. If he doesn't, you don't collect him.”

The room fell silent except for the cart wheels in the yard.

Slate had spent the morning watching Shen's people lower a road beneath their hands. He was willing to buy that skill. He would not let Shen put the same hand against one of his people and decide where he belonged.

The Surety closed the payment sheet. “Then the mission must end.”

Slate nodded once. “Pay what we owe, Serena.”

She drew the completed account toward her. The proposed settlement remained with Shen.

He didn't tear it up. Slate took that for the small concession it was.

The two applicants waited beneath the arcade after the meeting. Serena had brought chairs out of the sun, but only one was occupied.

Guo Yanshu stood beside the tool chest she had been packing the day before. Her dark hair was twisted close to her neck, and gray dust filled the seams of her knuckles. Cheng Yujin sat with both boots planted squarely beneath his knees, holding his mission token.

Slate checked the mission ledger. Cheng Yujin had eight months left on his term. Guo Yanshu carried an open-ended household duty. Different obligations, different offers.

Serena made the introductions again. “Cheng has eight months remaining on the term he accepted. Guo's household duty has no recorded completion date.”

“I remember.”

“Then let them hear what each choice costs.”

Slate looked to Cheng.

Han waited beneath the next arch, near enough to be called over. Shen had gone to inspect the south conduit with Ren. This conversation was for the people being discussed.

Cheng turned the token between his fingers. “I want to go back.”

“Then you should.”

Cheng looked up, waiting for Slate to name a price. “I asked to learn about the change,” he said. “I haven't withdrawn that request.”

“Serena has your request on file.”

“My brother took my place for this mission. He has his own term afterward.”

If Cheng stayed, his brother would have to finish his work.

“We can send you what we learn. When your term ends, I will reserve you a place for examination and put you on a return caravan if you still want it.”

Cheng's grip loosened around the token. “Will the examination still be available?”

“If we can do it safely. You will not have to ask twice.”

The shaper bowed his head. Slate left him with Serena and turned toward Guo.

She watched Cheng place his token in his belt pouch. “My sister maintains our refuge roof,” Guo said. “I keep its lower cistern. She sent a letter after Lu changed.”

“What did she say?”

“That she would like her knees back.”

Slate looked at the woman's hands again. Two fingers on the left bent less easily than the others. “Does she want to come here?”

“She wants me to find out whether the rest of him hurts less.”

“Lu can describe what changed. He cannot promise your body will respond the same way.”

“I know.”

“Do you want to stay?”

Guo looked past him toward the yard. Han was correcting the way a worker had wrapped an iron gauge for transport. “I want to be able to come back without my sister losing the roof crew because I left.”

“I can fund a replacement through the flood season and pay your return passage on a date you choose. Your application stays open until then. If that solves nothing, you lose nothing by leaving today.”

Guo rubbed one bent finger with the other hand. “Master Han said you wouldn’t keep a place for someone who left.”

“The application stays open whether you go or stay.”

“Even if the Surety says no?”

“Even then.”

Guo considered the offer. “The crew would need to be trained before I could go. Not promised. Trained.”

“Then Serena will put that condition in writing.”

Guo nodded once, still unconvinced, and picked up the last bundle of gauges.

Slate let her go.

Shen’s covenant did not need guards on every road. It made each person’s absence costly to the people left behind.

Lu’s tail settled behind him as he lifted a heavy chest onto the wagon. Guo thanked him; he showed her how to turn the wooden latch with its split concealed underneath. Matek watched the exchange.

“Lu remains head of the engineers?” Matek asked.

“Until I have a reason to replace him.” Slate didn't look away from the wagon. “Why?”

“I want the routes and return times for every engineer carrying orders outside the walls. If a courier misses the window, I need to know before a gate is opened for him.”

“You will get the roster. No private letters read and no courier stopped without cause.” Slate watched Matek’s face.

“I asked for routes, not letters.”

“Good. Serena has the wagon assignments, Brenn the detachments, and Lu knows who carries his technical plans. Ask him. If the route changes, report it to me.”

“Understood.”

Slate faced him fully. “You do not question Lu’s loyalty because Shen dislikes my answer. Bring me evidence of a real risk, and I will act on it.”

Matek’s expression barely changed. “The roster is for Bastion’s security.”

“Then we agree.”

The south crew completed Han's test before sunset. Slate heard the result from Serena while reviewing Harl's new sentry positions. They had closed the conduit, cleared the channel and restored the flow without asking either shaper to touch the stone.

Han had required them to do it twice.

By morning, the mission wagon stood ready at the eastern gate. Five craftspeople waited beside it. Ren and his nine soldiers had formed around the load, while Shen's twelve made a separate mounted file beyond the arch.

Lu came out carrying a narrow stone case.

He handed it to Han. “The channel sections. For whoever takes the Lianshi maintenance.”

She opened the case far enough to inspect the thin fitted pieces inside. Slate saw scored lines across the top panel, each groove filled with dark pigment. The fitted panels clicked softly.

“You finished these last night?” Han asked Lu.

“I didn't need to sleep yet,” Lu said.

Han looked at him over the case. “Neither did I, once. It wasn't permission to stop.”

Lu's bronze-flecked scales shifted around his mouth. “I'll remember.”

She closed the lid and held it against her chest. “I'll see that the replacement shaper receives them.”

Shen stood beside his mount. Slate went to him while Ren checked the wagon team. “The completed account is paid,” Slate said. “Serena has copies of the offer.”

“So do I.”

“If the houses name a replacement, send us the terms.”

“I will send an answer.”

Not quite the same promise. Slate didn't pretend otherwise.

Through the gate, the lowered approach caught the morning light. Traffic had already worn a fresh track around the lower bend. Harl had placed two sentries above the unfinished gallery, with another watching from the inner wall.

Shen studied their positions.

Slate could see him measuring the distance between them. “You could have guessed where we'd put them,” Slate said.

“Yes.”

“Then you know why they're there.”

The Surety turned back. “I have given no order to attack Bastion.”

“Good.”

“I have also given no release from the obligations we discussed.”

“Your people are leaving. Lu isn't.”

“I am aware.”

Neither raised his voice. Slate would have preferred a little anger. Anger might have given him a mistake to use.

Ren brought Shen his reins.

The Surety placed one foot in the stirrup, then paused. “Do not mistake the time needed to resolve this for agreement, Slate.”

“I won't. Don't mistake an open gate for permission to take someone through it.”

Shen mounted.

The black links on his banner passed beneath Bastion's arch. Slate watched all five shapers follow it, their wagon taking the lower bend one careful wheel turn at a time.

Guo looked back once. She raised a hand.

Then the retaining wall hid her.

Harl came down from the gate steps. “Shut it?”

“Let the carts through first.”

Beyond the walls, a sentry changed the watch. Inside, the carts kept moving.

Slate called Lu over.

The Builder watched the last of the mounted escort disappear around the bend. His hands were empty now.

“The eastern approach,” Slate said. “I need it finished.”

“I'll move the crew from the surveys.”

“And when it's finished, I want to know how you'd take it.”

Lu turned toward him. “Take it?”

“You know what Han knows. Shen has walked the route. Show Harl where you'd come through, and don't give him the easy answer.”

For a moment, Lu studied the lowered paving.

Then he pointed past the sentries, toward the old wall above the inspection gallery. “I wouldn't come through the gate.”

Slate followed his claw. “Start there.”

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XVII

The Divided Loyalty

Lu recognized Xie An's handwriting in the list of broken millstones.

She always closed the bottom of a seven. It made the number look like a bent nail. Twelve days after Shen left Bastion, Lu stood in the old healing house and counted three such sevens among requests for replacement stone.

The list had come back with the courier who had carried his letter east.

He read it again while a human carpenter waited for him to approve a door.

The first mark named a route. The second gave the number of people. The third meant they had been taken.

Six prisoners at the old mill beside the western transfer post.

Xie had written the list herself. Beneath it, another hand had added a departure date. A short line from the courier explained that the mill's keeper had made her tally the damaged stones. She had persuaded him to send the list to a shaper who might still repair them.

“Master Lu?” the carpenter called.

He lowered the page.

The carpenter held the door square in its opening. Lu could see the grain separating around the upper hinge. He narrowed his focus until the split stood out between the fibers, then drew the wood together around the screw.

“Lift it slightly,” Lu told the carpenter.

The carpenter obeyed. Lu moved the hinge by less than the width of a grain of barley.

The door swung without scraping.

“Better,” the man said.

Lu checked the join again because he didn't trust his attention.

Beyond the doorway, Fidem helped a woman sit beside a treatment bed. Her son lay on it with his left hand wrapped in linen. Two beds farther along, a red-scaled Raider held his forearm out to a priest of Lucidus.

Lu had spent the previous evening fitting the last stone beneath that floor. Han's sketches lay on the bench where he had left them. The repaired chamber occupied the ground level only, with the stair to the damaged upper rooms blocked by a timber door.

He had shaped that door himself. Its joints fitted so well that he could close it with a finger.

The chamber smelled of boiled linen and wet plaster.

Fidem beckoned him over. “We're ready.”

Lu folded the millstone list and placed it inside his belt.

He could listen to the demonstration. It would take only a few minutes. The eastern road's new bearing was finished, although its outer retaining wall still needed more courses. He had left that crew a full day's work before coming here. For once, no one was waiting for him to hold a roof.

Bastion spoke from the ward-flame above the far door. *“The six treatment stations are connected. Please maintain the central supply during the test.”*

The priest beside the Raider inspected a cut across his forearm. Two shallower wounds lay parallel to it, left by a split iron edge during salvage work.

She had already closed the first wound outside the chamber.

Now pale light gathered over the second.

Lu watched the exposed mana conduit beside the bed. Its fine channels caught his changed sight, each line distinct without a lens. He could see

where the stone had fractured and where his repair joined it. He couldn't have invented the pattern that lay beyond the join. The priest's healing gift ran through it and into the wound.

The cut closed.

The Raider flexed his hand. “The same?”

“One tenth less for the same closure,” the priest said.

Fidem turned to the boy's mother. “She can treat his palm now, if you're ready.”

The woman drew her chair closer instead of answering. Her son reached for her with his uninjured hand.

The priest closed the cut without removing any more cloth than necessary. When she finished, the boy touched his fingertips together and stared at them.

Fidem smiled. “Gently. She didn't give you a new hand to damage.”

“Can I go back to work?”

“After she tells you.”

The priest gave Fidem an appreciative look.

Lu checked the conduit's temperature with the side of his hand. Steady. The copper clamp beside his repair had warmed without pulling away from its bed.

Bastion confirmed the result. *“Restorative spells applied at an occupied station require one tenth less mana. The chamber supply requires sixty mana per hour, independent of occupancy.”*

“So we bring patients together,” Fidem said, looking toward the empty beds. “We don't keep the whole room charged for a single small cut.”

“That will reduce the expenditure per treatment.”

The Raider turned his arm over. “Does it save my repair reserve?”

“Your internal biomass repair is unaffected. The reduction applies to restorative spells cast upon you.”

“Then next time I'll bring the bigger wound.”

“Please don’t arrange one,” the priest said.

Lu almost smiled.

He had made a floor stand and a door close. Now healing a soldier used less of the priest's mana, and a boy could bend fingers he had thought were ruined. Han would have understood why that pleased him.

Xie would have too.

She had once kept a refuge open through a winter after its assigned house stopped sending grain. Lu had repaired the hearth while she watered the millet and told hungry travelers that the next bowl would be thicker.

He touched the folded page at his belt.

Fidem noticed. “Bad news?”

“Someone I knew has been taken.”

“By whom?”

“A house patrol.”

The warmth left Fidem's expression without becoming suspicion. “Can we help?”

Lu could have handed him the letter.

He could have asked Slate. The avatar had offered to pay for the channels at Lianshi and had let five useful shapers walk out of his gate. He had given Lu a place to work after learning that the men on the road had known his name.

All of that made the next lie harder.

“I need to find out more first,” Lu said.

Fidem rested a hand on the bed rail. “Let me know when you do.”

Lu agreed.

He waited until the boy and his mother had left before going back to his bench. He took a clean piece of paper and began listing the tools an eastern road survey would require.

A copy of the letter he had sent home lay beneath Han’s drawings.

In it, he had described his hands, his restored arm and the unsettling height from which he now saw a room. He had written about shaping wood. He had included the names of people who could explain conversion without demanding it.

He had left out the patrol routes.

Xie's reply asked him to open one.

By noon, Lu had arranged the engineering wagon. Two human assistants would accompany him: Tella, who drove the team and repaired its harness, and Orven, a mason who had learned to read the new foundation marks.

He told them they were examining the road east of Wayward.

The corps needed that survey. As its commander, Lu could requisition the wagon, tools and money without asking Slate again.

Matek found him checking the load. “Which sections?”

Lu showed him the survey list. “Drainage failures reported along the eastern route. The crews can expose them now. Before Han left, only she and I could decide which should be opened.”

“How far?”

“To the highland approach, if the road is passable.”

Matek read the names beside the wagon assignment. “No Scourge escort?”

“We're joining the next supply train as far as Wayward. Traders use the road beyond.”

“Traders hire guards.”

“I can wait for company.”

Matek held the list a moment longer.

Lu kept his hands still. He knew exactly how much pressure his fingers could put against the wagon rail before the wood yielded. His new senses could measure that pressure exactly. They couldn't tell him how to admit his lie and still make himself leave.

“Send a report from Wayward,” Matek said. “And tell me before you change that route.”

Lu took the list back. “Yes.”

Matek left him beneath the yard's ward-flame.

There would be no pretending he had slipped out unnoticed.

They followed the settled road east for six days before reaching Wayward, the last dependable post before the Wyldwood. Lu sent the report he had promised, listing the drains they had examined and Orven’s cracked bridge bearing. Then he paid for space with a northbound trading train that would skirt the forest’s north-eastern edge and turn toward the highlands.

He did not mention the mill.

The road followed the Wyldwood’s northern margin. Roots pressed through the old paving, and branches leaned over the track. Twice the wagon’s load caught before Lu persuaded a living branch upward without snapping it. Tella watched him work. “You could have led with that when you hired me.”

“I hired you to drive,” Lu replied.

“Then let me know before you teach the trees to do it.” She smiled at him over her shoulder.

Lu found it difficult to answer.

Orven kept a tally of each repair. He was proud of the small book Serena had issued him and wrapped it in oiled cloth whenever the clouds thickened.

Every evening, Lu watched him add another truthful entry to a journey built around a lie.

Over the next four days, they followed the forest's northern margin and slept beside other travelers wherever the road widened enough for wagons.

The wagon turned around the Wyldwood's northeastern edge and began climbing toward Ordan's highlands. Bare slopes rose beyond the trees, and the old road acquired the fitted drains Lu had known since childhood.

He had returned to Ordan's country in a body the houses had no place for.

At the last shared camp before the transfer post, a thin woman approached their wagon carrying a basket of boiled roots.

Lu knew Deng Shu by the missing tip of her left ear.

She stopped when he rose.

For several breaths, she looked from his face to his hands and down the heavy tail planted behind him. “Xie said you were taller.”

“She read the letter.”

“She didn't say this tall.”

“I gave her a measurement.”

Deng made a short, strained sound that might have become a laugh on another evening.

She set the basket on the wagon step. “The prisoners leave at first light. I thought you weren't coming.”

“The road hasn't become shorter.”

“We could have used some of your soldiers.”

“They aren't mine to bring.”

Her eyes moved toward Tella and Orven at the cookfire. “But these are?”

Lu felt the question settle.

“No,” Lu told Deng.

He took Deng away from the wagon and made her explain the mill. Six prisoners waited on a timber platform above the old wheel channel. Their wrists were secured to an overhead beam. House guards held the upper yard; a crossbow watched the entrance from the loft.

“They'll move Xie inland with the others,” Deng said. “After that, every road gets watched.”

“Why was she taken?”

“Moving families whose service hadn't been released. Keeping false counts.”

“And the others?”

Deng reached for the basket.

Lu caught its handle. “All of them.”

“Two helped her. One carried the messages. Two kept the route safe.”

“With weapons?”

“When they had to.”

He remembered Yan speaking about the children above the road.

Deng saw the change in his face. “You think everyone who held a bow chose Heshan?”

“I think you should answer what I ask.”

“One of them supplied Yan.”

Lu released the basket.

The cookfire snapped behind him. Tella was telling Orven to take the pot off before he burned supper.

“Did he know about the wagons?”

“I don't know.”

“Does Xie?”

“You can ask her when she isn't chained to a beam.”

Lu hated her for saying it. He hated that the answer didn't change whether he would go.

He brought Tella and Orven beside the wagon before the light failed.

Then he told them what it was for.

Tella listened without moving. Orven's mouth opened at the word prisoners and stayed open until Lu finished.

“You brought us across the forest for this?” the mason asked.

“For the survey too.”

Tella's expression stopped him.

Lu lowered his head. “Yes. I did.”

“You should have told us at Bastion.”

“Yes.”

“Does Slate know?”

“No.”

Orven looked toward the road as though a company might be marching along it already.

Tella rubbed both hands over her face. “Don't tell me we can simply go home. You're standing beside the only wagon we have.”

“You can take it. I'll remain.”

“And do what?”

“Find another way.”

She looked at Deng, then at the tools loaded under the wagon's marked iron straps. “People or weapons?”

“Six people. They leave their weapons behind.”

“They have none,” Deng said.

“That should be easy, then,” Tella replied.

Orven shook his head. “I won't fight house soldiers.”

“Neither will I,” Lu said. “I need the wagon at the lower mill track. If I don't reach it before the light, leave with the traders.”

“And if your friends want us to carry something else?”

“We don't.”

Tella held his gaze. She would decide what went into her wagon. “We don't,” she repeated. She picked up the reins.

The mill had lost its wheel years before.

Lu lay in the dry tailrace beneath it, feeling the channel bed through one palm. Water still reached the upper pond. A narrow bypass carried it around the abandoned machinery and returned it below the building.

Above him, six pairs of feet rested on wood.

He could feel weight where the platform's posts met the stone, but that didn't tell him whose feet they were. He drew a breath and narrowed his sight through the gap beneath the lowest board.

An ankle. A frayed hem. A chain hanging beside a knee.

He had helped design hiding places like this. Put a stoneshaper on timber, keep the nearest usable stone beyond easy reach, and ordinary house guards could watch a person who would otherwise walk through a cell wall.

The houses knew those methods too.

Lu's taller body barely fitted beneath the floor. Dust worked beneath his collar as he shifted forward. His beard caught a splinter. He eased it free with two short claws and folded his tail along the channel instead of trying to turn it beneath the joists.

For once, he missed being shorter.

Deng waited behind him with a rope and a hooded lamp. Farther down the track, Tella held the wagon beside a stand of brush. Orven had stayed with her.

A guard crossed the loft.

Lu watched the boards depress beneath each step. The man stopped near the prisoners, said something Lu couldn't make out, then went back toward the upper yard.

Lu touched the first joist.

He knew stone grain. Wood gave him a different pleasure, fibers running in long bundles that could bend without failing if he respected their course. He drew a knot away from the board's edge, loosened the fitted tongue and opened a slit beside the lowest prisoner.

An old woman's eye appeared above it.

She stared at him.

Then her lips moved. “Wen?”

“Quietly.”

Xie closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them, she was smiling. “You came.”

“I need to see your hands.”

She lifted her wrists as far as the chain permitted. Iron enclosed them. The chain rose to a staple driven through the overhead beam.

Lu could not shape iron.

He could feel the beam through the posts that carried it.

He planted his tail against the stone bed, rested one hand on each side of the opening and sent his shaping up the nearest timber.

The fibers tightened around the staple. Then the wood divided behind it.

Iron came free with a plug still caught through its loop.

Xie lowered her arms.

Lu opened a larger section of floor. She passed the chain down first, then lowered herself into his hands.

She weighed less than he remembered.

He set her beside Deng and went back for the next prisoner.

They came slowly: a young woman with blood dried around her wrists, a broad man who had trouble bending his knee, then a boy whose beard had only begun to grow.

The fifth prisoner had a soldier's posture.

He caught Lu's wrist as he reached the opening. “Where's the rest of your force?”

“Below the mill.”

“How many?”

“Let go.”

The man's fingers tightened.

Lu could have broken them against the board. He knew the force required with unpleasant precision.

Instead he eased his wrist back until the man's forearm rested against the edge of the opening, then lifted that board.

The prisoner released him rather than let his elbow bend backward.

“Climb down,” Lu said. “Or stay.”

He climbed.

The sixth was still above when a lantern shone through the loft.

“What are you doing?”

The remaining prisoner dropped flat.

Lu caught the chain before it struck the floor.

Boots ran toward them.

He pressed the loosened boards upward, closing the opening between the guard and the prisoner. The floor rose into a low wooden ridge. A bolt punched through it where Lu's head had been.

The crossbowman had moved to the edge of the loft.

Lu could see the man's leading boot through the narrow space beneath the ridge. He curled the edge of the floorboard under it as the guard reached for another bolt.

The man stumbled into the railing. His crossbow struck it stock-first and fell through the gap. He drew a sword. “Below! They're below!”

Lu pulled the last prisoner through.

The man landed against his chest. Lu's tail drove hard into the channel bed, taking the weight before they both struck the stone.

A bell rang in the yard.

Deng caught the freed man's chain. “Move!”

The prisoners crawled down the tailrace. Lu stayed beneath the platform long enough to reshape the openings into a tangle of joined boards. A blade struck through a gap and stopped a finger's width from his face.

He withdrew.

At the channel mouth, Xie struggled to climb the short slope.

Lu lifted her onto the track. The others crowded toward the wagon, carrying loose chains in their fists. Tella already had the team turned.

A soldier appeared above the bypass.

He raised a spear.

Lu seized the stone beneath the man's boots and lifted a waist-high ridge between them. The spear struck it and skidded over Lu's shoulder.

More boots crossed the yard.

He could close the track with fallen masonry. The mill's outer wall stood above the narrow passage the guards would have to use.

One pull would bring it down.

He saw where the stones would fall. He knew which men would be beneath them.

Yan had known too.

He moved along the channel wall toward the bypass instead, keeping the raised ridge between himself and the spear.

The water gate was wood. He caught its frame with one hand and pressed the other against the stone beneath it.

He folded it shut.

Water climbed behind it, spilling toward the disused wheel channel. Lu lowered a lip in the stone bed and gave the rising flow a new course across the pursuit track.

The first rush struck the wall he had raised. It turned, spread and poured between the mill and the wagon.

A soldier tried the crossing and stopped when the water reached above his knee. “Shaper!” he shouted.

Lu went backward toward the wagon, one hand trailing along the channel wall. His mana was running low. His body could remain awake for a long time; that didn't mean it could feed the stone indefinitely.

“Get aboard!” Tella called.

The fifth prisoner stood beside the wagon holding a short sword.

Lu hadn't seen him take it.

“Drop that.”

“They're coming.”

“Drop it.”

The prisoner looked at the water, then at the broad scaled creature between him and the track.

For an instant, Lu thought he would have to choose between stopping the man and holding the diversion.

Xie reached out from the wagon. “Leave it, Sui.”

The sword fell.

Lu climbed onto the rear step. Orven caught his belt and pulled while Tella sent the horses forward.

Above the flooded track, a guard lifted his lantern.

Its light caught Lu's gray scales, the bronze between them and the thick tail curling over the wagon's rear rail.

“That's the changed shaper!”

Lu heard him clearly.

So did everyone in the wagon.

Tella drove until the mill bell faded behind the hills.

At the first fork, Deng directed her onto a cart track screened by scrub. Lu kept his palm against the side rail. He could feel the axle's strain, every jolt through the loaded bed and the extra weight over the rear wheels.

Too much on the left.

“Move nearer the middle,” he told Sui.

The man obeyed.

Lu had spent years opening routes for the Forsworn without letting the houses know how much he could do. Tonight, a guard had watched him leave in a wagon issued by Slate's quartermaster, with the city's marked straps shining on its load.

He could remove the straps. He could cut new tracks across the hillside.

Neither would make the witnesses forget him.

Xie sat with her back against the tool chest. Lu freed the last wooden plug from the staple on her chain. The iron cuffs remained around her wrists, their edges dark against the rubbed skin.

“Does it hurt?” she asked.

“The form?”

She nodded.

“Less than the arm did.”

She studied his hands. “And the wood?”

“That is new.”

“Good.”

The word was so simple that he had to look away.

Across from her, Sui rubbed the bruises where his shackles had pressed against the wagon bed. “Yan said you'd found a patron.”

Lu looked back. “What did you supply him?”

Deng made a small sound beside the driver.

Sui watched Lu's face. “Food. Bowstrings.”

“Before he attacked the elven wagons.”

“I didn't choose his target.”

“Did you know it?”

Sui's mouth tightened.

Lu waited.

“Yes.”

Orven stopped adjusting the blanket beneath the injured man's knee.

Xie closed her eyes.

Lu remembered the child crawling under the wagon. He remembered holding the road while Peng fell.

He had brought Sui out too.

Tella kept the horses moving. “What happens when we reach your people?” she asked.

Lu could tell her they would avoid the sentries, take the families along one of his old routes and leave the wagon where a repair crew would find it. For years, that had been how he ended a journey like this.

Now Xie could barely hold a cup. The young woman's wrist had swollen beneath the cuff, and the man beside Orven needed someone to examine his knee. They needed the beds Lu had finished repairing.

“They'll be questioned,” he said.

Sui leaned forward. “You said we were going free.”

“I said I was taking you out of the mill.”

“That isn't the same.”

“No.”

Xie opened her eyes. “Wen.”

He faced her. He could bear her anger if she gave it to him. He had earned that from enough people already.

She held out her chained hands. “Start with these. We'll need to tell your healers why we still have them.”

Lu took her wrists carefully.

By dawn, they reached a stopping place on the road toward the forest. Tella watered the horses while Orven gave the injured man the last of their clean linen, unfolding it over his knees before passing it across. Deng went ahead to watch the next bend.

Lu sat beside the wagon's marked iron strap.

Slate had given him the authority to move it. Serena had paid for its wheels. Matek had asked where it would go, and Lu had looked him in the face and lied.

He couldn't arrive home with six prisoners and pretend the only question was whether Shen had treated them fairly.

He took Orven's survey book, turned past the drainage measurements and wrote down every name.

Then he added the mill, the route and the order he had used to obtain the wagon.

When Deng returned, she was breathing hard. “Scourge on the western road. Two of the green ones.”

Lu stood. “How far?”

“They'll reach the stopping place before we can get the horses back in the traces.”

Tella looked at him over the water bucket.

He placed the survey book on the driver's seat. “Leave the team where it is.”

Sui moved toward the scrub.

Lu caught the wagon rail. He did not reach for the man's throat or the stone beneath his feet. “If you run, they'll chase you.”

“You brought us to them.”

Lu looked toward the road.

A green shape moved above the brush, quick and silent. Another had already reached the far side of the stopping place.

Lu raised his empty hands. “I brought these people out of the mill,” Lu called. “They are injured. The house patrol is coming after them.”

The nearer Lurker’s gaze moved over the dangling shackles, the marked wagon and the six strangers packed against its side. “Are they prisoners?”

“Not mine.”

Before Lu could say more, Confederacy soldiers appeared on the track behind them. Their captain pointed at the wagon. “Return the debtors and stand aside.”

The nearer Lurker stepped between the wagon and the patrol. “Nobody is taking them by force.”

“They are bound under covenant,” the captain said. “Lower your weapons.”

Lu tried to get between them. “He means their service is owed. I brought them out of the mill. Listen to me.”

A crossbowman shifted to get a clear shot past Lu. The nearer Lurker saw the movement and pulled Lu behind the wagon. The bolt struck its iron strap with a hard crack.

The captain shouted for his soldiers to advance. One Lurker fired a red flare toward Woodhaven, calling the nearest Scourge company to the road. The second released a courier wyvern with a report for Bastion.

The wyvern beat west above the trees. Bastion would hear before a rider could reach Shen. Lu stepped back between the two armed groups, six freed prisoners behind him and his own lie written in Serena’s survey book. “Stop!” he shouted. Neither line heard him.

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XVIII

The Hidden Allegiance

The first bolt had struck Lu's wagon the previous morning. By the time Slate reached the road west of Ordan's highland transfer post, the house patrol had twice tried to take the six prisoners by force. The wagon stood on the Scourge side of the border; the patrol had crossed it carrying a house warrant. The wyvern sent west by the Lurkers reached Bastion before a Confederacy rider could reach Shen. One flare called Woodhaven; its first company had already joined the fight. Slate took wing as soon as the courier delivered his report. Brace followed on a wyvern.

Slate came over the ridge and saw that both sides had reinforced. Lurkers held the road around the well while the house soldiers pressed them back from the wagon. A second rank of Scourge came up from the western rise, their green scales dark with rain and road mud. The fighters below had formed no clean line. They were too close to the wagon.

At its center, six dwarves in travel-stained armor surrounded the rear wheels. Their captain held a folded warrant in one hand and the wagon’s rail in the other.

One Lurker stood on the wagon's roof; another held the rise above the track. Sui was being dragged from the bed while two prisoners tried to pull him back.

Slate folded his wings and landed beside the well. Brace was there a breath later with the advance guard. The two Mystics brought their staffs forward, ready to strike if either line moved.

“Release the man,” Slate called.

The captain turned.

The Scourge line held. The house soldiers did not release Sui.

Lu stood on the far side of the vehicle, one hand against its bed. He hadn't moved from it.

The warrant could wait until both sides stopped reaching for weapons.

“I have authority to return these prisoners,” the captain said.

“Then show me.”

Sui twisted between the two soldiers holding him. One dragged his arm higher. The other reached for a length of chain.

The Lurker on the wagon lowered his head. “They caught him when he climbed down,” the Lurker reported. “I stopped them taking the others.”

Slate nodded. “Hold where you are.” Slate walked toward the captain.

The dwarf raised his warrant. “Captain Bao, under the authority of the western transfer post and the house whose prisoners these are.”

“I’m Slate. You’re on my side of the border.”

“I know who you are.” Bao held the warrant stiffly between two hands. Its folded edge had begun to crease beneath his thumbs.

Slate smiled, showing every fang. “Then you know whose road you're standing on.”

Bao's eyes moved to the Scourge spreading beside the well. “I have orders to recover them.” Bao pointed a finger at Slate’s chest. “One of your people broke them out.”

Slate considered pulling the finger off and dropping it in the well. Shen would probably ask for it back. Slate met the captain’s eyes. “One of my people is about to answer for that. Let the prisoner go.”

Bao gave a short order.

One soldier loosened his grip. The other had already passed the chain around Sui's wrist. Sui lunged away before either could remove it.

The soldier fell against the wagon.

His partner drew a knife.

Slate moved.

He caught the knife wrist before the blade reached Sui, drove it against the wagon's iron strap and felt the fingers open. The weapon dropped. Slate put his other hand between Sui's shoulders and pushed him toward the waiting Lurker.

A crossbow snapped.

The bolt struck Slate below the collarbone.

Scourgeshield flashed white along his scales. He felt the impact spread across his chest, sharp enough to make him bare his teeth. The broken shaft fell between his feet.

The crossbowman stared at it.

Brace crossed the space before the man could lower the weapon. One claw closed around the stock. His other hand caught the dwarf's armor and lifted him off his feet.

“Hold!” Bao shouted.

His soldiers froze.

Slate still had the knife man's wrist. He turned it until the dwarf faced away from Sui, then released him with a shove. “That order came a bolt late, Captain.” Slate let Bao see the broken shaft at his feet. “Give the next one before I have to.”

Bao looked at the broken bolt, evidently realizing the same thing. “He thought you were killing Jiao,” the captain explained.

“I don’t give a fuck what he thought.” Slate pointed at the crossbowman with his tail blade. “If I tore Jiao’s arm off and beat your man with it, he’d better thank me for the lesson.”

Bao looked as though the Covenant had omitted a procedure for that. He settled on “Sui resisted lawful custody.”

Slate stepped closer.

The captain had to tilt his head to maintain eye contact. He did it. Slate respected that more than the argument.

“We’re done deciding this with weapons,” Slate said. “Your man gets his feet back when he puts the crossbow down. Mine will stop holding him when yours stop reaching for the wagon.”

Bao ordered the crossbow released.

Brace set its owner on the road.

The knife lay beside the rear wheel, mud packed against one side of the blade. Slate picked it up by the spine and offered the hilt to Bao.

The captain accepted it.

For a moment, neither moved.

Then Bao ordered his soldiers back to the well.

Slate turned to the wagon.

The old woman inside had wrapped both arms around a young woman with a swollen wrist. A broad man sat with his injured leg stretched along the boards. The others watched the Scourge without speaking.

Sui had stopped struggling.

The Lurker holding him kept the loose chain away from his throat.

“Anyone else hurt?” Slate asked.

The driver shook her head. “Only the ones we brought.”

Lu started to speak but Slate lifted one claw. “You'll get your turn.”

The Builder closed his mouth.

That was more restraint than his report had shown.

Slate took Bao's warrant to the side of the road and had the Lurker read it aloud. It named six prisoners, their transfer from the old mill and the officer responsible for receiving them farther inland. Slate recognized the seals, but couldn’t tell who had issued each one.

He returned the document. “Your report can say you found them. It can also say I refused to hand them over without hearing what happened.”

“My report already went east.”

“Then send another.”

“You will keep all six?”

“Until I know which of them need protection and which need a guard.”

Bao looked toward Sui. “That one carried stores for the men who attacked your own wagons.”

“I’m aware,” Slate said.

“Yet you prevent his return.”

“You can send that question to Shen,” Slate said. “I won’t spend the afternoon explaining my own wagon to a captain who brought crossbows across my border.”

Brace bared his teeth. “Want me to see them home?”

“Once their weapons are down. No souvenirs.”

The captain folded the warrant carefully. “The Surety will receive this.”

Slate nodded. “He should.”

Bao studied Lu across the road. The Builder stood with his hands away from the wagon now, making no attempt to touch the paving. “Will he be permitted to leave again?”

“Not today. Tell Shen to address me directly. Now get the fuck off my road.”

The captain glared, but had the good sense to keep his mouth shut. He gestured for the Confederacy soldiers to move out and return across the border.

Slate watched Bao take the warrant and his account back across the border. The captain had seen Slate stop a bolt, spare his soldiers and refuse the prisoners' return. Shen would hear all three. Whether he admired the restraint was his problem.

Slate sent Lu, the survey party and the six prisoners to Wayward under a Scourge escort. He and Brace followed the wagon, close enough to see Sui whenever he shifted toward the tailgate. Inside the guarded yard, a smith cut the prisoners' cuffs while Fidem's priests examined their wrists and the injured man's knee.

Slate found Tella easing a harness buckle free. "How much did Lu tell you before you left Bastion?"

"Road survey." She kept working the strap.

"And before the mill?"

"He told me he meant to bring people out. He left out that one of them had supplied the men who tried to kill your elves."

"Would you have refused?"

Tella pulled the strap through the buckle, then let it go. "I don't know. I never got to decide with the whole truth."

She indicated the old woman sitting beside Fidem's priest. "Xie was chained beside Sui. So were the others. I agreed to bring them out. I didn't agree they were all innocent."

Lu had written that Tella knew the real purpose before the breach. He had been honest about that much.

"He didn't order you to stay," Slate said. "Why didn't you take Orven home?"

“With Orven?” Tella looked up at him. “And leave Lu at the mill without a team on the night he said the prisoners were being moved?”

She set the buckle aside. “You can write that he gave me a choice. It won't describe it very well.”

Lu had made refusal look like abandoning the wounded. Whether he had planned that pressure or merely taken advantage of it, he would answer for it.

“I'll have Serena take your account when we get back,” Slate told Tella. “You won't lose your wages because I need to hear it.”

“I want my survey book back first.”

“Lu has it.”

“I know.” She picked up the buckle again.

Orven's account was shorter. He had gone to learn which old bridges the corps could repair. He had kept the drainage measurements, waited with the wagon and helped the injured passengers. He hadn't carried a weapon into the mill.

“I should have asked more before we left,” he said.

“Your commander should have told you the truth.”

Orven looked toward Lu.

Slate followed his gaze.

The Builder sat on a bench with his tail resting beside it. His new height had stopped surprising Slate until he saw Lu fold his hands between his knees, trying to occupy less of the yard.

Slate did not let the sight soften what he had to ask.

He sent the guards beyond ordinary hearing, left them within sight and sat opposite him. “Tell me when this stopped being a survey.”

“Before I asked for the wagon.”

“Before you asked Matek?”

Lu nodded.

“Say it,” Slate told Lu.

“Before I spoke to Matek,” Lu said.

Slate rested his forearms on his knees. “Why didn't you tell me?”

“I thought you'd stop me.”

“You didn't ask.”

“No.”

Slate had expected that answer. He’d still hoped Lu had found the prisoners by chance and acted without thinking. No such luck.

Lu took the survey book from inside his kilt. “The work we did on the road is recorded here. So is everything I spent. I added the mill and the prisoners' names.”

“After you broke them out.”

“Yes.”

Slate didn't take the book yet. “Were you still working with the Forsworn when I gave you the corps?”

Lu looked down at its cover. “I had no one here to move.”

“That isn't an answer.”

“I kept the routes. I meant to use them again.”

“Did you give them ours?”

“No.”

“Patrols? Stores? Gate watches?”

“No.”

“Did they ask?”

“They asked about the house patrols. I marked routes around the posts so families could pass. I didn't give them your watches or your stores.”

Slate sat very still.

On the road, Lu had told him how the Forsworn knew Ren's route. He had known their signs, their methods and the men who came out of the culvert. Slate had accepted that history because Lu had saved the wagons standing above it.

He hadn't asked whether Lu was still helping them.

He should have asked. Lu had still lied about the wagon.

“You let me think the connection was over,” Slate said.

“I let you decide not to ask.”

Slate's claws pressed against his own scales.

Lu looked up sharply. “That was wrong. I know it was. I didn't mean you should have guessed.”

“Then don't make me drag the answer out of you one word at a time.”

Lu opened the survey book and set it between them. “I wanted the people who knew me to hear about the form. I wanted them to know they could come here without losing their craft. Some of them help families leave. Some use those same paths to move weapons. I know the difference. I've known it for years.”

“And you kept helping.”

“The families still needed the paths.”

“So did Yan.”

Lu flinched.

Slate let the name remain. “He was going to drop a wagon full of children. You stopped him. I trusted you because you did.”

“I would stop him again.”

“You brought out a man who helped him.”

“I didn't know Sui knew the target until afterward.”

“Then why did you put him in my wagon before you found out?”

“Because he was chained beside Xie.”

There it was. Not a hidden grand design. A decision made beside someone Lu cared about, with everyone else expected to deal with the consequences.

Slate understood that too well to dismiss it.

Slate had given Lu the scales and command of the corps. He’d accepted the risks of both decisions. He hadn’t given Lu permission to use his name, his wagon and his people for a rescue he knew Slate might forbid.

If Shen blamed Slate for the rescue, Slate's soldiers would have to fight him.

“Did you promise them sanctuary in my name?” Slate asked Lu.

“No,” Lu replied.

“Did you use the authority I gave you to get there?”

“Yes.”

“Then from outside the wagon, it looks the same.”

Lu's hands settled flat beside the book. “I was going to tell the scouts.”

“You did. That's why we're talking here.”

Slate took the book at last. “You're coming back to Bastion. You won't issue orders to the corps on the way.”

Lu reached beneath his belt and removed the small seal Serena had given him for engineering requisitions. He held it for several breaths before passing it across.

Slate had seen that seal on requests for stone, iron and timber. It was less than half the width of his palm.

It had moved a wagon across a kingdom.

The prisoners reached Bastion tired, hungry and no longer chained.

Fidem received the injured at the healing house. Sui went into a guarded room beside the receiving yard. The others remained under watch while Matek took their accounts. None was asked to take the scales or swear to Lucidus before receiving food.

Slate made that instruction explicit.

He had enough disputed allegiances to count without manufacturing six more over an empty meal tray.

Serena brought Tella and Orven to the receiving room, recovered the survey book and arranged separate accounts. Matek compared those statements with the scouts' report and the original wagon assignment.

The facts became clearer without becoming more comfortable.

Xie had helped families evade inherited service. Her household records had concealed where some of them went. She admitted both. She said the boy had carried messages and the young woman had kept a refuge supplied.

Sui admitted supplying Yan.

He also insisted that Lu had changed sides, as though Slate would consider that an accusation against the Builder.

Matek delivered the statement with no expression. “He wants to speak to Lu.”

“Why?”

“He says Lu owes him the truth.”

Slate gave a short, humorless laugh. “Get in line.”

Matek remained standing. “Do you want me to send that answer?”

“No. Keep them apart until we've heard everyone.”

Serena laid the accounts beside the mission settlement Shen had taken away. “The money is the small part. Most of the materials came back.”

“What didn't?”

“Linen. Traveling expenses beyond the survey. Some timber he used to keep the load stable.”

“Charge it to the investigation for now. I don't want the driver paying for it.”

“I didn't put it against her.”

Slate looked at the rows of figures. “Did Lu alter anyone's orders?”

“His own route description,” Matek said. “He used the latitude you gave the corps. He didn't forge your seal.”

“Which will be a comfort to Shen.”

“Probably not.”

Serena pulled an empty chair closer to the table. “This is also the first time we've asked how far a corps commander can send himself without another officer approving it.”

Slate looked at her.

She met his gaze. “I can fix the form. You need to fix the authority.”

He could make the engineering corps ask him before issuing a hammer. He could turn every road repair into three signatures and blame Lu when the city took another season to finish.

That would make one kind of betrayal harder. It would also make his people wait for him to do work they understood better than he did.

“Journeys outside our holdings need operations approval,” he said. “The purpose goes to Matek. Changes in purpose get reported. Normal repairs stay with the commander.”

“And if the commander is in a place where waiting costs lives?”

“Then they act and report what they did. They don't plan it here and call it drainage.”

Serena made the note.

Matek tapped Lu's statement. “We should also distinguish an acquaintance from an active contact. He answered questions about people he'd known. We didn't ask whom he was still helping.”

“We'll ask.”

“Of everyone?”

Slate considered the city around them. Refugees carried old loyalties with their tools and bedding. Matek had once used exactly those connections to learn which roads an enemy intended to take.

He couldn't ban having a past.

“Of officers holding access they could use for it. Ask what they're doing, not whether they once ate with the wrong person.”

Matek nodded. “That I can use.”

Shen's demand arrived after the witnesses had been interviewed, carried by a mounted messenger who had followed the highland road west.

Slate received it in the same room where he had offered to pay for a replacement at Lianshi.

Serena read the whole document aloud.

The Surety named Lu's intervention at the mill, the use of a Scourge engineering wagon and the escaped prisoners. He required their return for examination under Confederacy authority. He also required Lu to appear and Slate to suspend further conversions among the obligated houses until the dispute was settled.

The account of the mill described the diverted water, the disabled crossbow and the visible gray-scaled shaper.

It did not describe Slate giving an order.

It did not need to. The wagon, the men and the authority all led back to him.

Shen enclosed a copy of Captain Bao's later report.

That one ended at the roadside well.

Slate listened without interrupting.

When Serena finished, he asked her to read the last section again.

“The continued protection of those who removed these prisoners will be understood as acceptance of responsibility for their removal,” she read. “A claim that the operation was unauthorized cannot settle the dispute while its beneficiaries remain under your authority and beyond ours.”

Matek folded his arms. “He leaves you no way to discipline Lu that counts unless you send him back.”

“He leaves himself no need to believe me.”

Slate remembered Shen supporting the road while Lu lowered its center. The Surety knew what they could build together. Now he had a report describing that new skill being used to take prisoners from his people.

An invasion would still be Shen's choice.

Slate no longer had the luxury of pretending the fear behind it was imaginary.

“Bring Lu,” he said.

The Builder arrived with a guard.

He had spent the intervening days in quarters near the receiving yard, with his tools inspected and his access to the engineering crews suspended. He could ask for books and send written advice through Brenn. He couldn't walk down to a damaged wall and decide the restriction no longer applied.

Slate had refused to put him in the same room as Sui.

Lu stood beside the table.

“Sit,” Slate told Lu.

He sat.

Serena read Shen's demands again.

Lu watched her mouth while she spoke. When she finished, his tail moved against the chair's rear leg.

“Are you sending me?” Lu asked Slate.

“No,” Slate said.

The answer came more easily than anything else Slate had said that day.

Lu closed his eyes.

Slate waited until he opened them. “That doesn't give you your command back.”

“I know.”

“I need you to understand why. You can disagree with Shen. You can bring me people who want to leave. You can argue that someone needs rescuing. You don't get to use my army's authority for an operation you've decided I'm better off not knowing about.”

Lu looked toward Matek. “I didn't take soldiers.”

“You took people who trusted your orders,” Slate said. “Tella didn't know why she was crossing the forest. Orven thought he was learning his trade. If that bell had brought twice as many guards, who would have carried them out?”

Lu's mouth tightened.

Slate leaned forward. “And afterward? If Shen marches, Tella doesn't defend this city. My companies do. You spent their lives without asking them either.”

“I meant to bring six people out.”

“You did. Now we deal with everyone who followed.”

The Builder looked at the requisition seal beside Serena's hand. “What happens to them?”

“Sui stays under guard while we investigate the attack he supplied. The others get their claims heard separately. Feeding a family is not the same act as helping someone kill ours.”

“And Xie?”

“Fidem says she needs rest and proper food. She's getting both.”

Lu swallowed. “Thank you.”

Lu was grateful. That didn't mean he would obey the next time Xie needed rescuing.

“You're still suspended. Brenn handles assignments for the corps until I appoint someone or decide you can be trusted with them again. You can submit advice. You don't issue it as an order.”

Lu nodded.

“Outside these quarters, a guard goes with you. No private couriers. You can send letters after Matek sees them.”

“That sounds like a house.”

Slate let the accusation land.

Anger would blur the issue. Slate had Tella’s account, Orven’s book and the bolt mark beneath his collarbone. He knew exactly what Lu had done. He’d punish him for that.

“A house put a debt on you before you were born,” he said. “I gave you a command. You used it behind my back. I’m taking it away until I can trust you with it again.”

Lu looked down.

For a while, no one spoke.

Then the Builder pushed his empty hands away from the seal. “I'll give Matek the old route names. The ones I used. He should know which reports might reach him twice under different marks.”

Matek uncrossed his arms. “All of them?”

“The ones I know.”

“That will do to begin.”

Lu went back to his quarters with the guard.

Slate remained at the table while Serena prepared the reply.

He accepted responsibility for investigating the misuse of his forces and resources. He would provide the relevant accounts, including evidence of Sui's involvement in the wagon attack. He would hear a defined claim for damages caused at the mill.

He would not return people under armed demand, release Lu into indefinite service or grant the Surety control over who could request the scales.

Serena read it back twice.

Slate changed one sentence that sounded as though he was asking permission to conduct his own investigation.

Then he sealed it.

Outside, the evening watch crossed the yard. Lu's engineers were among the workers making room for them. A mason carried a board covered in measurements past a rattling barrow toward Brenn, who had already acquired two other foremen and an expression of deep irritation.

The city still needed its eastern wall finished.

Shen knew that as well as Slate did.

Matek remained after Serena took the reply. “I'll need more eyes on the highland road.”

“Take them.”

“And if they find troops gathering?”

Slate looked at the small engineering seal.

He closed his hand around it. “Find out what they're bringing to break our walls.”

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XIX

The Closing Window

A DOG-SIZED JADE PANGOLIN HALTED AT THE LIP OF THE EXCAVATION. Overlapping green-black plates covered its back and tail, worn smooth along the edges. Long claws tapped the stone while its blunt muzzle traced the seam where the ironroot beetle had stopped.

Shen heard the beetle's digging change before its handler raised her hand. The steady scrape of its forelegs became a short, hard knock. Loose earth fell from beneath the practice wall. The beetle backed out of the cut with a root caught between its blunt mandibles.

"It has found the footing," the handler said.

Across the yard, the soldiers waiting behind their shields began to move.

"Remain where you are," Shen told them.

Their banner captain halted the line.

The beetle shook soil from its iron-brown shell. Ridges along its wing covers held strips of clipped root and damp clay. It was as large as the ox that had pulled the feed cart into the yard, but lower to the ground, with six legs set wide around its heavy body.

The handler crouched beside it and removed the root from its jaws.

It followed her hand.

"Not yet," she told it.

Shen came to the mouth of the cut. The opening ran beneath a bank of packed earth and ended beside the foundation he had raised for the rehearsal. A soldier could crouch inside it with room to draw a weapon.

He could not yet pass through the wall.

He had explained that distinction to them that morning.

“The animal has brought us to the wall,” he said. “It has not taken us through it.”

The banner captain inclined his head.

Behind him, rows of dull spearheads tilted in the morning light.

The practice ground lay outside Lianshi, where the old quarry provided earth banks, discarded stone and enough open space to assemble three banners. Men had been coming in for days. Each house had sent the troops it owed under the covenant and named replacements for the posts they’d left.

Shen had not asked whether those obligations would be honored.

He had decided where to use them.

Han stood beside the observer's rail with the returned mission drawings beneath one arm. Captain Ren waited near her. Neither had been placed in the first assault group.

Shen stepped into the excavation. Timber ribs supported its packed-earth roof, with a drain at the floor and a narrow vent above. Bastion had no quarry yard to hide spoil, but the test could show him how to open its wall safely. He tested the footing, shifted a lower course onto prepared supports, and widened the gap only after checking the load.

The first three pairs cleared the wall. The fourth entered before the opening was clear. A defender hooked the lead shield and turned its bearer across the passage. The man behind him had no room to advance or withdraw. Padded poles struck the trapped soldier twice before his companions pulled him free.

Shen halted the line. Ren marked the failure while the trapped soldier crawled out. “The entry needs more room,” Ren said.

“It does,” Shen agreed, ordering the team to reset.

Han pointed out that Bastion's eastern approach bent toward the hillside. Their straight entry had made the drill easier than the real approach. Shen moved the marker to match the angle. Han lowered the drawings without another correction. That was as close as she came to praise.

While the crew reset the line, the ironroot handler led her animal to the feed cart. It took a mineral-dark root between its forelegs and broke it with a sound like a mallet striking a plank. Damp fragments fell between its feet.

The other two beetles rested beneath awnings. Their handlers checked the pale membranes exposed at the leg joints and cleared stones from the toothed digging blades.

Three animals. Three teams accustomed to following them into narrow places.

No creature could replace the people who kept the roof above its shell.

Shen had seen the stores assigned to those teams: suitable roots, timber, lamps, tools and feed that couldn't be replaced by whatever grew beside the road. Their march would take longer than the march of soldiers carrying ordinary rations.

The Scourge carried much of their food inside themselves.

Every comparison returned to that.

The woman waiting beyond the observer's rail had left her place when the trapped soldier crawled out.

She sat him on a block, unfastened the strap cutting into his wrist and asked him to move each finger. Her gray mantle had a lining of white wool. A narrow blue cord held a little stoppered vessel against her breast, clear of the hand she used to examine him.

When she let him stand, she kept his shield. “He can practice without that until the swelling goes down,” she told his captain.

Envoy Siku Aputi had come from the Stillhold Concord with twenty-four Preservers, ice casters and attendants. She represented Isyra’s northern sanctuaries in the agreement with Shen; Neris Venn commanded the

detachment in the field. Siku had authority to protect the sanctuaries' routes and people but had no obligation under Ordan's covenant, and no authority to speak as the ice goddess's avatar.

Shen waited until she finished checking the soldier's hand. Siku counted each movement of his fingers, then wrapped the wrist. His captain waited beside the rail.

"You have seen the intended breach," Shen said, nodding toward the cut and the soldier's bandaged wrist.

"Your soldier couldn't move his fingers," Siku said. She rested his shield against the rail. "He won't survive a real assault if the passage traps him like that."

"We will widen the breach before the next drill," Shen said.

"You march tomorrow." Siku looked toward the waiting soldiers. "Some of these men haven't slept since they arrived."

"Then they will rest while the engineers finish," Shen replied.

Siku turned to the captain. "He can move his hand again. That doesn't mean he's ready to carry a shield." She left the shield on the rail and followed Shen to the drawings.

"Your request called this a limited action," Siku said. One finger tracked the northern road on the drawing.

"It remains limited."

"To recovering prisoners?"

"Slate must return the prisoners for hearings and agree to stop armed rescues on Confederacy land," Shen said.

Siku put one finger on the northern supply road. "The last grain train to the upper hospices is already late while your houses assemble banners. If the fighting blocks that road, our patients will run out of food. They cannot march south to find more."

"Which is why I intend to end the dispute at Bastion," Shen said.

“You intend to make the Scourge agree,” Siku replied. “Our patients may run out of grain before he agrees.”

Shen indicated the eastern approach on Han's drawing. “We take this position. It commands the unfinished works below his inner gate. We establish ourselves there and require an answer before proceeding.”

“And if he refuses?”

“We hold the approach.”

“While he makes more of the people who could come through your practice wall without a shield.”

She had read Han's account of Lu's transformation. Her copy lay beneath the supply order, marked beside the descriptions of his changed height, combined crafts and reduced need for sleep.

Siku studied the report from a healer’s angle. Her finger stopped at the account of Lu’s restored arm, then moved to the line describing his altered body. Shen read the same page and counted a skilled shaper beyond the reach of his houses.

“Our sanctuaries hold people until they can survive outside them,” Siku said. “Slate offers a body that might let them walk out tomorrow. A family hears the promise first. The cost arrives after.”

“You would deny them the choice?”

“I would keep them warm while we learn what the choice costs.”

“For how long?”

Siku looked down at Lu’s report. When she answered, the pause had lengthened. “Until we know enough.”

Shen thought of the man still waiting for his shield. Siku had made certain his fingers worked. She had also decided when he would be permitted to use them again.

“We have no means to compel that examination from here,” he said.

“I know. That is why I brought more than bandages.”

The Stillholds needed the grain road and Ordan’s northern houses secure. Siku also wanted a limit on transformations that might empty a sanctuary before its custodians considered a patient ready to leave. The mill dispute had brought her concerns into Shen’s war. It had not made them his.

“My detachment will secure the approach,” Siku said. “Your banners will leave the hospice convoys a clear road. We will carry the wounded, including his. Anyone we preserve stays in our care until the body is ready to travel.”

“Your care does not settle their custody.”

“Your custody does not make them fit to travel.”

Han lowered the drawings. Her eyes moved from Siku to Shen. “And the patient chooses whether to leave?” Neither answered at once. Shen saw that neither he nor Siku had put it into the terms.

“Neither side removes a patient from the other's holding place without agreement,” he said. “Put it plainly.”

Siku drew a folded sheet from her mantle. “And our command remains separate. Twenty-four field personnel, Surety. I can commit those twenty-four. I cannot promise every Stillhold, or Isyra herself.”

“I requested the people standing in this yard.”

“Then let the agreement name the ground they are to hold. I will not discover that protecting the northern route requires another captured town.”

“I kept that road open before your oldest living Preserver learned to tend a patient,” Shen said. The words landed harder than he intended.

“Then you know why I cannot leave mine waiting for grain while we argue,” Siku said. She folded the supply order along its crease, a patient motion with no softness in it.

Ren shifted the supply order to the top of his board.

Siku inclined her head to Ren, then fixed Shen with the same level gaze. Her voice never rose; the refusal in it didn't need to.

“Show me what your people can hold,” he said.

She led him onto the practice ground.

Her attendants set two shoulder-high stone posts on either side of a marked strip. Each had a hollow cup at its top and shallow grooves running to its foot. They poured water into the cups, then laid soaked felt along the ground between them. Water squeezed from the folded ends as the attendants pressed them flat. More posts remained wrapped on the cart, including replacements for any broken in the field.

The two casters knelt outside the markers with their hands against the stone.

Siku stopped an attendant from stepping over the wet felt. “Go around. The boundary does not know whose boot enters it.”

Frost whitened the cups. A thin ridge of ice grew along the felt, then spread across the prepared strip. The mist above it thickened only as high as the posts.

An attendant drew a weighted hide through on a rope.

Its lower edge dragged across the ice. White crystals climbed the leather, stiffening each fold until the hide stopped swinging. The man pulled harder. The rope stretched; the frozen edge held fast to the strip beneath it.

“Release,” Siku said.

The casters lifted their hands. The mist thinned, but the ice remained. An attendant used warm water from a kettle to free the hide before hauling it clear.

Shen touched the leather outside the frozen portion. Supple there, rigid at the edge. A man caught at the ankle would be fixed to the road before the frost reached his knee. His companions would have to leave cover to pull him out.

“You keep them alive,” Shen said.

“If we reach them before the cold goes too deep. If your soldiers do not spear a body while we are holding it.”

“And if they have wards?”

“Then we must overcome those before the frost can take their bodies. They can still lose their footing on ordinary ice.”

Shen watched the nearer caster flex hands that had begun to shake. “How long can they maintain it?”

“Longer without someone trying to break through. Much less if we have to hold a strong body instead of a hanging hide.”

“Again.”

“After they rest and the cups are filled.” Siku said it as though he had asked her to make the sun rise sooner. The water had diminished. Holding the boundary had cost the casters as well.

Slate could cross the strip in the interval. He could also go above it. Shen had seen the wings.

“I will still need soldiers at the ends and bows above it,” Shen said.

“Yes,” Siku replied. “We can close a prepared approach. We cannot stop an army wherever you point.”

She tapped one of the posts. “Break an anchor and the active hold fails. The ice already formed does not politely leave with it. Your men will need traction and room to withdraw.”

“Can the boundary move with the posts?”

“It must be laid again. Water, a joined strip, clear ground and people who can still channel. We use these to slow the attack until your soldiers can meet it, or to keep a wounded man from bleeding while his bearers reach him. The two tasks require different care.”

Shen looked toward the practice opening. The Scourge would reach his soldiers quickly. Freezing the entry while his own men crossed it would give them to Slate one at a time.

“You hold behind the first entry,” he said. “Clear our men before you close the strip. Prisoners are removed before it is laid again.”

“And wounded enemies receive a bearer, not a spear.”

“Provided they have ceased fighting.”

Siku folded the thawing hide carefully around its unbroken edge. “Write that where the assault captains will read it.”

They returned to the command room while the soldiers repeated the assault.

A runner brought the latest western reports before the map weights had been set down.

Ren read the first and passed it to Shen.

The Concord of Light had sent its first trained formation to a limited post on Bastion's western road. The officer named in the account was Sergeant Anwen Pell. A veteran red Scourge accompanied the unit as an instructor, but Pell issued its orders.

The observer had watched them depart beneath Lucidus's sign. A caravan master had heard the appointment read in the receiving yard: Slate approved the assignment because it would release Scourge troops for the eastern defense.

Shen read that sentence twice.

He remembered Anwen leaving a lost barrel in the practice ditch and sending a man to inspect the surviving lashings. She had understood that saving one load could lose the rest.

Now she had a post of her own.

“Not an entire western army,” Han said when he handed her the report.

“No. The beginning of one that will not require Slate to stand beside every human soldier.”

“They trained for that purpose.”

“I saw them.”

He had praised the training.

He still considered the praise deserved.

Siku read the report after Han. “Does this change how many people he can alter?”

“It gives him more troops to protect the city while he does it. It changes the time available to act.”

“Explain.”

Shen brought out the older mission reports and laid them beside the new account. Ren had dated each one.

Broken streets had become roads. Three companies could maneuver without Slate directing each turn. The old muster hall restored stamina to the people resting inside it. The Arcanum had working positions again. Lu could shape both timber and stone, teach crews through the night and recover from wounds that would have ended his former service.

Shen had supplied the people who made much of that possible.

He had done so deliberately.

“The city grows harder to compel each month,” Shen said. He kept one finger on the eastern gate. “It has an eastern wall, trained humans on the western road, and Lu still shaping beside him.”

Han drew Slate’s reply closer. The paper rasped over the map as she pulled it toward the eastern gate. She kept one palm on the page. “He is under restriction,” she said. “Lu’s requisition seal went to Serena. You read the letter.”

Shen placed two fingers on the gate marked in fresh ink. “I read it.”

“Then acknowledge that Slate took away his command.” Han tapped the line naming Serena. “Lu cannot send another wagon or spend another stone on Slate’s authority.”

“He can still teach.” Shen looked past her hand to the new wall. “The command was one part of what Slate gave him.”

“He could have taught without becoming Scourge.”

“For a few more years. With one craft. Now he has two.” Shen lifted his fingers from the map. “He has a city ready to protect the people he brings into it.”

Han didn't move her hand from the letter. “Everyone he chooses to bring, or everyone who asks to go?”

That question had been absent from the report Shen's officers prepared for him. It was present in Slate's reply. Shen folded the page along its old crease and laid it beside the map. He had no answer Han would mistake for one.

In Covenant, beneath the Weighted Court, an old Oathbearer lived below the floor on which petitioners argued their obligations. Shen had visited that support chamber often enough to know the slow movement of the bearer’s throat and the old repairs crossing its shell.

Stone saddles spread the court’s load above the chamber. Attendants kept the air passages clear and lamps within the bearer’s sight.

On his last visit, the Oathbearer asked him to move a lamp. When its light fell across an old scar, Shen moved it, checked the saddles, corrected a loose bearing and ordered new padding. The bearer thanked him.

He hadn't asked whether they wanted the court above them. He understood the omission more clearly now: keeping the bearer alive did not mean they had agreed to bear the court.

“The people who remain must be able to rely on the people who leave,” he said. “I have not said their debt lasts forever.”

Han set a finger on the house record. “You have no end date in the order. That is forever to the person doing the work.”

“I will not send an army to settle every household’s service.”

“Then do not punish a choice you cannot claim to own.”

Siku watched them without joining either side. Her gloved hands rested on Lu’s report, holding its corners flat against the draft.

Shen looked at the mission drawings.

Lu's channel sections had reached the replacement shaper at Lianshi. They were useful. The first maintenance crew had already corrected the bed he described.

That fact belonged beside the escaped prisoners.

It did not erase them.

“We can continue examining releases,” he said. “We cannot permit an armed rescue network to acquire a defended city beyond all answer to our claims.”

“Then specify what you expect us to prevent,” Siku said.

Shen turned to her. “Slate must stop sending soldiers to free people from our custody,” Shen said. “Taking the scales cannot exempt them from a hearing on what they owe.”

“I came because these roads feed our hospices and because your account described alterations no healer can reverse. I did not come to decide how many seasons a family owes a quarry.”

“The service question cannot be separated from it.”

“The treatment can. A person who arrives wounded must be allowed to recover before someone offers him a new body.”

Han looked at her. “And a person who has recovered?”

Siku laid her copy of Lu's account flat. “We would need to be certain he understood what would be lost.”

“You would need to be certain,” Han said.

“Yes.” Siku gave the answer without embarrassment. She would wait beside a patient for a year if recovery required it. Shen was less sure she would recognize the day the patient no longer required her permission.

He considered the twenty-four people outside. He needed their ice to secure the position, and their hospices needed his northern houses defended. That didn’t entitle him to promise whatever Siku asked.

He could make the immediate military agreement and leave the larger demand to the negotiations it would force.

“Write the limits,” he said.

Siku opened her papers.

The agreement was finished before the men were ready to repeat the assault. Shen returned to the yard with Ren. The first pair cleared the entry; the second waited until there was room. Siku's attendants kept their anchor site dry until the soldiers passed. A defender climbed the low wall and a spear pair turned him back.

“Better,” Ren said. “He is still slower than a Scourge, and he cannot strike behind him with a tail.”

“The next exercise accounts for that,” Shen said. He almost smiled.

The bearing above the practice opening shifted.

One of the engineers had drawn material from the wrong side while widening the second exit. The change was small. The weight above it was not.

Shen put his hand against the wall.

He caught the descending course and moved its burden through his arm into the sound pier beside him. Pain flashed through the mineral growth at his wrist. A fine pale line opened across an old deposit.

The soldiers beneath the opening continued moving.

“Clear the second exit,” he said.

Ren repeated it sharply.

The engineer withdrew his hands. His face had gone white.

Shen held the load until the last shield passed, then lowered the loose course onto a new bed.

He removed his palm.

The practice wall stood.

Ren reached for his wrist.

Shen let him examine it. “The mineral deposit has split,” he said. “I can still move the hand.”

“You should still have it dressed.”

“I will.”

The young engineer came forward. “Surety, I thought the upper courses had settled.”

“They had. Onto the bearing you removed.”

“I can restore it.”

“Show Captain Ren before anyone passes beneath it.”

The man bowed his head and went back to the opening.

Shen looked at the line in his wrist.

He had moved too much through one path because there were men beneath the wall and no time to distribute the strain carefully. He could do that again. He could not do it without limit.

Neither could he put himself beside every opening his army would make.

At Bastion, Slate would try to ensure he had to choose.

Shen went to the feed awnings while Ren fetched a healer.

The first beetle had finished its roots. Its handler cleaned the dirt from a flexible joint with a strip of wet cloth. The animal lifted its foreleg when she touched the place beneath its shell.

“Can all three march tomorrow?” Shen asked.

“With the feed wagons. Not ahead of them.”

“They will have their wagons.”

“And rest before you put them underground.”

“They will have that too.”

She looked at the bandage Ren was carrying back across the yard. “So should the men who open the stone.”

Shen held out his wrist for the healer. “I have been reminded.”

The runner from the western post reached Lianshi at dusk, his horse blowing foam and his cloak dark with rain. Shen read the dispatch once, then passed it to Ren. Two Lurkers had called Woodhaven’s forward company to the road. A courier wyvern had reached Bastion first. Slate had flown to the roadside well, stopped the fighting and kept the six people beyond Confederacy custody. His reply refused Shen’s demand to return them.

With Pell’s company holding a western post, Slate wouldn’t have to draw every Scourge back from the east.

Shen looked at the map. The city at the forest’s edge had roads, trained companies and stone shapers enough to close another gate before the next report arrived. Each delay gave Slate more time to finish the eastern approach. If Shen waited until Bastion could withstand a siege, the cost of his demand would rise beyond anything he could justify.

He turned the map toward Ren. “How soon can the first three banners assemble?”

“They are here. The stores and the third animal team arrive before dawn.”

“Then we move at dawn.”

“With six hundred?” Han asked. “That is a small force against Bastion.”

“It is a large force against one road.” Shen touched the eastern approach. “We seize the ridge and close the gate’s supply route. Then we summon Slate under truce. He will release the prisoners for individual hearings, suspend conversions until we have a release process, and compensate the houses left without shapers. If he refuses, we hold the road until he yields. We do not occupy Bastion.”

He set out the treaty conditions: the mill prisoners would be heard individually; households would receive compensation or qualified replacements for service they could no longer perform; and conversions involving people under covenant obligations would pause until a release process was written. No house could claim a changed person without hearing them. No foreign power could make an inherited claim vanish by moving them across a border.

“You are still asking him to sign a treaty made at spearpoint,” Siku said. Her eyes remained on the northern hospice route. “A narrow point can pierce as deeply as a broad one.”

“I am asking him to meet us before another rescue becomes a battle.”

“Then keep the hospice road open. Our people will hold its flank, not enter his city. We will carry wounded from either side. If either army uses a patient to bargain, the Stillholds withdraw.”

“Agreed.” Shen marked the hospice route in blue. “Your twenty-four remain under Stillhold command.”

“Commander Neris Venn will lead them in the field,” Siku said. “I retain the commission and the negotiations. She decides how to hold the road.”

Outside, a Jade Pangolin stopped at the yard’s eastern edge and scraped down to a buried iron drain. Its handler marked the seam; Shen shifted the first banner’s route around it. The stone-scaled creature trotted on, already testing for the next hollow.

At the yard’s center, the siege giants stood in their transport frames. Each was assembled from fitted slabs and could not walk without its shapers.

Their crews would guide them forward only if a wall had to fall.

A cragback hauled the heavy reserve cart into place. Its broad shell bore spare anchor posts, armor plates and stone wedges. The dwarven assault companies came around it in layered stone armor, each plate shaped to turn a glancing blow away from the ribs. Their shields were smaller than the Scourge’s, but their ranks held tighter than they had that morning.

Ren called the assignments over the noise. Three banners of two hundred: the first to isolate the gate, the second to take the ridge, the third held back with the engineers. The siege giants would remain behind the ridge unless Slate forced a breach. Neris’s twenty-four Preservers formed their own line beside the hospice road.

The force was not large enough to occupy the heartlands. It could not leave Covenant undefended for a long campaign, and Shen would not take it that far. The houses kept their reliefs and repair crews. The hospices retained their grain stores. Three banners could make Bastion choose whether to negotiate or risk a battle at its own gate. He intended to hold that threat over Slate without widening the campaign.

“You have not assigned me,” Han said. She held the old mission drawings against her chest.

“You will remain here.”

“To teach the next shapers?”

“And finish the maintenance the mission interrupted.”

“I would have preferred to finish the city.”

“So would I.” He looked at the bandage around his wrist. “The city can wait. This cannot.”

At first light, the banners assembled beyond Lianshi’s western gate. The ironroots moved between the first two lines, their handlers keeping the feed wagons close. Preservers carried the hollow ice posts in padded slings. Water casks, dry felt and covered litters followed behind them.

A slatecrane called from above. The signal passed down the line, banner to banner, until Ren raised his hand and the siege giants' frame crews halted in exact formation.

Shen counted the three banners. No household was being asked whether it wished to defend its neighbors. No soldier at the gate had chosen which dispute would bring that obligation due.

He had chosen the road, the force and the terms. If Slate refused, Shen would make him refuse in front of an army he could not ignore.

Ren brought him his Kirin-Shi. Shen mounted carefully, keeping the bandaged wrist straight. Beyond the gate, the first banner moved west. Morning light caught the overlapping edges of their stone armor. The terracotta centipedes clicked over the paving, and the cragback followed with the reserve cart. The stone lions ranged at its flanks.

The people beside the road raised their hands to the departing soldiers. A small girl waved to one particular man. He waved back until the road turned.

Shen followed the column west, toward the city he had helped teach to withstand him.

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XX

The First Breach

THE ROOTS IN THE SPOIL HEAP HAD BEEN BITTEN OFF.

Slate picked one from the fresh earth and turned it between his claws. Both ends carried paired grooves, pale wood showing beneath the wet skin. Whatever had cut them had been working under the northern edge of his eastern approach, less than a hundred yards from the last occupied watch post. “Please tell me we own an animal that does this,” Slate said to Edrin.

Edrin crouched beside the heap. The Lurker's tongue flicked over the exposed soil. “If we do, no one has been feeding it.”

Beyond the cleared ground, morning mist hung between the surviving trees. Matek's scouts had followed Shen's column for three days since it passed north of Wayward. They had counted the wagons, identified three bodies of troops and reported the digging beetles. Yesterday, the Confederacy had stopped beyond bow range of the eastern works. During the night, its soldiers had raised banks of soil and woven screens along the edge of the clearing.

Slate had expected an attack. He had hoped to get a reply to his last messenger first.

He dropped the root. “How fresh?”

“The patrol crossed here before dawn. This was under a turf cover. They found it when they checked again in daylight.” Edrin pointed to the fallen cover. Strips of sod had been laid across thin branches, then lifted from below and dragged aside to dump another basket. Whoever was digging had run out of room to hide the earth.

Good. They were pressed for time too.

Slate looked back at the approach. The finished wagon road rose toward Bastion's eastern gate. Its northern retaining wall stopped halfway along the new embankment, leaving an earth slope above the service yard where the builders stored timber and dressed blocks. Beyond that yard lay the old quarry access, guarded by Sumnu's forward company.

The Confederacy wanted the junction. Take it, and they could move soldiers up beneath the gate while cutting off anyone still east of the service yard.

Lu had marked exactly that danger on the drawing Brenn brought to Slate last night.

Knowing the danger hadn't given them another week to finish the wall.

“Sumnu. Excavation on the north side,” Slate sent. *“Start the yard evacuation now. Leave the timber.”*

Edrin sent Sumnu's answer through the Scourgemind.

“Already moving the workers. I'd rather they walked out before we start throwing their wages at the enemy.”

Slate almost smiled. Sumnu had been clearing the yard since the enemy arrived. Slate had kept the last crew at the exposed face to shore it while soldiers moved the loads that would obstruct their retreat. If that choice had left them too close to the enemy, the cost was his.

“Find their opening,” he told Edrin. “Don't go down it.”

The Lurker's eyes lifted toward him. “I had planned to send a polite inquiry.”

“You're welcome to shout it.”

Slate moved to the retaining wall and pressed his palm against the foundation. With his feet planted on the same stone, he let the Otolithic Matrix settle beneath the noise of marching soldiers.

Boots. A wagon wheel striking a joint. The irregular blows of a hammer behind him.

Under those came a slower scrape, followed by a pause and a shudder through the earth against the wall. He couldn't separate its exact depth from the other movement. He didn't need to. The repeated contact ended against the old foundation a short distance ahead.

The beetle had found stone.

“Brace. Clear the face above that seam,” Slate sent.

His guard commander sent two Raiders up the slope. Slate watched them pull a pair of laborers back from the edge. One man reached for a dropped mallet. The nearer Raider took the man under both arms and carried him away with the mallet still lying in the dust.

A horn sounded beyond the woven screens.

The hammering behind Slate stopped.

He turned toward the clearing as the screens fell outward. Shields rose behind them, square boards faced in pale hide, their black linked emblem broken by arrow slits. Soldiers advanced between the prepared banks in narrow files. Farther back, handlers led two armored beetles into low cuts in the ground.

Two in sight. A third already beneath him.

He had found the spoil from one.

“Two more excavations possible. Watch the south ditch and the quarry road. Nobody commits the reserve without Sumnu.”

A soldier emerged ahead of the northern file carrying a white pennant. He stopped where Slate could see him and unrolled a strip of paper.

“By order of the Surety, withdraw from the approach and surrender the persons named in the demand. Those who lay down their weapons will be held for lawful hearing.”

Slate glanced toward the gate. His own messenger had returned there late last night, unharmed and without an answer. Apparently Shen had preferred a delivery with better scenery.

“Tell him no,” Slate told the messenger.

The soldier lowered the paper. “The terms include protection for your workers.”

“Then don't shoot them while they leave.”

Slate waited until the pennant had passed behind the first shields before he gave the order to fire.

The ballista on the raised road kicked against its bed. Its bolt went through a hide-faced board, the soldier behind it and the man immediately following him. The file broke around the fallen shield. Crossbows answered from the banks, bolts rattling against stone and biting into the stacked timber.

War, then.

Slate climbed the retaining wall as Sumnu's first company met the advance at the quarry junction.

Raiders struck the shield line in groups, each covering the next one's recovery. A Lurker went over a board instead of around it, drove both feet into the man behind and landed among the spears. Two more followed before the opening could close. The Confederacy's front rank recoiled against the men coming up behind it.

Slate wanted to be down there. He could break that file open and keep breaking it until Shen ran out of soldiers willing to step over the bodies.

Then a crack opened beneath the ballista.

It ran along the paving toward the unfinished face, too straight and too fast to be settlement. The weapon's front foot sank. Its crew threw themselves clear as the whole bed tilted toward the edge.

“Off the road!” Slate shouted.

The stone bulged between his feet.

He spread his wings before the stone closed around his ankles, lifted clear and caught the wall's upper edge. Folding the membranes against his back, he swung down the outside face. His claws scraped sparks from masonry.

Below him, earth spilled from an opening beside the foundation, followed by the broad head of an ironroot.

The beetle's digging limbs hooked into the bank. Its ridged shell scraped timber shoring as it backed away from the stone it couldn't chew through. Behind it, a helmeted man was hauling on a short guide rope.

Above the animal, a human hand rested against the foundation.

There you are.

Slate dropped onto the ironroot's shell.

The impact drove the animal flat. Its rear legs thrashed against the earth, gouging trenches as it tried to lift him. He planted one foot between the ridges, leaned past its head and drove his claws toward the shaper's wrist.

Stone slammed outward.

His Scourgeshield flashed. The blow threw him from the beetle and into the service yard, where he hit a stack of squared beams hard enough to break the upper row. Pain ran across his back. The ward had caught most of the impact, but most was doing a lot of work in that sentence.

Slate rolled to his feet before the next stone reached him. He tried to open his left wing. Pain stabbed through its root where he had struck the beams, and the membrane sagged before he could get it extended. He folded it tight again. The next jump would have to come from his legs.

The next stone struck the beams instead. Splinters burst around his head.

The shaper was crawling from a narrow recess the beetle had exposed. He wore a short stone breastplate over brown cloth, with clay packed around the knees of his trousers. His left hand never left the wall. Even as he stood, the masonry beside him stretched into a sloping screen. Slate identified the caster. Level thirty.

Slate ran at the barrier.

The shaper thrust his free hand down. Stone teeth rose in a line across the yard. Slate shortened his stride, stepped on the first tooth as it emerged and

launched over the rest. A crossbow bolt hit his shoulder ward from the enemy bank. He felt the mana loss, kept his eyes on the caster and kindled Ash Infusion along two claws.

The curved slab folded toward him.

He hit it feet first. His weight and momentum drove the unfinished upper edge inward, but the shaper held the base. For an instant Slate hung above him, claws sliding over smooth stone.

The man's right arm came up to close the gap.

Slate caught it.

White fire entered the cut below the elbow. The shaper screamed and tried to wrench free. His left palm remained planted against the foundation; the stone under Slate's feet lurched again.

One wounded arm had not stopped the other.

Slate dragged him away from the wall.

The stone teeth stopped rising. He struck the breastplate with his unlit hand, caught its shoulder edge and pulled the man sideways until the fastening tore. The exposed throat gave him one clean strike.

He took it.

The caster's weight went slack.

LVL 30 Stoneshaper defeated.
XP gained: 4,500
XP available: 16,600

Slate dismissed the notification and let the fire die. He had wanted those hands building walls beside Lu's. Now he had more experience and one less shaper in the world.

The ironroot was withdrawing into its earth cut, its handler scrambling backward in front of it. Slate could follow them or deal with the soldiers

pouring through the opening above.

He chose the soldiers. “Brace, take the mouth!”

His commander hit the first man before Slate reached him. A spear scraped across Brace's ward. He seized the shaft, drove its owner against the edge of the opening and held him there while a second Raider tore through the next shield.

Slate came in low. His tail took one soldier behind the knees; he caught another by the breastplate and hurled him back into the crowded passage. For several breaths the attack became men trying to retreat through men still being ordered forward.

“Beams,” Slate told Brace.

They took the longest fallen timber between them. Slate shoved its end through the opening, drove it across the inner passage and rammed the other end down behind a tooth of raised stone. Brace wedged a second beam beneath it. Splintered ends scraped against the stone as the timbers took the pressure.

A spear probed through the obstruction. Slate snapped the shaft and threw the broken end back.

Edrin appeared on the bank above them, dust falling from his claws. “The northern cut joins a second trench. They can go around this.”

“How long?”

“Longer than coming through your wall.”

“I'll take it. Keep them digging.”

Slate climbed out of the yard. The ballista crew had cut the damaged engine loose from its bed and dragged the bolt chest away. Sumnu's second company was spread along the inner side of the junction, leaving room for the retreating workers. The first still held the outer quarry access.

They had stopped the first breach.

At the far end of the clearing, a white-robed dwarf stepped between two ranks of soldiers.

Shen carried his hammer in his right hand. A narrow bandage showed beneath the cuff of the other. His armor bore the same pale stone plates Slate had watched him wear into battle against the Forsworn.

Slate remembered Shen standing over the broken road, holding its weight while the others lowered it. He'd taken the dangerous end himself.

Shen knelt and placed his bandaged hand on the ground.

"Sumnu, pull the front back," Slate ordered.

The order had barely left Slate's mouth when the quarry road heaved.

Its surface did not explode. Two fitted courses slid apart, taking the shield line with them. A Raider fell to one knee as the footing shifted. The soldier facing him thrust for his throat, missed when the Raider's ward caught the point, then vanished behind a rising slab.

Shen was dividing the fight into compartments.

Slate ran toward him.

The shortest line crossed the service yard and the open strip beyond it. He could reach the dwarf before another wall rose if he didn't stop for the soldiers coming through the northern trench.

Brace kept pace on his left. "Your right," the guard said.

Two gray-clad figures were planting a pale stone post beside the trench. A third poured water into its hollow top while an attendant pulled a wet strip of felt across the ground toward its mate. Slate had seen the wrapped posts on the scouts' sketches. He hadn't known what they were for.

Frost spread from the nearer post. The wet felt disappeared beneath a white ridge, and mist rose between the two casters.

"Back!"

Brace caught Slate's arm before his next stride landed in it.

They skidded behind a pile of foundation blocks. Slate's heel scraped the edge of the strip. Cold tightened against his ward; a crust of ice formed under his foot and fastened it to the paving. He wrenched free before it could thicken, leaving a broken plate behind him.

Beyond the blocks, frost climbed the lower edge of a fallen timber. A loose shield froze upright where its rim touched the ground. The gray coats kept their hands on the posts.

That explained why Shen's soldiers had left the strip clear. Ordan had acquired help, and his allies had prepared this ground before Slate reached it.

“Ice barriers on the north side. Paired stone posts with a wet strip between them. Stay outside it. The ground freezes under your feet.”

Brace brushed the ice from Slate’s heel, then pointed beyond the blocks. “The far post’s open.”

Slate watched the white line crawl along the wet felt. It stopped short of the dry banks beyond the anchors. The casters had to hold the posts and keep water on the strip; their line was strong where they had prepared it and thin everywhere else.

He found Edrin on the opposite slope and sent the order through the Lurker at his shoulder. *“Take the outer post. Stay on bare ground. When the caster turns toward me, bring the anchor down.”*

Brace shifted his shield toward the nearest bow. “I’ll cover you from that bow.”

Slate kept his attention on the casters. The frost would catch a careless foot and drain mana from anyone who tried to muscle through. It would not stop a flank along the bank. He had the route; now he needed the gunner to make the defenders look the wrong way.

Slate looked for the other ballista. The first engine lay on its side, but two crewmen had carried its bolt chest to the intact weapon farther down the southern bank.

“Can you hit the dwarf?” he shouted.

The gunner leaned around the timber mantlet. He had a strip of shirt tied over one eye. “Not through his own men.”

“I'll open them up. Watch for white.”

Slate took hold of a block at the southern end of the pile and hauled it sideways. Brace caught the other end before it rolled onto his foot. Together they shoved the heavy foundation stone down the slope into the nearest advancing shields.

Men scattered. The block struck the bank at the bottom, broke through its loose crest and stopped half buried in earth. For a heartbeat the gap exposed Shen from the waist up.

The ballista fired.

Shen lifted his hammer and turned his shoulder. Paving rose across the bolt's path. The iron head struck that new barrier with a sound Slate felt in his teeth. Stone fragments swept the nearest soldiers from their feet.

The Surety vanished behind the broken cover.

“Reload!” Slate called. He waited for the next shaping. Nothing rose. Sumnu's soldiers gained several yards while the Confederacy's front rank tried to recover its formation.

There. Shen still had to protect himself.

“Sumnu, use it.”

“I am. Keep his head down.”

Slate scanned the shattered barrier for white cloth. A soldier crawled out from under a fallen shield, dragging another by the belt. No dwarf followed him.

The gunner had the next bolt on its track when Shen's hammer appeared above a different rank of shields, farther south.

“There!” Slate pointed.

“Our people behind him!”

Slate followed the weapon's line. Three retreating Raiders were climbing a slab beyond the dwarf. A miss would send the heavy bolt straight into them.

“Hold.”

He hated the word. The gunner held anyway.

Shen had chosen his cover well. Slate would have to move the ballista or move his soldiers, and the dwarf was already back at the exposed foundation. The pause had bought them a little ground. It had not broken the assault.

He turned back toward the quarry road.

Sumnu's first company was withdrawing by sections, one group covering while another climbed the new stone ridges. They moved faster than human troops could have managed. That speed was keeping them alive. It was also splitting them between channels that no longer led to the same exit.

Shen's soldiers knew which channels to leave empty.

They had practiced this.

Slate reached the nearest ridge and climbed onto it. From above he could see the junction, the raised road west to Bastion and the service yard below his right hand. The last civilian cart was crossing that yard toward the inner road. Soldiers walked beside it, keeping the workers between their warded bodies.

“Keep going,” he called. “Leave everything that slows you.”

A woman carrying a tool chest dropped it without looking back.

Then the ridge beneath Slate tilted.

He leaped to the next one as the first folded toward the retreating company. Two Raiders caught its edge on their shoulders long enough for a third to drag a trapped Lurker free. Their wards blazed separately. One failed. Stone struck red scales, and the Raider went down with blood spilling from his mouth.

Slate landed beside him and drove his own shoulder beneath the slab. “Get him out!”

Brace hauled the injured Raider clear. Slate's legs sank through loose earth until his feet reached the buried footing. He could hold the weight there for a breath, perhaps two. He could not hold it against Shen.

The pressure increased.

Slate twisted and threw himself sideways. The slab crashed into the space he had occupied. Its edge caught his tail, tore through the ward's remaining resistance and stripped scales along the upper ridge before he dragged free.

He swallowed the first pain-driven curse. The second came out anyway.

Shen was still fifty yards away, his palm on a stone course now exposed beneath the churned earth. He had advanced with his infantry to reach it. The dwarf hadn't moved the whole battlefield from the tree line. His soldiers were buying him pieces of it, and he was using each piece to buy the next.

Slate could fight that.

He just couldn't fight it by running wherever the last rock fell.

“Sumnu, stop retreating down the channels. Over the tops, south side. Second company covers. Leave the junction.”

“I've still got people at the quarry gate.”

“I know. Clear the south crossing before he closes that too.”

Sumnu's answer carried anger, but none of it went into delay. “Moving.”

Slate gathered the Scourge nearest him and drove into the soldiers occupying the southern channel. He stayed at their head, where his battered ward would take the first spears. Brace worked beside him, using seized weapons to hook shield edges aside. Behind them, a Mystic caught a wounded Lurker under the arms and pulled him through the opening they made.

The Confederacy gave ground one pace at a time. Their sergeant kept them together even when Slate broke the front board in half. He had to kill the man before the next rank lost its nerve.

For a moment there was room to move.

“Across!”

Scourge vaulted the narrowing gap. A Raider passed an injured comrade to Brace, then turned back to cover the next group. Slate counted the bodies coming over because counting was more useful than watching Shen's hammer.

Twenty. Twenty-one.

The next section of paving lifted vertically between him and the quarry gate.

He lost sight of the rest.

A pale stone post toppled into the northern trench. Slate looked up in time to see Edrin's Lurkers pull the nearer gray-coated caster away from its broken base. Water spilled across the bank. The mist between the posts thinned, leaving a strip of ice that no longer grew. One Lurker was limping, his left foot dragging; another broke the crust ahead of him with a captured hammer.

The frost had stopped spreading. The Lurkers were opening a path through the ice that remained.

It no longer led to Shen. A fresh shield rank had occupied it, and the dwarf was moving behind them toward the junction.

Slate could charge that line. He might even reach him.

Behind the raised paving, a civilian started screaming for someone named Orven.

Slate turned toward the voice.

The service cart had overturned at the blocked crossing. Its workers and escort had fallen back into the lower yard. Sumnu's remaining forward

section was descending from the quarry gate to join them, using stacked stone as cover from the soldiers entering above.

They had one way out, west through the old retaining works.

That route now passed under Shen's feet.

Slate looked toward Bastion. His city reserve was forming below the gate. Too far away to stop the junction changing hands, close enough to die trying if he ordered them forward into those channels.

“Hold the inner approach,” he told Brace. “Get the wounded through. Tell Brenn I need ropes and every lifting sling left in the gate stores.”

“You're going back.”

“The approach is gone. The builders come with us. Set the sling line and clear the cart.”

Brace looked over the new wall. Then he beckoned two of his guards and pointed them toward the gate with the wounded.

He kept the rest beside Slate.

On the captured junction, Confederacy soldiers planted their linked banner in a crack between the paving stones. Shen stood beneath it, turning toward the lower yard.

Slate slid down behind a broken parapet before the dwarf could see where he had gone. *“Sumnu. How many are still with the workers?”*

A Lurker crouched above the yard sent Sumnu's answer through the Scourgemind in short, pained bursts. *“Eighteen of ours. Eleven civilians. Two can't walk.”*

Twenty-nine.

Slate set his bleeding tail against the rubble and tested the drop.

He had lost the approach. He was not leaving Shen the people on it.

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XXI

The Falling Stone

SLATE LANDED BESIDE THE OVERTURNED CART WITH ENOUGH WEIGHT to break its remaining wheel.

The woman sheltering beneath it screamed.

“Sorry.” He caught the cart before it rolled onto her and shoved it upright. “Everyone still here?”

“Where else would we have gone?”

Orven sat against the retaining wall with his right leg stretched in front of him. Below the knee, his trousers had been cut away from an ankle pointing in a direction ankles should not point. He had wrapped both hands around his thigh to keep the leg still.

Slate remembered the mason's anger in Wayward, after Lu brought him back from the prison mill. Apparently serving under the Builder Corps was becoming an excellent way to get dragged into someone else's disaster.

This one belonged to Slate.

“We're getting you out,” Slate told Orven.

“I'd settled for getting home from the last trip,” Orven replied.

“You can complain about both on the way.”

“Rilla,” Orven said to the woman by the cart. “The buckled straps in the tool box. Bring those, would you?”

She crouched to pull the box from beneath the broken wheel. Her hands were steadier with a familiar task. Slate waited while she collected the leather and threw out the tools that would slow her down.

A crossbow bolt struck the cart beside Slate's head. He moved between the workers and the opening above, fed mana into his Scourgeshield and felt how little enthusiasm his body had for the expense.

Brace dropped into the yard behind him. The other five guards followed by different routes, choosing footholds the civilians could never have used. Dessa and Corren took the exposed corners. Their wards caught the next bolts while the three Lurkers climbed high enough to threaten anyone leaning over the captured road.

Slate looked west.

The old way out passed beneath a stone arch. Shen's shaping had lifted the paving above it and driven a slab across the mouth. Loose blocks filled the gap on either side. The workers had already tried shifting them; a broken iron lever lay in the rubble.

Above that obstruction, the remaining wall climbed to a ledge below the inner approach. Sumnu's second company held the ledge. Slate could see red scales between the projecting stones.

Thirty feet up, then a short crossing to friendly ground.

Slate tried opening his left wing. The damaged root seized before the membrane could take its weight. He couldn't lift himself on it, much less carry Orven. A proper repair needed more biomass than he carried, and the reserves brought into the yard were keeping the wounded alive.

Uninjured Scourge could climb. The civilians would need help.

He looked at Orven's ankle and the woman lying on two joined planks beside him. Her leg was bound above the knee, and a worker knelt with both hands pressed into the dressing. Eleven civilians. Two who couldn't walk. Neither would survive being hauled up by an arm.

“Who's commanding this section?” Slate called.

A broad Raider stepped from the stacked blocks at the eastern end of the yard. One horn had a pale notch worn across its tip. “Tarn. Sumnu told me to keep the road crew covered.”

“Good. Keep doing it. Six of your people go up that wall and prepare to haul. The rest hold here until the civilians are clear.”

Tarn looked at the height. “We can pass them up.”

“Both the injured need slings. Brace sent for them.”

“Then the others first.”

Slate shook his head. “Start tying what you've got. Shirts, belts, cart harness. We don't wait for ideal equipment while he's standing over us.”

Tarn turned to his soldiers. “You heard him. Anyone with trousers has rope.”

Rilla gave a short, disbelieving laugh. She stopped when a stone chip struck her cheek.

Slate pulled her behind his shoulder. “Keep laughing. I like that better than screaming.”

“Give me a reason.”

Fair enough.

He helped Tarn roll the cart against the eastern stack, making a barrier beneath the most exposed opening. Orven called them back before they stripped its harness. “Cut the traces beyond the buckle. The stitched ends won't hold a man's weight.”

Tarn examined the leather, then changed where he put his claw.

Slate watched six Scourge climb the western wall. They moved around shattered joints, driving claws into mortar or catching projecting blocks. Two reached the ledge and turned to help the others. No flying mounts, no staircase and no stoneshaper. They still had a way out that Shen's soldiers would struggle to follow.

A pale sleeve appeared above the blocked arch.

Slate moved into the open before Shen could put his hand to the wall. “There are injured workers down here.”

The Surety looked into the yard. His gaze passed over Orven, the woman on the planks and the shields around them. “I can see them.”

“Then leave the wall alone while we move them.”

“Send the civilians through under a white cloth. My soldiers will carry the injured to our healers.”

Slate could believe the offer. That was the part making him angrier. Shen would carry his workers carefully to a healer, then ask Slate to bargain for them one by one.

His own builders. Shen meant to make him bargain for their return.

“They go home,” Slate told Shen.

“The road is occupied,” Shen replied.

“I noticed.”

Shen's eyes settled on Slate's bleeding tail. “You cannot recover this position by remaining in the yard.”

“I'm recovering the people.”

For a moment neither spoke. Above Shen, a Confederacy officer raised a hand to stop the nearest crossbowmen from firing into the workers. Farther along the line, a soldier loosed at one of the Lurkers on the wall. One of the Lurkers fired a captured crossbow, driving him back from the parapet.

“Have your soldiers surrender,” Shen said. “The wounded will receive care.”

Orven and the other workers had helped build the shelters, channels and walls of Bastion. Their knowledge mattered to the defense as much as their labor. If Shen held them, Slate would have to bargain for the people who knew the city’s weak points.

He was not handing over eleven trained workers because Shen had won the road.

“No,” Slate said.

The Surety withdrew from the edge.

Slate heard the order he gave his troops.

“Secure the eastern entrance. Hold the upper crossing. No bolts into the civilian shelter.”

That left plenty of room to kill the Scourge around it.

“Sumnu. Cover the west ledge. They're going to try to cut our people off up there.”

“Already putting a line across it. How long?”

Slate looked at the first harness. Tarn had made a seat from the cart traces and was lowering it over the head of a narrow-shouldered laborer.

“Ask me when the first one reaches you.”

The laborer tried to help tighten the harness. His fingers shook so badly that Tarn gently pushed them away. “Name?” the Raider asked.

“Iven.”

“Iven, I've got you. Your job is to keep your hands on my shoulders. Not my throat. I want that available.”

Tarn crouched. Iven climbed onto his back, and a second soldier fastened the leather around them both.

Slate braced beneath Tarn's first foothold, giving him a stable step. The Raider climbed the lower face, reached the new seam and shifted his weight onto the next block.

The block turned.

Tarn threw himself left. One claw caught the adjacent course. Iven's legs swung away from the wall, and the harness took his full weight. A stitched strap tore from the cart leather, but the uncut trace held.

“Do not grab my neck,” Tarn said through clenched teeth.

Iven buried his face between the Raider's shoulders instead.

Slate climbed underneath them. He drove one hand into the open joint and pushed Tarn's heel toward a sound foothold with the other. Above, a Lurker lay flat on the ledge and reached down.

The wall shuddered again.

“Up,” Slate said.

Tarn jumped. The Lurker caught his wrist, a second pair of hands seized Iven's harness and they dragged both over the lip.

Slate dropped back to the yard before the loose course rolled out beneath him.

The block hit where he had been standing. Dust burst over the workers.

Shen didn't have to collapse the whole yard. He only had to make the climb impossible.

“One,” Orven said. He had watched every foot of it.

“Ten more,” Slate answered.

Above them, Tarn unfastened Iven and came back down by a different line. He spat pale grit from his mouth. “We're charging extra for the return trip.”

“Put it on Serena's desk.”

“I'd rather climb the wall.”

The next worker stepped forward before anyone called him.

Rilla knelt beside the leather pieces and began sorting out the cracked ends. She tested a buckle against her knee, discarded it and threaded a sound one onto a long trace. “That was the spare,” she told Tarn when he reached for it.

“I'll bring it back.”

“I meant it's better. Use it for the hurt people.”

He set it beside the woman on the planks instead. Rilla returned to sorting. She had stopped looking up every time a bolt hit the cart, and the workers

beside her were taking their cue from her hands.

Then the eastern barrier buckled.

A corner of the overturned cart drove into the yard. Spears thrust through the gaps, and a soldier climbed onto the rim with a short axe. Slate crossed the open ground in three strides and dragged him down by the ankle.

The man hit hard. Slate stepped over him to meet the next spear.

Brace was already at the breach. He held a broken axle across the opening while two of Tarn's soldiers pushed the cart back against it. The Confederacy's infantry had reached the stack by a new ramp on the other side. Every time the defenders shoved them away, another shield appeared above the boards.

Slate climbed the cart instead of pushing.

Three men looked up at him.

He struck the foremost shield with both feet and drove its owner backward down the ramp. His tail swept the second man's legs. The damaged scales along it tore again, and pain flared up into his spine.

He killed the third before the soldier could bring his axe around.

The narrow ramp was empty for a moment.

Slate seized a fallen spear and jammed it between two wheels of the abandoned work cart outside. He hauled on the shaft until the cart slewed across the ramp. Brace climbed beside him and shoved. The loaded vehicle rolled down into the next rank, spilling stone offcuts and men across the passage.

“That'll buy us about a minute,” Brace said.

“Then spend it.”

They dropped back into the yard as ropes fell from the western ledge.

Brenn's runners had reached Sumnu. Two Scourge were dragging a long lifting sling across the upper stones, with bundles of line over their

shoulders. Below them, Dessa caught the first rope and passed it to the worker tending the injured woman.

“Keep pressure there,” she said, moving his hand back onto the dressing. “I'll do the knots.”

Slate looked at the upper anchors. The haulers had wrapped their lines around projecting masonry. “No stone anchors!”

The nearest soldier looked down. “What do we use?”

“Yourselves. Back from the edge. Brace against the inner road, not this face.”

They moved at once. Four Scourge lay flat behind the ledge with the main rope crossing their bodies. Others paid out the working lines. If Shen shifted a block, the load would pull against soldiers who could move with it rather than tear a fixed anchor free.

It would still hurt them. Slate hadn't found a painless option.

Orven had the workers thread the sling under the joined planks, keeping the injured woman flat. Dessa added a binding across her hips while Corren stood over them. When a bolt came through the eastern gap, his ward stopped it inches above the woman’s face.

She flinched against the straps.

“That one was mine,” Corren told her. “You don't have to catch any.”

The woman watched the pale film around his forearm, then nodded.

Slate took the lower end of the planks. Dessa lifted the other. They carried her to the wall and called for the haulers to take the weight.

The sling rose.

For several breaths Slate forgot Shen, the lost road and the soldiers trying to get through the cart. He watched the woman travel upward with her hands locked around the edges of her litter. A Scourge climbed beside her to keep the planks from turning against the masonry.

The upper ledge tipped forward.

“Haul!” Slate shouted.

The rope tightened so hard that fibers cracked. The Scourge above slid toward the edge, their claws cutting grooves in the paving. Sumnu threw himself across the rear pair, adding his weight before they lost their footing.

The litter cleared the lip.

Hands pulled it across. The ledge dropped another foot, struck the lower course and stopped.

Orven breathed out between his teeth. “They don't build harnesses for that.”

“Today they do.”

Slate turned to Dessa. “His leg next.”

She looked at the blood running from his tail.

“Close the vessel at my tail. I need it braced for the next litter.”

Dessa’s eyes dropped to the blood tracking down the scale ridges. “That will cost part of your reserve.”

She had spotted the leak he was already tracking. His tail would hold for one more climb if he closed the vessel now; left open, it would fail when he needed to brace a litter.

“Do it. Enough to hold a load, not regrow scales.”

“Wasn't planning to polish you.”

She caught his wrist. Slate accepted a small transfer from the repair reserve she offered, enough biomass to close torn vessels and bind the loose flesh while he directed the reconstruction. Her hand remained steady until the transfer ended. The fresh tissue pulled tight over his tail; the missing scales, bruised back and damaged wing root stayed as they were.

Dessa had used part of her recovery margin. Slate reserved the remaining repair biomass for the company’s wounded. He could spend it on his tail

after the civilians were across.

“Save what remains for the wounded,” he told her.

“Then keep your tail out of the masonry.”

They lifted Orven onto the returning sling.

The mason caught Slate's forearm before the haulers took him.

Orven pointed to the separating courses. “The upper one will move on its own. Two ropes, one on each side, and keep the beam out of the center joint.”

Slate checked the cracked join and the gap beneath it. “Two ropes, one per side,” he told Tarn. “Leave the middle clear.”

Orven watched him give the order, then turned to help thread the sling.

Slate kept his attention on the rising wall. “Lift on my call,” he told the haulers. “Not before.”

Then Orven was rising, still holding his leg with both hands.

The eastern cart split down the middle with a crack of tearing timber.

A wedge of stone forced the broken halves apart, and infantry came over it with their shields locked. Slate met the first rank with Brace and Corren. This time there was room for three men abreast behind the boards.

He brought his ward against Corren's and activated Harmonic Resonance. The joined films caught at their edges. When a spear thrust turned the Mystic's shoulder, Slate kept the corner steady long enough for Corren to recover his stance.

They had practiced exactly that.

A heavy crossbow bolt struck Corren's chest.

The Mystic's ward flared and thinned. Slate had mana left in his own film. He couldn't give Corren that capacity through the join. He shifted forward to take the next shot on his body while the Mystic stepped back.

The connection separated.

Brace broke the spear haft pressing against Slate's throat and used it to lever the nearest shield aside. Slate drove through the opening. His claws tore leather and flesh. The Confederacy's front rank fell back, leaving a man curled against the stone wedge.

They could still hold the entrance.

They could not keep doing it for long.

“Civilians?” Slate called.

“Eight out,” Dessa answered. “Three left.”

Tarn had Rilla in the harness on his back. He stopped beside the barricade to take a workman's hand and guide it onto the rope. The man's left palm was bloody, but he could climb if someone supported most of his weight.

“Keep your feet against the wall,” Tarn told him. “Let them pull.”

An infantryman shouted from the ramp beyond Slate.

Brace looked up first. “Tarn!”

A shaped block came over the eastern barrier at shoulder height.

Tarn turned. He pushed the workman behind the timber stack and crouched over the woman on his back. The block struck his ward squarely between the horns.

The film flashed once.

Stone hit him.

Slate reached him before Rilla could free herself from the harness. She was screaming into the Raider's back, unable to see what had happened to his head.

He cut the upper strap, pulled her clear and passed her to Dessa.

Tarn did not move.

Slate pressed a hand to the Raider's throat, then stopped wasting the time the other two civilians needed. “Get her up.” His voice stayed level. That was useful. His company needed orders they could hear, not a reason to stop and look at Tarn.

Brace took Tarn's place beneath the third climber. Dessa strapped Rilla to her own back and climbed. At the ledge, the haulers pulled until the rope cut into their hands.

Slate and Corren held the broken entrance.

Another shaped block rose behind the enemy shields.

Slate could see the caster's sleeve through a gap but not reach him without abandoning the yard. He picked up a stone offcut and hurled it into that gap. A shield jerked sideways. The rising block fell short, striking the ramp among the soldiers trying to climb it.

“Move!” Slate ordered the civilians.

The last civilians cleared the ledge.

Now the remaining Scourge could use their own strength. They climbed in pairs, helping the injured, leaving no unguarded stretch of wall for the infantry to reach. Once the section was moving, Slate sent Corren up after Dessa. Only Brace and the last two section members remained with him.

One of those soldiers stooped over Tarn.

“The next shields are through,” Brace said, watching the road below.

Slate looked from Tarn’s body to the advancing shields. If the Confederacy recovered him, Shen could make a spectacle of the dead Raider and turn the rescue into a warning. Slate would not leave Tarn under the enemy’s banner. “Tie his wrists. I’m taking him up.”

Brace looked at him. “I'll cover you. Climb.”

The soldier looped a length of line around Tarn's wrists and passed it over Slate's shoulder. Slate dragged the body to the wall while Brace covered

him. The dead weight pulled at his injured back, and his repaired tail wouldn't take the brace he wanted from it.

He climbed without using it.

One clawhold. Then another. His feet found the spaces between courses. Tarn's body scraped against the stone below him, heavy enough to pull him loose if he leaned too far out.

The wall moved.

Slate flattened himself against it. A block rolled beneath his right foot and struck the yard. The next handhold widened into a crack. He shoved his forearm through before it could close, caught the far edge and hauled them both upward.

Below, Brace jumped for the wall as the enemy entered the empty yard.

An axe struck Slate's calf. His ward caught the edge, spent the last of the mana he had kept feeding it and went out.

The next blow would meet scales.

A rope dropped against his face.

“Take it,” Sumnu said above him.

Slate locked the line around his wrist and pushed away from the shifting stone.

The haulers dragged him across the lip with Tarn beneath him. Brace landed beside them a moment later. Two enemy spears came over the edge, followed by hands trying to climb. Sumnu's waiting soldiers drove them back down.

Slate rolled onto his side.

The gunner from the southern ballista was limping toward the inner road with the rest of his crew. Behind him, Scourge hauled the intact engine backward on its bed. They had kept the withdrawal route open while Slate emptied the yard.

“All eleven civilians,” Sumnu said. “Seventeen of the eighteen section members alive. Your guard accounted for.”

Slate looked at Tarn. “Take him with the wounded.”

Sumnu didn't correct him.

At the gate approach, Slate called a fresh Raider to take the rear watch and stayed beside Sumnu on the last stretch to the gate. His ward was gone, his tail was torn, and he had orders to give. He ordered the wounded ahead of him.

They broke the temporary timber crossings behind them. Sumnu withdrew the companies in order, covered by Harl's garrison at the inner defenses. Shen's troops followed far enough to occupy the abandoned ledges, then stopped to bring up their own supplies.

By the time Slate reached the gate, the junction no longer looked like a battlefield they might immediately retake.

Confederacy shapers were joining the captured blocks into breastworks. Soldiers carried bolts forward in wicker baskets. The ironroots waited beside fresh cuts, their handlers feeding them while timber went down into the excavations.

An army was settling onto the road he had paid to rebuild.

Fidem met the wounded inside the gate. Orven’s litter went straight to the healers. Slate’s tail still bled, and he couldn't walk the lines himself. He chose a bench facing the gate. “Serena. Give me the count and the beds we have.”

He sat where he could see each litter come through. Six open beds were not enough for eleven civilians and nine wounded Raiders.

Fidem set the treatment kit beside him. “I can close the worst cut while Serena reads.”

Serena arrived with the hospital allocation board. “Nine Raiders need treatment. Eleven civilians are back inside the gate; two cannot walk. Tarn is dead. We have six open beds and enough linen for the first shift.”

“Open the old infirmary. Take beds from the officers’ quarters and send the clean canvas from the lower store. The two civilians go first. Put the Raiders who can hold a ward tomorrow in the other beds.”

Serena marked the board and sent two runners to the supply room.

Fidem closed the worst cut along Slate’s tail while Serena updated the tally. Slate kept his attention on the gate and the next litter.

Across the gate court, Tarn’s body lay under a blanket too short to cover his feet. Rilla stood beside it with the cut harness still looped around one arm.

She kept her eyes on the blanket. Her fingers had tightened the leather until the edge pressed a line into her palm.

Slate stopped beside her. “You got eleven people over that wall.”

“Tarn got them over.”

“Then I’ll put his name on the report. You can set the harness down.”

Rilla let go of the straps. The leather fell against the board.

Slate turned back to Serena. “Put the torn harness in stores. We need to know which seam failed before we send another crew over that wall.”

“We lost the road,” Serena said quietly.

“Yes.”

“How much farther back should I move the stores?”

That was a question he could answer. He made himself look at her board.

Beyond the gate, a hammer rang three times against stone. Slate turned toward the sound.

The linked banner was rising over a new breastwork on the captured approach. Beneath it, Shen's soldiers were unloading his supply wagons into the shelter Lu's crew had built for their own tools.

Slate had brought stoneshapers to Bastion because his people needed walls that would last.

From the bench, he watched those walls close around the enemy.

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XXII

The Enemy Within

LU TURNED THE BROKEN STONE OVER AND RUBBED HIS THUMB ALONG A groove on its underside. “Where was this?”

“Below the eastern approach,” Slate said. “One of the courses Shen moved while we were getting the workers out.”

“Which course?”

Slate put two claws against the drawing on Lu's table. His tail still ached when he bent over it, although two nights of rest, food and repair had closed the worst damage. He could move without Brace offering to carry him. That was progress.

Lu followed the marked line, then turned the fragment again. “This isn't a drain.”

Matek stopped inspecting the books beside the window. “The drawing calls it a drain.”

“The drawing was made from the open end.” Lu pointed to the groove. “A roller ran here. Something heavy was meant to slide through it.”

Slate looked at the Builder's hands. The short claws could have passed for blunt tools until Lu spread his fingers over the fracture and picked a grain of mortar from the old cut. Bronze flashed between his gray scales. He hadn't reached for the measuring cord lying beside him.

“Can men fit?” Slate asked.

“I need to see the other side before I tell you that.”

That was why Slate had come to Lu. He’d hoped the answer wouldn’t involve another trip underground.

For two days, Shen had been turning the captured approach into a place where his army could live. Slate's people had watched every wagon entering it. The bulk of the labor had gone into the obvious breastworks. Several smaller crews kept disappearing below the road.

Some would be clearing shelters and drainage. Slate would have done that himself.

He would also have looked for a way through the wall that didn't require walking under Harl's crossbows.

“The lower access was filled,” Matek said.

“I checked the closure,” Lu replied. “The fill is sound.”

“Sound stone is becoming a less reassuring description.”

Lu looked up at him.

“Yes,” Lu said.

No counterargument. No attempt to explain how much worse the walls would be without him. Slate appreciated the restraint more than another promise.

“Brenn is opening the inner inspection hatch,” he said. “You'll come with us.”

Lu's gaze moved to the guard at the door. “To inspect?”

“And tell me what the drawings miss.”

The Builder gathered his cord and plumb bob. He left the little wooden models on the table, setting the fragment beside one shaped like a channel gate.

Matek watched until they were in the passage. “He could tell them what we repaired.”

“He could tell us what they know.”

“Those are not different abilities.”

Slate slowed enough to look at him. “That's why you're coming.”

The intelligence officer made a dry sound in his throat and moved ahead to speak to the escorts.

Outside, the city smelled of hot broth and fresh-cut timber. The wounded had been moved out of the gate court. Rilla was carrying folded blankets into the receiving house, the salvaged harness hanging from her shoulder with the other straps. She saw Slate and stopped.

Slate expected a question about Tarn. Instead, Rilla said, “Orven says you're not to let anyone set his ankle crooked.”

“Tell him I don't make the medical decisions,” Slate replied.

“He said you'd say that.”

Slate rubbed a claw against his palm. “Tell him I'll ask Fidem.”

She accepted that and carried the blankets inside.

Lu had remained beside the guard while they spoke. When Slate turned back, the Builder asked, “Will he walk?”

“The healers think so. He seems more worried about what it will do to his footing on a ladder.”

“He measures from the ladder. I've told him not to.” Lu stopped there. His gaze dropped to the chalk dust along his own belt.

Slate let him keep the rest of that thought.

They reached the gate stores as a runner returned from the northern road. Matek listened to the report out of Slate's hearing, then came back.

“The courier to Woodhaven passed the last relay. Merus has the warning. Shale's answer hasn't reached us yet.”

Slate nodded. He had sent the warning when the first scouts reported Shen's column. The nursery couldn't be emptied because Bastion had become inconvenient to defend. If Shale came, she would need other adults ready to keep the young fed and settled.

He wanted her here badly enough to resent the distance.

“Keep the route watched,” he said. “We don't lose a runner carrying her reply.”

Below the stores, Brenn had lifted the inspection hatch and cleared the cellar of everyone except a working party. A white ward-torch burned in a bracket beside the stair.

Bastion spoke when Slate stepped into its light. *“The lower passage is not connected to the restored observation network. The closure at its exterior end was last inspected eleven days ago.”*

“Any movement at the inner doors?”

“None within the connected chambers.”

Slate looked into the open hatch. A ladder descended into a dry shaft. At the bottom, a narrow stone way ran east beneath the road.

“Leave two soldiers here,” he told Brenn. “Nobody comes up because they sound friendly.”

“I was going to ask for a familiar face as well.”

“That'll help.”

Brace followed Slate down, then Lu and Matek. Four guards took the remaining space behind them. The other three from the watch stayed with Brenn, covering the stair and hatch.

The passage forced Slate to turn his shoulders. Lu had less trouble with the width, though the new height still made him duck before he needed to. He noticed Slate watching and straightened a little.

“You can scrape your head later,” Slate said. “Show me the rollers.”

Lu knelt beside a stone strip running down the center of the floor. He brushed dust from two parallel grooves. “The opening upstairs was for a lifting frame. They lowered a carriage here, then rolled it under the road to examine the bearings.”

“The report put the drain at the bottom,” Matek said.

“It is at the bottom. Below this.” Lu pointed through a narrow slot beside the strip. Slate saw a deeper channel, clogged with grit. From outside, someone looking into that channel would have seen water stains and the underside of the carriage track.

“How far does this run?”

“To the bearing they needed to inspect. I don't know where that is yet.” He touched the wall and closed his eyes briefly. Then he moved his hand higher, following a joint through the soot.

Slate put his palm against the opposite face and stilled his feet.

The familiar noise of his escorts came through the stone. Beyond them, lighter contacts repeated from farther east.

He raised his free hand.

Everyone stopped.

The distant movement continued.

Not the sliding weight of a beetle. Steps. A pause, a scrape and another set of steps close behind.

Slate pressed his jaw against the wall to improve the contact. The movement strengthened and shifted slightly upward. *“People coming west. Above this floor.”*

He passed the warning to the others. Lu's nostrils widened, but he kept his hand against the stone. *“There should be a second working level,”* the Builder replied. *“Room to reach the upper bearings. The carriage would bring them to a ladder.”*

Slate could feel the people moving. He couldn't feel an empty ladder shaft, read a floor plan through the wall or tell how the two passages met.

“Show me,” he whispered.

Lu moved forward a few paces and stopped beside a shallow recess. His claw followed a vertical scar in the masonry, lifting a thin line of dust from its edge. “Here. The ladder was removed. The side was closed afterward.”

Matek reached past him and touched the same wall. “And someone else can open it.”

The plaster above his hand cracked.

Slate dragged both men back as a spear thrust through the widening seam.

Brace caught the shaft against his warded forearm and wrenched it sideways. Stone broke from the opening. Behind it, a man in a narrow helmet tried to pull his weapon free while another shoulder crowded him from above.

Slate drove his claws through the first soldier's leather collar. Brace released the shaft, caught the falling body and dragged it out of the way before it could pin Lu against the opposite wall.

“Back to the stair!” Slate said.

The floor lifted under his feet.

He struck the roof shoulder first. His Scourgeshield took the scrape, and he twisted onto his side before the rising strip could crush him against it. A hand appeared in the opening above the dead soldier.

A shaper. Of course they had brought a shaper.

Lu dropped to one knee. His tail planted against the wall behind him, and both hands went flat against the swelling floor.

The upward movement stopped.

It did not reverse. Lu's arms trembled as he held a narrow patch beneath Slate level. The stone on either side continued creeping toward the ceiling.

Slate got his legs under him and crawled into the shallow space Lu was preserving. “Can you lower it?”

“Not while he's pushing. Move first.”

Slate reached through the opening for the fingers pressing against the stone. The enemy shaper withdrew his hand before Slate could catch it.

Lu let out a breath and lowered the strip before it could jam permanently against the roof. Dust poured over his beard.

“Now?” Matek asked.

“Now I can.”

“I meant can we stop standing where he can do it again?”

Lu pointed behind them. “Timber. The hatch ladder, or the braces by the stair.”

Matek relayed the order while Slate climbed into the reopened ladder shaft. He could fight better above Lu than on top of his fingers.

A shield filled the upper opening.

Slate hooked its rim with his claws and pulled it down hard enough to bring the soldier with it. The man struck the opposite lip headfirst, his neck breaking as his body fell across the shaft. A second defender stabbed over him, forcing Slate to flatten against the wall.

Confined space. No room for his tail to swing. No advantage in having a larger body if he let them keep him in the narrow end.

He released the shield and dropped.

The soldier above tried to follow the movement with his spear.

Slate caught the point in the meat of his palm, letting his scales and ward stop most of its depth. Then he pulled the man down after it.

Brace killed him before he reached the floor.

Slate climbed over the fallen bodies and came out into the upper passage.

Two soldiers faced him. Behind them, a woman in a clay-streaked coat knelt with her hand against the paving. Beyond her, three more men were turning toward a door at the western end.

They were already past the lower interception point.

“Brenn. Three moving toward the store cellar from the upper way,” Slate sent.

The reply came through Matek below. *“Hatch party ready.”*

Slate couldn't follow those three until he dealt with the two between him and their shaper.

The first man thrust low. Slate stepped onto the shaft, broke it against the floor and drove the splintered end into the second man's thigh. His other hand caught the first under the jaw. He slammed the soldier against the wall, felt the neck give and let him drop.

The injured spearman tried to get his shield up. Slate kicked it aside.

The paving beneath the man split.

Slate jumped back as a stone rib rose between them. Its upper edge struck the ceiling and began forcing it down. The shaper was closing the passage behind her own soldiers.

“Lu!” Slate called.

Below him, Matek passed up a brace the guards had brought from the stair. Wood scraped against stone as Lu took it.

A thick brace rose through the ladder shaft. Its end bent as it reached the ceiling, spreading along the cracked underside. A second branch of the same timber extended down against the sound floor beyond the seam.

The falling roof stopped on the wooden support.

Lu climbed into view behind it, his fingers gripping the timber as its grain lengthened under his palms. His short claws left neat parallel marks in the bark. He planted his tail against the jamb and looked past Slate at the damaged arch.

“Left side,” he said. “The right won't carry you.”

Slate went left.

The enemy shaper tried to lift another ridge. Lu moved one hand from timber to stone and flattened the beginning of it beneath Slate's feet. His other hand kept the wooden brace against the roof.

He could not control the whole passage. He could keep one line open.

Slate took it at a run.

The shaper rose, pulling a short knife from her belt. He struck her wrist aside, caught her arm above the elbow and drove her against the standing support. Her head hit the wood. Before she could recover, he pinned her other hand behind her back.

“Alive,” Matek called as he climbed through the shaft.

“Working on it.”

Lu reached them and pressed his palm to a loose board lying beneath the brace. It split along the grain into two curved lengths. He fitted them around the shaper's wrists, leaving space for cloth between wood and skin, then tightened their ends into a single cuff.

Her fingers strained for the wall.

Slate pulled her away from it. “Sit.”

She stared at Lu instead. “That is not a mason's art.”

Lu looked at the brace holding up the roof. “It is now.”

A crash came from the western door. Slate turned toward it, but Brenn's report arrived before he could move. “Three caught at the hatch. One bleeding. Still breathing.”

Matek counted the prisoners and bodies, then sent guards east to check the opened closure. Nine infiltrators, including the shaper. Five alive. The masonry plug at the outside end had been cut back from the enemy side, a narrow passage opened beside the packed earth.

They had not needed Lu to tell them where it was.

They had needed someone who understood the old bearings.

Slate watched Lu examine the cracked roof. The Builder touched the stone twice, then added a second timber leg beneath the damaged side. His hand shook when he let go.

“How long will it hold?”

“Without being pushed? Until we can replace it properly. If another shaper starts on that pier, get everyone out.”

“Can you stop them coming this way again?”

“With timber shutters and an iron grating behind the new closure. It needs someone watching it. I can't build you an unattended wall that Ordan's best people will politely leave alone.”

Slate looked at Matek. “Find out which other passages they were told about.”

The intelligence officer took the prisoner's arm. “The investigation into Lu’s Forsworn contacts stays open,” Matek said, holding Slate's gaze.

“It does.”

Lu kept his eyes on the roof. He had kept it off Slate. Slate could trust him with that much. He still couldn't trust the Builder to decide which information his commander ought to have.

“You have supervised engineering duty,” he told Lu. “Brenn assigns the site. Matek approves access to the old plans. A guard stays with your crew.”

The Builder looked at him then. “May I direct the workers?”

“At the assigned site. No requisitions, no travel orders and no private couriers.”

Lu breathed in, slowly enough that Slate could see the effort. “I can build under those terms.”

“You can start with the stair. I'd like our side to have a ladder again.”

By evening, Harl had men at both inner access points and Lu had a crew fitting oak shutters into the passage. The captured shaper was held away

from masonry under Matek's supervision. Slate had eaten, repaired the cut in his palm and spent two quiet hours in the guard quarters while the next watch took the wall.

No Mystic on the wall had been able to share a failing ward with the others. Slate would close that gap before the next rescue.

When Corren came to report for the next watch, Slate asked him to raise his ward.

The Mystic obeyed. A faint film settled around his chest.

“How much did you have left in the yard?” Slate asked.

“When you sent me up? Enough for one more bolt, perhaps. Not another block.”

“I had more than that while we were joined.”

“I know. I could feel the join holding after my own ward weakened.”

Slate touched his forearm to Corren's. Harmonic Resonance caught the two films together. The Mystic's ward remained wholly dependent on the reserve inside his own body. “Then we need the next step.”

The interface offered Kinetic Dispersion as the next step after Harmonic Resonance. It required level twenty-six, a thousand biomass and five hundred experience to spread a focused impact across compatible shields. It might keep one exhausted bearer from folding, but the others would pay mana for that block. Slate could fund the purchase before the next watch; each Mystic would decide for themselves. He chose the evolution, then summoned Dessa and sent Brace for Brenn.

Kinetic Dispersion I
Major evolution
Excess impact against one ward is distributed across the capacity of compatible shields within the joined network.
Requirements: LVL 26; Harmonic Resonance I
Biomass cost: 1,000

XP cost: 500

Dessa read her own offered requirements in silence. Corren kept the ward raised while he considered them.

“Twenty-six,” she said. “Just.”

“Twenty-seven,” Corren answered. “I have the experience.”

“So do I.” Dessa looked at Slate. “The biomass?”

“Three thousand from the evolution reserve. Serena is checking what can be released after the repair allocations.”

“That buys quite a few intact soldiers,” Corren said.

“It may keep the next three intact.”

Slate did not tell them it would have saved Tarn. He did not know how much mana Tarn had possessed when the block hit him, or whether anyone could have kept a compatible ward joined while carrying a frightened woman up the wall.

He knew he had stood beside an exhausted Mystic with capacity he couldn't share.

That was a problem he could fix.

Serena arrived with the allocation instead of sending it. “The wounded keep their allocations. Three thousand biomass remains available from the evolution reserve. It is the last uncommitted reserve until the next collection.”

“Release it to us. One working group first. We test the join before I authorize a second draw.”

“I’ll put the limit in the issue order,” Serena said. “The wounded’s allocations stay untouched.”

The storekeepers divided the measured reserve into three transfers. Each recipient accepted a thousand biomass. Dessa and Corren confirmed their

own five hundred experience expenses before Slate committed his.

Evolution acquired: Kinetic Dispersion I
Biomass spent: 1,000
XP spent: 500
XP available: 16,100

The new pathways tightened across Slate's chest and down the inside of his arms. When he raised a ward, the film dragged against his scales as if it had become too close-fitting. He dismissed it and waited for the discomfort to ease. Beside him, Dessa flexed her shoulders while Corren held both hands flat on his knees.

Brenn let them sit until all three could form their wards without the sensation changing.

Then he brought them into the covered practice court.

The suspended beam was still there from the Crusader drills. Someone had padded its striking face again, covering a split with thick leather. Slate took the center position while Dessa and Corren joined their wards to his.

“Low swing,” Brenn told Brace.

Slate deliberately thinned his own ward while Dessa and Corren held theirs firm. If the lighter blow passed the limit he had set for his local defense, they would learn whether the joins carried the excess before anyone tried a harder strike.

The beam struck Slate's chest. He caught it with his forearms and felt the first cost in his own ward. When the concentrated impact exceeded that local response, a second demand crossed the joins.

Dessa's ward brightened. Corren drew a sharp breath. “Mine paid,” he said.

“Mine too,” Dessa answered.

Slate had felt the surplus spread evenly through the three connected defenses. His neighbors hadn't received free protection. They had paid part

of a blow aimed at him.

“Again. A little higher.”

Brenn made them repeat the test with each bearer taking the center. On the fourth swing, Corren signaled that his reserve was running low. Slate stopped the beam before Brace could draw it back.

“Step out.”

The Mystic separated his ward. The pressure of his connection vanished from Slate's awareness. Dessa remained joined, but the next test had only two reserves available to pay for it.

“Lower,” Slate told Brace.

Corren sat on the bench and watched them catch the lighter swing. “If I stay until mine breaks, you have to take the next blow without warning.”

“Exactly.”

Brenn was already marking a rotation on his board. “Then the call comes before that. Nobody gets praised for being the last one to admit he's empty.”

Brenn added the threshold to his board and showed it to Corren and Dessa. Slate checked that both had seen the mark before he called the test complete.

They finished before any ward failed. The three-person test gave him a defense he could use, provided he kept the people close, rested and honest about what remained in their reserves. It didn't give him a reason to stand still under everything Shen could throw.

At the court entrance, Lu waited with a guard and a board balanced against his hip.

He had drawn the captured approach from memory, then marked the supports his crew had put beneath it. Several of those supports now stood inside the enemy's new breastworks.

“Brenn sent me the observers' sketches,” he said. “These are the loads they added today. He wanted to know where they would need more bearing.”

Slate took the board. Outside the practice court, the evening watch was moving toward the gate. Beyond that gate, Shen's engineers were still building.

He tapped the new supports. “Show me which ones they can't afford to lose.”

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XXIII

The Broken Approach

SUMNU WANTED TO BRING DOWN THE PLATFORM WHILE THE ENEMY ballista was still on it. “The frame first,” he said, pointing to Lu's drawing. “Then the men trying to save the frame. We can wreck the bearing while they're looking up.”

Slate studied the marks beneath his claws. Shen's engineers had built a firing platform into the captured road, high enough to reach over the broken outer works. Its front stood on old masonry. The rear still rested on temporary timber while the shapers extended a permanent support underneath it.

By tomorrow, they would have stone all the way down.

Today, Slate could burn it.

“We destroy the supports and withdraw,” he said. “If they run, we don't chase them into the camp.”

Sumnu lifted his head. “I know what a raid is.”

“So do I. I'm saying it where we can both hear it before we find a reason to forget.”

That earned a flash of teeth.

Edrin lay along the broken parapet beside them, watching the enemy through a gap. He had been still so long that dust had begun collecting between his scales. “The gray coats have three pairs of stone posts laid out behind the work yard,” he said. “One strip frozen. The other two have crews and water.”

“Same lanes as yesterday?”

“Wider gaps between them. Their infantry leave the ground clear when the keepers wet the strips.”

Slate looked through the opening. Pale hide shelters stood beyond the new platform. Soldiers were carrying timber from the old storage racks while a shaper worked at the base of a pier. The raised surface above him held the disassembled parts of a heavy ballista.

Farther back, a gray-coated woman stood beside a map stand under an awning. Bronze clasps held her mantle against the wind. She spoke to two casters near a wrapped stone post, then pointed them toward the western end of the yard.

Neris Venn, if their prisoner had told Matek the truth.

The Stillhold Concord had sent twenty-four people under Commander Venn. Matek's prisoner described them as keepers of northern hospices. Apparently keeping people safe included freezing Slate's soldiers to a road until Shen could reach them. He would have preferred a detachment that confined itself to bandages.

“Matek wants their orders,” Slate told Edrin. “Route notes, reinforcement counts, anything that tells us what they're doing next.”

The Lurker shifted his eyes without moving his head. “Would the officer carrying them do?”

“If he's portable.”

“They're generally lighter without their horses.”

Slate checked the approach one last time.

Thirty-six Raiders, Sumnu among them, waited below the wall. They had been drawn from the rested company that held the inner road during the retreat. Edrin would take seven other Lurkers along the northern spoil bank. Brace and six guards stayed with Slate. The two Mystics on this watch hadn't acquired Kinetic Dispersion. He would have to manage his own ward; Dessa and Corren were resting after last night's test and would be needed when Shen came for the gate.

He had fifty-one Scourge besides himself. Enough to wreck an unfinished position. Not enough to occupy an army’s camp.

The objective was the platform supports and the satchel from Neris’s table. Anyone who ran into the camp belonged to Shen.

“Move when the wagon turns,” he said.

They watched a team pull a load of dressed blocks toward the platform. The driver backed his animals between two guide ropes. When the wagon's high side hid the western sentries from the work yard, Edrin dropped over the parapet.

His Lurkers flowed after him.

Slate activated Phase-Shift Cloaking and felt its steady mana draw settle beneath his skin. The cloak wouldn't silence his feet or hide him from a soldier watching the open slope. He kept the wagon between himself and the nearest sentry as he crossed.

Brace followed on his right. Behind the guard, Sumnu's Raiders moved low through the broken ditch.

The warning horn sounded before they reached the timber racks.

Slate let the cloak go. He had crossed the watched ground. No point spending mana to hide when the sentries had already seen them.

He hit the first rack shoulder first and drove it onto the soldiers forming behind it.

Timber crashed across shields. A man scrambled over the fallen poles with a spear, saw Slate and tried to stop. Slate caught him by the belt and hurled him into the next pair before their points could come down.

Sumnu's Raiders swept through the opening.

They didn't stop to fight every soldier in reach. The first group held the broken rack while the next drove for the platform. A pair of Raiders climbed the outside of its frame, cutting lashings as they went. Below them, soldiers trying to form a line found Scourge landing behind their shields.

Slate went for the shaper at the pier.

The man looked up, snatched a hammer from the ground and swung at Slate's head. Slate caught the handle. The shaper abandoned it and pressed both hands to the stone beneath his knees.

The pier widened toward Slate's legs.

He jumped onto the unfinished bearing, caught the man's coat and pulled him clear of the masonry. The shaping stopped. Brace took the shaper from him and passed him back between the guards, both wrists held away from stone.

“One for Matek,” Brace said.

“He'll be delighted.”

Slate climbed beneath the platform.

The air smelled of fresh sap. Broad oak posts stood between the old footing and the beams overhead, their tops packed with thin wedges. Lu had circled those wedges on the drawing. When the upper frame settled, the new stone support was meant to take its load.

Until then, a careful fire would accomplish more than a hundred blows against the pier.

Slate put one hand against the nearest beam and projected a short stream of Cleansing Fire into the packed wood above it.

The wedges blackened. White flame ran along the dry edges, biting into the beam where resin gleamed at a split. He stopped feeding the fire before heat filled the whole space, moved to the second post and kindled its packing in turn.

Above him, a heavy wooden arm struck the platform boards.

The ballista crew had tried to lower part of the weapon before the frame gave way. They had dropped it instead.

“Out from under!” Slate called.

The Raiders on the upper frame jumped.

Slate seized the lower end of the first post and pulled it toward himself. Its burnt head crushed beneath the weight above. The beam settled, carrying the platform down until the second post began to split.

Brace hauled Slate backward by one arm as the first bay collapsed.

The sound drowned the fighting.

Boards, stone blocks and the ballista's great arms fell into the bearing pit. A rope snapped past Slate's face with a whip crack. The half-built pier stood at an angle beneath the wreckage, carrying a load its shaper hadn't finished preparing it to take.

Sumnu climbed onto a fallen beam and raised one arm. “West group, the ramps! Break the hauling lanes!”

Raiders tore the removable timber sections from the ramps behind the platform. One group rolled a loaded cart into the largest excavation. A handler dragged an ironroot backward from beneath a tilting brace while two soldiers cut its guide rope free of the wreckage.

Slate left them to it. Three men were busy saving one beetle instead of bringing spears against his flank.

He wanted Shen paying for every yard.

The enemy's nearest infantry line broke when the platform fell. Soldiers retreated through the work yard, dragging wounded and abandoning shields caught beneath fallen beams. The Raiders followed far enough to keep them from reforming around the surviving piers.

Edrin appeared beside an overturned survey table at the foot of the platform, a leather satchel caught in his tail. “The officer was less cooperative than the papers.”

“Alive?”

“Yes. Running.”

“Let him.”

Beyond Edrin, gray-clad casters were lowering a pale stone post into a prepared socket. An attendant poured a pail into its cup. Another drew wet felt across the road.

Slate saw the white edge spreading along it. “Back from the strip!”

A Raider stopped with one foot across the felt. Frost thickened around his heel before he could lift it. He struck downward with a captured spear, breaking the first crust, but ice filled the break while he drew the weapon back.

His ward flared. Then the scales above his ankle whitened.

Beside him, another Raider scrambled onto a fallen shield and slid out of reach, dragging himself by his claws. The Confederacy infantry kept running through the dry opening beyond the posts.

They knew where the safe path was.

Slate started toward the trapped Raider, but Brace was closer. His commander caught him beneath the arms while the two Mystics broke the ice around his foot. They hauled him behind a block, leaving blood on the white crust.

“I have him,” Brace said. “Find the next pair.”

Mist was already rising across the northern end of the yard. Edrin's Lurkers bounded onto the wrecked table and the stones beyond it. One caught the edge with his tongue and hauled his trailing foot clear as frost spread beneath him.

At the first strip, an attendant tipped warm water into a cup. One of its casters drew back, hands trembling, while another knelt in his place. Behind them, the third crew unrolled felt across the southern approach.

Slate understood what Neris had built.

One pair had to rest and refill. Three could cover the approaches in turn while their crews recovered. He could go above the low mist. His soldiers could climb around the ends. Doing either would carry them out of cover and into the infantry forming beyond it.

“Sumnu, stop at the broken frame,” Slate sent.

“Their rear is open on the south,” Sumnu replied.

“They're laying the third strip there. We have the platform. Don't pay for the camp.”

Sumnu turned his soldiers as an attendant pulled the wet felt beneath an abandoned cart. Frost crept over its wheels and joined the spokes to the stones under them. A shaft settled into the ice and stayed there when a retreating mule tried to drag it free.

Had the Raiders kept running, they would have reached that ground while it was closing around their ankles.

Slate watched a keeper take a knife to the mule's traces. The animal stumbled clear and fled between the soldiers. The keeper had to climb onto the cart to escape his own strip.

They could trap themselves with it. That didn't make being trapped beside them a good plan.

He found Neris near the awning. She held up one hand to stop the northern casters while a pair of Confederacy soldiers carried a wounded man through. The water bearers waited with their pails. Only when the wounded soldier was clear did she let them finish filling the cups.

The barriers needed water, clear ground and crews who could keep channeling.

They also needed someone telling frightened infantry when to stay out of them.

Slate pointed to her. “Edrin. We break their coordination, then we're gone.”

The Lurker glanced toward the satchel. “If you want those, give me someone with empty hands.”

Slate passed the papers to one of the guards. Edrin's smile showed briefly, sharp with relief at being free of the burden. “The outside of the north pair,” he said. “I can reach the caster there.”

“I'll take his attention.”

“You usually do.”

Slate opened his wings and sprang over the fallen frame where the enemy could see him. The repaired left root pulled but held. A crossbow volley followed him up; he folded his wings and landed behind the next stack before the soldiers could correct their aim. The short flight had carried him past the rubble. Staying above it would leave every bow in the yard a clear shot.

A horn sounded from the far end of the road. Shen's white mantle appeared among the troops coming down from the captured junction. He had been farther east when the attack began. Now he was returning with enough infantry to make staying in the work yard expensive.

Slate had a few breaths before the dwarf reached useful stone.

He spent them running at the northern anchor.

The caster beside it rose. He was an older man with pale scars across both wrists, his gray coat folded back from his hands. He pressed his palm to the stone cup. Frost crawled down the grooves toward the strip at its foot.

Slate identified him at level thirty.

“Clear the left!” the man shouted.

Slate jumped onto the overturned table before the mist reached it. Ice whitened the lowest boards. He sprang off the far side, landing outside the pair with the table between himself and the next strip.

The caster drew a short staff from beside the anchor. Ice thickened over its iron head, narrowing to a point.

So he could fight without holding the post.

Slate spat Cleansing Fire across its base from a few feet away. The active magic unraveled where the white flame met it. Meltwater ran from the felt, exposing a dark gap in the strip. Ice remained on the stones to either side.

He kept the stream on the gap until the caster's attempt to close it failed, then cut it off. Clearing the entire strip that way would leave him too little mana to survive the man standing over it.

The staff came for his chest.

Slate turned the point aside with his warded forearm. Cold pressed through the film, forcing him to feed it more mana. Rime spread across the outside of his fingers. He struck his hand against the table edge to break it before the staff came around again.

Edrin dropped over the bank behind the caster.

The Lurker caught the man's right arm and pinned it against his back. The caster drove his elbow backward, struck Edrin under the jaw and twisted the staff toward him with the other hand.

Slate stepped inside the swing.

His claws caught the gray coat below the ribs. The caster tried to turn the staff again, but Edrin held his arm and dragged him off balance. Slate's next strike entered beneath the raised shoulder and reached the heart.

The point broke against the paving when the staff fell. Its ice lay among the splinters of wood.

LVL 30 Ice Caster defeated.
XP gained: 2,250
XP available: 18,350

Edrin let the body fall. Blood ran from a split beneath his jaw. “The papers were easier,” he said.

Slate kicked the anchor out of its socket. The hollow top cracked against the curb, spilling the remaining water. Killing the caster wouldn't have stopped his replacement kneeling there. Breaking the cup would.

The neighboring crew was wetting its felt again.

“Move,” Slate told Edrin.

Slate took the next gap with a single hard wingbeat. Edrin cleared it in a lower bound beside him. Mist reached the table as they left it, and the nearest broken boards froze to the ground. The strip they had disabled remained slick, but the other two pairs still guarded the camp.

Neris was pulling the surviving attendants away from the ruined anchor. She saw Slate and stepped behind a soldier's raised shield, dragging one of the younger casters with her. “Leave the post,” she told him. “Your hands are shaking. Give me your hands.”

The young man tried to pull free. Neris held his wrists until he stopped reaching for the wreckage. Slate could have reached their shield line if he kept running.

Then Shen struck the ground with his hammer.

A ridge rose across the bank ahead. Slate veered toward the work yard as the edge climbed above his shoulder. Edrin went over it, caught the upper lip and dropped onto the same side as Slate before it could turn.

Shen had reached the old footing.

The route behind the fallen platform began to narrow.

“Withdraw. Now.” Slate sent the order through the nearest Scourge. Sumnu answered from the western ramp, where his Raiders were already carrying the wounded toward the ditch.

“We need that bearing open.”

Slate looked back at the half-built pier under the collapsed platform. Shen was drawing it upright, using the buried base to push a new wall through the wreckage. He was trying to divide Slate's group from the withdrawal before they cleared the yard.

Lu had drawn the old joints beneath that pier.

The stone still wasn’t ready to carry the load. If they could drag the fallen beam across it, Shen would have to hold that weight as well.

“The upper beam,” he told Edrin. “Help me pull it down.”

They climbed opposite sides of the fallen frame. Slate caught a dangling rope around his forearm while Edrin hooked his claws into the beam's split end. Together they dragged its weight farther across the rising pier.

Shen's new wall leaned.

For a moment nothing moved. Slate felt the rope cut into his scales. Edrin's feet scrabbled against the wreckage.

Then the unfinished bearing failed.

The pier sheared where fresh shaping met the old course. Its top dropped into the excavation, taking the heavy beam with it. Slate released the rope and beat his wings, pulling clear as the platform wreckage shifted again. He caught Edrin's forearm long enough to swing him off the tilting beam, then landed beside the withdrawal.

Shen stopped the far side from falling onto his infantry.

He couldn't hold that load and close the withdrawal at the same instant.

“Go!” Slate shouted.

The last Raiders crossed the opening.

Brace reached Slate at the ditch, one hand raised toward the inner ballista. “The gate ballista has one clear shot before their infantry retakes the angle.”

Slate looked from the loaded engine to the new lip of Shen’s wall. “One shot at the new lip. Then get the weapon clear.”

Sumnu was already gathering the wounded onto slings. “They go first?”

“The wounded and prisoners. Everyone else in order. Harl, loose when the litters clear the ditch.”

Brace turned and put the last two guards between Slate and the enemy crossbows.

They withdrew as Harl loosed his single bolt. It struck the rebuilt lip of Shen's wall and shook loose enough stone to drive the pursuing infantry

into their own ditch. Harl's men kept the gate lane clear while the wounded passed.

Sumnu was waiting inside with the count.

All fifty-two Scourge had returned. Nine needed treatment before they could fight again, including the Raider whose leg had been frozen. None had died in the yard, but the injured man was shaking so hard that two soldiers had to hold the litter steady.

Slate would wait for the healers before calling that a bloodless return.

The captured shaper went to Matek. Slate took the satchel from the guard who had carried it out and kept it until the intelligence officer came for it himself.

“Did he carry a seal?” Matek asked.

“Ask the officer. Edrin let him run.”

Matek opened the satchel and examined its contents. Several stiff sheets had been wrapped around a narrow wooden writing board. Damp clay still filled the grooves along its edge, holding impressions from the survey pegs used beside it.

“Where did you get this?” Matek asked.

“The survey table beside the platform,” Slate said.

“Good.”

Slate waited while Matek separated the papers. He recognized enough marks to find the repeated house names, but the cramped notes beside them would have taken him half the morning to work through. Matek read them once and began laying the sheets in order.

“Supply allotments,” Matek said. “Two more banners coming forward. Two hundred in each before any losses on the road.”

“When?” Slate asked.

“They were sent behind the first expedition. The last messenger put them at the western staging post two days ago.”

Four hundred more Confederacy personnel. Slate looked toward the gate. They had wrecked the first force's platform. They hadn't stopped the next force walking toward the ruins.

“Could they arrive today?” Slate asked.

“Late today or tomorrow, if this dispatch is current. I'll have the scouts confirm.” Matek unfolded the last sheet.

It was a plan of the eastern gate approaches. Three short lines marked the inner road, one above another. Slate recognized the bend where the rescued workers had crossed into Harl's protection.

“Read that.”

Matek followed the notes with a claw. “The southern approach is to be fixed with infantry. The gray detachment holds the northern crossing. Shapers work against the center once the defending force is committed.”

“Against the gate?”

“Below it.” He turned the sheet.

The second drawing showed a narrow bite taken from the roadbed beneath the gate's outer corner.

Slate imagined the center giving way while his soldiers faced attacks on both sides. The city wall didn't have to fall. A descent of a few feet could put the defenders on broken ground while Shen's infantry crossed above them.

“How much of this can he still do without the platform?”

“The ballista support will have to be rebuilt. Most of the plan does not require it.”

Slate sat back.

That was why the Stillhold keepers had held the yard instead of following his Raiders out. They had preserved the ground Shen needed to assemble the next attack. Neris had lost an anchor and a caster, then kept the other strips working long enough for the infantry to recover. Her people couldn't move those barriers quickly. They didn't need to if he kept attacking the ground they had already prepared.

The raid had worked. It had bought time, damaged the siege preparations and brought him the attack plan.

It had not persuaded his enemy to reconsider.

Sumnu came into the room carrying a torn strip of felt wrapped around a fragment of pale stone. He dropped it beside the drawings, where it began to drip. “The men want another go.”

“The nine we sent for treatment too?”

“Especially them. That's why I'm talking to you.”

Slate touched the torn felt. Water soaked into the wood beneath it. They could lay it under loose gravel before raising the posts, concealing the strip until the cups were filled. His scouts needed to watch the water bearers as carefully as the casters. Breaking an anchor worked. Letting the enemy choose every place where he had to break one would get soldiers killed.

“Let them eat,” he said. “We got what we went for. Next time they come to us.”

Sumnu studied the gate drawing. “That soon?”

“As soon as Shen has enough soldiers to believe the losses won't stop him.”

“He had enough yesterday.”

Slate almost smiled. “He's getting more.”

A runner arrived before they finished placing the captured notes beside Lu's survey. The message had come through the northern relay, carried in a split wooden case to keep the rain off it.

Matek read the outer marks, then handed it to Slate. “Shale.”

Slate broke the fastening and asked him to read it aloud.

The nursery had caregivers for every watch. Merus had the stores and the older young occupied with their lessons. Shale had left Woodhaven after the arrangements were checked, bringing a small escort rather than emptying its defenses. The runner who carried her reply had overtaken the earlier courier on the return route.

She expected to reach Bastion before the next nightfall.

The final line was short enough that Slate recognized it himself after Matek read it.

“Keep a way in open.”

Slate looked at Shen's drawing of the ground beneath his gate.

He would need to keep more than a doorway open for her.

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XXIV

The City Holds

THE FIRST ENEMY BANNER CAME DOWN THE SOUTHERN APPROACH while Lu was still cutting holes in Slate's road.

Slate watched another paving block settle onto the lifting sled. Beneath it, a trench exposed the old bearing against which Shen intended to work. Two carpenters were lowering an oak beam across the opening. Lu knelt between them, his tail planted behind him, and guided the beam into a socket with both hands.

“How many?” Slate asked.

“Three seated. This makes four.”

“You asked for six.”

“I still want six.”

The Builder looked toward the approaching banner, then back at his hands. Bronze glinted beneath the dust on his knuckles. The oak's squared end spread against the socket until the carpenters could release their ropes.

Slate had spent a lot of money making this road strong enough for loaded wagons. Now he was paying men to remove the parts that made it continuous. Shen could move a connected bed of stone. The new beams would carry a short section independently, provided Lu finished before the attack reached it.

“You have until Sumnu starts swearing,” Slate said.

“He started when we took the first block out.”

“Then listen for my name.”

Above them, Harl's crossbows opened on the southern column.

Shields rose in overlapping ranks. Bolts struck wood and iron, and one man fell out of the advancing line. The soldiers behind him moved around his body without breaking formation. Farther north, gray coats passed between the ruins of the firing platform Slate had destroyed the previous morning. They carried two hollow stone anchors in padded slings. Water bearers followed them, keeping the felt rolls dry until the posts were in place.

The reinforcements had arrived during the night. Matek's scouts had counted the two additional banners at the captured junction. Shen had rested them while his first companies prepared the approaches.

Slate had been given one night to use the papers Edrin stole.

He would have preferred three.

“South is engaged,” Sumnu reported. *“They're bringing ladders through the ditch.”*

“Hold your reserve,” Slate sent Sumnu.

“I know which part of a diversion this is. They're still trying to stab us.”

Slate looked along the inner parapet. Brenn had kept the uncommitted Raiders behind the gate court, out of sight of the southern attack. Harl's soldiers held the upper firing positions. Lynia's Mystics were divided between those positions and the wounded collection point, with a smaller group watching the north.

They could cover the wall. They could not be strong everywhere beneath it.

“Keep working,” Slate told Lu. He climbed the inner stair, checked the southern fight through Sumnu's offered sight, and found Shale at the top.

For a moment he forgot the road.

She had tied her black hair back with a strip of cloth. Dust lay along the silver scales of her shins, and a shallow scratch crossed one cheek. Her wings were folded neatly against her back. All the irritation he had carried

since receiving her letter left him at the sight of her standing there under her own strength.

Then she reached him, caught his jaw and kissed him hard enough to make Brace study the enemy instead. “You kept it open,” she said.

“The west gate. I was fairly specific about which one to use.”

“I noticed. Three runners were fairly specific as well.”

He kept one hand against her waist. “The children?”

“Fed. Guarded. Furious that I wouldn't bring them.”

“All of them?”

“The ones who can argue. The others had opinions.”

Her smile reached him before she looked toward the southern ditch. “Merus watched the handover himself. The broodkeepers have every watch covered. We left four days ago, used the northern route past Wayward and stopped at the last relay before dawn. Your runner told us where the enemy patrols were.”

“And your escort?”

“Four Lurkers. Eating downstairs. I did the same before I came up.” She lifted his hand off her waist and pressed it briefly between hers. “I'm ready, Slate.”

He believed her. Her breathing was steady, and she moved without guarding her hips or drawing a wing tight against an injury. She had come as a fighter who intended to get home again.

“North side,” he said. “The gray casters want to pin Edrin below the wall while Shen comes through the middle. I need him free to hit their shapers.”

Shale studied the stone posts. “Those are the ice anchors?”

“Watch the wet strip between them. It freezes your feet to the ground. Go around it, and don't assume your ward will keep you moving.”

“Show me where you got through.”

He gave her the memory of the previous day's attack: the soaked felt, frost closing around the Raider's ankle, attendants refilling the cups while a caster rested. He included the ice left after he killed the man at the northern post. She watched through him without interrupting.

“I'll take the outside,” she said when it ended. “Edrin can keep their eyes on the wall.”

Slate wanted to say more. He wanted a room without people waiting for orders and enough time to ask which child had learned to argue since he last visited.

A stone struck the parapet below his elbow.

Shale brushed powdered mortar from his shoulder. “After.” Then she was moving toward the northern stair.

A shout came from the southern stair before Slate could return to Lu.

Through Sumnu, he saw a ladder slam against the lower wall. It carried hooks shaped from stone instead of iron. As the top caught, the hooks spread into the joints of the parapet. Harl's men tried to push it away and found it fixed beneath their hands.

Three infantrymen climbed while crossbows covered them from the ditch.

The fixed ladder would let the shaper below reach the parapet. Once he reached the upper stones, the wall would become his weapon.

“Brenn, send the nearest reserve file to the stair,” Slate sent.

“The center?” Brenn asked.

“One file. Keep the rest.”

Slate watched a soldier on the parapet take a bolt through the throat. The man fell backward, leaving his crossbow hooked over the merlon. A Raider reached the opening before the first enemy helmet rose above it.

Sumnu met the shaper halfway up the ladder.

He had gone over the wall rather than wait for the man to climb it. He hooked his claws over a rung below the shaper's feet. He swung outward, hooked the man's belt with his tail and pulled him away from the stone. They fell together into the ditch.

Slate's hands closed against the parapet. Sumnu had enemy infantry on both sides and no ward group paying for him.

The Raider commander landed on top, rolled through the nearest spears and came up beneath a soldier's shield. His waiting men dropped ropes. He looped one around his forearm while they shot into the soldiers trying to hold him down.

"Up, damn you," Slate sent.

"Busy," Sumnu replied.

The haulers dragged Sumnu out with the shield still covering his head. Below him, the shaper crawled toward his own infantry, one leg folded beneath him. Above, the reserve file cut the ladder's wooden rails between the fixed hooks. The lower length fell away with two men on it.

Slate let go of the parapet. *"Next time take a rope down with you."*

Sumnu looked at the crossbow hanging beside the dead guardsman. *"Next time give me the man who sent them."*

Slate went back to Lu.

The fifth beam was seated. The sixth lay on the sled, its far end still too wide for the socket. One carpenter had a strip of bloody cloth tied around his forearm. He hauled on the rope with the other hand while his partner guided the load.

"Send him in," Slate said.

"He won't let go," Lu answered.

Slate caught the rope himself. "You can put that in the report. Go get stitched."

The carpenter surrendered the line. Brace brought another soldier forward to take it, freeing Slate before the first heavy stone came over the southern breastwork.

It struck the road beyond the working party and broke into three pieces. A second followed, higher and farther left.

Ranging shots.

Slate looked down the approach. Shen stood on the surviving center bearing with his hammer grounded beside him. His white mantle was folded back over one shoulder. Infantry advanced ahead of him behind tall shields, keeping the inner road between themselves and Harl's upper positions.

“Dessa. Corren,” Slate called.

The two Mystics stepped out from the gate recess. They had rested through the raid and the night, eaten, and come to him with full reserves rather than promises that they could manage.

Slate raised his ward. Dessa joined on his left, Corren on his right. Harmonic Resonance caught the touching films together. Beyond that familiar contact, the new pathways of Kinetic Dispersion tightened into readiness.

“Call your limit early,” he said.

“You heard Brenn,” Corren answered. “He threatened to make me explain it to Serena.”

“I'd rather explain an empty reserve than a dead Mystic,” Dessa said. She crouched beside the exposed socket. “Lu. Stay behind my shoulder.”

The next block came directly at them.

Slate met it with his forearms crossed before his face. His ward flared. Stone cracked against the film, and a brutal demand went through the joins on either side of him.

Dessa grunted. Corren's feet slid half a pace over the paving.

Slate lowered his arms. The largest fragment fell between his claws without reaching Lu.

His ward had taken the first impact. When the impact exceeded what it could absorb alone, both Mystics had spent mana to take the rest. He felt each new demand on their joined wards. Another blow like that would drain all three again.

Behind them, the beam scraped into its socket.

“Closer to me,” Lu told the carpenter. “The far side's too high.”

Another stone rose beyond the infantry.

Slate hated standing still while a man selected the next object to throw at him. Every instinct wanted him across the road with his claws around the shaper's wrist.

Lu needed another half minute. That was the job.

“Right side,” Slate said.

They shifted together. Corren took the second block on his warded shoulder, turning enough to send the broken pieces away from the carpenter. Slate felt the shared demand bite into his own reserve. Dessa's film flashed beside him.

“Two more like that,” Corren said. “Then I step out.”

“One,” Slate told him. “Leave the margin.”

The infantry reached the new gap.

Brace met them with the rest of the watch. A spearhead scraped Slate's ribs while he turned to block a smaller stone aimed at Lu's hands. He caught the spear shaft, wrenched its owner against the edge of the road and sent him into the trench.

Corren took a heavy crossbow bolt against his chest. The join pulled at Slate again.

“Now,” the Mystic said.

“Out.”

Dessa shifted closer as Corren separated. Two guards caught the forward edge of a timber screen and dragged it across his retreat. He reached the recess with his ward still intact, sat down hard and began the slow business of recovering what he had spent.

Without Corren, only two reserves remained to carry the next impact.

Slate and Dessa gave ground to the screen.

“Lu!” Slate called.

“Seated. Get off the center!” Lu shouted back.

Slate lifted the carpenter under one arm while Dessa pulled Lu upright. They cleared the open course as the paving beyond it dropped.

Shen had begun the undercut.

The road's outer corner descended in a grinding sheet. Soil poured from the exposed edge. Beneath it, a low arched back moved through the earth beside the foundation, pushing spoil into the ditch. An ironroot had brought the excavation close enough for the shapers to reach sound bearing stone.

Then the lowered road stopped against the oak beams.

The sixth support bent. Lu braced his tail and planted both hands against its inner end. The grain lengthened into the neighboring timbers, spreading the load across the sockets. The carpenter crawled behind him and drove a wedge into the remaining gap with a mallet.

Shen's leading infantry found a trench where they had expected a slope.

Brenn sent the reserve forward.

Raiders came through the gate in two files and struck the stalled line from the sound portions of the road. They caught shields from above, hauled soldiers across the trench and threw them back into the following ranks. Harl shifted his crossbows to the men trying to bring ladders through the broken ground.

Slate let himself enjoy the sight.

Then Shen lifted his hammer, and the outer bearing rolled sideways.

The first beam tore out of its socket.

Lu cried out. His right hand left the oak, fingers curled tight against his palm. The joined grain split with a sound like a tree coming apart in a gale.

Shen had stopped trying to lower the road. He was pulling the anchors away from the bridge.

“Back to the gate!” Slate ordered.

The Raiders withdrew by files, covering the men climbing out of the trench. Brace dragged the carpenter behind the screen. Dessa helped Lu back without letting him stop to reach for the splitting wood again.

Slate couldn't hold the supports by standing under them. He couldn't fly an army out of a collapsing gate approach, either.

He needed Shen's hands occupied with something else.

“Edrin. I need your attack.”

“North strip's frozen. Shale is outside their shields.”

Through the offered glimpse, Slate saw her crouched beneath the outer lip of the northern ditch. The gray casters faced the wall. Edrin's Lurkers showed themselves between the broken stones, forcing the casters to keep the nearest strip closed. The mist rose only to the tops of the posts, but the infantry behind it kept their spears raised.

An enemy officer saw Shale first.

He shouted and turned with his sword raised. She sprang out of the ditch, caught his sword arm and drove him against the nearer anchor from outside the frozen strip. Water slopped over the cup. Frost spread across his coat where it touched the stone.

Her ward brightened against the cold. She planted one foot on dry rubble and swept her bladed tail through the exposed felt at the post's base. The

first cut stopped against ice. She struck again, breaking the crust and severing the strip beneath it.

Then she shoved the officer's weight against the anchor and jumped back.

The post tipped out of its shallow socket. Its cup broke on the rubble, spilling water across the severed felt. The mist thinned. Ice remained under the fallen officer, who scrambled away on his hands before he could stand.

One caster stayed kneeling with his palms pressed to the second post, trying to restore the hold across the break. His hands shook. The other reached for a water vessel and tried to lift the broken anchor.

Edrin hit him from the other side.

The northern infantry turned to meet the two Scourge, leaving their shields pointed away from the wall. Lurkers descended into the gap. Shale caught a man trying to reach the warning horn, dragged him off his feet with her tongue and cut him down before the instrument reached his lips.

“North is moving,” Brenn said beside Slate.

“Keep them moving. Lu, can you hold the inner two supports?”

The Builder had tucked his injured hand against his chest. He studied the road while a guard stood between him and the spears.

“If he stops pulling them sideways.”

“I'll arrange that.”

Slate spread his wings. “Brace. You're with the crew.”

“Slate.”

“He has to let go of the road. You can reach me from the left stair.”

Slate waited just long enough to see his commander send two guards that way. Then he jumped from the gate lip and beat upward, clearing the stalled infantry before they could raise their spears.

Crossbows turned toward him. He folded one wing, dropped below the sightline of the northern rank and landed on the moving bearing beside Shen.

The dwarf released the stone.

Slate's claws struck the hammer haft instead of his throat.

Shen turned the blow across his body and drove his shoulder into Slate's middle. He was shorter, heavier than he looked and planted on ground that answered him. Slate slid toward the broken edge before he caught the dwarf's mantle and pulled him close.

“You could have kept building,” Slate said.

“So could you.”

Shen struck him under the ribs with the hammer's short end.

Slate's ward took most of the force. Most was not all. He felt the blow in his teeth and drove his knee into the dwarf's chest before Shen could draw the weapon back.

The mantle tore in Slate's hand.

Shen stepped away, laid one foot against the edge of the bearing and tipped the whole slab.

Slate went with it. He caught the upper rim rather than resist the fall, swung underneath and drove his tail across Shen's exposed ankle.

The dwarf staggered. Stone rose around his heel to steady him.

Slate came over the rim with ash-white fire coating his claws.

Shen caught the first strike on his armored forearm. The second entered the gap below the wrist.

The ash burned inward through the wound. Shen's fingers opened, and the stone around his heel crumbled. He moved the hammer into his other hand before Slate could seize it.

One hand hurt. The other still worked.

A stone ridge struck Slate across the thighs and knocked him backward into a kneeling soldier. The man's spear snapped beneath them. Slate rolled clear, wings tight, as Shen brought the hammer down where his head had been.

The bearing cracked.

For the first time Slate saw the price in the dwarf's face. Blood had soaked the bandage at his older wrist wound. His injured hand shook against his armor. Fighting Slate hadn't relieved him of the road's weight.

Neither of them could afford a long fight here.

“Slate.”

Shale's voice reached him through the Lurkers coming along the northern edge. *“Below you. They're sending more shapers through the cut.”*

He looked past Shen.

Two men were descending into the ironroot excavation behind the bearing. If they reached the supports while Shen kept Slate busy, the gate approach would still fall.

Shale was already running toward them. She caught the first at the ladder, drove him backward over its rail and landed on the second with both claws extended. Infantry followed her into the cut.

She had bought him a choice. He could stay and try to kill Shen, or use the opening to save the road.

Slate wanted the dwarf dead badly enough to recognize the danger.

He sprang backward off the bearing.

His wings opened over the trench. One hard beat carried him to the inner lip, where Brace seized his wrist and hauled him onto the remaining boards.

“Can we keep it?” Slate asked Lu.

The Builder looked at the split anchors. “Not while he has that outer bearing.”

Lu tried to open his injured hand. Two fingers had swollen until the scales no longer lay flat. He pressed them against his belt to keep them out of the way and reached for the timber again with his other hand.

“Lu. Look at me.”

He did, reluctantly.

“How long before the inner sockets go?”

“One is already moving.”

Behind Slate, a Raider carried the dead guardsman's crossbow through the gate. There was blood along its stock. Lu watched it pass, then looked down at the beam beneath his palm.

“I can save the inner ends,” he said. “You won't have a road across them.”

“Then lose the outer span,” Slate said. “Save the gate.”

Lu stared at the timbers he had spent the night preparing.

Slate knew what he was asking. A road could be rebuilt. The soldiers waiting behind it were harder to replace.

“Cut it.”

Lu put his good hand against the inner beam.

The joining grain began to separate. He couldn't unmake Shen's stone. He could release the oak that tied the threatened span to the surviving sockets. The carpenter beside him hacked through the first retaining rope, then passed his axe to a Raider and took the second.

“Everyone off the boards,” Brace called.

Slate sent the warning outward through Edrin. Shale climbed clear of the excavation, dragging an injured Lurker by the harness across his chest. The remaining Scourge fell back along the northern lip.

Shen saw the timbers part.

He drove his hammer against the bearing and tried to raise the outer span beneath his infantry. Slate put a short stream of Cleansing Fire through the exposed packing under the nearest loaded beam.

Dry wedges blackened and crushed.

The span dropped.

Its broken end struck the excavation, taking the ladder and the forward breastwork with it. Shen's rising stone met the falling oak at an angle. The collision threw planks across the ditch and forced the dwarf to turn toward the soldiers caught on his side.

Slate cut off the flame. Heat washed over his face. He had spent enough mana for the day to feel the effort behind his eyes.

Across the new gap, Shen held a tilted block above three men trying to crawl clear. A fourth lay pinned beneath the timber. The Surety could advance or let them reach him.

He lowered the block behind their backs and made them a shelter.

Shale reached Slate's side as the northern casters abandoned their attempt to join the broken strip. Frost clung to the rubble below them, but there was no longer a continuous approach to the gate for the keepers to close. Neris sent bearers for a wounded attendant while the others lifted the intact post. Confederacy soldiers raised shields around them as they withdrew.

“The shapers?” Slate asked.

“One won't be shaping today. The other left his ladder.” Shale shifted the injured Lurker toward the guards. “This one needs a healer.”

Blood ran down her left forearm. She saw him notice and flexed the hand. “Mine still closes.”

He touched her wrist, then let her pass the wounded man to Brace.

The southern horns changed their call.

Sumnu answered through the nearest Raider. *“They're pulling the ladders. Permission to follow?”*

Slate looked at the broken center, at Lu sitting beside a socket with his bad hand in his lap, at Dessa standing over Corren while both recovered behind the screen.

“To the first abandoned breastwork. No farther. Get our wounded.”

Sumnu took the limit without argument.

The fighting didn't stop at once. Crossbows kept firing from the southern ditch. A knot of Confederacy infantry held beneath the northern wall until Edrin gave them a route back that didn't pass through his Lurkers. Harl's soldiers lowered their weapons as the last of that group carried its wounded away.

Only then did Slate hear the hammer inside the gate.

The carpenter was driving a temporary pin through the surviving beam. His partner had come back from the healers with a bandage on his arm and was holding the lantern for him. Lu watched each strike, correcting the angle with his uninjured hand.

“Will it carry?” Slate asked.

“People,” Lu said. “No wagons until we replace the sockets.”

“People will do.”

Brenn began bringing the companies in. The first Scourge crossed the narrow repaired section carrying a soldier between them. Behind them came a human guardsman with his own crossbow slung over his back and an enemy spear serving as a crutch.

The gate remained upright. The inner road had held. Beyond it lay enough broken timber and lost masonry to keep Serena angry for a season.

Slate watched the wounded pass before he allowed himself to look at the enemy.

Shen's banners were withdrawing toward the captured junction in order. They had lost the ground immediately below the gate, not their army. The eastern road beyond the ruins still disappeared behind their shields.

Shale leaned against his shoulder. “You still want the road.”

“The gate held, his attack failed, and he lost another caster. I’ll enjoy that. Then I take the road.”

Shale looked up at him. “I’ll be here when you do.”

“I know.” He flattened his hand against the sound gatepost, still smiling.

The carpenter’s hammer shivered through the timber into his palm.

An hour later, when the last stretcher had crossed, Shen came back to the far edge of the gap. He carried his hammer in its sling, clear of his hands. Beside him, Ren raised a length of white cloth.

Slate watched the dwarf wait on the road he had failed to take.

This time, the Surety was asking to be heard.

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XXV

The Ashen Terms

By morning, men from both armies were carrying their dead over the same stretch of road.

Slate had agreed to a pause in the fighting when Shen raised the white cloth. Getting the wounded out had used the remaining daylight. Finding the dead had taken much of the night.

The pause would last until noon. Nobody had mistaken it for peace.

He stood beside the gap with Brace while Confederacy soldiers brought a litter down from the captured junction. Their officer stopped at the agreed marker, a broken wheel laid flat on the ground. Two of Harl's men met him there. The litter passed between them without either side lowering its spears.

“Ours?” Slate asked.

Brace looked beneath the blanket. “Garrison. Southern ditch.”

The dead man still wore the little wooden tally used to draw his meals. Slate had seen Serena's clerks issuing those when the companies were formed. A name, a unit and a right to be fed. The soldier's fingers were closed around it beneath the blanket.

“Fidem has the names being checked,” Brace said.

Slate stepped aside for the bearers.

Across the gap, Shen watched a different group descend into the wreckage. He had changed the torn white mantle. His right hand was wrapped from wrist to knuckles, and he carried his hammer on the left side now. Ren remained beside him with the recovery list.

A shout came from below the road.

The men in the excavation crowded around a fallen beam. One knelt and put his face against the narrow space beneath it. Another waved for the officer at the marker.

Slate heard the answer before the officer reached him.

A man was alive down there.

He spread his wings and dropped into the cut. “Hold your weapons,” he said as the nearest infantryman turned. “Where?”

The soldier pointed rather than argue.

A helmet lay in the mud beneath the beam. Beside it, two fingers moved against the broken edge of a shield. The man's chest was hidden under boards, one leg trapped where the timber crossed a displaced block.

Shen came down the cleared steps on the other side. “Do not lift the beam yet.”

Slate stopped with his hands beneath it. “Tell me why.”

“It is holding the upper block. Move it first and the stone falls into the space around him.” He crouched beside the block, keeping his bandaged hand against his chest. With the other, he pressed the loose pieces into a single broad face. The shape settled slowly against the side of the excavation.

Slate felt the pressure ease from the timber. “Now.” He lifted.

The beam rose a few inches. A medic crawled beneath it with two soldiers holding his ankles. He reached the trapped man's shoulder, spoke into the darkness and began clearing boards from his face.

Slate's feet sank into the wet earth. The wood was heavier than it looked. He shifted one claw deeper into the split and kept the load steady while the medic worked.

“Leg's caught,” the man said.

“Which side?” Shen asked.

“Yours.”

The dwarf moved his hand lower. Stone scraped past stone, and the medic drew the trapped soldier toward the light. His shield came out with him, folded nearly in half.

Shen held the block until they had the man on a litter. Then he lowered it into the empty space and stood with his left hand braced on his knee.

Slate set the beam down.

The rescued soldier looked from one avatar to the other. He tried to speak. The medic stopped him with a cup against his lips. “Later,” he said. “Use your breath.”

Shen watched until they reached the steps.

“He was under there all night,” Slate said.

“They could not hear him through the stone.”

Neither had known where to search. Slate could sense movement through a short stretch of connected material when he stopped to listen. That didn't make every silent space beneath a battlefield visible to him. He wondered how many places they had passed over while looking for the men who could shout.

“We need another search,” he told Brace when his guard reached the cut. “Close contact. No walking past because the surface looks settled.”

Shen gave Ren the same order.

For those few minutes, both armies searched for survivors.

The meeting took place in the roofless tool shelter beside the abandoned southern breastwork. The table had survived under a fallen door. Someone had scraped the mortar off it and fitted a short block beneath the broken leg. Empty tool pegs lined the wall behind it, with pale outlines where saws had kept the grime off the stone.

Slate looked at that block before sitting.

Shen saw the look. “If I intended to overturn the table, I would not require the stone.”

“Neither would I.”

“Then we may leave the furniture out of the discussion.”

Slate sat. Matek took the place beside him, laying their prisoner records on a dry board. Brace stayed behind his right shoulder. Ren stood opposite with Shen's papers. Neris arrived last, her gray coat buttoned over a bandolier of folded dressings. A wool wrap covered one side of her neck. Above it, her skin was raw where wet cloth had frozen against it.

She put a narrow writing case on the table. “I can record what we agree here,” she told Slate. “I can commit my keepers to the medical passage. Wider terms would have to go to the Stillholds.”

“Then we will deal with your keepers.”

She opened the case. Her fingers were stiff enough that she had to shift the pen twice before finding a comfortable grip.

Shen waited until she was ready. “I will withdraw from your immediate approaches if we settle the return of the prisoners and the authority under which future disputes are heard.”

“How far back?” Slate asked.

“East of the western quarry tracks. The advance works will be dismantled.”

“The junction?”

“Returned to you.”

That deserved his attention. Slate had come expecting an offer to stop attacking while Shen kept the road. The dwarf was putting a useful withdrawal on the table.

“And in exchange?” Slate asked Shen.

“The six taken from the mill enter an agreed hearing. Lu answers for his part in their removal. Until those matters are concluded, you suspend

further transformations among people subject to Confederacy obligations.”

Matek drew one of the records toward him. “Some of the mill prisoners face allegations of violence. Others were held for obligations their families dispute. Do you intend to hear six cases or establish one result?”

“Six cases,” Shen said. “I have not required one verdict.”

“Where?” Slate asked.

“At Lianshi. Before officers empowered to examine the records.”

“Your officers. On your ground. Holding the people whose release we're discussing.”

“They were held on that ground before your officer removed them.”

Slate rested his hands on the edge of the table. Lu's decision had handed Shen a real grievance. Pretending otherwise would give the dwarf an excuse to dismiss every other objection.

“Lu went without authorization,” Slate said. “He used my wagon and withheld what he was doing. He's lost authority because of it. You can question him here, with me present. You can bring witnesses against each prisoner. If one of them killed someone, I want to know who, where and what evidence you have.”

“Then permit the hearing,” Shen said.

“A hearing. Not a delivery,” Slate replied.

Ren shifted behind Shen. Neris's pen paused above the page.

Slate looked at her. “What part of the mill claim brought you here?”

“The grain road supplies our northern hospices. Your quarrel is obstructing it.”

“His army is sitting on the road.”

“And you have altered one of his shapers beyond any healer's power to restore.” She laid her pen down. “We need to know what happens to

someone who accepts your scales before that offer reaches our patients.”

“Ask Lu. He's inside the gate.”

“I have read what he can do now. That is not the same as knowing what was lost.”

Slate looked at her bandaged neck. She had come onto a battlefield to keep him from offering people a different body. He doubted she had asked Lu whether he wanted the old one back.

“You can send a healer to talk to him. You don't get to decide whether he was allowed to choose it.”

“We do not let a frightened patient agree to a permanent treatment merely because someone promises it will end his pain.”

“Then make sure he understands it. Don't make sure he can never leave.”

Neris reached for her pen again. “Those are not the same duty.”

“I'm glad we agree. None of that proves the six people from the mill belong in chains. We still need evidence for each case.”

Shen's bandaged fingers moved against the tabletop. He stopped them when the motion hurt. “You propose that I submit Confederacy obligations to your judgment.”

“I propose that you don't take people out of my protection before I can judge what you're asking.”

“And if the judgment requires their return?”

“Depends on the judgment.”

There was the difficulty, spoken plainly. Slate knew how little that would reassure a ruler whose prisoners had been taken from a guarded mill. He would not have accepted that answer from Shen if their positions were reversed.

He still couldn't promise to obey a verdict he hadn't heard.

“Put a mixed hearing here,” he said. “One examiner from you, one from me, and a witness we both accept. Evidence in front of all three. Separate findings for each person. Neris can record it if her field authority allows.”

“I can keep the record,” she said. “I cannot judge a Confederacy service claim.”

“Fine. We find someone for the third seat.”

Shen considered the proposal long enough that Slate began to believe they might get past the first objection. “Who enforces the finding?” the dwarf asked.

“Within Bastion, my people.”

“May a Confederacy officer attend the execution of that finding?”

“As an observer.”

“May he take custody if you refuse to execute it?”

“No.”

Shen leaned back. “Then it is advice.”

Matek set down the page he had been holding. “A Confederacy officer tried to take custody on our road before you attacked the city. Bao was not carrying a judgment from any mixed hearing.”

“Which is why I am specifying the authority now.”

“You're specifying the right to come back with soldiers,” Slate said.

“If an agreement is broken, an agreement must permit a remedy.”

Slate looked through the missing roof. Harl's men were standing above the southern ditch, watching the enemy recovery parties. Down the slope, a Scourge helped lift a litter past the broken wheel.

He could agree to a remedy. He couldn't agree that Shen decided when to invoke it and whom to take when he arrived.

“Compensation for a proven obligation,” he said. “A fixed amount, not a family held for another generation. We can establish a bond before the hearing so the money isn't dependent on me enjoying the verdict.”

“This is not solely a question of money.”

“The wood elves’ release had a price. We agreed to it, and I paid it,” Slate said. “Give Lu and the two applicants a defined claim. I’ll pay for work they leave unfinished. I won’t let a claim follow their children.”

“A shaper who leaves a channel without a trained replacement can drown the next valley.” Shen rested his bandaged hand on the treaty.

“Then name the work and an end to it.”

“An agreed release,” Shen said.

“With terms they can actually meet. Who decides when they’ve met them?”

“My office, with the houses responsible.”

“The same office commanding the army outside my gate.” Slate let that sit.

“If an officer refuses to hear a valid claim, he answers to me.”

Slate had spent the previous day trying to stop the man who was supposed to be the final safeguard.

Neris set her pen down. “Give the people already named on the rolls time to hear the evidence,” she said. “Set a day for it. They can recover from the fighting before they make an irreversible decision. A short delay would not put every future arrival under a claim.”

Slate looked at Matek. The intelligence officer's face gave him nothing useful until he tapped the closed prisoner record once.

A fixed interval was better than Shen's blanket veto. Neris made the delay sound as reasonable as waiting for swelling to go down. It still left the people already here waiting while someone else decided when they could become Scourge.

“They can hear the claim before choosing,” Slate said. “I won't order them to remain unchanged for it.”

Shen watched him across the table. “You would permit the transformation while their case is pending.”

“If they choose it.”

“Then you place them beyond any obligation that you later decide is incompatible with their new allegiance.”

“I place them under my protection.”

“Those are the same answer when I ask for enforcement.”

Slate had no answer Shen would accept.

He could name a hearing, a witness, a bond and a time limit. At the end of it, Shen wanted the right to make an obligation hold even if Slate objected. Slate wanted the builders whose hands had raised his walls, the people they brought with them, and the authority to keep them once they chose him. He would not return his own people to make another ruler’s ledger balance.

Outside, a wheel creaked over the temporary boards. The injured soldier they had lifted from the excavation passed on the litter. His medic had covered his face against the sunlight, leaving his mouth clear to breathe.

Shen waited until the bearers were gone. “I can return the junction today,” he said. “You can send the workers to repair the road tomorrow. Consider what you gain by delaying further transformations until the hearing ends.”

Slate imagined it. Wagons entering from the east again. Lu working with two sound hands, given time to mend. Corren spending his next reserve on practice instead of surviving a stone aimed at his chest.

He wanted it. But Shen still wanted the power to call Slate’s own people back. The restored junction could wait. Giving another ruler a claim inside Bastion could not.

Slate pushed his chair back. He didn't stand yet. “I won't give you that.”

Neris closed the ink bottle before either avatar moved.

They did agree on the wounded. Medical parties would finish searching the marked ground until sunset. Neither side would advance a fighting position during that extension. Captured soldiers too badly hurt to remain in the forward holding rooms could be treated under their own healers with named escorts from both sides. The arrangement gave no authority to remove the mill prisoners or Lu.

Neris wanted permission to preserve patients whose wounds couldn't be treated before the truce ended.

“Here,” Slate said. “With their agreement. You don't take them north because you think they'll be safer there.”

“An unconscious man cannot give you an agreement.”

“Keep him alive. When he wakes, ask him where he wants to recover.”

“And if moving him would kill him?”

“Then tell him that. His custody doesn't change because your healer kept him breathing.”

She glanced toward the litter route before answering. “Put that separately from medical fitness to travel.”

Matek drew the page toward him. Slate watched him make room for the distinction. He wanted the wounded treated. He also wanted a record that being kept alive didn't make a man the property of the person doing it.

Matek read the narrow terms aloud twice. Ren corrected the location of the northern marker. Slate insisted that Neris distinguish the medical passage from any settlement of the larger dispute.

For once, she seemed pleased with the distinction.

When the witnesses had finished, Shen rose. “The obligation to defend my people does not end because this assault failed.”

Slate stood opposite him. “Then stop asking me to end mine.”

Shen took his papers. He left the little block beneath the table leg where it was.

Slate stayed until the Confederacy party reached its own guards. He had come close enough to peace to picture tomorrow without the siege. Now he could hear the enemy hammers starting again beyond the junction.

“He offered more ground than I expected,” Matek said.

“He wanted more authority than I can give him.”

“I heard.”

Slate turned toward the gate. “How long can he stay out there?”

“As long as the wagons keep coming.”

“Then show me where they come through.”

Matek found a route sketch among the records and spread it on the table. “Two supply crossings. Most wagons use the southern ford. Harl can reach it without weakening the gate.”

Slate put one claw on the ford. “Put scouts on both banks. I want the escort count and the next wagon’s time before nightfall.”

“You’ll have them.” Matek handed over the marked map.

By late afternoon, scouts had marked both supply crossings. Slate left their map with Matek and found Shale in the west court, tightening a strap on her travel pack. Her four escorts waited beneath the arcade. The cut on her forearm had closed; both hands took the pack’s weight easily. “You’re leaving tonight.”

“At sunset,” Shale said. “The young need another room before the older ones start climbing into the eggs.”

“How are they?”

“Our son decided a nesting basket needed a door. Three of them took it apart for him.”

“Did it need one?”

“It already had an opening.” Shale leaned into his side. “The broodkeepers have four uncovered shifts this week. Merus found a site by the garden for the second room, but he needs people who can learn each child.”

“I’ll fund the keeper wages and training. You and Merus choose them.”

“He’s arranging lessons for the older ones. I want you there when they start making marks they expect us to read.”

He could command an army through a dozen minds and still need Matek to read a cramped dispatch aloud. Sitting beside his own children while someone taught them letters shouldn't have felt like admitting a weakness.

“All right,” he said.

“I meant it.”

“So did I.”

She kissed him. For a moment the court and its passing carts belonged to someone else. “Come back to us when you can.”

“I will.”

At sunset she left with all four escorts, lifting a hand before she turned toward the northern relay.

When he returned to the command room, Matek had spread the captured supply papers beside the route map. Brenn stood at the table with Edrin. Beyond the eastern window, lanterns marked the enemy's wagon line.

“They can replace the platform,” Slate said. “They can bring more shapers. As long as we're sitting here, Shen chooses when we fight.”

Edrin put one claw beside a narrow crossing on the map. “His wagons don't get to choose the road.”

Slate leaned over the table. “Tell me about that crossing.”

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XXVI

The Severed Road

THE WAGON DRIVER STOPPED TO PISS OVER THE EDGE OF THE crossing, six feet above Edrin's head.

Slate watched from the rocks on the opposite slope and decided the Lurker commander would enjoy that part of the report.

The driver finished, hitched up his trousers and went back to the team. Beneath the road, Edrin remained pressed against the culvert's outer face. His hands rested in two shallow joints. His tail had found a third purchase below them. Only the slight turn of his head told Slate he was awake.

He had been there for nearly an hour.

The driver clicked his tongue. Two mules leaned into their harness, and the wagon rolled toward the staging yard with sacks piled above its sideboards.

Slate counted the wheels across the narrowest section.

One wagon at a time. No room to pass. A steep cut above the road and a rocky watercourse below it. Shen had chosen the best available route for moving supplies around Wayward without taking the town first. The army at Bastion depended on this crossing remaining clear.

Thirty-two Scourge had come with him. With Slate, the strike force numbered thirty-three.

He intended to leave with the crossing still clear and its owners changed.

Brace lay behind the next rock, the watchfire lighting the ridges of his scales. The other seven guards waited farther down the slope. Sixteen Raiders had worked their way into the scrub west of the staging yard.

Edrin's seven companions were divided between the culvert and the upper quarry path.

Nobody had brought a wagon. Getting the strike force here had required two nights of movement along tracks that would have broken an axle before the first rise.

Sumnu had wanted to come.

Slate had left him with Bastion's fighting companies instead. Brenn could arrange the reliefs, Harl could hold the walls and Lynia could manage the Mystics. If Shen attacked while Slate was away, he wanted Sumnu where the first line threatened to break.

Matek had approved the approach and remained at headquarters, where reports from both fronts could find him.

Slate had eaten, slept and opened his advancement choices before leaving Bastion. He held eighteen thousand three hundred and fifty experience. He could bank it for another fight or invest seventeen thousand to reach level thirty-five. Mana-Infused Monomolecular Edge was available for 900 biomass and 600 XP. It could sever a working at contact, but he would have to reach the shaper’s defenses first. Calcifying Suffocation remained locked until level thirty-eight. A stronger body would help him reach the shapers. Another level would also bring him closer to Calcifying Suffocation. Slate bought the level and left 1,350 XP unspent.

LVL UP: 35

XP invested: 17,000
XP invested in self: 297,500
XP available: 1,350
Next LVL investment: 17,500

The level strengthened the body he already had. Before the march, he held Brenn’s counterweighted training beam steady with one arm while Brenn pulled the other end; the last time, it had dragged his wrist down. It had not

refilled his ward or taught him how to take a defended crossing. He still had to do the last part himself.

Below, Edrin moved his left hand. *“Six at the western barrier. Four more changing watch. The shaper is in the tally house.”*

Slate followed the offered view. A square stone building stood at the eastern end of the yard, its lower wall stained dark by water. A woman in a quilted coat was arguing with the driver beneath its porch. She held a short staff against one shoulder and kept pointing at the wagon's rear wheel.

The wheel had a split rim. It had left a wavering track across the wet paving.

“She wants it unloaded,” Brace murmured.

Slate watched two laborers bring chocks. “Good. That keeps the load here.”

Beyond the porch, soldiers sat beneath an awning with bowls in their hands. Others stood beside stacked shields and bundles of spears. This was a guarded supply post, not an unprotected line of drivers. Matek's scouts had watched the garrison change twice before Slate committed to the raid.

The exact count had varied as escorts arrived and departed. Edrin had last reported just over forty fighting personnel in the yard and along the approaches, with drivers and laborers besides them.

The Scourge would be outnumbered. They would also begin inside the perimeter.

“Wait for the meal bowls to go down,” Slate sent. *“I want their hands occupied.”*

Edrin's answer carried a quiet amusement. *“You used to be more interested in the meal.”*

Slate bared his teeth without answering.

The western sentries changed places. One of the relieved men set his spear against the barrier and reached for a bowl before unfastening his helmet.

Slate stood.

He activated Phase-Shift Cloaking, feeling the steady mana expense beneath his scales. The post's magical warning hadn't been raised, but the tally house held a lit sensor stone above its door. Edrin had watched it brighten when a shaper passed underneath. Slate didn't need to learn what it would do when an avatar came over the roof.

The cloak wouldn't hide him from a man looking up.

He kept below the ridge until the watchfire lay behind the tally house. Then he spread his wings, dropped from the rock and glided across the dark upper slope.

The roof rose beneath him.

He landed with his claws spread across the tiles, caught the edge of the ridge beam and folded his wings before they could show above it. One tile broke under his foot. He held still while it slid into the gutter.

Below, the argument continued.

“It's carried twice that load,” the driver said.

“Then it has been foolish twice,” the woman replied. “Take the sacks off.”

The woman had turned her back to the yard while the driver tried to defend his wheel.

Slate looked west.

Edrin came over the culvert lip behind the nearest sentry. His hand covered the man's mouth. The Lurker bent him backward, killed him and lowered the body against the barrier before the second guard turned.

The next sentry saw the empty space where his companion had been.

Then a Raider hit the barrier from outside.

The timber frame swung inward, carrying the alarm bell down with it. Spears fell from their rack. Edrin's Lurkers came through beneath the moving beam while the Raiders poured over it.

Slate let the cloak go and dropped from the porch roof.

The stoneshaper heard the tiles shift. She turned with her staff already rising, fast enough to catch his first strike across its shaft.

He Identified her at level thirty-one.

“Get inside!” she shouted at the driver.

Slate drove forward. Her boots slid over the stone, and a low ridge rose against his leading foot. He jumped it, caught the porch post and used it to swing around her staff.

She abandoned the open yard and backed into the tally house.

Stone climbed across the doorway between them.

Slate caught the upper edge before it closed, pulled himself over and landed on the writing table. Clay tallies and little counting stones scattered beneath his feet. The shaper struck the table's nearest leg with her staff, breaking it before he could step down.

He fell with the top, rolled and came up inside her reach.

His claws cut her coat below the shoulder.

Ash-white fire clung to the wound. Her left arm jerked, fingers opening as the damaged pathways failed to carry the working she had begun.

She struck him across the face with her other hand's staff.

Slate's ward caught the iron head. The blow still turned him enough for her to step out of his reach and stamp against the floor.

Water erupted through a narrow channel beside the wall.

Cold spray struck his legs. The floor was the upper cover of the culvert. The shaper had opened a passage from the backed water on the uphill side and sent it through the room.

The broken table slid toward him.

Slate kicked it aside and sprang onto the window ledge. Water carried the tallies out through the reopened door. Beyond it, drivers were climbing onto

their loads while Scourge and soldiers fought in the widening stream.

She was trying to clear her own yard with it.

“Your grain's out there,” Slate said.

The woman stood on a raised strip along the wall, her injured arm held against her ribs. “It is still mine.”

The ledge beneath his feet rolled inward.

Slate jumped for her.

She brought the staff across his throat. He caught it with both hands, letting his ward take the pressure while his tail struck the strip beneath her ankles. She staggered, recovered and drove one heel into the wet stone.

The floor rose between his knees.

He spread his legs before it could trap them together. Stone scraped the scales of his inner thighs. The channel narrowed, forcing water higher around them.

Slate had hurt her arm. She had a staff, a working hand and two feet still feeding commands into the structure. He could keep cutting different parts of her until one of them stopped fighting.

She meant to crush him with the room before he could kill her.

He released the staff with his right hand and caught her coat at the breast. She leaned away, bracing hard enough that her boots sank into the raised strip.

Exactly where she wanted them.

Slate bit through the staff's wooden shaft.

The pressure against his throat vanished. He drove his free hand beneath the woman's jaw, lifted her face and struck through the unarmored throat with his other claws.

The stone stopped climbing.

He held her clear of the rising water until her body went slack, then lowered her onto the strip she had made.

No one else had entered the room. Her last working was still carrying water through the open channel.

LVL 31 Stoneshaper defeated.
XP gained: 4,650
XP available: 6,000

Slate dismissed the notice and climbed through the window.

The staging yard had become a mess of shouting men, overturned bowls and floating bundles. Two Raiders were dragging the western barrier clear of the culvert's outlet. Farther up the slope, Edrin's Lurkers held the quarry stair against soldiers trying to reach the higher road.

Brace saw Slate and pointed to the channel. “Can you stop that?”

“Not by shaping it,” Slate told Brace. “Get the lower mouth clear.”

The water had a route out. The broken barrier was damming it.

Slate joined the Raiders at the timber frame. They lifted together. A spear thrust between the soldiers carrying it, struck a warded chest and slid into the water. Brace dragged the spearman off the wagon he had climbed and pinned him beneath one knee.

The barrier came free.

Water burst through the outlet. The level in the yard began to fall, taking spilled grain and a dead soldier's helmet with it.

Slate looked for the next organized resistance.

At the eastern entrance, a squad had locked shields around the supply officer. Behind them, drivers were turning a team toward the road out. The horses shied when a Raider landed beside their heads.

“Don't hurt the team!” Slate called.

He needed those animals more than he needed a dramatic charge through them.

The Raider took the bridle instead and hauled the lead horse's head around until the driver stopped pulling against him. Another Scourge climbed onto the wagon and dragged its brake lever down.

The officer tried to push his shield line past the halted team.

Slate went over the wagon.

He landed behind the shields, seized the officer by the back of his coat and lifted him clear of the men around him. A soldier turned with his spear. Slate put the officer between them.

“Drop it,” Slate told the spearman.

The spear point stopped against the officer's own breastplate. “Do it,” the man said, barely able to force the words out around Slate's grip.

The spear hit the ground.

One by one, the remaining men lowered their weapons. Brace's guards moved in behind them, separating officers from soldiers and keeping both away from the wagons until their hands were secured.

The fight on the quarry stair ended last. Edrin let the final three men come down with empty hands. They looked at the flooded yard, then at the Scourge beside the road, and chose the place he indicated.

Slate counted his own people through their reports.

All thirty-three alive. One Raider had a spear wound through the calf. A Lurker's forearm lay at an angle that would need setting before he could rebuild it properly. They drew measured repair reserves under the awning while guards kept the curious away.

The defenders had lost men at the barrier and the stair. Several more lay injured where they had fallen. The drivers had mostly saved themselves by climbing onto their cargo.

The officer Slate had captured watched a guard bandage one of his soldiers.

“Your army will come for us,” Slate told him. “I'd prefer they found living prisoners.”

“They'll come for the crossing.”

“Then we agree it's worth keeping.” He left the officer with Brace and walked the length of the yard.

The higher stacks had remained dry. Grain, fodder, bundled clothing, spare harness and iron fittings waited beneath the awnings. One wagon carried replacement parts for a heavy ballista. Another held water casks, tightly bound rolls of felt and pale stone cups packed in straw. Two covered litters were lashed above them. Slate recognized replacements for the equipment the Stillhold keepers had lost outside Bastion. The felt was still dry; no caster had turned this wagon into a fighting position.

Shen could raise a wall from the road. He couldn't shape barley out of a hillside, feed mule teams on his divine authority or deliver water and dry bedding to the Stillhold keepers by declaring that someone owed it. Each barrier they laid needed bearers and wagons behind the casters. Here were the loads meant to keep the next set working.

Slate rested a hand on the nearest grain sack. The kernels shifted beneath the coarse cloth, dry despite the water running between the stacks.

This was the first piece of the invasion he had taken that would hurt more tomorrow than it did today.

Edrin climbed down from the stair carrying a little brass horn. “They kept the alarm above the yard. The bell was for drivers.”

“Did they sound it?”

“One note.”

Slate looked along the eastern road. “How far will that carry?”

“Farther than I'd like.”

They had taken the crossing. Now they had to hold it long enough to matter.

Slate sent four Lurkers up the eastern slope to watch the bends. Two more went west with a report for the nearest relay. Brenn had sent a relief force to the concealed camp on their northern approach. It was less than half a day's march behind them, under orders to move only when the crossing was confirmed taken.

Until the relief arrived, Slate's group had to defend the crossing and its wounded.

“Turn the wagons,” Slate told Brace. “High sides toward the eastern entrance. Leave a gap we can close.”

“And the drivers?”

“They can help or sit under guard. Nobody gets handed a spear.”

The man with the split wheel chose to help.

He showed a Raider how far the axle could turn without tipping the load, then swore at a second driver for hauling on the wrong trace. Before long, four wagons stood across the mouth of the yard with their teams led into the shelter behind them.

Slate had the prisoners moved beyond any straight line through that barricade. Brace checked the injured before posting guards beside them. Edrin took the upper stair again with two Raiders carrying loose shields.

The answer to the horn arrived before dawn.

A mounted escort came around the eastern bend, followed by a covered wagon and a file of infantry. Their leading rider saw the blocked entrance and raised a hand.

The whole column stopped.

Slate had hoped the dark would bring them close enough to take without another fight. The officer was cautious enough to disappoint him.

“Post commander!” the rider called.

Slate stepped into the gap between the wagons. “Changed.”

The officer wheeled his horse. “Scatter!”

Crossbows rose behind him. Slate stepped back as the first bolts struck the wagon sides. One punched through the upper board, passed over his shoulder and buried itself in the awning post.

The enemy infantry spread along the uphill cut. They had seen the blocked road and were looking for the path around it.

Edrin waited until the first pair reached the quarry stair.

Then the Lurkers came down from above them.

Slate heard the first shield strike the steps. He stepped out through the wagon gap with six Raiders and drove at the men still trying to form on the road. Brace followed with the guard, leaving the rest to protect the wounded and prisoners.

The mounted officer tried to carry his horse past the Scourge along the outside edge.

Slate caught the stirrup leather as the rider passed.

The strap tore. The officer fell sideways, one foot still caught, and the horse kicked wildly against the road. Slate severed the second binding with his tail and rolled clear before a hoof struck his head.

Brace dragged the fallen man out from under the animal.

The infantry at the bend had seen enough. They withdrew behind their crossbows, taking the covered wagon with them. Slate let them go until they had cleared the narrow turn, then sent Edrin's nearest pair to follow from above.

He wanted to know where the survivors carried the news.

He didn't need another pursuit into ground he hadn't inspected.

The captured officer had a broken collarbone and an impressive vocabulary. Brace relieved him of his knife while he was describing Slate's ancestry.

“I can't help with most of that,” Slate told him. “Where were you going?”

“To the Surety.”

“With what?”

The officer closed his mouth.

Edrin returned carrying a dispatch case he had cut from the prisoner's belt. “Written version,” he said.

Slate took it. “Much more considerate.”

They had no second assault before sunrise. The men who escaped had seen a barricaded crossing, Scourge above the road and a force willing to come out from behind its wagons. Reopening the route would require more than an escort looking for breakfast.

Slate used the interval to eat and repair the shallow cuts across his thighs. The wounded Raider's calf had begun closing after a measured transfer. The Lurker kept his reset forearm supported against his chest. Neither was assigned to the next watch.

By midday, the relief reached the western bend with Brenn's orders. Twenty-four fit Scourge had followed the marked approach under a company officer. Edrin's two messengers returned with them. The force had waited at the concealed camp with the route already marked; the relay merely told them to start.

Slate brought the captured dispatches to the relief officer, who could read the route marks. He spread the papers over a dry sack while Edrin laid out the matching locations in pebbles.

The message was an order to move stores forward from a second staging ground, farther along the route toward the Confederacy frontier. The first invasion force was asking for food, replacement tools and more people to repair the approaches.

Slate had just captured the place where those loads had to pass.

“Can they go around?” he asked.

“Pack trains can use the higher paths,” the officer said. “Loaded wagons can't. Not until they cut a new grade or take this one back.”

“Then they'll have to send soldiers away from Bastion.”

Edrin moved one pebble off the captured junction and set it beside the crossing. “And leave fewer at the next yard.”

Slate looked beyond it, toward the route entering Ordan's country.

For days he had been asking how to keep Shen out of his city.

He put his claw on the next staging ground. “Mark that for Matek. We bring him the whole case.”

He handed the crossing over to the relief commander. The man would keep the wagons blocking the eastern entrance, use the captured supplies to feed his force and report any enemy movement before committing to a pursuit. Slate's original detachment would return together, carrying the two wounded where they couldn't walk. The captured officers would go with them; the remaining prisoners stayed under the new garrison's guard.

The relief had also brought food for the detachment, additional repair reserves and a message that had followed Slate out of the city.

He recognized Fidem's seal.

Brace opened the letter when Slate handed it to him. “Western post. Sergeant Anwen Pell.”

Slate set the dispatch case aside. “Read it.”

The attack had come two mornings earlier. A Vallyrian raiding party had set a wagon alight beyond the post and tried to draw the Crusaders out to save its cargo. Pell had sent a small party with cover while keeping the rest behind the prepared barrier.

The real attack came through the ditch on their other side.

Her twenty-four had changed frontage under her orders, protected the drivers already inside and rotated the men whose shield arms were failing. The Scourge instructor had helped drag a wounded human out of the gap

and warned of movement beyond the next rise. He hadn't taken command from her.

The raiders withdrew after losing their way through the barrier. Three Crusaders were wounded. None had died. The post and the supply wagons it sheltered remained in their hands.

“The instructor signed beneath her report,” Brace said. “He says she refused the pursuit before he could suggest it.”

Slate looked at the wagons across his own entrance.

Pell had been standing beside a training load when Shen first watched the formation. Now she had faced an enemy trying to make her choose between courage and the job she had been given.

She had kept the post.

“Send her my thanks when you get back,” he said. “And tell Fidem the unit stays on that assignment. They won't improve if we take the responsibility away the moment they've earned it.”

Brace folded the letter carefully. “He'll like hearing that.”

Slate could spare a little more attention for the east because Fidem's soldiers had held the west. That was what he had built them for.

“Tell Fidem to keep training them,” Slate said. “I'll need more.”

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XXVII

The Forsworn Offer

LU PULLED THE WOODEN MOUNTAIN APART.

What had looked like one steep ridge became three narrow walls with troughs between them. He set the pieces on Slate's table and turned the middle section sideways. A tiny cut appeared near its base.

“That's a passage?” Slate asked.

“One passage,” Deng Shu said. “Not a road through the whole mountain.” She sat opposite him with her hands flat on her knees. The missing tip of her left ear showed above her tied hair. She had looked steadily at Slate since Matek brought her in, but the look changed when Lu fitted the pieces together again. She leaned forward as though he might close a real route beneath his fingers.

Slate had returned from the captured crossing two days earlier. His wounded were in the receiving house. Brenn's relief still held the quarry road, and Shen had begun sending troops east to reopen it.

The army outside Bastion was thinning.

It had not gone home.

Matek had used the captured dispatches to identify the fortress supplying the frontier roads. Now Deng was offering a way past its outer patrols, through country the official route drawings treated as solid mountain.

“The Folded Mountain,” Lu said. “Dark rock and pale limestone, pressed into long ridges. From one valley, you can hear an axe in the next without seeing the trees being cut.”

“And how far to walk between them?”

“That depends on which cleft is open,” Deng said. “It can take most of a day to reach a house you heard at breakfast.”

Slate looked through the little cut again. Lu had carved a few square marks into the protected troughs. “Villages?”

“Villages, fields, refuges. Families who don't appear where the household rolls say they should.” Deng kept her gaze on him. “Those are the people we're asking you to leave alone.”

“If they're not fighting me, that shouldn't be difficult.”

“If your soldiers need grain, they'll look where grain grows.”

A fair objection. Slate sat back. “What exactly are you offering?”

She touched the westernmost trough. “Guides for these two valleys. A crossing into the third, if the people who maintain it agree. Places to find water and places where the water runs under inhabited rooms. Which doors belong to a refuge and which belong to a house patrol.”

“And the fort?” Slate asked Deng.

“Shouguan stands beyond the outer Nine Spans crossing. Its stores feed the roads coming west. We know how some of its supplies are brought in. We don't have a way for your army to walk through its walls.”

Matek laid the captured dispatch beside the model. Shouguan's mark appeared twice on the page.

Slate recognized it now. He had made himself learn that one.

“Your price?” Slate asked.

“Protected passage for the families using our refuges,” Deng said. “Payment for what your army takes. No household service imposed in another god's name. Nobody made to take your scales before receiving food or shelter.”

“Those are terms I can work with.”

“The mill prisoners released.”

“Not all of them.”

Deng's fingers tightened against her knees. “You said you'd hear their cases.”

“We are hearing them. Sui supplied an attack on my people. That doesn't disappear because you have a useful map.”

She looked at Lu.

The Builder's right hand had been repaired enough to hold a tool. The new scales over two fingers were paler than the rest. He kept those fingers away from the model while he moved it closer to Deng.

“He told me the same,” Lu said.

“You brought Sui out.”

“I brought six people out before I knew enough about one of them.”

“And now you help him keep that one.”

Lu's tail pressed against the floor behind his chair. “Now I tell you what I know before anyone gets into my wagon.”

Slate let the answer stand. It had cost Lu more than a promise made privately would have.

Matek opened a second document. “Xie has identified the refuge marks you've given us. She won't vouch for every person who uses them.”

“I didn't ask her to.”

“You asked us to accept a release for all six as part of a military agreement.”

Deng drew a breath through her nose. “Then leave Sui's case out. Hear the others without waiting for Shen to decide he's ready.”

“Agreed,” Slate said. “A separate hearing, not a promised outcome.”

She didn't like the distinction. She was willing to continue past it.

“There's another problem,” she said.

Slate looked at Lu. The Builder had stopped moving the model.

“Wei,” he said.

The gray coat. The iron guard over the left cheek. A broad armored back moving through a wall while Slate chose between pursuit and the soldiers trapped beneath it.

He remembered Wei Zhen very clearly.

“Where?” Slate asked.

“One of the eastern troughs,” Deng said. “He still has the Cragback.”

Slate put both hands on the table. “And you were going to mention that when?”

“Before you went there. I'm mentioning it now.”

Matek watched her without moving. “Can you command him?”

“No.”

“Can anyone here?”

“No.”

Lu looked at Slate. “Some want the obligations changed. Some want every structure depending on them broken. Wei has a beast that can make the second choice for a whole valley.”

“What's he planning to break?”

Deng touched the model beyond Shouguan's approach. “The fort's retaining works. He says the houses will abandon it when they can't hold the road. The handlers have been moving feed toward that trough.”

“He follows a ringing iron,” Slate said. “I saw it.”

“The Cragback follows a sound it associates with feeding. Usually.”

Slate disliked the last word more than the rest of the explanation.

“So your offer comes with a siege beast nobody at this table controls,” Slate said.

“It was there before the offer,” Deng said. “Refusing us won't remove it.”

She was right. He could have done without how much she knew it.

“Then we verify what we can,” Slate said. “One route. One objective. If your information holds, we write the rest.”

Matek pushed the captured staging orders toward her. “The western transfer store. This one.”

Deng studied the marks, then reached for a blank board. “There's a service channel below the weighing room. The entrance was closed when the old wheel was removed. It doesn't open into the store itself. You'll come up under the empty scales.”

Lu leaned over her drawing. “Timber closure or stone?”

“Both. The inner boards keep the loose fill from falling back.”

The Builder looked at Slate rather than asking Deng what tools to bring. “I can inspect that.”

“One assignment,” Slate said. “Under escort, through Brenn. Matek gets every mark on that drawing.”

Lu slid the model toward the intelligence officer. “He can keep this one too.”

Three evenings later, Slate crouched in the old wheel channel while Lu tested the timber closure with his less tender hand.

They were still west of the Confederacy frontier. Deng had brought them to a transfer store on the invasion route through the Wyldwood, where loads arriving from the highlands were weighed before going on to Shen's forward camps. Reaching it had required more forest travel than Slate wanted.

Behind him, Brace waited with his watch. Edrin and three Lurkers had gone around to the outer yard. Deng's two guides watched the track while she pointed out the surviving marks above the old channel.

“That wedge stays,” she whispered. “The platform rests on it.”

Lu examined the joint. “It used to. They added a pier.”

“How can you tell from here?”

“The old support isn't carrying weight.” He drew his hand across the boards. A narrow strip bent inward, bringing loose grit with it. Slate saw a larger space on the far side and the foot of the new pier beyond it.

Lu opened enough of the closure for him to pass, then fitted a wooden brace into the disturbed fill. “Don't touch the left side.”

Slate went through on the right.

The passage smelled of stagnant water and spilled meal. He could hear boots above him. A shaft of lamplight fell through a gap beside the old scale platform, showing the lower rungs of a ladder.

Deng had been right about the entrance.

Now he needed to find out who else knew it was there.

He climbed until he could see beneath the platform's rim. Two men were counting sacks near the outer door. A guard stood beside them with a spear laid across his forearms. Farther back, a clerk turned pages at a desk.

No caster in sight. No reason to assume one couldn't be in the next room.

Slate showed Edrin the doorway through the offered view. *“Three breaths.”* He waited, then lifted the old scale platform.

The nearest laborer dropped his sack and scrambled backward. Slate came up through the opening with the platform above his head. The guard thrust at his ribs. He turned the wood into the spear, knocked it aside and drove the platform into the guard's chest.

The man went down under it.

The outer door opened as Edrin struck the sentry beyond it. Two Lurkers entered low, one taking the doorway to the inner store while the other caught the clerk's wrist before he could pull a cord beside the desk.

Slate hauled the platform off the guard and took his spear. “Stay down.”

The man looked at the bent point and obeyed.

Shouts rose in the yard.

Brace's watch came through the service entrance. Lu followed last, his tail braced against the ladder while he helped Deng over the broken rim. She pointed toward a small door behind the clerk's desk. “The rolls are there.”

“Deng,” Slate called.

She stopped at Slate's voice.

“With a guard.” He sent a Lurker after her and turned toward the inner store as an axe struck its door from the other side.

The panel split. A soldier pushed his shoulder through, followed by a second man holding a broad shield. Slate stepped onto the shield's lower edge, forcing it down against its bearer's knees. The axeman swung over him.

Slate caught the wrist and broke it against the jamb.

Brace dragged the shield bearer out while Slate shoved the injured man against the wall. Beyond them, soldiers were pulling the loading doors open to reach the outer yard.

Edrin's remaining Lurker shouted a warning from outside.

Slate went through the store at a run.

A soldier turned with a crossbow leveled at his chest. The bolt struck Scourgeshield and glanced into the stacked sacks. Slate hit the man before he could drop the weapon, drove him backward and killed him against the loading frame.

The others reached the yard.

They found Edrin waiting above the cart ramp, with a Lurker on either side. The guard commander at the loading doors saw the Scourge blocking his retreat and shouted for his men to form around the nearest wagon.

Slate climbed the door frame.

The commander looked up too late.

Slate landed on him, drove him to the ground and held him there while Brace's guards came through behind him. Two soldiers tried to force their way past the wagon. Edrin's Lurkers stopped them. The rest lowered their weapons when their commander ordered it.

“That's enough,” Slate said.

The guards had surrendered both yard and store. Down the track, Deng's guides brought back the runner they had intercepted, his arms secured behind him.

Then he smelled burning oil.

One of the guides came through the weighing room with a lamp in one hand and a bundle of papers in the other. Behind him, orange light spread along the edge of a shelf.

Slate caught him before he reached the loading door. “Put it down.”

The man tried to pull away. “Those are service rolls.”

“The building has people in it.”

“They're out.”

Slate heard pounding from beneath the stair at the back of the store.

He turned the guide until they both faced the sound. “Who is that?”

The man's expression changed.

Slate took the lamp from him and handed it to Brace. “Keep him here.”

The little stair door had an iron latch on the outside. Slate tore it off and pulled the door open. Three porters crowded into the light, coughing. One

carried a small boy with both arms wrapped around his head.

“They shut us in when the alarm rang,” the nearest porter said.

Lu reached the burning shelf before Slate could turn back. He pressed his palm against its frame. The uprights bent away from the stacked grain, carrying the flame toward the middle of the room. Two guards dragged the separated shelf through the loading doors and overturned it on the wet ground.

Edrin kicked the unlit bundles clear while a guard brought water.

Deng came out of the record room with another armful of rolls.

She stopped beside the coughing porters. “I told you to bring the records out,” she said to the guide.

“They'll take them back.”

“I told you to bring them out.”

The man looked at the child, then lowered his eyes.

Slate waited until the porters were beyond the smoke. “Did you know they were in there?”

“No.”

“Did you check?”

The guide didn't answer.

Lu stood beside him with soot across his repaired fingers. “That boy doesn't become less trapped because you meant to free him,” he said.

Deng looked from Lu to her guide. She had demanded Sui’s release at Slate’s table. The man standing beside her had nearly burned four people alive.

This time Lu did not look away.

They brought the remaining rolls into the yard. Some were service records. Others listed stores, payments owed to drivers and deliveries still expected

from Shouguan. Deng wanted the first pile burned. Matek would want all three read.

“Those names lead back to families,” she told Slate. “You take the rolls into a fort, and the next person who captures it owns every route we've hidden.”

“We also need them to prove which obligations were altered and which payments were already made.”

“Then copy what proves it. Don't put our refuge marks in your army's supply books.”

Slate looked at Lu.

The Builder opened one roll with care. “There are names here that Xie gave us. The same household charged twice for the same season. Burning it would hide that as well.”

Slate had wanted useful information. He had received evidence, frightened families and an ally who could damage all three while trying to help.

“Matek gets the originals under guard,” he said. “You can sit with him while the claims are separated. No copies of refuge routes for general distribution. The porters choose whether to go with us or remain here. Nobody burns another room until we've cleared it.”

Deng held the roll a moment longer before giving it to Lu. “And him?” she asked, looking at the guide.

“He comes back and answers for the fire. Same as Lu answered for the wagon.”

She turned toward the man. “You heard him.”

Deng wasn't happy. She had agreed to the raid; now she had to answer for her guide.

Slate could work with that.

They held the store long enough to collect the records, disarm the soldiers and separate the prisoners from the porters. The three adults chose to leave

with the boy. Slate gave them time to collect their blankets and food before moving the column west.

Eight Raiders met them at the agreed junction that night. Brenn had assigned the escort from the captured crossing before the operation, leaving sixteen there while the eight were away. The escort took the military prisoners back to that post and restored its full garrison. Slate kept the guide who had set the fire with his own party, along with the four civilians heading for Bastion.

The transfer store remained standing behind them. Its records and defenders had gone. Retaking an empty building wouldn't put either back into Shen's hands.

The guide walked under escort. Lu carried the records beside him.

By the time they returned to Bastion, Slate knew the service entrance had been real, the transfer orders matched the captured dispatches and Deng knew routes farther east than his scouts had reached. He also knew her people couldn't be treated as another Scourge company waiting for orders.

They wrote a limited agreement in the command room. Protected access to the named refuges. Payment for supplies. Guides who could refuse a route that endangered the families sheltering along it. Separate investigation of the mill prisoners and the attempted store fire. No license for Wei Zhen or anyone else to use the Scourge advance as cover for breaking inhabited retaining works.

Lu would serve as their supervised engineering intermediary. Matek would receive every operational message. The restriction on Lu's private couriers remained.

Deng put her mark beneath those terms. “I can answer for the people who sign with me,” she said. “Not the whole mountain.”

“Then those are the people I'm making an agreement with.”

After she left, Lu kept the wooden model on the table. “You should not let Wei choose when the beast moves,” he said.

“I wasn't planning to.”

“Planning not to may be less useful than finding his handlers.”

Slate studied the carved trough beside Shouguan's approach. “Put that in Matek's next list.”

He had another problem to address before taking his army into those valleys.

The woman at the crossing had kept shaping after Ash Infusion damaged her arm. Shen had done the same. A local wound could cripple the channel it reached and still leave a caster with enough functioning pathways to bring a wall down.

Slate needed an attack that could follow those pathways beyond the place his claws entered. The paralytic could stop a limb and leave a shaper another hand to work with. Duotoxin could ruin his aim, but a wall fifty feet wide didn't require much precision. Slate wanted to damage the mana network itself.

He brought two candidate evolutions to Lynia in the guard practice room that evening.

AVAILABLE
- **Magotoxin I** | *Major evolution.* Injected toxin spreads through a target's mana network, disrupting casting after the claw comes free. **Requires:** LVL 30. **Cost:** 1,600 biomass; 800 XP.
- **Mana-Infused Monomolecular Edge I** | *Major evolution.* A cut severs active workings at the point of contact but does not follow the target's internal pathways. **Requires:** LVL 24; Monomolecular Edge. **Cost:** 900 biomass; 600 XP.

The edge could cut through a working he touched. Magotoxin could follow a shaper's mana pathways after his claw came free. Slate chose Magotoxin.

Magotoxin I
Major evolution

Produces a compound that attacks internal mana networks after injection through a puncture wound. Disrupted pathways impair active channeling and can drive damaging feedback through the affected network.
Requirements: LVL 30
Biomass cost: 1,600
XP cost: 800

Lynia studied the Magotoxin pattern through the view he offered. Her attention followed the proposed route down his arm and stopped at the claw. “Where will you keep it?”

“A separate reservoir. Two charges.”

“Separate from your blood, or separate from the other secretions?”

“Both.”

She made him show her the route.

The pattern would line its own synthesis chamber and carry the compound through a dedicated channel in his right index claw. A small outlet near the point would remain closed until he deliberately released a charge. The new reservoir wouldn't share the valves controlling Duotoxin.

He could still make a mistake with it. Putting the new compound in every gland would give him more places to make one.

“No fire on that claw while it's charged,” Lynia said.

“I can keep one finger out of the coating.”

“Then practice doing so before anyone needs to stand beside it.”

Serena had released sixteen hundred and six biomass for the construction and its first three charges, after keeping the repair allocations separate. Producing each charge would consume two biomass. The gland wouldn’t fill itself for free.

Slate accepted the transfer from the stores bearer and checked the expense before committing it.

Evolution acquired: Magotoxin I
Biomass spent: 1,600
XP spent: 800
XP available: 5,200

The reconstruction tightened along his forearm. He rested the hand on the bench while the new channel formed, feeling pressure move down through the finger to the claw. Lynia waited beside him until he could open and close the outlet without the neighboring valves responding.

Then he made the first charge.

Two biomass left the operating reserve. The synthesis drew mana as well, a slow demand while the lined chamber filled. He didn't try to hurry it by forcing more power through an unfamiliar structure.

Lu had made a lidded collection cup with a narrow hole through its wooden top. Slate pushed the claw through, opened the outlet and let the first charge enter the empty cup.

The pressure in the reservoir eased.

He closed the outlet before withdrawing. Lu plugged the hole, keeping his hands away from the wet point.

“No seepage along the claw base,” the Builder said. “The outlet closed cleanly.”

They had verified the delivery. An empty cup could tell them nothing about how long a living stoneshaper would lose control of a spell.

Lynia took the sealed test sample for disposal. Slate made two more charges, spending the remaining four biomass and enough time for each to finish. The full reservoir sat apart from the familiar poison structures. He tested the closed valve again, then practiced coating the other claws with ash-white fire while leaving the injector bare.

Lynia watched until he could leave that claw bare without hesitating. “You still have to reach them,” she said.

Slate closed his hand carefully. “That's usually the part I enjoy.”

On the table beyond the practice bench, Lu's wooden mountain stood beside the captured route maps. If Deng's account held, Wei Zhen was moving feed through those valleys toward a creature that had already gone through one fortress wall in front of Slate.

He sent for Brenn.

The next army leaving Bastion would need to arrive before the wrong man rang that iron.

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XXVIII

The Covenant Crossed

FIDEM BROUGHT HIS OWN CHAIR TO THE DEPARTURE MEETING.

He set it between Serena and the map, moved a stack of deployment orders off the seat and sat down before anyone could tell him that the army was busy.

Slate approved. He had been wondering how long the governor would stand in the doorway waiting for a gap.

“Isela returns in five days,” Fidem said. “She would like an assurance that you intend to be alive when her next caravan leaves.”

“Tell the ambassador I have plans,” Slate directed.

“So does she.” The priest shrugged. “Hers involve forty wagons and a discussion about prisoners.”

Serena put down her pen.

That got Slate's attention too.

“How many prisoners?” Slate asked.

“She hasn't said,” Fidem replied. “She wishes to discuss a regular arrangement.”

“Of course she does,” Serena said. “We feed them, house them and settle them. Her contribution is unlocking a door.”

Fidem turned to her. “Some may be people we would gladly receive.”

“And some may need a door locked again,” Serena groused. “I'd like to know which before we unload them.”

Slate drew the map closer. Three days had passed since the agreement with Deng. Scouts had watched Shen withdraw from the forward junction outside Bastion, taking his surviving engines and wounded east. Cutting the supply road had made Shen’s siege expensive. It hadn’t destroyed his army.

Brenn would hold the recovered approaches. Harl kept the garrison. Matek would remain where reports from both fronts arrived, with authority to direct the western intelligence effort through his appointed field officers.

Slate was taking a force through Wayward and into the highlands. Fidem would have to answer Isela's questions without him.

“You can negotiate trade,” Slate told him. “Within the rates and storage we already have. Serena handles the accounts. New families can settle under the same terms as the people already here.”

Fidem leaned forward. “And the prisoners?”

“Find out who they are, why they're being sent and whether they want to come. You can agree to hear individual cases. No promise to take every person the Empire puts on a wagon.”

“Or to turn them into Scourge,” Fidem said.

“Definitely not that,” Slate agreed.

Serena resumed writing.

“Foreign troops, territory or commitments to another war come back to me,” Slate continued. “So does any standing prisoner arrangement. If the ambassador wants an answer sooner, she can send a smaller request.”

“She will ask whether cooperation has become less important to you.”

Slate considered the governor's mild expression. Fidem was asking it too.

“I’m leaving you authority to make agreements I intend to honor,” Slate said. “I’d call that important.”

Fidem rested his hands on the table. “Then write it down so she can get a copy.”

Serena pushed a clean page toward him. “Read it before he signs. His handwriting is improving faster than his spelling.”

Slate ignored her. Mostly.

They settled the written delegation while Brenn finished the marching assignments. Ninety-six Raiders would travel in two detachments of forty-eight, drawn from the fit strength of the fighting companies. Orrik would lead one. His deputy had taken command in the west and would follow Matek’s plans while Orrik was away. Sixteen Lurkers and eight Mystics went with them. The twenty-four members of the Avatar's Guard came off their old company rolls. They counted once.

With Slate and Lu, that made one hundred and forty-six Scourge. Six human engineers, Deng and her remaining guide brought the expedition to one hundred and fifty-four people.

The captured quarry crossing kept its own twenty-four. The wounded, trainees and troops assigned to Bastion stayed under the officers who knew their readiness. Slate had no intention of emptying his city because the east had finally offered him its throat. Recruits were still coming into Bastion. Brenn would send the next company east once it passed muster, with its own provisions and repair allotment. Harl’s garrison would keep its people.

“You'll have the reserves,” he told Brenn. “Use them if Shen’s troops return to the eastern approaches. Don't wait for a message from me while Harl is losing a gate.”

Brenn put a weight on the western edge of the map. “And when they withdraw again?”

“Keep the city. Make them pay for coming close. Don't follow them into the woods to prove a point.”

Sumnu showed his teeth at that. “He means me,” he told Fidem.

“You're coming with me.”

“Then you can tell me yourself.”

For the first time that morning, Fidem smiled without having to work at it.

Slate left him the signed authority and the chair. By the time the expedition took the eastern road toward Wayward, the governor was already arguing with Serena about how many arriving families could fit into the next restored block. Lu's crews had spent the preparation days building a temporary earth ramp beside the ruined outer span. The loaded wagons went down it one at a time, under an engineer's eye.

It was a useful argument to leave behind.

Eleven marching days brought Slate to the first of the Nine Spans.

He spent part of those days above the column, flying ahead to inspect bends before wagons reached them. He spent more on the ground, waiting for harness repairs, muddy grades and the scouts who kept Shen's retreating detachments from finding an easy flank. The road through Wayward and the Wyldwood was theirs to use again. It wasn't safe enough to stop watching.

They reached the highlands with their food wagons intact and their soldiers fit to fight.

The frontier stood on the other side of a ravine.

Slate crouched behind a wind-polished ridge and looked at an entire neighborhood hanging beneath the road he needed.

Stone arches crossed the gulf in three rising tiers. Houses crowded the galleries built along them, their red and black tiled roofs tucked beneath the next curve of masonry. Laundry snapped from poles over a drop that made the people below look no larger than his claws. Smoke climbed from little chimneys and flattened under the bridge deck.

Far below, a river thundered through white spray.

The upper road was wide enough for two wagons to pass. It ran straight toward a fortified station on the eastern abutment, where a pale banner carried the Confederacy's linked black squares. Soldiers stood behind its parapet. A ballista faced the western approach.

Eight more crossings lay beyond this one, along the route toward Covenant. Slate only needed the first. The road to Shouguan turned toward the Folded Mountain on its eastern side.

Taking this bridge would put his army inside Ordan's territory.

“They built houses under a military chokepoint,” he said.

Lu's gaze stayed on the arches. “They built the crossing over houses that were already there. Look at the joints beneath the east station. The gallery stone is older.”

Slate could see different colors. He trusted Lu about the joints.

“Can they drop it?” Slate asked Lu.

“They can withdraw the last section of road into the abutment,” Lu said. “The bearing channels are prepared. They can't draw the whole bridge through that building.”

Lu pointed with a repaired finger. A narrow seam crossed the road a short distance from the eastern gate. “That section moves. The homes hang from the fixed arches below it.”

“And you're sure the arches keep supporting the houses?”

“I am sure they built it to. I would like the operators to survive long enough to ask how well they maintained it.”

Below, a woman was shaking crumbs from a cloth. A soldier leaned over the parapet and shouted down at her. She shouted back without lowering the cloth.

Slate couldn't hear the words. He understood the dispute.

The garrison had warning of his approach. People were still in their homes because leaving meant abandoning those homes to an army, or because no one had given them somewhere better to go.

He brought Edrin's view into his own.

The Lurker lay above the eastern station, looking down a steep cleft. A ledge ran along the cliff beyond it. Hoof marks scored the exposed stone. *“Mounted patrol. They went behind the shoulder of the ridge. There is a path back toward our approach.”*

Slate showed the ledge to Sumnu. “Watch the north side. Light cavalry.”

“On that?”

“Apparently.”

Sumnu studied the narrow shelf, then beckoned his nearest detachment officer. “Leave them room to come off it. I want them where they can fall over.”

The western approach offered no cover for a charge. Flight would put Slate over it quickly, but the defenders had mounted crossbows along the roofs to catch precisely that kind of visitor. Even if Slate flew into the station alone, he would have to keep its operators off the controls until Lu crossed the exposed bridge.

He had enough soldiers to make them watch more than the sky.

“Brace, take your first watch across with Lu when Sumnu has their parapet occupied. The engineers wait until we hold the station. Edrin, roof guards first. Don't jump into rooms you haven't cleared.”

Lynia moved closer to the ridge. “And us?”

“Cover the approach from the ridge. The lower track is your field. Keep the line clear of the houses and hold mana to bring back the wounded.”

Lynia studied the slope. “If they use the lower track, I can catch them before they reach the operators.”

“Do that. Edrin will call the approach, so coordinate the timing with him.”

Slate checked the closed outlet in his right index claw. Two charges remained in the isolated reservoir. None had entered a living caster.

Lynia gave him a short nod and shifted to the ridge angle.

Beyond the ravine, the station bell began ringing.

The garrison had seen Sumnu.

Raiders came onto the road carrying captured shields in front of their bodies. Crossbow bolts struck wood. Behind the first rank, Mystics sent their attacks at the exposed parapet, forcing the defenders to duck before reloading.

Slate launched from the ridge.

He stayed below the line of the station roof, flying beside the bridge instead of above its road. The river's rising air caught one wing harder than the other. He corrected, banked beneath an arch and passed a kitchen window close enough to smell frying onions.

A child screamed inside.

He hoped the next meal would be less exciting.

The upper gallery stair climbed toward the station's side door. Two soldiers were dragging a timber barrier across its mouth. Below them, a line of residents struggled upward with bundles, cages and a rolled mattress that had jammed against the railing.

Slate landed between the soldiers and the stair.

His wing struck the barrier before they could set it. He folded, drove one man against the wall and caught the other's spear shaft beneath his arm.

“Move back,” he told them.

The spearman tried to pull free.

Slate snapped the shaft and threw the point onto the empty landing behind him.

Both men moved.

A stone shutter began descending above the stair.

It came down across the side entrance, shedding gray dust. Slate caught its lower edge. Scourgeshield brightened against his shoulders as the weight forced him into a crouch.

“Get that mattress clear!” he shouted.

The man carrying it stared at him.

“Drop the damn mattress!” Slate shouted.

The man let go. A woman shoved the roll sideways, opening enough room for the people behind her to pass.

Slate turned his head toward the soldiers pinned beside the wall. “Help them!”

One reached down for the nearest child. The other seized the mattress and dragged it away from the stairs. Residents squeezed past Slate beneath the shutter, ducking around his tail.

“Lu. Side stair. Now,” Slate sent.

Across the bridge, the road scraped against its bearings.

The last section was moving east.

Slate held the shutter while the gap widened behind Sumnu's advancing soldiers. They hadn't reached the moving section yet. If it withdrew completely, they would have to cross an open drop under fire.

He could fly. Lu could not.

“Jump before it gets wider,” he sent Brace. *“Bring him.”*

Brace didn't waste time objecting. Through his offered view, Slate saw the guard commander lift Lu around the chest. The Builder tucked his tail and swore as Brace ran the last few strides.

They cleared the gap with inches under Brace's trailing foot.

The rest of the watch followed. Dessa landed badly against a loose stone, caught herself and pulled Corren forward before the next bolt arrived. Their wards joined as they gathered around the side entrance, sharing the cost of the impacts through the active network.

Slate felt the connection only when they reached him.

The three wards shared the strain. The shutter was still very heavy.

Lu pressed his hands against its edge. “The operator is forcing it. I can give you a stop, not lift it while he keeps feeding the descent.”

“A stop is fine.”

Stone thickened beneath the shutter's side guides. Lu built two short shoulders against the existing wall, bracing his tail while the new surfaces took the load. He pulled his fingers free as Slate eased down.

The shutter settled against the stops with a sharp crack.

“Don't stay under it,” Lu said.

Slate came out fast.

The last residents were on the landing. The guard put them against the inner wall, beyond the direct crossbow line. Slate left Dessa and Corren with them and went through the station door.

A soldier struck at him with a halberd. He caught the shaft near the head, pulled the man off balance and slammed him into the doorpost. Behind the soldier, a woman stood inside a waist-high ring of stone with both palms on its rim.

The road outside ground another foot into the abutment.

The woman saw Slate and lifted her right hand.

A stone rib crossed the doorway at his knees.

He jumped onto it. Another rose toward his chest. He pushed off before it could close, caught an overhead beam and swung into the room.

Her ward flared as his tail struck it.

She stumbled without taking her left hand off the ring. “You cannot have this crossing.”

“Your people are still on it,” he said.

“Then call yours back!” The dwarf sounded frantic.

She had found a choice he disliked and meant to make him pay for it. Slate could respect the tactic while wanting to bite through the hand using it.

He coated his left claws with ash-white fire and kept his right index bare.

The shaper lowered herself behind the control ring. Stone closed over her shoulders, leaving a narrow opening through which she watched him. Slate struck the shell. Fire spread across its face, biting at the active working, but the structure held long enough for a spear to thrust from behind a cabinet.

He twisted away. The point scored his hip as his ward took most of the force.

Brace came through the doorway and caught the spearman before he could thrust again.

Slate put both feet against the outside of the ring and pulled on the shell's upper edge.

Stone split where the fire had weakened the fresh join.

The shaper jerked her hand up to close it. Slate drove his left claws against her ward again, holding the flame at one point while her stone tightened around his ankles.

The ward gave beneath his fingertips.

He reached through with his right hand, tore the coat below her arm and drove the index claw into her side.

One deliberate release.

The pressure in the small reservoir fell by half.

She struck him across the mouth with a stone-weighted fist.

Pain flashed through his jaw. Slate turned his teeth toward her wrist. The hand withdrew before he could catch it, driving back toward the control ring.

The shaper tried to close the shell.

Her whole upper body convulsed.

A ragged pulse ran around the control ring. Stone burst from its far side. The road stopped with a crash outside, and the grip around Slate's ankles slackened enough for him to tear free.

“Lu!”

The Builder entered behind Brace, put one palm against the ring and the other on the floor. “Keep her off it.”

Slate dragged the woman clear.

She clawed at his wrist with ordinary fingers, still strong enough to hurt when her nails found the damaged edge of a scale. Her legs kicked against his thighs. Magotoxin had broken her working. It hadn’t stopped her trying to kick him apart.

Brace took her arms while Slate held her away from the stone.

Lu's tail locked against the floor. Beyond the door, the bearing channels shrieked as he forced a new stop into the prepared track.

The woman spat blood against Slate's chest. “You don't know the load.”

Slate pointed toward Lu. “He does.”

Slate hoped he sounded more certain than he felt.

The ring trembled under the Builder's palms. He loosened one hand, felt along the broken rim and changed the angle of his wrist.

The road slid smoothly along its bearings.

Outside, Raiders shouted as the gap began narrowing again.

The shaper's fingers twitched against Brace's grip. A pebble near her foot rolled toward her.

Not long, then. Or not complete. Slate hauled her onto the wooden table before the pebble could become a wedge beneath his heel.

“Bind her here. Keep her hands clear of the wall.” He left Brace securing the prisoner and went to the parapet.

The cavalry had reached Sumnu's flank.

Shaggy animals came along the northern shelf, shoulders higher than their narrow rumps. Their riders crouched behind swept horns, carrying short lances. Broad split hooves struck exposed rock with a clack, held for a breath where a horse would have slid, then peeled free for the next stride.

Cliffstriders.

Three emerged onto the western approach abreast of the Raiders' rear ranks. The first rider lowered his lance.

Sumnu's soldiers opened around him.

The animal carried its rider into the space they had left. Raiders struck from either side, one catching the lance shaft while another pulled the rider out of his low saddle. Sumnu drove his shoulder against the second mount's breast, turning its rush into the parapet. It scrambled upright, hooves scraping for grip, with its rider clinging to the saddle straps.

The third rider wheeled back toward the ledge.

Behind him, the next animals had stopped to recover on a wider shelf. The riders saw the road blocked and began backing along their own approach. A Cliffstrider tried to plant on loose shale, slipped and regained the firmer rock below it with a violent toss of its horns.

The retreat was slow enough for Edrin's Lurkers to take the upper path away from them.

Slate climbed onto the parapet where the remaining defenders could see him. “The controls are ours. Lower your weapons and keep your bridge.”

An officer beneath the ballista looked at the side door, then at the road sliding back into place. His roof guards were down or held at clawpoint. Raiders were already gathering beyond the shrinking gap.

He set his sword against the wall.

The others followed before Sumnu crossed.

By late afternoon, the road was locked in its extended position with Lu's temporary stops supported by the station's own mechanical catches.

The six engineers inspected the galleries with two local maintenance workers who had watched the shutter come down on their neighbors. They had agreed to keep the bridge upright, not to serve Slate.

His force had lost no one. Seven needed treatment, including the Raider a lance had caught beneath the ribs. Five had shallow wounds that their carried reserves could repair. The two more seriously injured were Raiders, and both would remain at the station.

Slate assigned twelve Raiders including those two, four Lurkers and two Mystics to hold the crossing. Under one of Sumnu's officers, those eighteen would also guard the prisoners and the wagons they couldn't take forward yet.

The marching force would leave with one hundred and thirty-six people. The defenders had dead to recover from the roof and the western approach. Several riders had escaped along the cliff before Edrin closed the path.

They would carry the news east.

The captured stoneshaper lay on a wooden cot in the upper room. Corren had dressed the puncture and watched her attempts to move mana through her hands. She could shift a loose chip now, provided she waited between efforts. A stronger attempt made the muscles along her neck jump.

Slate stopped beside the cot. “Don’t push it.”

“You poisoned me.”

He nodded. “Yes. Trying to force your way through it is hurting you.”

She stared at his right hand. He kept the injector curled away from her, its outlet closed. One charge remained. The first had reached enough of her active network to break her control, but she had already begun finding routes that still answered.

Shen might have recovered faster. A caster who stopped channeling might react differently. Slate wanted Lynia to examine the prisoner before he trusted the toxin to work the same way twice.

“My sister lives on the second gallery,” the woman said.

Slate waited.

“I want her told where I am,” she demanded. “By someone who can speak without showing all those teeth.”

“Give Corren her name. We’ll send a local worker.”

“She won’t come if your soldiers crowd the stairs.”

Slate shrugged. “Then they can leave her room to pass.”

It didn't cost him anything to be polite. Her sister could speak for the other families on the gallery. Letting her approach without an escort would be quieter than filling the stairs with guards.

Sumnu met him outside the upper room. “Useful animals,” he said, gesturing toward the cliffstriders.

“Putting a Raider on top of one might be considered animal cruelty,” Slate noted.

“I was thinking of loads.”

Slate looked at him.

Sumnu’s mouth widened. “Then riders.”

Slate rolled his eyes. “Keep the saddles with them. No experiments beside the railing.”

He could almost see the next argument forming. A Cliffstrider's brief hold on steep rock had military value. So did the handler who knew how to care for it and when it needed to rest. He would prefer not to discover the distinction by watching one of his soldiers fall past a kitchen window.

Slate stood on the gallery where he had held the shutter. A woman approached carrying a dented pan.

He recognized the frying onions.

“Your soldier took my stair rail,” she said.

Slate looked down. A length of shaped wood lay across the damaged entrance, reinforcing one of Lu's stops. “We needed it.”

“So do I,” she argued. “My husband cannot climb those steps without it.”

Lu heard her from the doorway. “I can replace it before dark,” the Builder offered.

“With the same bend,” she told him. “He knows where to put his hand.”

The Builder followed her down the stairs to measure it.

Slate watched them go. Yesterday she’d known the Scourge only from stories and soldiers’ warnings. Today one had flown past her kitchen, another had torn out her railing, and their avatar controlled the road above her roof.

His garrison would need these people’s food, labor and knowledge of the bridge after he moved east. Rob them, and they would hide their supplies and stop helping Lu. He hadn’t taken the crossing to make it useless.

He looked at Brace and issued his orders. “No one enters a house without its owner or an officer. Pay for food. Keep the kitchens working. I want the repair list before the wagons cross.”

Brace looked toward the road beyond the eastern gate. “And tomorrow?”

Slate could see the first pale fold of mountain above the roofs. Shouguan lay in that direction, feeding the army that had tried to break his city.

“Tomorrow, we find out how much of their war fits inside one fortress.”

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XXIX

The Moving Mountain

THE BELL SOUNDED TWICE FROM INSIDE THE MOUNTAIN.

Deng stopped so abruptly that the engineer behind her walked into her shoulder.

Slate raised a hand. The column halted along the narrow track, Raiders turning outward while the human engineers moved into the space between them.

Three days beyond the captured crossing, the Folded Mountain had become a succession of ridges he could see over and valleys his army couldn't walk through without a guide. Pale limestone ran through the dark rock in long, steep bands. Pines grew in the troughs. Somewhere beyond the next crest, an axe continued striking wood as though there were no war.

The bell sounded again.

Iron on iron. Two blows.

Slate looked at Deng. “How far?”

She pointed through a notch above the trail. “The northern feeding ground. If he's still using it.”

“Edrin. Keep the column here.” Slate climbed to the notch, spread his wings and rose above the ridge.

Shouguan stood on the next shoulder of the mountain. Its western curtain crossed a broad saddle, towers joined by a wall thick enough to carry a loaded cart along its top. Behind it lay a forecourt with sheds and stacks of timber. A second wall guarded the rising ground beyond. Slate could see storehouse roofs and the upper keep above that.

The southern end of the outer curtain merged into a buttress descending toward terraces of narrow fields. Houses clustered along a watercourse below them.

To the north lay an old quarry bowl, pale scars climbing its far side. A haulage cut connected it to the forecourt.

And on the track below Slate, the Cragback was coming out of the trees.

Its first step folded a milestone down into the road.

The carved stone sank beneath a broad forefoot, bent sideways and hardened into a low ridge behind the departing heel. The beast didn't slow. Its sideways horns pushed branches apart. The taller ridge above its neck carried strips of pine bark from a tree it had scraped on the way through.

Wei Zhen sat between the armored shoulders.

Slate saw the gray coat and the iron plate over his left cheek. The chain lay across his lap. Ahead of the Cragback, two handlers dragged a low sled piled with dark sacks. A third man carried the iron ring.

They were taking it toward Shouguan's southern buttress.

Slate banked back to his people. “We found Wei.”

Deng closed her eyes briefly.

“Don't start,” Slate said. “Can your guide reach those terraces without crossing the fort's road?”

“Yes.”

“Send him,” Slate ordered. “Tell the residents to get above the lower fields. Away from the retaining walls.”

She caught her guide's sleeve and spoke quickly. The man went down the track at a run.

Lu climbed onto a rock beside Slate to look through the offered view. His tail settled behind him, taking enough weight that he could keep his hands free.

“The south buttress carries that whole shoulder,” he said. “It will not all fall at once. The upper fields will shear first.”

“I don't want to find out what comes second.”

“Neither do the people living under them.”

Sumnu came up from the halted Raiders. “How many with him?”

“I counted eight men. The beast is the problem.”

“For the fort.”

“For whoever it walks over.”

Sumnu looked toward the hidden saddle. “Then put someone else in front.”

Slate almost smiled. Under different circumstances, that would have been an adequate plan.

“Get your detachments onto the western ridge,” Slate told Sumnu. “Stay on the loose ground, not the paved track. If it comes toward you, clear its path. Don't try to hold it with your bodies.”

He showed Brace the feeding sled and its handlers. “We'll need those alive.”

“Wei too?”

“Especially Wei.”

The last time Slate had seen him, the Forsworn leader had escaped while Slate and Shen pulled soldiers out of the stone. Slate had no intention of repeating that exchange if he could give his people enough warning to avoid being trapped in the first place.

He left Lu with the engineers and Lynia's reserve, then took flight again.

This time the fortress saw him.

A horn sounded from the outer wall. Soldiers ran toward the parapet. Slate stayed beyond their crossbows and circled above Wei until the man looked up.

“Stop the beast!” Slate called to Wei.

Wei shaded his eyes with one hand. “You came to take the fort. There it is.”

“You're about to put it through a village.”

“The houses depend on that wall. Break it and they cannot keep Shouguan supplied.”

“There are families under it.”

Wei pointed toward the upper keep. “There are families in its service rolls too.” He pulled the chain. The Cragback turned its head a little, then lowered its muzzle toward a sack the nearest handler had opened.

Slate watched the motion. Wei's chain had moved the skin beneath an armored ridge. It had not dragged that enormous head around by strength.

The food had done more.

“Deng made terms,” Slate called.

“Deng made her terms.”

There it was. Wei understood. He simply didn't care.

Slate folded his wings and dropped.

The Cragback's head came up.

He had expected the horns this time. He rolled above the sideways sweep, passed behind the tall neck ridge and landed on the beast's back with both feet between its plates.

Wei struck at him with the end of the chain.

The iron hit Scourgeshield and wrapped around Slate's left forearm. Wei pulled, trying to drag him toward the narrow gap beside the saddle. Slate braced one foot against a plate and caught the chain with his other hand.

“You don't get to use my attack for this,” Slate told Wei.

Wei spat at him.

The beast lurched sideways.

A ballista bolt struck the ridge above Slate's head. Iron broke against armored stone. Splinters of the shaft whipped across his shoulders as the Cragback turned toward the wall that had fired it.

Slate dropped into the saddle hollow beside Wei.

The first rank of defenders was coming out of Shouguan's gate.

They carried tall shields with iron shoes along their lower edges. Behind them, shapers bent over the road. Stone teeth rose across the saddle, one row after another, while crossbowmen spread along the slope.

They had chosen to meet the beast before it reached the buttress.

Sumnu's Raiders appeared on the western ridge behind them.

The officer at the gate saw the Scourge and changed his order. Half his soldiers turned toward the new threat. The rest kept their shields pointed at the Cragback.

Slate was on the back of an angry siege engine between two armies about to collide.

For once, his own position might be the least of his problems.

“Sumnu, hold the ridge. Let them divide,” Slate sent.

Wei jerked the chain toward the beast's neck. A hooked length of iron lay beneath the front of the saddle, where the armor gave way to thick hide. Slate caught it before Wei could drive it down.

The man drew a knife with his free hand.

Slate seized the wrist and slammed it against the plate between them. The knife fell into the saddle hollow.

Below, a handler struck the ring frantically.

The Cragback ignored him.

It drove into the first row of stone teeth.

The whole obstruction sagged. Pyramids that stood higher than a man curled beneath its chest, their points dragging lines across its belly before flattening into the road. It lifted one foot over the changing mass and stamped.

A wave of stone rolled toward the shields.

The front rank broke apart before it reached them. Most ran clear. A man who tried to retrieve his dropped weapon went down as the road took his ankle. His companion cut the boot away and dragged him behind a boulder.

Slate saw them escape and stayed with Wei.

He tore the hooked iron from the saddle and threw it clear of both armies. “We're getting off.”

Wei's hand plunged into the gap beside his thigh.

The saddle strap released.

The whole leather seat slid beneath Slate's feet.

He spread his wings, but the chain around his arm caught against the tall ridge as he rose. Wei dropped down the beast's opposite flank, holding the loose end.

Slate hit an armored plate chest first.

His ward flared. Air left his lungs. The chain pulled tight across his wrist while the saddle slipped out from under him.

Wei was using Slate's weight to lower himself to the road.

Slate cut the chain with his tail.

The severed links snapped apart. Wei fell the last few feet, rolled clear of a hind leg and scrambled toward the handlers.

Slate pushed off the Cragback's flank as its spined tail swept past him.

He caught the air too late to clear the tail entirely. A spine struck the edge of his right wing. Scourgeshield took the point, but the force spun him

sideways above the road.

He landed hard on the loose western slope. *“Brace. Wei is off the beast. Gray coat, heading north.”*

The guard commander's answer came with a glimpse of moving scales. *“I see him.”*

Slate flexed the wing. Pain ran along its leading joint. It moved. He would not trust it to turn sharply under another load until Lynia had looked at it.

He could still run.

The fort's soldiers had reached Sumnu's ridge. Their officer drove them uphill in short advances, shields covering the men behind. Raiders struck down from above, withdrew before the spears could fix them and came in again along the line's exposed ends.

Sumnu waited until the officer committed his reserve.

Then he took a dozen Raiders straight through the lower edge of the formation.

The shield line folded around their charge. Slate saw Sumnu's bladed tail cut a spear shaft, then the Raider commander's broad jaws close on a shield rim. He tore it down while the soldier behind it tried to let go quickly enough to save his hands.

The man beside him thrust into Sumnu's ribs. The ward caught most of it. Sumnu seized the shaft, dragged the spearman forward and broke him against his own shield.

Slate ran along the lower slope toward the handlers.

The Cragback had reached the second obstacle. The shapers kept thickening the barrier at its base as fast as the beast pressed through the top. Their work held for a few breaths.

Then the Cragback lowered its head and shoved.

Stone rose in a broad curl in front of its horns. The nearer shaper fell backward. His partner pulled him free before the curl rolled over the place

they had been kneeling.

The creature went after the ballista.

That put it on a line through the middle of the outer curtain, away from the southern buttress.

Slate could use that, provided no one convinced it to turn again.

He reached the feeding sled as a handler tried to drag it toward the terraces. “Leave it.”

The man let the rope fall and ran.

Slate caught him after three strides and brought him back by the collar. “I need you to tell me what it eats.”

“It'll eat you!”

“Then help me keep its mouth occupied.”

The handler stared at his teeth. Slate put him down before the man could decide he was choosing between two mouths. “What's in the sacks?”

“Meat. Cracked bones. Salt.”

“How much does it take to stop?”

“You don't stop it while it's angry!”

That was a useful answer, even if Slate would have preferred a different one.

He sent it to Lu, along with the view of the north quarry. *“The haulage cut. Can we draw it in there after it gets through the wall?”*

Lu studied the image from the shelter of the ridge. *“The cut is wide enough. There are timber skips beside it. Don't ask me to hold the wall while it passes.”*

“I'm asking you to keep a way open for us afterward.”

“Wood across the churned stone, once it has hardened. I can do that.”

Slate pointed the handler toward the sled. “Help me move it north. My people will keep you alive if you stay with them.”

“Wei will kill me.”

“No,” Brace sent.

Slate accepted the offered view.

Wei lay on his stomach beside a scrub pine with a guard's knee between his shoulders. His gray coat had torn open at one elbow. The iron cheek plate was pressed into the soil.

Brace held the chain where Wei could see it.

“Wei has other problems,” Slate told the handler.

The man picked up the sled rope.

At the curtain, the ballista crew abandoned their engine.

The Cragback planted both forefeet against the wall.

For a moment, the structure held its shape. Slate could see shapers on the parapet, arms buried to the elbows in the top course. Their combined effort dragged the surface upward while the beast's weight pressed it down.

The central section bulged.

The ballista tilted toward the forecourt.

Then the wall folded around the Cragback's shoulders.

Stone poured over its armored back in thick slabs that bent instead of breaking. The parapet rolled inward, carrying the abandoned engine with it. The neighboring tower twisted at its base. Its roof remained upright long enough to make the motion look impossible, then leaned into the growing breach.

The sound reached Slate as one sustained grinding roar.

He had watched Shen raise defenses out of bare ground. He had watched Lu find a fault thinner than a hair and use it to divide a block cleanly.

This was a mountain animal forcing a fortress to fit around its body.

“Clear the gate!” he shouted.

Sumnu's soldiers had driven the sortie back toward it. Raiders broke off as the tower began leaning. Defenders fled through the gate or out along the ditch, dropping shields that would only slow them.

Orrik and Vesna were already beneath the gate's outer arch.

Orrik turned at Slate's warning and caught Vesna by the belt. She was facing the soldiers coming out of the gate. Neither had seen the tower lean.

It came down before he could pull her clear.

Slate felt their presences vanish.

He kept moving.

The Cragback had turned the fallback lane into a kill zone. The soldiers still on the slope needed a way clear of the moving stone.

“Nobody follows the beast into moving stone,” Slate sent to the force. *“Edrin, the northern cut. Stop the inner-wall bowmen from getting a clear line on Lu.”*

The Lurkers went over the surviving section of curtain while the defenders were watching the collapse. Crossbow bolts began striking the inner parapet from positions its soldiers had thought secure a moment earlier.

The Cragback dragged its hindquarters through the breach.

Its tail plowed a trough across the fallen wall. The stone settled behind it, hardening into folds that reached Slate's waist.

Beyond those folds lay the forecourt and the north haulage cut.

Slate handed the sled rope to two guards and took the iron ring from the handler. “Come with us.”

“I told you it won't stop.”

“Then don't stand in front of it when you ring.”

They hauled the sled over the first hardened ridge. One sack split, spilling salt and pale fragments of bone. Slate left the trail where it fell.

At the next fold, a Lurker dropped from the broken tower and landed beside him with a cry.

His leg bent beneath him.

Slate caught him before he rolled into the trough. The Scourge's shin had broken. He hauled him onto the firmer slope and sent a guard back with him, then took the rope himself.

The Cragback was turning toward the southern forecourt.

The last handler had gone that way with an open sack.

“Deng!” Slate shouted.

She stood beside the ridge, close enough to see the man across the breach. She cupped her hands and called his name. Slate caught none of the rest through the grinding stone, but the handler stopped.

She pointed at the houses below the buttress.

He looked toward them, then back at the creature following his sack.

For a moment Slate thought he would keep running south.

The man dropped the food and climbed onto a stack of timber.

The Cragback lowered its head.

Slate dragged the sled into the mouth of the northern cut. “Now.”

His handler struck the ring twice.

The beast kept eating.

An inner-wall bolt hit the sled's upright. Another struck Slate's shoulder, glancing from his ward. Edrin's people fired back. Below them, Lu and the engineers were pulling timbers away from a shed whose stone footing had cracked.

Slate opened another sack and spilled its contents along the haulage track.

The smell was sour enough to make him grateful he wasn't hungry.

The Cragback lifted its head.

“Again,” Slate said.

The ring sounded.

This time the beast turned.

It came toward the cut faster than Slate liked, claws sinking into the paving. He pushed the sled ahead of him while the guards dragged from the front. The handler ran beside them, striking the ring and looking over his shoulder so often that he nearly went down under a runner.

Slate pulled him upright. “Watch your feet. I'll tell you if it gets closer.”

“It's getting closer!”

“Then keep running!”

They reached the quarry bowl with the beast's breath blowing dust along the track behind them.

Slate tipped the sled.

Sacks rolled down the shallow spoil slope, breaking apart as they went. The Cragback pushed past him, shoulder scraping a strip from the quarry wall, and followed the tumbling food.

He flattened himself into a side recess with the handler pressed beside him. The guards climbed above the animal's reach.

Its tail passed the recess last.

Spines carved through the outer lip, leaving their feet on a shelf narrower than Slate's hand.

Then the Cragback was below them, tearing into the spilled load.

The handler began shaking.

Slate let him. He needed a moment himself.

The animal had entered the quarry because food lay there and it was no longer being shot in the face. The high walls were stone. Calling the bowl a pen would not make them capable of holding it.

“How long will that last?” Slate asked.

The handler looked at the scattered sacks. “I don't know.”

“Good. Keep telling me when you don't know.”

He climbed out of the recess and called the guards down. They left the handler with a pair watching the quarry from above, with strict orders to withdraw if the beast came toward the cut. Nobody was to ring the iron again.

By the time Slate returned to the forecourt, Lu's crew had laid a timber way across the hardened folds of the breach.

The Builder had shaped the ends of salvaged beams into interlocking beds. He couldn't make the ground underneath them trustworthy, but the broad supports spread their load. Engineers carried the next lengths forward while Raiders screened them from the inner wall.

Sumnu held the gate's surviving flank with half his force. The other detachment had occupied two outer sheds, giving the Mystics a roof over the wounded. Edrin's Lurkers kept the northern parapet and watched the quarry cut.

They owned enough ground to stay.

They did not own Shouguan.

Slate found Wei beneath a shed awning, wrists tied to a beam behind his back. Brace had taken the iron cheek guard away to check for concealed edges. Without it, the old scar pulled one side of Wei's mouth downward.

Deng stood in front of him.

“You sent the warning,” he said.

“I sent people out of the fields.”

“They'll be back under the rolls tomorrow.”

“They'll be alive tomorrow.”

Wei looked past her to Slate. “You have your breach.”

Slate stopped close enough that Wei had to raise his head. “And you have a guard.”

“You needed the beast.”

“I needed a way through the wall. Don't confuse that with needing you free.”

He turned to Brace. “Keep him away from the handlers. Separate them before anyone talks.”

The guard commander took Wei into the shed.

Deng watched until the prisoner disappeared. “Some will say you took him for Shen.”

Slate looked toward the collapsed tower. “They can come here and say it.”

She followed his gaze. Two covered bodies lay beyond the timber way. The recovery party had brought them out after the stone settled. “I'll tell them what happened,” she said.

He needed her account, not her approval.

Her guide returned before dusk with dust whitening his trousers. He had reached the upper irrigation stair before the first break in the wall. The people tending the terraces had helped him carry the warning down to the houses. From the ridge, he had watched families gathering above the fields.

No one could tell him yet whether all the houses had emptied. Deng sent him back with water and two engineers who could inspect the most exposed retaining sections. They would return before the next assault; Slate needed a safe approach for the supply parties as much as the residents needed sound walls.

“The beast is still north of them,” Slate said. “Don’t tell them it can’t come back.”

The guide gave him a tired, unpleasant look. “They can hear it.”

Lynia found Slate at the northern approach. He extended the bruised wing while she examined the joint, then held it steady for her second check.

“No break. Keep the load off it tonight. The joint will not take another hard launch yet.”

“Then it carries nothing until morning.”

Lynia watched him test the range once more, then nodded. “I’ll mark a route that keeps you off that wing until the keep is in reach.”

Slate kept the repair small, closing the split scales along his wrist while leaving the larger allocations with the injured Lurker and the two Raiders in the shed. The wing would stay unloaded for the night.

One hundred and thirty-four people remained alive in the expedition. The Lurker and two Raiders from Sumnu’s charge would stay behind the next assault. Orrik and Vesna had died under the arch when the tower came down.

Before the next company moved, Slate would put the Cragback’s route and the collapsed wall on the same map.

From the inner wall, a horn called the defenders to new positions. Stone rose across a gate that had been open when the Cragback first appeared. Soldiers hauled bundles onto the parapet above it.

Shouguan was preparing to receive him properly.

Slate climbed onto the intact roof of the nearest shed. The upper keep stood beyond two rising courts. Somewhere inside it were the stores, dispatches and officers supporting the army that had come for Bastion.

Behind him, the Cragback struck the quarry wall hard enough to shake dust from the roof tiles.

Slate kept his eyes on the keep. “Sumnu. Bring me the company officers.”

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XXX

The Captured Stronghold

Lu was arguing with a carpenter when Slate arrived. “If I make that joint rigid, the first rise under the left side will turn the whole frame over.”

“If you leave it loose, we'll be carrying a staircase that wants to lie down.”

“Yes. Until we put it against the wall.”

The carpenter looked at Slate for help.

Slate tested the nearest rail with his foot. The section settled an inch without taking the rest of the structure with it. “Will it stay under my soldiers?”

“If they keep their weight between the rails,” Lu said. “And if your carpenter stops improving it.”

The man took his peg out of the joint. “I'd like that objection remembered.”

“Put it in writing,” Slate told him. “After we're inside.”

They had worked through the latter half of the night, using beams and planks salvaged from the outer sheds. The result lay in four sections beneath a canvas screen. Broad wooden feet supported a flexible deck. At its head, paired frames could unfold into a steep stair, with rails high enough to shelter crouching soldiers behind lashed boards.

Lu had shaped the fitted joints. The engineers had cut, hauled and assembled the lengths too large for him to move alone.

It looked like a drunken dock had decided to climb a castle.

Slate wanted two minutes from it.

Beyond the shed, Shouguan's inner wall caught the first light. Its gate had vanished behind the stone the defenders raised the previous evening. The approach was smooth except for three shallow transverse seams.

Edrin had watched the gate crew test them during the night. Each seam could become the edge of a trench, with a moving lip that would trap a foot before the rest of the road tilted. The captured delivery records showed where wagon loads normally waited. Lu had matched those positions to the reinforced strips between the seams.

The defenders expected him to walk his soldiers onto their prepared stone.

He intended to give his soldiers a wooden path over it.

Sumnu joined him beside the folded stair. “We could have ladders on that wall already.”

“They have shapers waiting under that parapet. I want them occupied before anyone climbs.”

“They're repairing yesterday's damage while we wait.”

Slate pointed at the carpenter checking the last joint. “Then let him finish.”

Sumnu tested the rail with one hand, watching the separate sections settle. He had helped recover Orrik and Vesna. Slate wanted the next climb to give his soldiers more warning when the ground changed beneath them.

“We use the frame,” the Raider commander said. “When they leave us a better opening, I take it.”

“That's what I need you there for.”

Sumnu bared his teeth. Better than another warning.

Slate went over the assault assignments once. Forty-eight Raiders would advance under Sumnu. Edrin took nine Lurkers including himself. Lynia led four Mystics, and twenty of the Guard would support Slate and the engineers. Lu would bring four human craftsmen behind the first rank.

Everyone else had a job in the captured forecourt. Secure the breach. Keep the prisoners apart from the wounded. Watch the quarry. Protect the food

and the route back to the bridge.

The three badly injured Scourge stayed under cover. Two guards remained above the Cragback with its handler; two more kept Wei away from him. The beast had spent most of the night eating or grinding its flank against the quarry wall. It had not acquired respect for the boundary because Slate posted sentries above it.

Deng's guide and the two engineers had returned from the terraces before dawn. They had marked two damaged retaining sections for repair and found a way for supply bearers to avoid them. The residents were still keeping their children above the fields.

For now, warning them had been enough. Slate couldn't let the need to keep warning them become his plan for the whole campaign.

He flexed his right wing.

The bruised joint moved without the sharp catch he had felt yesterday. Rest and the repair allocation had done their work. Lynia had checked it again before allowing him to stretch it fully. He could make a short flight. He would not be carrying a passenger.

Brace watched the movement. “I still prefer the stairs.”

“You'll get them.”

“With you on them.”

Slate showed his teeth. “Eventually.” He left the cover of the shed and climbed the surviving western tower. Its top gave him a clear line toward the inner parapet. Men turned as he stood above the broken roof.

“Last offer,” he called. “Lay down your weapons. You'll be fed, your wounded treated and your people allowed to leave when we can escort them safely.”

A dwarf stepped into view above the gate. A bronze-scaled cuirass covered his chest. His beard had been braided short enough to keep it out of the collar, and one shoulder of his coat bore the linked squares Slate had come to recognize.

“Captain Song Jie,” Edrin sent through the connection. *“One of the prisoners named him.”*

Slate studied the dwarf's position. He stood behind a stone shield fitted into the parapet, with only his head and shoulders exposed. “You command here?”

“I do.”

“Then you can end it here.”

“You are a long way from Bastion.”

“Your wagons knew the way.”

Song looked toward the damaged outer curtain. “The Surety will come for this place.”

“He can find it standing.”

“He will.”

The captain stepped back. Crossbows rose along the parapet.

Slate dropped behind the broken roof before the first bolts arrived.

“Worth asking,” Brace said from below.

Slate spread his wings. “I liked my offer.” He launched toward the wall, climbing high enough for every defender on that section to see him. Crossbowmen shifted along the walkway. The little ballista above the gate swung upward on its mounting.

Slate turned before it fired.

The bolt passed behind him. He folded into a steep descent and landed beside the shed as Sumnu's soldiers brought the wooden way out from beneath its screen.

The defenders had spent their first prepared volley looking up.

Now the Raiders ran forward with the frame between them.

Mystics moved behind its broad side boards. Edrin's Lurkers left the western tower at the same moment, crossing toward a lower stretch of the inner wall under the cover of its projecting storehouse roof. The attack had three visible pieces. Song could move his shapers to one of them. He couldn't watch Slate, the roof and the approaching stair with the same pair of hands.

Slate joined Brace at the frame's leading corner.

The first road seam opened.

The forward foot dropped into the trench. The section above it tilted, but its joint turned instead of wrenching the next length sideways. Raiders at the carrying handles heaved. Lu pressed his palm against the rail, widening the foot that still bore on sound paving.

The leading section slid across the opening.

“Don't stop!” Slate called.

They reached the second seam as stones rose along the first, trying to seize the deck from beneath. The wooden joints creaked. Lu moved beside the frame, one hand sliding along the rail while the engineers kept his route clear of feet.

A bolt struck the carpenter's board two inches from his face.

He ducked without letting go. “I have another objection!”

“Write smaller,” Lu told him.

Slate laughed once, then put his shoulder beneath the leading crosspiece as the next trench opened.

The frame caught across it.

A ridge climbed beneath the middle section. This time the defenders were lifting the whole approach, trying to turn the flexible deck over rather than pull it apart.

Lu stopped. “Left side down. Right side forward.”

Slate sent the order through the nearest Raiders before their footing changed again.

The right side dragged ahead. The frame twisted, its forward section slanting toward the gate's southern pier. Two hinges popped out of their wooden sockets. Lu caught the rail with both hands and drew the broken sockets into new positions around the pins.

He was changing the stair to fit the route the defenders had left them.

Sweat darkened the hair above his forehead. Bronze glints flickered among the scales of his wrists. The careful, hidden craftsman Slate had first met was working in full view of a fortress, making its own ground serve an enemy assault.

“There,” Lu said. “Set it there.”

The leading feet struck the pier.

Raiders drove the carrying poles forward. The folded frames rose, stair treads opening between them. Lu kept both hands on the lower joint until the top struck the parapet.

It landed short of the gatehouse, against a position Song had stripped to reinforce the roof under Edrin's attack.

Sumnu saw it. “Up!”

The first Raiders climbed while the rear ranks held the feet in place. Defenders ran along the parapet toward them. A pot broke against the stair's side boards, splashing oil down the wood.

Lynia's nearest Mystic knocked the following lamp away with a forceful strike of magic. It burst against the stone outside the frame.

Fire spread across the wet paving.

Lu stepped back as two engineers dragged a soaked canvas over the oiled boards. The upper treads were beyond their reach.

“Slate!” Brace called.

The little ballista had turned down toward the stair.

Slate climbed.

Dessa and Corren came with him, keeping contact long enough to join their active wards before the first strike. The bolt hit Slate across the shoulder and burst against Scourgeshield. Kinetic Dispersion divided the impact across their three joined wards. Each paid from their own reserve. He felt Corren's contribution falter after the next volley of crossbow bolts hit the same cluster.

"Step out. Below the boards," Slate sent Corren.

Corren dropped back before his reserve failed. The connection narrowed to Slate and Dessa.

Brace pushed past Slate with a carried shield over his head. He took the next bolts against its face, reached the upper tread and drove the shield into the defenders waiting there.

Slate came over beside him.

An axe struck the edge of the carried shield. Slate caught the axeman's elbow, hauled him across the parapet and threw him into the walkway behind Brace. A second defender lowered his spear. Dessa struck the shaft aside before retreating to the stair, leaving Slate's ward to bear its own costs again.

Sumnu's first Raiders joined them.

The foothold widened along the wall.

Below it, the stone sealing the gate withdrew into its frame. The timber doors opened inward.

Song was sending his reserve into the forecourt, where Lu and the engineers stood exposed beside the stair's feet.

Slate saw the first shields emerge. "Lynia, gate. Sumnu, bring the rear rank around." He jumped from the parapet to a lower roof, then down behind the gate reserve before its second rank had crossed the threshold.

His tail struck the door's wooden brace.

The heavy leaf swung into the men still coming through.

Slate caught its iron pull ring and hauled it farther, closing the passage behind the forward rank. Spears jabbed around the edge. One cut across his thigh. He pressed his warded shoulder against the door and kept pulling.

Outside, Sumnu hit the isolated soldiers from the side.

Inside, Slate heard a familiar grinding beneath his feet.

He let go of the ring and jumped onto the raised threshold.

Stone closed where his ankles had been.

Captain Song stood at the foot of the gate stair, one palm spread against its pier. In his other hand he carried a short iron mace. Identify showed him at level thirty-two, a stoneshaper whose developed channels lit strongly through Slate's Combined Vision.

The captain had left the parapet to keep command of his gate.

Slate could appreciate that.

Song looked at the sealed door and the Scourge standing alone inside it. “Your people will have to break that open.”

“They're getting good at doors.”

The captain struck the pier with his palm.

The threshold tilted toward the killing gap below the gate stair.

Slate jumped for him.

Song met him with the mace. It struck Slate's ribs, and his ward flared across his chest. Slate landed badly and rolled under the second swing, coming up beside the stair instead of between the captain and the door.

He kept the outlet in his right index claw closed. One Magotoxin charge remained, but Song's mace kept that hand away from the captain's body. Slate wasn't going to lose a finger reaching past its head.

Slate caught the haft with his left hand.

The captain drove forward, bracing against a step that rose beneath his heel. Slate's ward dimmed under the pressure. He couldn't outlast a man who had a fortress to push with.

He stopped trying to push back.

Slate turned with the mace, letting its head slide past his ribs. His tail caught Song behind the knee. The captain's leg buckled before the rising step could support it.

Slate drove him onto the stair.

Song kept hold of the mace. He struck Slate's wrist hard enough to crack a scale and reached for the stone with his free hand.

Slate pinned that forearm beneath his knee.

The captain tried to lift him with the stair itself.

Slate opened his jaws and bit through the exposed side of Song's neck.

The next step stopped halfway through rising.

He held the captain until the mace fell from his hand, then moved clear of the unfinished shaping before it settled.

LVL 32 Stoneshaper defeated.
XP gained: 4,800
XP available: 10,000

Slate dismissed the notice.

The gate was still closed.

He climbed onto its threshold, caught the pull ring and hauled until the first gap opened. A Raider's claws appeared around the edge from outside.

Together they dragged the door clear.

Sumnu stepped over its lowest brace. Blood ran down one side of his chest, but he was standing straight and looking beyond Slate toward the rising courts. “You took the short way.”

Slate spat onto the paving. “I wouldn't recommend it.”

The Raider commander looked at Song's body, then at the unfinished steps. “Keep going?”

Slate showed him Edrin's latest view.

The Lurkers had reached the storehouse roof. Beyond them, defenders were gathering between two granaries, trying to form a new line across the next court.

“Together this time,” Slate told Sumnu.

They took the lower court with the men from the wall joining them from above.

Slate had expected the defenders to fall back toward the keep. Their lieutenant instead put crossbows in the granary doors and ordered the shield line to stand. Behind them, laborers were dragging loaded carts across the mouth of the upper passage.

He was buying time to close another approach.

“Edrin. The carts.”

The Lurkers moved along the roof, staying below its ridge until they were over the men at the cart shafts. One dropped beside the leading team and cut its traces. Another seized the brake lever. The load stopped sideways with a gap still open between its rear wheel and the wall.

Sumnu drove at the shield line before the lieutenant could change his order.

Slate went with him, keeping his wings folded in the crush. A spear glanced along his jaw. He shoved its shaft upward and pushed through beneath it, shoulder to shoulder with a Raider whose bloodied hands had lost two claws.

The defenders held long enough for the crossbows to fire.

Slate felt a bolt strike his side. His weakened ward took the point without stopping all of its force. Beside him, the Raider dropped to one knee.

Slate caught his upper arm.

The man shook his head once and pushed him forward.

The bolt had entered beneath his jaw. He stayed kneeling, bracing against a fallen shield, while the next Raider stepped past him into the line.

Slate couldn't save him by stopping there.

He drove his shoulder into the nearest shield. Sumnu struck the same rank two places to his left. The defense broke between them, men turning to protect flanks that had been covered a moment earlier.

“Weapons down!” Slate shouted. “You can still stop!”

The lieutenant looked up at the Lurkers above his carts.

He lowered his sword.

The crossbows stopped firing as Sumnu's soldiers reached the doors. A man inside the nearest granary tried to lift his weapon again, saw a Raider already within arm's reach and set it carefully on the floor instead.

Slate put a guard at each entrance and went to the gap between the carts.

Above it, the upper court had emptied.

Edrin came down from the roof beside him. “A party went out along the northeast service way. I have a pair watching where they go.”

“Following?”

“Watching. They know we're here.”

“Keep it that way. Nobody runs into an unexamined passage after them.”

The keep's outer door stood open. A clerk waited inside with both hands visible, surrounded by rolls of paper stacked in wooden racks. He had put a bucket of water beside the nearest lamp.

Slate looked at it. “Good choice.”

The clerk swallowed. “I thought you might think I meant to burn them.”

“I was about to ask.”

“They're accounts.”

“Those burn too.”

“Not if someone keeps the soldiers out.”

Slate assigned a guard to the door and told the clerk to leave the bucket where it was.

The remaining barracks surrendered after word of Song's death reached them. Lu's engineers checked the central cistern, the kitchen hearths and the retaining joints beneath the occupied courts. The water ran clear. The kitchens had grain and fuel. The keep's main rooms belonged to the Scourge by midday.

There were still locked stores, service stairs and outlying galleries to search. Slate marked their entrances for guards instead of treating silence as proof they were empty.

He had taken the fortress. Now he had to make it safe.

Brace found him at the granary doors with the loss report. “Hesh died in the court.”

The Raider with the bolt beneath his jaw. Slate looked at the fallen shield beside the wall. “I saw.”

“Four more Raiders need treatment. One of ours and one Mystic too. All alive when I left them.”

Three dead since the Cragback came through the outer curtain. One hundred and thirty-three survivors in the expedition, with yesterday's badly wounded still in the lower shed and six new patients needing their share of the reserves.

Slate's wrist hurt. His ward was weak enough that he could feel its thinness around his ribs. He had no interest in another clever assault that afternoon.

He looked through the open granary.

Sacks stood in rows beneath a dry roof. The next building held fodder. Beyond that, Edrin had found harness, iron tools and racks of replacement ballista parts. The army outside Bastion had not been supplied by divine favor appearing in a wagon bed. It had been supplied from rooms like these.

Now those rooms answered to him.

“Get the wounded inside,” he told Brace. “Feed everyone before we ask them to carry another load. Then send for the stores officer.”

“Theirs?”

“Ours knows what we brought. Theirs knows what we've taken.”

The officer proved to be a thin woman with ink stains on both sleeves and a cut across her forehead. She objected to Sumnu's soldiers opening sacks without marking which rows they came from.

Slate gave her two engineers and a guard, and told her to start with the food that would spoil first.

She stared at him. “You mean to stay.”

“I didn't bring carpenters to steal lunch.”

She looked past him at the broken gate, then asked for her tally board.

By early afternoon, wounded Scourge lay beside wounded defenders in the barracks nearest the kitchen. Their guards remained separate. So did the repair reserves and the ordinary bandages. Slate had no intention of confusing a shared roof with prisoners free to pick their weapons up again.

Lu found him on the keep stair. The Builder was carrying a split length of railing.

“Your staircase worked,” Slate said.

“Part of it is still outside.”

“Most of my army is inside.”

The Builder looked down into the occupied court. The human engineers were eating with their backs against a wall while a pair of Raiders carried water past them. For a moment Lu's tired expression opened into pleasure.

“Yes,” he said. “They are.”

Slate let him have the moment.

Then Lu set the railing down. “The upper storehouse floor has been repaired more than once. I want it cleared before you stack captured iron there. And the north service stairs need inspecting. The drawings don't match what I can see at the landing.”

“Take an escort.”

“I was going to ask for one.”

That pleased Slate nearly as much as the stair had.

“Tell Brace where you're going. No closed passage without a guard ahead of you.”

Lu collected his timber and went to find his crew.

The clerk from the keep brought the dispatch chest soon afterward. Edrin walked beside him. They set it on the table in the room overlooking the western approach, where Song had evidently received reports from his towers.

Slate recognized Shen's seal before the clerk unfolded the first order. “Read it.”

The instruction had arrived before the Scourge reached the frontier. It ordered Shouguan to retain enough food for its own garrison, move designated stocks toward the western campaign and prepare additional accommodation for troops assembling farther east.

The clerk laid a second sheet beside it.

A drawing of a hollow stone post occupied one corner. Beside it, a clerk had marked the dimensions of the cup. Slate had broken one much like it outside Bastion.

“Commander Neris Venn,” the clerk said. “Stillhold keepers require fresh water, covered recovery rooms and storage for replacement anchors. Felt and bedding are to be kept dry.”

“How many keepers?”

“The final count isn't here.”

The requisitions for animals, food, lodging and patients exceeded what Neris’s twenty-four Preservers could use. Neris still commanded that forward detachment beside the hospice road. Marshal Neriq was assembling a second contingent of keepers under her own command. The rooms she wanted were inside the fortress Slate had just taken.

“Were they built?” Slate asked.

“Cleared, sir,” the clerk said. “The east store was emptied for beds. No patients had arrived.”

Slate kept his claw away from the paper while Edrin turned the next page.

It held the garrison's instructions if either defensive wall fell.

“Hold the upper position,” the clerk read. “Signal the loss. Surviving companies unable to reach the keep are to assemble at the eastern road station under the Surety's appointed officers. No separate attempts to recover the fortress.”

Slate looked out at the empty signal cradle above the keep.

Song had fired it before Slate reached the inner court.

“And if the whole fortress falls?”

The clerk's voice became quieter. “The same assembly. Additional banners are called under the defense covenant. The station has standing orders to provision them.”

Shen didn't need to make a speech to each house. Their oaths had already settled which side they stood on when foreign troops crossed the frontier. Slate had crossed it, taken a fortress and given them a rallying point they could name.

Edrin set a finger beside the requisition dates. “They were gathering before yesterday. We didn't beat all of them to the wall. We beat the part assigned to hold it.”

Slate had known this conquest would make the war larger. Knowing it in Bastion was easier than reading the provisions for the next army from the previous commander's desk.

A Lurker appeared in the doorway with the report from the eastern lookout.

Two distant signal stations had answered the keep's last flare. Mounted couriers were leaving the farther one along separate roads. Edrin sent him back to keep watching and turned to Slate.

“We should get this to Matek.”

“Copies. Keep the originals here.”

He would send Brenn the supply figures, Serena the captured stores and Fidem a report he could put in front of the Imperial ambassador. Bastion's eastern attacker had lost its main forward base. That was a victory worth announcing accurately.

Shen and the Stillhold Concord were preparing to come for it together. That belonged in the same report.

Below the window, soldiers gathered as Brace carried Lucidus's banner onto the captured wall. One of the human engineers had found a sound socket for its pole. The cloth rose above the broken curtain, and a cheer spread through the forecourt.

Slate went to the window.

Sumnu stood among the Raiders with his bandaged side turned away from their eager shoves. Lu's crew had come out of the shade to watch. Even the

guard at Wei's door turned his head for a moment before returning to the prisoner.

They had earned this.

Slate stayed until the banner caught the wind.

Then he went back to Song's table, moved the captured dispatches aside and pulled the fortress plan toward him. “Get the officers fed,” he told Edrin. “Then bring them here.”

He put his claw on the eastern road. “This time, Shen gets to knock.”

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XXXI

The Stolen Fortress

THE STAIR MOVED BENEATH LU'S HAND.

Slate felt it a moment later through the stone under his feet. The tremor traveled up the north wall, crossed the landing, and stopped at the iron hinge of the storehouse door. No cart had passed outside. No shaper in Lu's crew was working this side of the keep.

“Down,” Slate said.

Lu pulled his palm away. The top three steps folded into the wall. Slate caught the Builder by the collar and threw him across the landing before the floor split. Two guards followed him into the storehouse. Slate jumped after them as a seam opened where he had stood.

The stair fell one level and stopped with a crack that shook dust from the ceiling. Stone blocks dropped into the space beneath it. Whoever had shaped the cut intended to leave no passage between the upper stores and the north court.

Lu rolled to his feet. He had once been short enough to pass beneath the warehouse railing without ducking. In his new body he struck it with one shoulder and swore in Dwarvish. His tail came down behind him, a third point of balance while he studied the ragged edge of the floor.

“That's load-bearing,” he said.

“It was. Where did the pressure come from?”

Lu's pupils narrowed over the broken stone. Slate could see him measuring its faces and the angle of the split without a tool. The Builder had spent the last week demonstrating his new precision whenever anyone gave him an excuse. He made no joke about this measurement.

“East. Through the service wall,” Lu said. “They left a thin web under the top course and pulled it away. Someone's still working from the other side.”

“Can you hold this room?” Slate asked.

“If I give up the stair.”

“It's gone. Hold the room.” Slate sent Edrin the shape of the collapse through the Scourgemind. Two Lurkers had gone ahead of Lu to examine the north service stairs. One answered from the gallery beyond: a pair of former garrison shapers were withdrawing through a sealed door, taking the gallery with them a span at a time. The Lurkers had followed until the floor began to break under their feet.

“Let them move,” Slate sent. *“Watch where they intend to leave. No one crosses a working floor alone.”*

Edrin's reply came with an image of a black slot between two walls. *There's a second way out. Narrow enough that they think we won't use it.*

Slate looked at Lu. “They've left a door for themselves. Can you keep it open?”

“I can tell you when it's closing. Keeping it open depends on what's beyond it.”

“Then let's have a look.”

He left two guards with Lu and sent Brace for the senior engineer. The storehouse held captured iron, lamp oil and the grain the Scourge had counted that afternoon. Slate had put his flag over the fortress only hours ago. He was not giving its food back to Shen by allowing a retreating crew to drop it through the mountain.

In the lower court, soldiers were still carrying the wounded indoors. Slate intercepted Sumnu beside the barracks. “North service way. Demolition team. Keep your companies off the upper storehouse floor until Lu signs it. Put a reserve at the cistern. If they cut the water, I want hands on the intake before the level falls.”

Sumnu glanced at the dust drifting from the gallery windows. “How many of them?”

“Edrin has seen two. There'll be more. Song's last orders sent his surviving companies east, but nobody orders a fortress demolished with two men and a prayer.”

“Do you want my Raiders in the passage?”

“I want you where the next failure will hurt. The cistern and food. I'll bring the guard through the gallery.”

Sumnu looked as though he disliked the second part. He didn't argue over it. He sent his nearest lieutenant toward the cistern and took the granary steps himself.

Brace met Slate at the service door with six of the Guard. Dessa was among them. Corren and the rest of the unit held the keep, the prisoners and the route to the outer gate. Brace had picked people who could fight in a passage without blocking one another.

“Edrin has a Lurker in the ventilation shaft,” Brace said. “We can follow the lower wall to her.”

“The engineer?”

“Coming. She wants her hammer.”

“Then give it to her.”

They passed under a row of lamps set in recesses too shallow to hide a person. The air smelled of wet grit and old oil. At each turn Slate touched the floor with a claw, feeling for the minute shifts his otolithic sense could find before a stone broke openly. He had come to rely on the ability while fighting Shen. A steady floor told him little about the wall on the far side of it, and he left enough distance between soldiers that one collapsing slab wouldn't take the whole party.

The gallery narrowed where a shaper had moved its inner wall outward, taking most of the floor with it. Only a ledge remained.

“They've made their route single-file,” Brace said.

“For us. They know where the supports are.”

Dessa set one foot on the remaining stone. A slow line of dust ran from the wall above her head.

“Back,” Slate said.

She obeyed before the line became a crack. A block drove outward and struck the opposite wall where her shoulder had been. Stone fragments whipped across Slate's ward.

At the far end of the new opening, a dwarf in a leather apron raised his hand to the wall again. Slate saw the mana gather along his forearm.

Slate sent a pulse through the Scourgemind. Edrin's Lurker came out of the ventilation shaft behind the shaper and cut across his working arm. He screamed and fell against the narrow wall. The floor didn't collapse. The Lurker pulled him clear of the edge and bound his hands before he could touch stone again.

Another shaper fled deeper into the passage.

“Alive?” Slate asked.

Yes. Angry.

“Good. Ask him how many more are under us,” Slate sent to the Lurker.

The senior engineer arrived carrying a narrow mason's hammer and a coil of marked cord. She stood beside the opening, looked once at the unsupported edge and tugged the cord tight between two surviving joints.

“This is not a tunnel,” she said. “It's a drain someone widened. The main support is lower. Lu can put a foot on it from the storehouse side if he comes down through the east bay.”

“How quickly?”

“If you stop them from taking that support away.”

Slate passed the answer to Lu. The Builder sent back a precise picture of the bay and where his crew could reach it. He had three craftsmen with him, two human and one Scourge, and wanted the lower opening kept clear until they braced it.

“You get that,” Slate told him. “I'll make sure the people trying to close it are busy.”

The captive dwarf laughed through a bloody mouth. “Too late.”

Slate crouched before him. “For which part?”

The man tried to look past him. Slate shifted until their eyes met. “You had a way out,” Slate said. “Your officers are using it. You can help keep it open and walk. Or you can keep pretending they came back for you.”

“They will seal the northern cut.”

“There it is. When?”

The captive's jaw worked. Edrin's Lurker tightened the cord around his wrists and he winced. “When the beetles reach the mark,” he said.

The engineer looked up. “Ironroots.”

A scraping rose beneath the passage. It came in short, uneven bursts, too slow and rough to be a shaper's work. Slate had heard ironroot beetles excavating around the approaches before. Their jaws took compacted earth, not the fitted stone around them. The creatures could undermine an earthen service tunnel and carry the spoil away. A stoneshaper could then break the unsupported span at the chosen moment.

“Where's the mark?” Slate asked.

The dwarf pressed his lips together.

Slate stood and pointed to the senior engineer. “Take him to Lu. If he knows the line, put him beside someone who can tell when he's lying.”

“He'll be tied,” she said.

“Of course.”

The captive stared at Slate's claws. Slate gave him a pleasant smile and walked on.

The gallery turned toward the outer earthworks. Edrin had placed a second Lurker above the route, beyond the reach of anyone moving at floor level. She sent Slate a view of four retreating figures and the cart they were pushing. Its load was mostly wooden chests. Two soldiers carried crossbows. A third wore a shaper's apron beneath a cuirass. The last had both hands flat against the wall as he moved.

At their pace they could reach the final cut before Lu braced the drain.

Slate counted the distances. He had a narrow channel, a depleted ward reserve and no space to spread his wings. The cart was slowing them. He could catch it if the floor held long enough. He could also trap his own Guard behind the next collapse.

“Brace, take two above with Edrin's Lurker. I want the cart stopped from the far end. Dessa and I will come behind. Leave us a route back.”

Brace looked at the cut beneath the wall. “You aren't going forward with only one beside you.”

“Then bring one more. Your job is to close their exit. Choose who's good at that.”

Brace chose a Raider with a broad shield and took the overhead shaft. He had stopped trying to make every order sound like a request for Slate's safety. Slate found that much easier to work with.

The remaining three crossed the first gap on a timber plank the engineer's crew had set in place. Slate put his weight on the far edge before Dessa followed. The stone there was thin but stable. Beyond it, a crossbowman saw them and fired.

Slate's ward caught the quarrel. Dessa sent a hooked blade down the passage. It struck the man's shoulder guard and pulled him off balance. The Raider came over the plank behind her and drove his shield into the man before he could reload.

The cart lurched forward. Its shaper twisted the wall between them. A ridge rose across the passage, lifting one wheel while dropping the other. The chests began to slide.

“Leave it!” the leading soldier shouted.

The shaper did not. He bent to save a chest bound with red cord. Slate saw a gap between the raised wheel and the wall. He went through low, scraping two scales from his back, and struck the man's bracing knee. The shaper fell over the tongue of the cart.

Slate pinned his wrist beneath one foot. His free hand found a seam in the cart's wooden frame. Monomolecular Edge passed through it without much resistance. The front axle tore away when Slate pulled.

The cart dropped across the passage. Its chests spilled. The leading soldier vanished around the final bend while the second tried to climb the load.

Dessa caught that one and forced him down.

The trapped shaper raised his other hand. Mana flared along the ridge in the wall. Slate cut into the stone at the visible line, severing a physical lip. The mana continued through the deeper working. The floor beneath Dessa began to tilt.

“Back!” Slate warned Dessa.

She jumped onto the cart. The Raider pulled his prisoner over the chests. Slate released the shaper's wrist only long enough to seize the other hand and turn him away from the wall. He slammed both palms together and bound them with his own strap.

The floor gave way behind them. The fallen plank disappeared into a dark gap.

Lu's voice came through the Scourgemind from the storehouse. *I have the lower support. Don't put more weight on the outer wall. I'm taking the load toward the east bay.*

Slate looked at the pinned cart and the high opening Brace had taken. *“Can you hold us a route out?”*

For people. Not the cart, Lu replied through the link.

“That's enough,” Slate replied through the link.

He wanted the chests. He wanted the shaper. He wanted the final passage open. But not at the cost of his people. Slate passed the captive to Dessa and climbed toward the overhead opening.

An ironroot beetle burst from the earth beneath the gallery wall. Its jaw plates were packed with black soil. It struck the stone base, found no purchase and backed into its tunnel, pushing spoil with its hind legs. A second emerged farther along the earthen seam. There were fresh chalk strokes on the wall above them.

The mark.

Someone had set the creatures to excavate to that line, then intended to use shaping on the exposed stone support. The beetles were labor, dangerous but limited. The waiting shapers were the weapon.

Slate sent Lu the position and the depth he could see. Lu answered with a sharper sensation of pressure beneath the bay. He understood. He was already shifting the remaining support toward sound rock.

Slate reached the high shaft as a bell sounded outside.

It wasn't one of the fortress alarms. The note came from farther east, across the hill beyond the north cut. An answering signal rose behind it.

Brace sent an image from above: the leading soldier had reached the exit. He was climbing toward a saddle path, one hand raised to call the men waiting there. Beyond him, two Confederacy shapers pressed their palms against separate sides of the same stone pier.

“They'll take the last bridge,” Brace said.

“Then take their hands off it.”

Edrin's Lurker dropped from the shaft mouth onto the nearest shaper. Brace struck the other with the rim of his shield. The man fell away from the pier, but not before a crack ran through it.

Slate climbed out beside them. The north cut opened onto an earthen ramp with a short stone bridge across a narrow ravine. It was the route the demolition crew had expected to use. On the far bank, four soldiers were already pulling ropes through rings set in a retaining wall. The ropes held no siege engine. They were attached to wedges above the bridge's far seat.

Slate saw what they meant to do. The shapers would break the near pier. The soldiers would yank the wedges out of the far one. The bridge would fall whole, with everyone on it.

"Edrin, ropes," Slate sent.

Two Lurkers moved over the ravine on separate routes. One caught the far wall; the other struck a soldier at the first rope. Slate ran to the near pier. Its crack spread as the fallen shaper reached for stone again.

Slate put his tail through the man's legs and drove him away from the wall. Brace caught him. Then Slate planted both hands against the bridge's side and felt it shift. He couldn't shape it back. He could hold some of its weight while Lu made the route behind him trustworthy.

The far soldiers pulled.

One wedge came free. The bridge dropped a hand's breadth. Slate's heels slid in loose soil. His damaged wrist bit with pain and his ward consumed mana as falling fragments struck his shoulders. Across the ravine, a Lurker severed the second rope. The wedge remained seated.

"Get off it," Brace said.

"I know."

Slate had no intention of dying to save a bridge. He counted the soldiers still on the span. The last Raider dragged their captive clear of the near end. Dessa reached the far bank and helped Edrin's Lurker secure the soldiers there. The route had served its purpose.

Slate let go and jumped for the bank.

The bridge settled another foot. It hung from its far seat, unusable for wagons but still attached. Lu's support took some of the movement through

the wall behind him. The storehouse didn't follow it into the ravine.

Slate landed hard enough to reopen the crack in his wrist scale. He rolled, came up, and turned toward the signal hill.

The leading soldier had escaped. The others were prisoners. Behind him, the shapers had failed to bring down the keep, the cistern or the upper stores. They had taken the north stair and the wagon road. He could replace both if Lu's crew had time.

He sent Edrin after the fugitive as far as the next crest, with orders to observe and return. The man might lead Edrin to whoever had ordered the demolition. Killing him on the next slope would tell Slate nothing.

By dusk, Lu had built a supported footway into the east storehouse bay. The senior engineer inspected each seating joint while the former garrison shaper watched from a guarded chair. Whenever the captive tried to call a crack harmless, she made him explain the load it would bear. Slate left her to it.

The captured chests held demolition orders, chalk, spare chisels and measured sketches of the fortress's weakest approaches. One held the signal phrases used along the eastern road. Another contained names of the men detailed to close Shouguan if it fell. The list was longer than the crew Slate had caught.

He spread the sketches over Song's table. Shen had prepared to lose the fortress. The demolition crew hadn't acted merely out of spite. It was the first part of a plan to make the conquest expensive to hold.

Lu entered with dust in the bronze glints of his scales. He had steadied the storehouse, but his shoulders sagged. The short claws of his hands were caked with lime. He laid a piece of the broken gallery wall beside the map.

“This seam was shaped before we attacked,” he said. “They prepared places to pull it apart. The beetles only cleared the earth under the last supports.”

“How much of the fortress?”

“I can certify the cistern and both granaries tonight. The upper stores need another inspection. The eastern gallery may have more cuts. I won't put

men to sleep above it until I know.”

“Use the keep. Bring the prisoners through the court, not the galleries.”

Lu hesitated at the table. “The ones who stayed to destroy it knew there were wounded inside. Some of their own.”

“Then they trusted you to save them,” Slate said.

Lu looked at him. Slate held his gaze. “You did. I intend to keep making that an expensive habit for Shen.”

The Builder's expression changed, amusement arriving reluctantly beneath the exhaustion. “You'll have to leave me enough stone to work with.”

“I took you a whole mountain. Don't tell me you're short.”

Lu picked up the broken piece and turned it in his hands. He found a hidden channel cut through the middle, fine as a hair. Slate's Combined Vision caught a residue of mana within it, an active working still holding one fragment against another. When he touched it with an ordinary claw, the contact passed through the glowing line without changing it. Monomolecular Edge could cut the physical stone around the line. It couldn't reach the magic that held it.

He had paid for a weapon sharp enough to open material seams. Shen and his shapers had learned to put their strength somewhere a material blade couldn't touch. Cleansing Fire might unravel the line, but the flame would damage the stone carrying it. That was an acceptable bargain on a battlefield, less so beneath a roof full of wounded.

Slate returned to the pattern he had passed over in Bastion. Mana-Infused Monomolecular Edge would let a contact cut sever a working without breaking the stone around it. He could save his ten thousand experience toward the seventeen thousand five hundred needed for level thirty-six, and leave nine hundred biomass for the wounded. Lu had shown him what leaving Shen’s hidden seams intact could cost. Slate chose the edge.

Mana-Infused Monomolecular Edge I
Major evolution

Carries a controlled mana current through the cutting lattice, allowing a contact cut through an active nonphysical working.
Requirements: LVL 24; Monomolecular Edge
Biomass cost: 900
XP cost: 600

He had brought reserves for a campaign, and Serena hadn't released them so he could admire a menu. He confirmed the allocation against the reserve tally before authorizing the construction.

Evolution acquired: Mana-Infused Monomolecular Edge I
Biomass spent: 900
XP spent: 600
XP available: 9,400

The change began at the roots of his cutting claws. Heat traced a fine line along each lattice. Slate closed his hand and waited while the construction finished. He could feel mana enter the edge. Maintaining that flow took effort; he couldn’t leave it running through every fight.

“Let me test it on that,” he told Lu.

Lu set the fragment in an empty stone tray, away from the charts. “The line is weak. If you overfeed the cut, you'll break the whole piece.”

“That's why you're watching.”

Slate drew a narrow current through the lattice. Directed Mana Conduction helped him keep the flow even. It did not provide more mana. He touched the glowing line with the edge of one claw.

The physical stone remained unmarked. The binding snapped. Two fragments shifted apart in the tray.

Slate looked at Lu. “Now I know what it does.”

“On a small, unguarded working,” Lu said. “Don't reach into Shen's hands and assume they'll come apart.”

“I was planning to make him work for it.”

Slate put the separated fragments beside Song's drawings. He wanted the cost entered in the ledger and the limits tested again before anyone built a plan around the new edge. A magic line within arm's reach could be cut. A hidden network beneath a fortress could not.

Edrin returned after nightfall. The fugitive had reached a signal station east of the ravine. From there, fires appeared along three separate approaches. Mounted parties passed between them, carrying orders away from Shouguan rather than toward it.

“They're not assembling at the fortress,” Edrin said. “They're closing the roads around it.”

Slate studied the captured map. Each marked station sat beyond an approach he would need for food, reinforcements or retreat. Shen was allowing him to keep the prize long enough for its walls to become the edges of a trap.

Slate sent Sumnu the southern station and Edrin the north saddle through the Scourgemind. *“Twelve Raiders south, four Lurkers north. Leave tonight. Find the signal crews before they close our supply roads.”*

By the time the nearest bell rang again, Sumnu’s Raiders were moving down the southern service road.

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XXXII

The Unquiet Province

THE FIRST VILLAGE SENT SLATE AN INVOICE.

Its elder had written down the grain his soldiers had eaten, the gate hinge a Raider had torn off while searching for weapons, and the labor needed to repair two irrigation checks. At the bottom she had added the price of one cloudmoth cocoon crushed beneath a guard's boot.

“That last one is ambitious,” Sumnu said.

Slate held the sheet farther from his eyes. He could make out a few numbers. The elder, a woman named Pei Fen, watched him over the table and seemed to know exactly how much of the writing he could read.

“How much for the hinge?” he asked her.

“The iron is ours. Three hours for the smith.”

“And the cocoon?”

“You came through the breeding house after I told you not to.”

“I didn't. One of mine did.” Slate set the invoice down. “Which one?”

She pointed to a young Raider posted outside the door. His claws were clean. A streak of pale silk clung to the seam of his boot. “He thought there might be a crossbow behind the frames,” she said.

“Was there?”

“There were forty cocoons. Now there are thirty-nine.”

Slate called the Raider in. The soldier confirmed he had stepped among the breeding racks during the search. He had found no weapon. Slate assigned

him to help the village smith fit the hinge before he returned to his company, then told Sumnu to put the cocoon on the supply account.

Fen didn't thank him. She turned the paper around and tapped the irrigation checks. “These break when no one tends them. If your soldiers hold the upper road, my workers need to cross it at dawn and dusk.”

“Give my patrol a list of names. They won't delay your people at the gate.”

“And when the next patrol comes?”

Slate had planned for exactly that. He showed her the seal Lu had cut in a piece of hard timber. “Your list goes to the road post and the fortress. Either patrol can check it. If one stops a named worker without cause, send the worker to my commander with the time and the soldier's name.”

“You expect me to complain to your commander about your soldiers?” Fen asked.

“I expect you to tell me when they're making my road worse,” Slate said.

Fen considered him for a long moment. “You will get a list. You will also get a second invoice if the water misses the lower orchards tonight.”

“Fair.”

Slate left with the first invoice. Sumnu waited until they were outside before speaking. “You let her charge you for a bug.”

“I let her tell us which door mattered. Our people could have burned the breeding house and reported they'd found nothing. Now she knows I'd hear about it.”

“She still doesn't like us.”

“I didn't buy her affection. I bought a working gate and a reason to keep the silk in this district.”

The road rose through the lower terraces of the White Stair. From below, its walls seemed to climb without end, each line holding a narrow strip of orchards or damp beds fed by the spring above. The upper air was cool. Warm vapor drifted from covered breeding houses set against the rock.

Workers carried baskets of mulberry leaves through their doors. Some watched the Scourge patrol pass; others shut the shutters.

They had occupied Shouguan for three days. The fortress's cistern held, and Lu had certified two granaries. Its damaged north stair remained closed. Builders were laying a new wagon way around the ravine, but Lu had refused to let loaded carts use it until the far seat stopped settling. Slate had given him that authority and had no interest in taking it back because a courier disliked waiting.

Holding the stronghold required food. Protecting the farms that made it worth holding required a road. Every road the Scourge claimed made another household decide whether to stay, flee or take up arms.

At the next terrace, Deng stood beside a sluice gate with three orchard workers. She had come from the frontier crossing as a guide, then remained after the fortress fell. Slate hadn't asked her to speak for every settlement. She knew this one well enough to tell him who would answer a question and who would shut a door.

“The north channel is still running,” she said. “The lower gate isn't.”

“Broken?”

“Closed from the hill. The district warden ordered it shut before he rode east yesterday. He told the orchard workers the relocation wagons would take them before the next watering.”

One worker, a thin man with a scar crossing his chin, stepped forward. “Our fields are below that gate. If it stays shut, the early trees dry.”

Slate studied the channel. Its water slipped through a fitted stone throat above them, then divided between two terraces. The lower branch was dry. A raised stone shutter blocked it where the wall met the hill. The mechanism was built into the rock. Lu could move it if Slate brought him here, but Lu was holding a fortress together.

“Can a local shaper open it?” Slate asked.

The worker glanced at Deng. “The one who maintained it left with the warden.”

“Of his own choice?”

“He had a wife in the upper town.”

That answered nothing. Slate sent a scout along the hill track to inspect the gate from above. He told Deng to keep the workers out of the channel until they knew why it had been shut. Someone might have prepared the shutter to break if a stranger touched it.

His precaution earned him an impatient look from the scarred worker. Slate let the man have it. Water running an hour late could be fixed. A crushed farmer took more work.

Edrin's warning arrived while they were still at the gate.

Column on the upper road. Two dozen armed. Four wagons, perhaps five. Families aboard. They are moving east and keeping the lower approach out of sight.

An image came with the message: wagons covered in gray cloth, wheels throwing pale dust, soldiers riding on both sides. A boy's hand held the rear board of one wagon until a guard struck it with the flat of his spear. The hand disappeared beneath the cover.

“Where?” Slate asked.

Above the south orchard. They'll reach the fork before your patrol if they keep this pace.

The fork led east toward Shen's assembly stations. It also controlled the hill track to the sluice gate. Slate described the wagons to Deng. Her face went still.

“Craft households,” she said. “They'll take the people who can keep the water moving.”

“And leave us the dry trees.”

“Some of those families may have chosen to go.”

“Then I'll ask them when the soldiers stop speaking for them.”

Slate sent Sumnu to hold the lower road with eight Raiders, enough to make a clear line without exposing the fortress. Edrin already had three Lurkers above the column. Brace took the guard with Slate up the narrow orchard path. The rest of Sumnu's company remained at Shouguan. If this was a lure, Shen would find soldiers waiting at the gate instead of an empty prize.

The orchard route climbed between low stone walls. Cloudmoth breeding houses stood farther back against the warmed rock, their vents breathing damp air across the path. Slate could smell leaves, wet plaster and the sharp metal scent of the channel's exposed workings. Two children watched him from beneath a ladder until their mother drew them inside.

He wished the column had used the broad road. Its captain would wish the same when the Lurkers came down behind him.

The first wagon reached the fork as Slate climbed onto the wall above it. He saw four under canvas, then a fifth at the rear. Forty or fifty people could fit among them if the loads were as cramped as the image suggested. Two soldiers rode at the head. The rest walked with shields and long spears. A pair of shapers kept one hand free of their reins.

The captain was a woman in a bronze-edged coat. She recognized Slate at once. Her riders pulled their mounts short, causing the first wagon to jolt behind them. “You've interrupted an ordered evacuation,” she called.

“The road has changed hands. Stop the wagons.”

“These are Confederacy subjects under a district emergency order. The wardens sent me to move these households east before your army reached the terraces.”

“Then the covenant can tell them where to sleep after I ask whether they want the ride.”

She studied the walls beside the road. “You don't have jurisdiction here.”

“I have the fork.” Slate spread one wing, letting her see the gold scales catch the light. “Give me a better argument before your people mistake this for a fight.”

The captain spoke softly to the shaper nearest her. Slate couldn't hear the words. He felt the change beneath his feet when the man put his palm on the road.

“Brace. Left wall,” Slate sent.

Brace and two guards dropped into the ditch before the wall moved. A wedge of stone rose between Slate and the lead wagon, meant to screen the captain while the drivers turned east. Slate jumped from the wall onto its top. It lifted him high enough to see the rear of the column.

Edrin's Lurkers were already above the last wagon.

“No fire into the carts,” Slate sent. *“Horses and armed hands. Leave the families room to move.”*

The captain drew her sword. “You are holding civilians hostage.”

“Open the covers,” Slate said. “They can watch us decide that.”

Her shaper raised a second wall. Slate leaped down before it met the first. The new block cut him from the head of the line. A spear came through the gap between them. He caught the shaft, pulled the soldier forward and threw him into the ditch, keeping the point away from the wagon horse.

Sumnu's Raiders struck the fork below. They did not charge the wagons. They formed across the east road and drove the escort toward the terrace walls, where the horses couldn't build speed. A Lurker landed beside the rear driver and cut the harness traces before he could whip the team into a run. The wagon stopped. Its cover shifted as people inside braced against one another.

The first shaper tried to drop the raised wall toward Sumnu. Slate ran along its base and drove a claw through the man's coat, pinning it to the stone behind him without touching his flesh. The shaper flinched and lost the movement.

“Don't,” Slate said. “You'll flatten your own wagon.”

The captain came around the other side of the wall and struck at Slate's neck. He caught the sword on his warded forearm and used his tail to take

her legs. She went down hard but rolled before his claws found her throat. Skilled. She rose behind a shield bearer, putting two men between them.

The second shaper touched the channel wall above the fork.

Stone opened under the water.

The stream that should have gone to the lower orchards poured across the road, knee deep and rising. Wagon wheels sank into the softened verge. A horse screamed. The captain's soldiers backed toward the upper bank, leaving the first driver struggling with the reins.

Slate saw the trick. The flow would wash the wagons against the terrace edge. The shaper could close the breach after his own people crossed, and Slate would spend the afternoon pulling civilians from a flood while the escort escaped.

“Deng, gate above us. Open the lower branch,” he called.

“The shutter may be trapped,” Deng warned.

“Inspect first,” Slate replied. “Bring the workers. I only need the water turned, not a miracle.”

Slate put his shoulder against the first wagon and shoved it out of the deepest flow. The horse kicked at him. He took a blow against his thigh and kept pushing until both wheels found the raised side of the road. Brace climbed onto the driver's bench, freed a jammed rein and brought the animal forward.

Behind them, a Raider smashed the channel shaper's hand away from the wall with the wooden back of his shield. Edrin's Lurker closed the distance and bound his wrists. The water kept coming. The stone cut stayed open without him.

Slate could force the channel shut by breaking its lip. That would cut off water to the orchards for days. He wanted the road and the water. He left the channel to the people who understood it and went after the captain.

She had gathered twelve soldiers near the east fork. They could retreat through the orchard gap if they moved now. Sumnu barred it with his

Raiders. Slate came from the flooded road and the captain found herself facing both.

“Put the sword down,” Slate said. “You'll keep your wounded. You won't take the households.”

“They owe service to their member house.”

“You can write that to Shen. I'm asking what they'll do.”

She looked over his shoulder at the wagons. A man had pulled the cover back. Two children sat beside him, soaked to their waists. One of her own soldiers was helping another family down. The captain's expression tightened. She had chosen the flood as a screen, and now she could see where it ran.

“They are safer with us,” she said.

“Maybe some are. I won't stop anyone who chooses your road after I get the soldiers off it.”

For the first time, she looked uncertain whether to believe him. Slate could hardly blame her. He was armed, larger than she was, and standing among her people with blood on his claws. He did not soften his posture. He gave her a clear choice.

“The next order you give can save them a second fight,” Slate told the captain.

She lowered her sword. The soldiers nearest her followed. Two farther back ran for the orchard. Edrin let them go far enough to leave the families, then took them from above. Neither had a chance to raise a crossbow.

The fight ended before the water did.

Slate went to the wagons himself. He had the escort's weapons collected and moved the prisoners to one side of the road. Then he asked the passengers to come down in family groups. Some waited until he stepped back. Others needed a hand under the axle where the flood still moved too quickly for a child to stand.

The first man to speak gave his name and demanded to know if the Scourge intended to eat them. Slate told him which granary held food and which barracks held the wounded. The man looked unconvinced. His daughter asked whether the cloudmoths would still hatch if the breeding house had gone dry. She was thinking farther ahead than her father.

“The water's being turned back now,” Slate said. “Ask the woman at the gate how many racks she needs carried out.”

Deng had reached the upper shutter with two workers. They found a locking pin jammed into its slot, meant to keep the lower branch closed even if its stone face was moved. One worker removed it with a mallet while Deng watched for any change beneath the upper wall. The spring returned to the lower channel. Water drained off the road in a widening sheet.

The scarred worker came down to Slate with the pin in his hand. “This was set yesterday,” he said.

“By your official?”

“He took the key. I don't know who set the pin.”

Slate gave the pin to Edrin. “Find out where he rode.”

He had the carts moved onto firm ground before discussing where anyone would go. Of the households aboard, several had close family east of the fortress and still wanted to join them. Slate gave them a captured wagon and an escort as far as the next neutral turn. He let them leave without a speech.

More stayed than he expected. Two had worked the irrigation checks. One made the metal teeth for cloudmoth winding frames. A widow kept the orchard records and knew which terrace had lost its winter trees. A stoneshaper's apprentice, who had ridden beneath the rear cover with his hands bound, asked whether Lu needed anyone who could measure a support without trying to move it.

“He'll ask you to prove it,” Slate said.

“Good.”

Slate liked the answer.

The captured captain watched from the wall while the families sorted themselves. She had expected a forced conversion, perhaps a triumphal march of prisoners under Scourge guard. Slate wanted workers who could keep the terraces alive and a district that didn't have to be fed from Bastion.

“You will report all this to Shen,” he told her.

“You are releasing me?”

“After your wounded can travel. With the people who chose the east road. You will tell him I returned his soldiers alive, and that the households you brought away have answered for themselves.”

“He won't recognize your authority.”

“I noticed.” He left her with a guard and went to speak to Fen. Her lower terrace had received water before the sun passed the western ridge. She crossed the irrigation charge off her invoice. The cocoon remained.

“I thought you'd try again,” she said.

“I stepped around the breeding house this time.”

“Your soldiers didn't. One helped us carry trays when the channel broke.”

“Charge me for that too, if you like.”

She didn't smile. She folded the paper and put it away.

By evening the wagons stood beside the road post. Families who had chosen to remain were taking stock of rooms, work and the winter they would now spend under Slate's protection. The orchard crews had returned to their channels. Sumnu had enough soldiers on the fork to hold it and no reason to claim every farmhouse.

At the road post, Slate lit a small white flame over the blank dispatch sheet. It burned brighter than he intended and stopped drawing mana from him.

Slate told Brace to keep the captain's guard outside the room. He had invited one goddess into enough meetings to know she could make

everyone else forget why they were there.

“You waited until the carts were unloaded,” he said.

Lucidus's image stood in the flame, silver and gold narrowed to the size of his hand. “You wanted the families to answer without me standing over them.”

“I wanted them to answer without anyone standing over them.”

“Then you know what you have chosen to protect.”

He looked at the roster on the table. Pei Fen's cloudmoths were not on it. Neither were the irrigation gates, the smith who would repair a hinge or the child who had asked about dry breeding racks. A roster couldn’t feed these people or keep their farms watered. If he wanted them to stay, he had to keep the district working.

“Five wagons of households,” Slate said. “Some went east. The rest can stay without being bound to my army. I'm keeping the fork and the water.”

“You already hold a fortress. Ordan's avatar will call each village you defend another piece taken from his covenant.”

“Shen can call it what he likes. His captain tried to carry people away behind a locked sluice gate.”

“And he will say you crossed an emergency movement to take them.”

“He will. I sent her back alive to make the argument. She saw who chose to leave.”

The flame brightened. Lucidus hadn't come to dispute whether the captain lived. Slate could hear the question beneath hers: how much more fighting would he bring into her domain?

“The Vallyrian houses have begun testing the western roads again,” she said. “A convoy outside Koral lost its escort yesterday. Your captains recovered the survivors, but they cannot be in Koral and here. You have stretched the Scourge across two fronts while its young are still being raised behind walls that have only just been rebuilt.”

Slate disliked the reminder because it was accurate. He had seen the western dispatch before leaving Shouguan. The survivors were alive; the convoy's grain was gone. One lost load could be replaced. Enough of them would empty a garrison without Nocturnus sending an army.

“I left the western seats with their own garrisons,” he said. “Matek has the destabilization campaign. Bastion has the Concord's healers and Crusaders, and Woodhaven's reserve stays home. Serena knows what I've taken from the stores. She'll send grain when the road is certified, not before Lu says a wagon can cross it.”

“You have named the people who will bear the strain.”

“Yes. That's why they have authority to tell me when one of my plans can't be fed.”

“And if the west needs soldiers while Shen closes the east road?”

“Then I stop chasing his retreating companies. Sumnu holds the fork, Edrin watches the hill tracks, and the fortress takes the families who can't remain safely below. I keep one road open to Bastion. I don't march on Covenant just because Shen sends me a letter.”

Lucidus studied him. “That is a narrower war than the one you could wage.”

“It's the one I'm fighting.”

“Until he forces more.”

“Until I decide more is worth the cost.” Slate set his claws against the edge of the writing table. “You chose me because I could make that decision. Trust your avatar to know when a road is worth defending.”

She was silent long enough for him to hear the water passing through the lower channel. The workers had opened it again. If he abandoned the terrace tomorrow, they would remember what his promises had amounted to.

“I trust you to see an advantage,” Lucidus said. “I am asking whether you can see the limit.”

“I just gave it to you.”

“You gave me a plan. Keep to it long enough for the people under it to live.”

“I intend to.”

“If you mean to move beyond that road, tell me before the armies do.”

“I'll tell you. I won't ask permission.”

A reluctant smile crossed her face. “No. You rarely do.”

The light returned to an ordinary flame. Slate let it die. He added the western convoy loss to the dispatch for Serena, then marked the road and water crews as the first eastern supply priority. Lucidus had made him account for the west before he committed more of its supplies to the east.

Slate sent Shouguan a list of the people staying and their skills. He sent the same list to Lu, with the apprentice's name marked. The captured captain's account would reach Shen. His report would take several days to reach Fidem and Serena. By then, they’d have new eastern outposts to supply.

With the district roster sent, Slate checked his status before leaving the village.

Name	**Slate**
Faction	**The Scourge**
Form	**Scion**
LVL	**35**
XP invested in self	**297,500**
XP available	**9,400**
Next LVL investment	**17,500**

BIOWEAPONS
- **Acid Gland II** *(Etching Acid)*
- **Active Duotoxin Control** *(Paralytic Neurotoxin II, Hallucinogenic Psychotoxin)*
- **Magotoxin I** *(mana-network disruption after injection)*
- **Prehensile Tongue** *(Anticoagulant Saliva)*
- **Claws and expanding jaws**
- **Tail Blade** *(Monomolecular Edge, Mana-Infused Monomolecular Edge I, toxin delivery, Vampiric Blade)*

BIOLOGICAL SYSTEMS

- **Skeletal System II** *(Crystalline Osteo-Remodeling, Mana-Forged Osteo-Matrix)*
- **Muscular System I** *(Mana-Forged Musculature)*
- **Integumentary System IV** *(Chromatophoric Sheathing, Mana-Forged Hide II, Phase-Shift Cloaking)*
- **Sensory System I** *(Combined Vision, Otolithic Matrix I)*
- **Nervous System II** *(Mana-Forged Synapses, Directed Mana Conduction)*
- **Immune System III** *(battle regeneration, rapid wound sealing)*

UTILITY & SPELLCRAFT
- **Communion**
- **Cleansing Fire**
- **Ash Infusion I**
- **Scourgemind** *(concurrent exchanges)*
- **Scourgeshield II**
- **Harmonic Resonance I**
- **Kinetic Dispersion I**

He closed the sheet and climbed the terrace wall for a final look at the White Stair. Lamps glowed among the breeding houses. Water crossed the stones in thin, controlled lines. Beyond them, at the east fork, his guard had lit its own lamps beside the confiscated weapons.

The fortress above was still worth holding. Now there were people below it who would demand that he hold more than the walls.

Slate found he wanted to see whether Shen could make him leave them.

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XXXIII

The Imperial Visit

The Imperial ambassador arrived with forty wagons and wanted to inspect the receiving house before she saw the governor.

Fidem met her at the eastern gate. Isela Varela had traveled under a striped awning rather than behind the curtains of a carriage. Dust marked the edge of her shawl. She stepped down while her attendants were still securing the horses and surveyed the repaired road running into Bastion.

“You paved the market approach,” she said.

“Lu's builders did,” Fidem said. “It no longer becomes a pond when it rains.”

“That is an improvement several Imperial cities would buy.” She touched a hand to her heart in a brief greeting. “Fidem. Your letter suggested you might be waiting at the Hall.”

“You asked to see the receiving house,” Fidem said. “I thought you might prefer company on the way.”

“I do. I also want to know where the children are being fed.”

That was better than beginning with the prisoner proposal. Fidem led her past the wagons and into the city. Merchants were unloading cloth, iron fittings, preserved fruit and bundles of dry paper. A woman with heat magic supervised the coals beneath a wash kettle. Her assistant carried ordinary fuel to the brazier while she rested her hand. Three newcomers stopped to watch steam lift from water that had been cold moments earlier.

Isela noticed the woman. “She was in the last caravan.”

“I pay her by the heating. She insists on feeding the fire between uses so she can finish the day.”

“Then you listened to her. A surprising number of employers tell a heatworker to replace coal with her hands.”

Fidem had made that mistake once. He did not repeat it.

At the receiving house, a family of five ate near the west window. Fidem had moved them out of a storeroom that morning; their bedding no longer blocked the passage. Isela glanced up at the sleeping gallery before turning to the occupied benches.

She counted the cots without seeming to. Her gaze stopped at a young man whose hand had been bound in clean linen. He was turning a broken shoe in his lap, trying to see how the sole had come loose. “Was he with my caravan?”

“He arrived yesterday from the western road,” Fidem said. “A wagon wheel caught his hand.”

The young man looked up, startled to become part of their discussion.

Fidem approached him. “Tomas, may I show the ambassador what happened?”

Tomas lifted the bandaged hand. The fingers moved, stiffly but under his control. Fidem had closed the split in the palm the previous evening. Healing had not restored the strength he would need to pull a boot apart and resew it. That would take rest and work.

“A priest of Lucidus,” Isela said. “I had been told there were more of you now.”

“There are. We still need clean water, thread and a place for Tomas to sit while he recovers.”

Tomas laughed under his breath. “He means to make me mend the receiving house's shoes.”

“When your hand is ready. You have already identified six pairs.”

Isela turned toward the children eating at the window. “And them?”

“Their parents are choosing a room this afternoon. The cooper's yard has work for one of them. The other taught letters before the fighting closed their school. Serena wants an intake clerk.”

“You describe a city that has learned to put arrivals to work quickly.”

“We ask what they can do. We also ask what they want. Sometimes the answers differ.”

She let that sentence stand. Fidem suspected she had come to see whether he meant it.

Outside, a wheel struck the repaired paving with a hard report. Shouts rose from the gate. Fidem reached the door as one of the Imperial wagons lurched sideways. The rear axle had broken at the joint and the load had rolled against a stone bollard. Its driver was pinned between the bench and the wagon wall.

Crusaders from the training yard were already running toward it. Their white and gold tabards had gathered dust from practice. Dain went to the horses. Anwen and two others braced the tilted wagon while an Imperial teamster pulled the driver free.

Fidem knelt beside him. The man's left leg lay at an angle the knee hadn't made on its own. He was conscious and trying to explain the wheel. “The axle can wait,” Fidem told him. “Tell me where it hurts most.”

“There.” The man touched above the joint, then gripped Fidem's sleeve. “Don't let them lift it by the foot.”

“They won't.”

Fidem checked the pulse at the ankle and asked Anwen to hold the thigh. His healing could close tissue after the bone was set. It could not make a broken leg useful if they sealed it twisted. The driver's breathing steadied when Anwen put her shield down and took his weight with both hands.

Isela arrived beside them carrying the folded shawl from her shoulder. She laid it under the man's head without asking who would wash it afterward.

“The cargo?” he asked her.

“Still here,” she said. “I would be far more annoyed if you tried to drive it on that leg.”

One of the Crusaders smiled. The driver didn't, but he let Fidem straighten the joint. The cry that followed made the children inside the receiving house go quiet. Fidem held his hands over the injury until the worst torn tissue closed. Heat ran through his palms and left him light-headed. He stopped before the demand grew into exhaustion and let Anwen apply the splint.

“He goes to the healing house,” Fidem said. “Bring his work crew to him once he's settled. He will want to complain to them in person.”

The driver managed a weak laugh.

Isela watched the Crusaders carry him away. “Slate trained them?”

“His people trained them to hold a line and get the wounded out of it. We teach the healing. They have been practicing both.”

“Their first instinct was the horses.”

“Dain's was. If the team had bolted, we would have had more than one patient.”

“A useful instinct.” She retrieved her shawl, now marked with road grit. “You said you wanted to show me the city. I believe it has introduced itself.”

Isela asked to continue on foot. On the reopened central way, a caravan smith argued with Builder apprentices over a hinge while children ran ahead of a handcart. Fidem remembered stepping over rubble here; now wagons used the street and the taps ran clean.

A shadow crossed the road. The children looked up first. A gryphon came over the eastern roofs, four legs tucked beneath its body and a separate pair of wings working hard against the afternoon air. Its rider lay low over the neck, one hand on the harness. The animal descended toward the old landing ground outside the Hall and struck the stone with all four feet before opening its wings to brake.

Isela stopped beneath the arcade. “That used to be a roc.”

“Kegan would be pleased you noticed,” Fidem said. “He has been reminding everyone of the distinction.”

They went to the landing ground. Kegan was already there with two handlers, checking the gryphon's forelegs while the rider unfastened a message case. Its beak clicked at his sleeve. He offered a measured strip of meat and ran his hand over the wing joint before allowing anyone else near it. Fidem could see the strain in the animal's breathing. It had carried one rider and a light load, and neither achievement had come free.

“The west ridge patrol was pinned below the old cattle track,” the rider told Brenn's runner. “Two Vallyrian scouts above them. We saw the trap before the patrol took the bend. I marked it and sent the ground team around. All six came out. One has a cut leg, but he can ride.”

The runner took the map and hurried toward Brenn. Kegan looked up at Fidem. “It made the landing without a second pass. The new hind legs held. The harness left no abrasion across the shoulders.”

“You have said three things you can test,” Fidem told him. “I suspect you have a fourth.”

“Its wing recovery after the climb was better than last week. I want a day of rest before the next flight.”

Isela had expected a wonder. Kegan gave her a schedule, a feeding requirement and a list of joints to inspect. Fidem liked that she listened. The gryphon turned its head toward her, yellow eyes bright, then returned to the meat. There was no spark along its feathers and no fire in its breath. Its value had just arrived in a messenger's hand.

“How many riders?” Isela asked.

“One pair ready for that route,” Kegan said. “We are training more. The animals will decide how quickly.”

“A small beginning,” she said.

“A successful one,” he corrected, and went back to the wing.

Fidem led her on only after the rider had gone to deliver the remaining names. He had watched the western patrol train under Scourge instructors; now a new force had helped bring it home. Slate would value the report for its usefulness. Fidem wanted him to hear that no one had been lost.

“You have spent more on repair than I expected,” Isela said.

“The stoneworkers make our spending visible. They still need timber, iron, food and time.”

“Most rulers prefer a wall they can point to.”

“Slate wanted the road because soldiers use it. Serena wanted it because grain uses it. The households wanted it because they live here. I was happy they agreed.”

Isela's smile was small. “That is one way to govern an argument.”

They entered Fidem's office above the Hall kitchens. Warm air came up the stair with the smell of bread crust and the clatter of bowls being stacked for the next meal. Serena had left the trade schedule on the table and a note beside it. The iron fittings could be paid from the current allocation. The preserved fruit couldn't be accepted at the Imperial price unless Isela agreed to count damaged crates separately. At the bottom Serena had written: *No standing prisoner intake without names, charges, capacity and a route home for those we refuse.*

Fidem put the note where Isela could see it.

“Serena's handwriting is as warm as ever,” Isela said.

“She has arranged every bed you inspected. Her concern is justified.”

“I hoped it would be.”

Isela took a packet from her case. The first pages concerned tolls, loading dates and messenger passage. She offered a schedule that kept the road from Koral open through the next season.

“The Confederacy campaign does not reach our frontier,” she said. “Its merchants may complain about caravan times, and I can write that

complaint in a more elaborate hand if it helps. The Emperor has no wish to join your war. He does want to know the arrangements we make here will survive it.”

“Slate left me authority for trade,” Fidem said. “Serena approves the rates and storage. We can keep the wagons moving. If your roads change, tell us before the drivers leave Koral.”

“Agreed.”

Isela set two fingers on the route from Koral. “An agreement on paper will not comfort a driver whose wagon reaches the western road after dark. Slate has taken his most experienced troops east. What holds that road now?”

“Brenn commands the field response. Harl holds the city gates. Matek's people still watch the approaches, and the Crusaders have begun escorting the short runs between the receiving posts.”

“The volunteers I saw at the broken wagon?”

“Some of them. They are ready to keep a team together and get a driver out of danger. I would not promise they can defeat a Vallyrian company alone.”

“Honesty helps. I can send guards with the wagons, if your commander knows where they may carry weapons.”

Fidem drew a line at the ford on Serena's route sheet. “Imperial guards remain with the caravan through the outer receiving post. Inside Bastion, Harl's gate captain directs the escort. If there is a Vallyrian sighting, Brenn decides whether the wagons shelter or return. Your captain may advise him, but two people cannot give opposite orders to the same drivers.”

Isela tilted her head. “You learned that from Slate?”

“From a driver whose team turned into a blocked lane while two officers argued. Slate later put the rule in writing.”

“If the road closes, who pays for spoiled goods?”

“The party that owns them, unless one of our officers damages them while taking control. Then Serena will demand an inventory and argue over every

crate.”

“I have met her. I believe you.”

She made a mark beside the ford. Fidem noticed that she left the rate for escorted travel open. That would bring Serena to the table, as it should. The ambassador could see that the Scourge army's absence had made security harder. Fidem wanted her to see the command that remained, including the human troops now training under it.

A clerk knocked and brought in a request from the receiving house. A young woman from Isela's caravan had asked where she could apply for scales. Her brother had enlisted in the Scourge months earlier. She had a letter from him and two days before her wagon continued.

“I can speak with her after you leave,” Fidem said.

Isela looked surprised. “Would you send her directly to an army officer?”

“Eventually, if she still wants it. First I want to know what her brother told her. Some people think the transformation is a cure for an old injury. It may replace a body, but it gives that person new needs and service obligations. Two days is enough to start a conversation. It is not a deadline for an answer.”

“You advise against becoming Scourge?” Isela asked.

“I advise against deciding from a wagon window,” Fidem replied. “A transformation gives someone a new body to learn and an offer to serve. Slate has no use for someone surprised to discover that a Lurker hunts or a Builder works through the night.”

Isela picked up her pen. “And does she have to join your faith first?”

“No. The Concord is here if she wants it. Scales and worship are different choices.”

“The Emperor's advisers have discussed that distinction at length. It appears you have already had to practice it.”

“Every receiving day.”

Fidem wrote the young woman's name on the back of the clerk's message. He would send her to a Scourge recruit who could speak about the body she was asking for without selling it as a miracle. He would speak to her too, if she wanted him. Neither he nor Isela would decide for her simply because she had asked during the visit.

She moved to the next packet. It was thicker. “This is the proposal you expected.”

Fidem counted the pages. “How many people?”

“Not an immediate convoy. A regular channel. The first group would be small enough to test your process.”

“How small?”

“Thirty, perhaps.”

Serena would call thirty a full receiving week, even without the Empire trying to make it an experiment. Fidem opened the first list. It named offenses, terms remaining and the institutions holding each person. The categories varied wildly. Theft sat beside desertion; a refused labor order beside assault; possession of prohibited pamphlets beside murder.

“You have put a glassmaker who declined a requisition beside a man convicted of killing his brother,” Fidem said.

“They are both inconvenient to their administrators,” Isela replied. “That is the reason I was asked to raise the offer. It is also the reason I brought you the actual charges.”

Fidem looked up. Isela hadn't disguised the Empire's benefit. He could respect that much without accepting the proposal.

“You want us to take people you do not wish to hold,” he said. “Some may be useful here. Some may want to begin again. That does not make them interchangeable.”

“I do not believe they are.” She folded her hands. “The Imperial office that sent the list does. I can return a narrower answer.”

“Slate authorized me to hear individual cases. He kept any standing arrangement for himself.”

“And the scales?”

“Those are a choice made here, after a person knows what transformation means. Release from an Imperial cell cannot depend on agreeing to become Scourge. Nor can refusing it become a new sentence in Bastion.”

“My instructions anticipated that some would decline. They did not specify what you would do with them.”

“That is why we need a route home or a lawful settlement outside our city before they travel. We cannot invite someone across a border on a promise, then shut the gate because they kept their own body.”

Isela tapped the glassmaker's name. “Would you hear this case?”

“Yes. With the full record and a conversation with the person.”

“The thief?”

“What was stolen? From whom? What has he done since?”

“You are going to make my office work.”

“It sent you a list,” Fidem said. “I assumed someone there could read it.”

Isela laughed. “That sounded almost like Slate.”

“I hope he has borrowed something from me as well.”

“He has. He fed my messenger before sending him back.”

Fidem wrote three conditions beneath the existing delegation: records sufficient to examine each case, a choice to accept or refuse settlement after hearing the terms, and no automatic conversion. He added separate handling for people convicted of violence and those punished for political refusal. Serena would want capacity and funding in the same document. Fidem made space for her figures rather than pretending a priest's goodwill could house thirty strangers.

The ambassador read the conditions without interrupting. She circled the line requiring the Empire to pay for transport home if Bastion refused a candidate. “That will be contested.”

“Then begin with the people you expect us to welcome. You do not need a permanent policy today.”

“The office wants one.”

“It will have to wait for Slate's answer.”

Isela set the pen down. “I can send three case files with the next courier. No people until your review is finished. Trade proceeds under the schedule we agreed.”

“That I can sign.”

Fidem signed the trade schedule. Isela took it, leaving the prisoner list on his desk.

He placed Serena’s note beside it. A glassmaker who had refused a requisition and a murderer had arrived on the same page. Neither had been asked whether he wanted Bastion.

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XXXIV

The Forsworn Breach

THE GUARD HAD DRIVEN THE FIRST STAKE TOO CLOSE TO THE CAVE mouth.

Lu moved it a hand's breadth left and pressed his tail into the ground for balance while he set the timber. The rock behind it looked solid, but a narrow fault ran from the floor to the roof. When the wagon drew against the rope, force would follow that line. He wanted the load in the sound wall, where the horses could pull without bringing stone down on the prisoners.

“There,” he told the guard. “Now it holds.”

The man tested the line. “You can see all that?”

“I can feel the pull and measure the angle. I still prefer not to test it with a wagon full of people.”

The guard gave the stake another wrench and went back to his post.

They had brought the prisoners from Shouguan to a refuge at the accessible edge of the Folded Mountain. The fortress's damaged passages were a poor place to keep captured shapers. From here, escorts could take the wounded west when the road opened, while Matek's people questioned those who might know Shen's next movement. Wei Zhen traveled in a separate wagon, guarded by Raiders who had seen what his Cragback could do.

Lu had argued for this transfer. He had drawn the temporary pens, placed the water and inspected the little stone chamber where the most dangerous prisoners would spend the night. Slate had agreed to the design after making him answer one question: could anyone from Lu's former network enter without being seen?

Lu had said no.

He was less certain now.

The Folded Mountain made liars of sight lines. A voice in the western cleft could be heard beside the refuge while its owner was a long walk away. Rock ridges hid the ordinary houses in the troughs. Lu could see a strip of beans climbing poles on the opposite slope, but only the chimney of the house that tended them. Its smoke flattened against the rock before finding a way upward. A bucket knocked against stone somewhere below. He remembered carrying tools along those paths with one shoulder turned to keep his bag from catching. His new body would need more room.

People lived here, farmed narrow fields and used the cave paths to cross between them. Some had sheltered families from household service. Others had used those same routes to attack soldiers and move weapons. Lu knew both kinds.

He inspected the refuge wall a second time. The timbers were sound. The door could be barred from inside. Along the inner wall, shallow shelves held cups and folded bedding above a dark line of damp. The floor had been packed level with stone chips, though a bulge of bedrock still forced everyone carrying water to step around it. A groove beside the threshold carried seepage back outside. Lu had kept it open when he set the pens. Block it with a sill and the bedding would be wet by morning.

The approach was another matter.

Wei called to him from the guarded chamber. The former Cragback handler sat on a low bench with his bound hands resting on his knees. He had been fed. His left cheek showed the old scar beneath the iron guard the Scourge had taken away. He looked at Lu's work on the doorframe as if he were judging a mason's apprenticeship.

“You made it wider,” Wei said.

“The stretcher needs to pass,” Lu said.

“It also makes a better opening for men coming in,” Wei replied.

“Only if they reach it.”

Wei lifted his wrists. “You know what they will do to me if your old friends take me.”

Lu checked the guard at the entrance. The man was watching Wei's hands, not listening to the conversation. “You drove a beast through a fortress with families below it. People will want an account of that.”

“An account takes time. They prefer a wall and a body inside it.”

Lu had heard Forsworn men talk that way. Others would refuse. He had once told himself the difference stayed clear because he knew who was speaking. Now those men were scattered across different valleys. Some hid their plans until the stone was already moving.

“Slate has ordered you guarded,” Lu said. “His guards will carry out that order.”

“Until they decide I cost more to keep than to give away.”

“That's not the calculation he's making.”

Wei gave him a long look. “You're certain you know his calculations?”

“Enough to know he wants you alive.”

Lu measured the gap between the bench and the wall, then had the guard move Wei a pace farther from the stone. The prisoner's hands were bound, but he had spent years working beside a creature that could unmake defenses. Lu was unwilling to learn in a hurry how much of that skill belonged to Wei himself.

Deng came through the refuge entrance carrying a basket of flatbread. She stopped when she saw him staring at the rock. “You're measuring the old crack,” she said.

“Someone cleared loose stones from it. This morning.”

“Children use that cleft to reach the spring.”

“Not with iron picks.”

She set the basket down. “I told Xie she could come. She wanted to speak for the refuge families.”

“Who came with her?”

“Two others.”

“Names.”

Deng saw something in his face. “Lu, I wouldn't bring Yan to a prisoner transfer.”

“Would he need you to?”

The first alarm came from the upper watch. A Lurker saw figures moving along the ledge above the spring. One had a coil of rope. Another carried a covered lantern. The watch sent their image through the Scourgemind to every Scourge at the refuge. Lu received it with the others. The figures were still too far away to name.

Lu went to the door of the prison chamber. Its guard, a Raider named Teren, had already drawn her short sword. “Do you know the approach?” she asked.

“Enough to know we're facing the wrong one. Those people want you watching the ledge. Close the passage behind the rear pens.”

Teren sent the order to her partner. Lu went with her to the narrow path. The path came around a shoulder of rock, then descended beneath a shelf where old miners had cut a low opening. The light fell away at the bend. Old pick strokes corrugated the roof, their lower edges polished where people had steadied themselves with a hand. Lu bent beneath them and drew his tail close. Cool air flowed out past him; somewhere beyond the opening, water dripped with the slow regularity he remembered. If Yan still remembered the route, he could reach the back of the pens while everyone counted bodies above the spring.

“There are families in the next trough,” Lu said. “Don't collapse the shelf.”

“Then give me a door.”

He touched the rock on either side of the low opening. Stone answered him slowly. He drew two lips inward, leaving room to see through and enough space beneath for water to drain. A hard stop, not a sealed tomb. He shaped a timber crosspiece across the gap, seating it in the new stone. The work cost him concentration. He could feel every uneven pressure in the roof, every root that had grown through the old mortar.

Someone struck the far side before he finished.

The timber shook. Teren planted her feet beside it. Lu thickened the left seating and released the stone. “How many?” she called.

“Three,” a voice answered. “One of them is me.”

Yan Bo.

Lu's hands went cold despite the warmth of the stone under them. “You chose a poor entrance,” Lu said.

“It used to be ours.”

“There are prisoners and wounded behind me.”

“We know. Open it before the household guards move them again.”

“Those guards work for Slate. He took the prisoners from the household.”

Yan laughed once. “A different owner. You used to notice the difference between a door and a cage.”

Lu could have told him about Xie's release, about the hearing Deng had negotiated and the people who had chosen to remain in the occupied terraces. The words would take longer than the plank would stand if Yan brought a shaper to the other side.

“Who sent you?” Lu asked.

“The people who stayed when you left.”

The answer struck where Yan meant it to. Lu had left. He had chosen the shape Slate offered and built walls for an army. He still knew which households needed the paths beyond this refuge. Yan knew it too, and was

using them as cover for a seizure that would make every family near the cave responsible in Shen's eyes.

“You don't have all of them behind you,” Lu said.

“We have enough.”

The ledge above the spring erupted in shouting. Crossbows fired toward the figures with the rope. Lu heard the bolts strike stone and a bell-throated warning from somewhere deeper in the folds. Its hollow note traveled across the trough, making the distance hard to judge.

Then the crosspiece moved.

Yan's shaper pressed from the far side. Stone began to part around the left socket Lu had just made. Lu felt the working seek the small imperfection where his new stone met the old rock.

“Teren. Two steps back,” Lu warned.

“I'm holding this,” Teren replied.

“It's going to swing toward you.”

She backed away. The timber jerked free and struck the wall where she had been. Three figures came through the low gap beneath it. Teren met the first with her blade. Lu drove the loose timber across the second man's legs by shaping its wooden fibers at the hinge. He could not strike with a poison claw or put his body between trained fighters and call it a plan. He could change the space they had to fight in.

Yan came last. He was thinner than he had been at the road culvert, his short coat patched again at the elbows. He held a stone knife in one hand. Lu knew the grip. It was meant for reaching a shaper's working hand.

“Stop,” Lu said.

Yan stepped past the fallen man and cut for Lu's wrist. Lu pulled his hand away and set his tail against the floor. The blade scored gray scales without reaching the tendons. Teren drove Yan back, giving Lu room to move the broken timber between them.

The shaper touched the wall. A narrow passage opened beside the prison door, just large enough for someone to slip through.

Lu had measured the wall that morning. He knew where the void would meet the pen.

“They want Wei,” he sent through the Scourgemind. *“Rear chamber. Now.”*

The Scourge guard at the pen answered at once. He moved Wei and the other captured shaper away from the wall, keeping their hands bound and their mouths clear. Slate had insisted that even prisoners dangerous enough to shape a fortress would be able to breathe and speak. Lu was grateful for the detail now. The guard could order them to move instead of dragging them blindly through a collapse.

Lu shaped the wooden doorframe into the breach. Its grain twisted through the opening and locked against stone. A hand appeared on the far side, pushing. He drew the frame tighter, measuring the force against his own reach. Wood was new to him. It moved with a different patience than stone, fibers taking strain and warning him before they broke.

“You learned that from Silvys,” Yan said.

“Some of it.”

“And what did Lucidus charge?”

Lu looked at him across the barricade. “She didn't make me come here.”

Yan's mouth tightened. He had expected a different answer.

Above the spring, the other attackers began to withdraw. The Lurker on the ledge had taken their rope and one prisoner. Their lantern lay broken on the path. The diversion was failing.

Yan signaled his shaper. The man at the wall reversed his pressure. Rather than force the breach, he began to close it with Lu's frame trapped inside. The fibers screamed under the load. Lu cut his control before the crushing force could travel through his hands. The frame snapped. Stone met stone.

Teren struck the nearest attacker as he tried to cross back beneath the shelf. He fell. Yan caught his collar and pulled him toward the low opening.

“Let him go,” Lu told her.

“He tried to enter the pen.”

“And I know where that path goes. We can follow without killing him on the floor.”

Teren didn't release him until she saw the man could walk. Then she moved aside a pace, keeping the point of her blade between Yan and Lu.

Xie arrived from the front of the refuge with Deng and two guards. She had gray in her hair Lu didn't remember from the mill wagon. She saw Yan, then the broken timber.

“You promised a hearing,” she said to him.

“Slate promised you one,” Yan answered. “You can thank him while his men keep our enemies breathing.”

“I came out of that mill because Lu brought me,” Xie said. “Do you think I forgot who chained me?”

“You forgot what happens when the chains change hands.”

“I remember enough to know this refuge survives by keeping its word. We offered guides under terms. You break them here, and the families beyond us pay for your courage.”

Yan looked at Lu. “Will your new lord protect them?”

Lu couldn't promise what Slate would do in every valley. He could promise what the agreement said and what he intended to enforce.

“He paid for what his soldiers took,” Lu told Yan. “He let people leave his road. And I am standing between you and a prisoner who would gladly have me chained again. That ought to tell you what I chose.”

For a moment Yan's old expression returned, the skeptical one Lu had once seen over a damaged culvert. Then the ledge watch called that more

Scourge were coming. The moment closed.

Yan backed toward the crack. “You know the route. Come after me when you decide whose wall you're protecting.”

“I have already decided.”

Yan slipped through with the wounded man and his shaper. They moved into a cleft Lu knew well. It ended at a narrow stair beyond the refuge, then divided into two cave paths. One led to family houses. The other came out above a military supply track. Lu had used it years ago to move tools and people beyond household inspection. He sent the exact route to the Lurkers, warning them not to treat the family exit as a target.

They caught one of Yan's party at the stair. The rest had prepared a stone drop behind them. The Lurkers stopped rather than follow through a closing roof. Yan escaped with the shape of the refuge, the guard placement he had seen and the knowledge that Shouguan's prisoners were being moved west. He could sell that to Shen, or spend it himself.

Slate arrived from the terrace road with Brace and a Raider detachment before the prisoners were moved again. Lu had sent the first report as the breach opened. Slate inspected the smashed frame, the surviving captives and the guards at both approaches. The avatar's face gave away little.

“Your entrance was sound when you inspected it?” Slate asked.

“The rock. I missed the fresh tool marks in the crack until this morning.”

“And this route?” Slate touched the map Lu had drawn for the Lurkers.

“I knew it. I should have marked it before the wagons came.”

“Yes.”

Lu waited for the rest. Slate studied the line leading to the family houses.

“You trusted me with this transfer after what happened at the mill,” Lu said.

“I trusted your measurements. I put guards around the prisoners. Those are different decisions.”

Lu accepted the distinction. He had made it himself while setting the door and then failed to apply it to the mountain beyond.

“Yan thinks every wall I build for you proves he was right about me,” Lu said.

“Yan can think what he likes while he runs from it,” Slate replied.

Slate turned the map so Lu could see the track above the refuge. “You can leave my service if you choose. I won't send a company after you for deciding your work belongs elsewhere.”

Lu looked up. Slate didn't sound as though he were granting a pardon or asking for thanks.

“And Lucidus?” Lu asked.

Slate held his gaze. “It's her gift you're wearing. I couldn't tell you what she would think of someone setting it aside.”

Slate wouldn't stop him leaving. He had made no such promise for Lucidus. Lu looked down at the short claws he had used to shape the door. The stone-gray scales along his wrist caught the last light in small bronze flecks. He had wanted these hands. He still did. He disliked that Slate knew exactly how to make the wanting matter.

“I'm here,” Lu said. “I intend to finish the road.”

“Good. Then help me keep Yan from choosing where it ends.”

“Which exit will Yan use next?” Slate asked.

“The military track. He won't lead pursuit into the houses if he can help it. Not while Xie is still speaking for those people.”

“You sound sure.”

“I know him well enough to be wrong in specific ways.”

Slate assigned a guard to the supply-track exit and ordered the prisoner transfer delayed until Lu could certify a route Yan didn't know. Then he told Xie that the agreement still held for those who had honored it. Deng would

witness the new guard instructions. No one at the refuge had to guess whether Yan had made them all enemies.

Lu helped Teren replace the broken frame while the sun went down. He could have shaped a perfect door in minutes. He took the time to set its load on the rock he had trusted at the start, then added a second exit for the families who used the spring. The refuge would not become a prison because of what Yan had tried.

Xie watched him fit the last timber. “He thinks you came here to be forgiven,” she said.

“I came because the prisoners needed a safe road.”

“Both can be true.”

Lu tested the hinge. The door opened without dragging on the floor. “Maybe,” he said. “I don't think either one gets decided tonight.”

The new frame held when Teren pulled it shut. Beyond the ridge, a stone fell in a cave Lu had once called a hiding place. He could no longer tell which side of it Yan stood on. He could tell where the next wall needed to go.

He marked the family exit on one copy of the map and the military track on another. Slate received both. The guard received only the route it needed to protect.

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XXXV

The Gathering Hosts

Shouguan's last signal reached Covenant before the messenger carrying its loss.

The high bell sounded twice from the eastward station, then once from the north. At the Weighted Court, every clerk at the morning table stopped writing. Shen waited for the final note. It did not come. The station had signaled the fortress under attack, not its recovery.

Ren entered with the first written dispatch while the echoes still moved among the arches. “Captain Song held the inner wall after the outer curtain fell,” he said. “The bearer left before the keep was taken.”

“How many of our people withdrew?” Shen asked Ren.

“No verified number,” Ren replied. “Song ordered his reserve toward the eastern road station. The western and southern posts have not answered.”

Shen set down the stone marker he had been using to weigh a requisition. The marker bore the black linked squares of the Confederacy. Across the Court, delegates from the member houses rose from their benches. The Oathbound charter hung above them in layers of carved stone, each binding relief cut by shapers who had believed those words would outlive them.

Morning light reached the upper articles through the open arches. Below, the clerks worked beside shallow lamps, their elbows polishing the same hollows in the table year after year. Each house's bench stood beneath its carved mark. Some had been lengthened as their delegations grew; none had been moved closer to Shen's seat. He could tell which runners were new by the way they hesitated at the aisles, looking for a household servant to show them where they belonged.

The charter had outlasted its carvers. The terms did not disappear because a foreign army had managed to occupy one fortress.

“Read the defense article,” Shen said.

The senior clerk did. He named the member houses, the minimum troops and stores each owed when Confederacy territory was held by an outside force, and the authority of the Surety to assign their employment. No delegate protested. No one needed to be convinced that Shouguan had fallen within the article. They needed to know where Shen intended to send their people.

“The relief columns assemble at the eastern road station,” he said. “The ridge houses bring their cliffstriders along the upper paths. The southern banners hold the terraces below the White Stair. The quarry houses take the wagon road and its repair teams. I want a second line of supply before any of them advances.”

A clerk wrote as he spoke. Ren placed colored stones on the map. Three roads converged on Shouguan. The Scourge had captured the fortress at their center, but Shen still controlled the far ends. Closing them would take hours to order and days to make real. Slate had used shorter intervals to turn losses into advantages before.

The northern delegate asked, “Do you intend us to retake the keep at once?”

“I intend you to keep it from feeding him. A hasty assault would give Slate another banner to eat.”

The man looked at his map, not at the language. “Then my archers hold the upper road?”

“With cliffstrider scouts above them. No single exposed line. If he takes one height, the next must still see his movement.”

The delegates took assignments to their runners. Shen sent his chief engineer to the crews gathering at the eastern station. She had kept Covenant's water and road work running while his first strike went west. Now she would have to coordinate crews who had arrived from houses with different methods and equal pride.

“You want the passes prepared for demolition,” she said.

“Only the military spurs. Mark the irrigation feeds, household roads and spring works before anyone cuts a bearing. We may need those roads after the fighting.”

“You should have told Song that.”

Shen met her gaze. He had told Song to deny usable defenses if the fortress fell. Song's demolition crew would know how to protect water and grain only if their drawings were accurate and their officers still cared after losing their walls. Shen couldn't reach backward to improve the order.

“I will make the limits explicit here,” he said.

The engineer gathered the marked plans. “I will make sure the crews can read them.”

Outside the Court, a deep growl rolled through the entry passage. The senior household officer from the western marches had arrived with two stone-maned lions. Their handlers held the animals apart from the gathering clerks. One lion's dark mineral plates overlapped across its shoulders; when it moved, the plates struck one another with a slow clicking sound. The second lay down in the shade, its unarmored belly hidden against the flagstones.

The officer bowed. “My house's guard is ready.”

“You will command the center reserve at the road station,” Shen told him. “Your lions stay with you unless an enemy reaches the command post. I do not want them spent against a line they cannot catch.”

“They'll dislike sitting still,” the house officer said.

“Then feed them before the men begin to complain,” Shen replied.

The officer accepted the assignment. His beasts belonged to a scarce breeding line. Shen had seen them frighten soldiers and hold a doorway. He had also seen a spear find the ordinary flesh behind their armored collars. Their presence should make a reserve difficult to rush, not become an excuse to waste them as a spectacle.

The next courier brought word that the outer station had fallen silent. A rider had seen smoke from Shouguan and men retreating east without their banner. The Scourge had taken the keep.

Shen had the Court bell sound the full defense call. He watched the delegates depart by assigned doors so their runners would not crowd the same stair. They had rehearsed this muster for generations. They had never faced the Scourge.

He went to the eastern gate before midday. Cliffstriders were descending a side route above the ordinary road, their split hooves spreading against rock too steep for a horse. Their long faces carried dark harness straps, and sweat had wet the shaggy hair of their chests. The riders dismounted at a flat shelf to let them drink and breathe. A captain saluted from above rather than forcing another descent for ceremony.

“How far can they go after this?” Shen asked the handler who had come down on foot.

“To the lower saddle today, if we rest here. Beyond that, tomorrow. The last descent left three of the animals coughing.”

“You will not take them past the saddle today. Mark the coughing animals for the reserve route.”

The captain's expression tightened. He had expected to be sent to Shouguan at speed. Shen could understand the desire. The mounts wouldn't climb better because their riders were ashamed to rest them.

Below the shelf, spearmen from two houses stood beside their supply wagons. Their armor varied: some wore fitted stone plates over leather, others carried broad shields engraved with household marks. They had traveled with their own cooks, armorers and water casks. Their obligations had brought them here. Ren's assignments would have to make them fight together.

Shen walked between the ranks. A young dwarf from the southern banner asked whether the Scourge had reached his family's orchards. The question came without challenge. The soldier's knuckles were white around his spear.

“Not according to the last report,” Shen said. “The White Stair's lower terraces are under watch. If I receive a different report, your captain will hear it.”

“My sister keeps the upper checks.”

“Give her name to Ren. He can ask the station for her household's condition.”

The soldier bowed. Shen moved on before the answer became a promise he couldn't yet keep.

The forward road master met him at the third of the Nine Spans with a splinter of stone in his hand. A loaded wagon had crossed it at dawn. One corner of its deck had dropped beneath the rear wheel, then risen again when the load passed. The road master had closed that lane and sent the wagon back.

Shen dismounted to inspect it. The nine bridges crossed separate cuts in the mountain, each narrow enough that a broken approach could stop a column more effectively than an army. Between the spans, the road bent against the cliff. Loaded wagons waited nose to tail, their wheels chocked while the teams stood in harness. The smell of warm leather and mule sweat lingered in the sheltered turns. Out on the third span, a cold draft rose through the cut and lifted the edge of his coat.

The parapet looked sound. Its top had been rubbed smooth where drivers leaned over to judge a wheel's clearance. The deck beneath its far end had a hairline fracture following a repair seam. Water ran through the cut below, carrying pale grit where the stone had begun to grind. Shen could hear it between the creak of harness and a teamster calling for the next wagon to hold.

“Who worked it last?” Shen asked.

“Our own crew before the western march,” the road master said. “We raised the outside seat after the frost. It held the ammunition wagons.”

“Until now.”

The road master looked past Shen at the waiting banners. “I can send the troops over one rank at a time. The feed wagons cannot use it.”

“Then the feed wagons wait.”

Shen put his palm against the damaged seat. The fracture had not been cut deliberately. Pressure from the earlier repair had concentrated at one corner. The next heavy wagon would widen it. He could lift the deck, but that would transfer the load to the weak side and make the road master's problem visible only when the whole approach fell.

He asked for timbers from the nearest supply cart. A shaper from the quarry house came at his call, still wearing the stone plates of a marching soldier. Shen showed him where the bearing failed. The man measured it with a plumb line, then shifted his line and measured again.

“You can seat a brace on the old foundation,” the shaper said. “Not on the repair.”

“Do it. I will hold the deck while you place it.”

The first beam went beneath the outer edge. Shen took some of the span's weight into the sound wall on his side. The shaper fitted the beam against the deeper foundation and widened its stone socket. Men hauled a second timber into place. Above them, the waiting cliffstriders moved along the high side route, riders watching the opposite bank. The animals could cross elsewhere. Their scouts would warn Shen if anyone used the pause to approach the bridge from the eastern cut.

A horn sounded above them.

One rider pointed toward a dark shape circling beyond the next ridge. Wings. It stayed too far away for Shen to identify the Scourge carrying them. The shape turned once and disappeared.

“They know the road is busy,” the road master said.

“They knew that when our first banner left Covenant. Finish the brace.”

The quarry shaper glanced up at the sky, then put both hands back on the stone. His socket closed around the beam. The deck settled a fraction and

stopped. Shen released his support slowly, testing whether the load would stay with the new bearing. It did.

“One wagon empty,” he told the road master. “Then a half load. Watch the far joint while each crosses. If it moves again, close the span and send the next loads around.”

“That adds half a day.”

“The feed animals will need half a day less if we don't drop their grain into the cut.”

The road master smiled without much pleasure and went to organize the test.

Shen mounted again after the empty wagon crossed safely. The fracture would need permanent work when the road wasn't carrying an army. He sent the measurement to his chief engineer with the other limits: weight, number of wagons, which side route remained open. She would hate inheriting a hurried repair. She would hate losing the road more.

The third span had become a bottleneck before Slate touched it. Shen knew the avatar would look for others. He placed a guard at each crossing and told their captains to report a change in sound beneath the decks as readily as a visible enemy. A Scourge raid could be fought. A bridge collapsing beneath a banner could kill hundreds before they reached the fight.

Neriq arrived at the Weighted Court three evenings after Shouguan fell, leading the Stillhold Concord's Preservers. She came on a low sled drawn over a strip of maintained cold by four attendants who looked no warmer than anyone else in the courtyard. Her mantle was gray, the wool at its edge white. A blue cord held a stoppered vessel at her breast. Behind her, teams carried hollow stone anchor posts in padded slings. Water casks and dry felt traveled on separate wagons.

The sled left a white track across the courtyard. Meltwater gathered at its edges and ran toward a drain already crowded with straw from the supply carts. A clerk lifted his robe clear of it. The attendants waited with their anchor posts still in the slings; Shen sent a household servant to clear space beneath the arcade before anyone set them on the wet stones.

She stepped from the sled and watched the sunset touch the roof of the Court. “A beautiful evening,” she said. “I would rather be enjoying it than preparing another casualty station.” Her voice had the softness of someone speaking just before sleep. Shen had learned not to mistake that for uncertainty. She had read Neris Venn’s field report from Bastion and brought the replacement anchors and water crews it called for.

“Shouguan is occupied,” he told her. “I am gathering the required contingents. Your detachment is not bound by their covenant.”

“I know which paper my people signed.” She looked at the anchor wagons. “Isyra's sanctuaries agreed to keep the northern water routes from being consumed by an army that cannot stop growing. We have brought the tools for that work.”

“I will not ask you to hold a line without a retreat.”

“We had a retreat last time. It still ran through broken stone.”

Shen could still see the post broken open under a Scourge charge. Neris's people had kept their cold working active until the wounded were behind the second line. She had lost two Preservers during that withdrawal. Shen had written their names to the sanctuaries and received no reply about the names, only a request for replacement casks and a clearer map.

He gave her both now.

Neriq placed a finger on the road north of Shouguan. “This spring feeds three villages before it reaches the military culvert. If we close the upper water to freeze the culvert, they will lose a planting.”

“Use the lower draw.”

“It gives us less reach.”

“It keeps the villages alive.”

She looked at him, her pale eyes steady. “Then we work closer. We will need shields that can move when the casters tire.”

“You will have them.”

It was a real concession. Shen marked two companies for her position, reducing the strength he could place on the direct road. The separate agreement had not made Neriq an obedient banner captain, and he had never wanted her to be one. Her costs were different. If he pretended otherwise, he would lose the very capability for which he had brought her.

Three days of muster followed. The repaired span took the first supply wagons, and the member houses sent troops toward the eastern station. On the third night, Ren found Shen over the signal map. “The first road station reports Scourge patrols in the lower terraces. One of our relocation columns has not arrived.”

Shen looked at the White Stair. He had ordered the transfer of specialists whose labor sustained the district. Remove them and Slate would inherit walls he could occupy but fields he couldn't keep. The order had been meant to preserve their families' obligation to the Confederacy, not merely deny Slate workers. He knew how it would appear to the people riding those wagons.

“Find out whether they were stopped or chose to turn,” he said. “Do not report a desertion because a wagon is late.”

“The station captain wants to send riders after them.”

“Not until we know where they are. An armed search through occupied terraces will make a fight wherever it finds a door.”

Ren nodded and reached for another dispatch. “The demolition team at Shouguan returned six men. Their captain says the north wagon bridge is damaged. The cistern and granaries remain in Scourge hands.”

“How many did he leave?”

“At least four missing. Some may be prisoners.”

Slate had kept the fortress. Shen had broken its wagon bridge and bought time to close two more roads. Not enough. The surviving stores would feed the Scourge for weeks if the surrounding villages supplied labor and water. Shen had to contain the district before it became a new center of Slate's rule.

“Send the northern banner to the saddle at dawn,” he said. “The southern banners to the terrace approaches. Our center waits until my chief engineer has checked the crossing. No one rushes the keep because a bell makes him feel late.”

Ren wrote the orders. “And Neriq?”

“Her Preservers begin at the lower draw. Give her two companies for movable cover. Their captains follow her orders while defending the position. If she withdraws, they return to my command. Make that plain before anyone reaches the water.”

“What do you want reported to Covenant?”

Shen looked at the line of roads surrounding Shouguan. The Court would hear that a fortress had fallen, that the member houses had answered and that the Stillhold Concord had come under its own terms. It would not hear him call the occupation temporary. Slate had earned the right to be treated as a commander who meant to stay.

“The truth,” Shen told Ren. “We have assembled an army. We have not yet recovered the ground.”

The next morning he rode toward the eastern station on a Kirin-Shi whose stone-colored hide caught the first light along its neck. Its horn swept backward above the brow, clear of the reins. The animal picked its way over the fitted mountain road with a care no ordinary horse could match. Its handler rode behind with feed and a second set of tack.

Cliffstriders moved high on the left. The lions traveled with the center reserve below him, handlers walking to preserve their strength. Neriq's anchor wagons followed the lower road, keeping the water covered and the felt dry. Each element had a place and a cost.

At the saddle, Shen saw the first smoke from Shouguan. Lucidus's banner remained above the damaged curtain.

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XXXVI

The High Assault

Shale reached Shouguan with twelve fresh veterans and found Slate looking up at a ridge. Willowmere had the hatchery. Shale had come because these soldiers needed a commander, and because she wanted to see the war Slate was fighting.

He didn't greet her until he had finished counting the figures along its crest. The highlanders had placed shields between two rock teeth above the western supply road. Behind them, riders waited beside cliffstriders whose dark, divided hooves clung to a slope no horse would attempt. Farther down, a bell-throated ape sat in a rope harness beside its handler.

“You've come at a good time,” Slate said.

“You sent for help. I assumed the invitation was sincere.”

He turned at last. The scales at one wrist were newly repaired, a paler gold than the rest. He looked tired in a way he would deny if she named it. His expression improved when he saw the soldiers she had brought.

“Brenn spared twelve?”

“He spared eight. I persuaded four more that their rotation began early. The western garrisons still have their people.”

“And the young?”

“In Woodhaven with Willowmere. I want the count of your wounded, not a story about how brave you were.”

Shale gave him the list she had carried. He scanned the marks he knew and asked her to read the rest aloud. She did. Only after that did he explain the ridge.

The enemy had taken it before dawn. Their archers could see the wagon road from two positions. The cliffstrider troop controlled a side approach that would let them reinforce either crest if the Scourge attacked one first. Lu had identified a lower seam where his builders could make footholds, but he couldn't reach it while the ape warned the crest every time a soldier moved through the trees.

“You want the height before the next supply convoy,” Shale said.

“I want the convoy to use it without paying a toll in blood. Their riders have been up there since midnight. The mounts will need to rest.”

“Then I'll make them choose where to rest.”

Slate's smile showed for a moment. “That's why I asked you here.”

She would not pretend the smile meant less than it did. He had given her command of a hard job. She wanted it, and he knew she did. She could enjoy the command and still know what it would cost. People she loved would climb under arrows because she told them to.

Lu joined them at the base of the wooded slope. The Builder carried a coil of marked cord and a wooden box containing wedges, pegs and chisels for the human engineers. His tail left a broad track in the damp soil. The senior engineer walked beside him with three of her crew.

Pine roots crossed the slope in crooked tiers, holding pockets of wet needles above the loose stone. Shale tested one with her heel before putting her weight on it. Resin stuck to her palm where she steadied herself against a trunk. Through the branches below, she could see the wagon ruts cut deep into the road's uphill edge. Teams had been pulling toward the shelter of the bank. There was nowhere to turn a loaded wagon before the next bend.

“The seam is sound above the first ledge,” he said. “Below that, the face breaks under a concentrated load. I can make steps for one person at a time. Not a road for your whole force.”

“One at a time is enough if the next person can cover the first,” Shale said. “Can you open them without telling every archer where your hands are?”

“Not from here. Once I reach the face, they'll see the stone move.”

“Then they need another thing to watch.”

She went over the plan with Edrin. His Lurkers would cross the wooded lower approach in pairs, making enough movement to draw the ape's warning without exposing Lu's crew. A pair of flying Scourge would climb from behind the southern rock tooth and strike the archers while the builders made their first steps. Shale would take the veterans up the seam. Sumnu's reserve waited on the lower road in case the cliffstriders came down to cut them off.

Edrin listened, then pointed above the crest. “The wind carries noise toward us. If they call from the ape, it will reach the northern riders before our flyers do.”

“How many calls has it made since dawn?”

“Four. It answered another from farther east after the third. The handler gave it water and let it rest after the last.”

“Make it call once more for no reward. Then send the flyers while its throat is empty.”

Edrin's expression sharpened. “It won't be empty long.”

“It doesn't have to be.”

Shale assigned the routes herself. The veterans she brought had fought among roots, ruins and city roofs. They knew how to move without a commander narrating every handhold. She gave each pair a destination and a withdrawal point. If Lu's steps failed, they wouldn't pile beneath him waiting for instructions.

The first Lurker moved at the edge of the trees. The ape rose in its harness, pale ruff lifting around its face. Its throat pouch swelled. A hollow boom crossed the valley. High on the ridge, two archers turned toward the false movement. A rider lifted a hand to the northern troop.

Edrin's Lurker vanished into the trees before an arrow arrived.

The handler worked the ape's strap and offered it water. Its mouth hung open. Shale watched the rider at the north crest lower his hand. He had been

warned, seen nothing and begun to doubt the warning.

“Now,” she sent.

Two winged Scourge rose from the southern ravine. Shale stayed with the veterans on the ground. Her wings could carry her over the ridge, but they couldn't carry twelve soldiers through the archers with her. One flyer took an arrow through the outer membrane and adjusted his angle without falling. The other dropped behind the archers' screen. Both struck within breaths of the first alarm.

Lu ran to the face. He planted his tail against a shelf and put one palm on the rock. A shallow step grew beneath his hand. He made a second above it, then moved his weight to test the first.

“Follow,” Shale told her leading pair. She waited until their boots took the first steps before putting her own claws into the stone. The new footholds were narrow. Lu had given the climbers an honest route, not a staircase. Each veteran stayed low enough to let the person above move without catching a shoulder or wing. The rock was cold beneath Shale's fingers. Water had left a slick dark stripe down the seam; she kept her grip on its rough edge. A root caught the folded tip of one wing as she passed the last tree. She eased it free before climbing higher. Above the branches, the wind tugged at her folded wings and carried the smell of the mounts down from the crest.

An arrow struck the rock beside Shale's head. Powder stung her cheek. She looked up and saw a highland archer leaning over the parapet beyond the southern fight. “Edrin. One above the seam.”

The Lurker on the ledge sent a view of the archer's boots. He could reach them only by crossing an exposed gap. Shale didn't order him into it. She shifted beneath an overhang and waited for the next shot. When the archer leaned out again, she hurled a stone chip. It hit his bow hand. His arrow went wide. Her leading veteran reached the ledge in the moment the man drew back.

The ape called again, shorter this time. From the northern tooth, cliffstriders began to descend.

They did not run straight at the climbers. Their riders used a slanting line across the face, crossing from shelf to shelf where the split hooves found purchase. The riders carried long spears, their legs sheltered behind the animals' shaggy chests. At the bottom of the traverse they could strike Lu's crew while most of Shale's veterans were still on the wall.

“Sumnu, lower route,” she sent.

“Moving,” Sumnu replied through the link.

He wouldn't reach the builders before the first rider. Shale measured the distance and changed the climb. “Lu, stop making steps upward. Give me a lateral shelf to the right.”

“The face is split there.”

“For how far?”

“Seven paces before sound rock.”

“I need four.”

Lu hesitated only long enough to find the load. The rock moved outward in a narrow lip. It could carry one person if they kept close to the wall. Shale sent her next veteran along it and followed. The route brought them beneath the riders' crossing rather than above it.

The first cliffstrider came down with its rider leaning back on the saddle straps. Shale caught the animal's foreleg at the knee and pulled it off line. Its hoof spread against her arm, scraping scales. She did not try to stop its whole weight. She turned its descent toward the solid ledge beside her. The mount landed awkwardly and the rider's spear passed over her shoulder.

Her veteran struck the spear shaft. Shale seized the rider's belt and hauled him out of the saddle. He fell onto the shelf, where another veteran pinned him before he could roll away. The cliffstrider scrambled above them, hooves clicking for purchase. It found it and climbed, leaving its rider behind.

“Leave the animal,” Shale ordered. “Take the saddle path.”

The second rider saw the trap and pulled his mount upward. Its chest heaved. It had made the long night climb to the ridge, descended once for reinforcement and was being asked to climb again under armor. The handler on the crest shouted for a pause. The rider ignored him.

The mount stopped on a shelf scarcely wide enough for all four hooves.

Shale's flyers turned the archers back toward their own screen. One of them landed atop the northern tooth and cut a bowstring. The other remained low, forcing the riders to watch the air as well as the face. Neither could stay exposed indefinitely. Shale needed the crest before the highlanders regrouped.

She climbed past Lu's last step using the natural seam. A defender thrust a spear down. She caught it beneath one arm, braced both hind feet against the wall and pulled. The man came over the edge. He struck the lip Lu had made and rolled into two waiting veterans.

Shale reached the crest with blood on her cheek and stone dust under her claws. The wind carried the smell of trampled grass and dung. A feed sack lay open beside a tether peg, grain worked into the mud by hooves. She set her foot beside it and felt bare rock under a thin layer of soil. There would be little purchase here if a shield drove her backward.

The enemy captain had formed six shield bearers around the ape's handler. The animal crouched behind them, throat pouch twitching. Its next call would bring help from farther east if the echo traveled through the right valley.

“Keep the ape alive,” Shale said. “Take the handler.”

The captain heard her and drove his shields forward. The first impact pushed her back toward the cliff. She let the line come a step, then struck its left edge with her tail. Her veterans hit the opened space before the shields could close. The fight became a struggle between small groups on ground too narrow for either side to form a wall.

The handler tried to loose the ape. Edrin's Lurker dropped behind him and cut the harness rope. The animal bolted across the crest, away from the

blades. The handler went down under the Lurker's weight with one hand still gripping an empty strap.

The captain's last shield bearer yielded when he saw Sumnu's Raiders climbing the lower path. Shale hadn't expected them so soon. Sumnu had found a cattle ramp beyond the northern tooth and used it while the cliffstriders hesitated. He came up smiling beneath a cut across his shoulder.

“I was told there would be a road,” he said.

“There is now.”

The ridge answered with a tremor.

Shale put a hand on the rock. It moved once beneath her palm, then again farther east. A highland shaper had reached the far tooth with the riders who had withdrawn. He was pulling on the seam that ran behind their new position, trying to make the crest itself a weapon. The captured captain shouted a warning to his own men before Shale could. They threw themselves away from the seam.

“Sumnu, get your people off the outer lip,” she sent. *“He is taking the rear bearing.”*

The Raider commander moved without asking for the geometry. He pulled his nearest pair to the inland side. Shale counted the exposed soldiers. Two veterans remained beside a wounded flyer who had landed badly on the crest. The wing membrane was torn; the joint still moved. They could carry him if the rock held another thirty breaths.

“Lu, can you support us from below?” Shale sent.

Not that tooth, Lu replied. *I can give the wounded a shelf on the west side. Six paces. No more.*

“Make it.”

Shale went to the flyer herself. He tried to stand and the damaged wing snagged on a broken shield. She cut the strap holding the shield, folded the membrane clear and put his arm across her shoulders. One veteran took his

other side. The second faced east with a captured bow, firing when the shaper leaned out far enough to see his work.

The rock split behind them. A slab the size of a wagon bed fell away from the rear of the ridge. It struck the lower slope and broke into pieces that thundered toward Lu's crew. The senior engineer dragged a carpenter behind a buttress while Lu dropped both hands to the wall and thickened the shelter above them. Fragments hit the new stone. The crew stayed upright.

Shale reached the shelf with the flyer. It was narrow and rough, but it had a sound connection to the western face. She put him on it with the veteran and turned back toward the shaper.

He had brought two archers. They were already drawing on the people carrying the wounded. Shale crossed the crest low, claws catching in the cracks. The first arrow skimmed her ward. The second struck the stone where she had been. She came up beneath the archer's raised bow and drove him into the inner wall. The other archer loosed at arm's length. His arrow entered her upper arm before she could turn aside.

Pain cleared the last hesitation from her movement.

She pulled him off his feet and rolled him away from the cliff. He landed where Sumnu's reserve could bind him. The shaper saw his protection gone and put both palms to the rock.

“You want this ridge?” Shale said. “Come hold it.”

He had no intention of coming closer. The seam rose instead, making a barricade between them. Shale struck it with both hands. Her claws opened the physical face, but his working kept the rest moving. She didn't waste time trying to out-shape a man with a mountain under his hands.

“Edrin. His left side,” Shale sent.

The Lurker had already found a lower crack and was climbing toward it. The shaper turned his head when the green scales appeared. That moment of divided attention slowed the wall. Shale vaulted it while it was still low enough to cross. She landed beside him and caught the wrist he had planted in the stone. He pulled away and abandoned the working.

The wall stopped rising.

Sumnu came around the far end with three Raiders. The shaper retreated with the remaining cliffstrider riders, using the animal path Shale had wanted to cut. She could have chased them down the slope. The wounded flyer was still on Lu's narrow shelf, and the enemy knew every foothold below the saddle. She held the crest instead.

“Don't follow,” she sent. *“Make them climb for it tomorrow.”*

She pulled the arrow from her arm only after Lynia's nearest Mystic checked that the head had come free. The wound would take repair biomass, but the arm moved. Shale handed the bloodied shaft to Sumnu.

“They brought this up a mountain. I hate to waste it.”

“I'll put it in the stores tally,” he said. “Under your name.”

The enemy had been driven off the height without being destroyed. Shale wanted that reported plainly before anyone started cheering. The next attack would come with a better map of her defenses. She started changing them before the captured captain's orders were even read.

Lu was still below, widening the foot of the steps for the wounded to descend. The engineers set a rail where the rock changed from firm to loose. Shale made them mark the limit of the repaired route. A cart still wouldn't cross it. Men with ropes could.

The captured captain carried orders in a waxed tube under his coat. Shale took them to Slate at the lower camp. He had followed the fight through the Scourgemind, but the paper contained what no distant eye could see: relief forces were assembling at a road junction east of the high saddle. Two Confederacy banners approached from different valleys. Neriq's Preservers were to take a lower water route toward them. The orders named a date for concentration.

Slate had a runner bring Lu and Edrin to the map. Shale remained while the positions were marked.

“We have the height,” she said. “They can retake it if we leave four people and a prayer up there.”

“Then we don't,” Slate said. “Sumnu holds the lower ramp. Edrin keeps eyes on the eastern saddle. Lu makes the first steps safe for supplies, no more.”

“And the flyers?”

“Let the injured one rest. The other can watch until night.”

Shale wanted to go back up before anyone thought her work finished. Slate caught her hand at the map and held it long enough to look at the blood along her cheek.

“That yours?”

“Some.”

“Lynia can count it. I need you commanding the ridge tomorrow, not collapsing on it tonight.”

“I was going to eat first.”

“I expected that.”

She leaned close enough to show him the small cut was already closing. “I liked the climb.”

“I know.”

The answer pleased her more than praise would have.

She returned to the ridge at dusk. The wind had dried the blood along her cheek and stiffened the mud on her feet. Below, the supply road had disappeared into shadow; she could still hear a wagon wheel knock against stone at the bend. Her soldiers had dragged the captured feed sacks against the inland rock and were eating in its shelter. She folded her wings close and crouched beside the first watch to see how much of the eastern approach the rock concealed.

The cliffstriders that had withdrawn to the eastern saddle were still visible between rock teeth, their handlers walking them rather than riding. The ape had been captured unharmed and given water. Its handler, under guard, told

Shale how far its warning could carry in calm air and how long it needed to rest before a full call.

She placed listening posts outside that range.

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XXXVII

The Mountain Unleashed

THE FIRST BELL CAME FROM THE QUARRY.

Slate was at the ridge fort Shale had taken, watching Lu's engineers fit timber under its weakest outer lip. The sound reached him through the valley: one iron strike, a pause, then two close together. It was not the signal code Edrin had taken from Shouguan. It was the feeding ring Wei's handlers had used with the Cragback.

The quarry watch sent its view a heartbeat later. A sack had been thrown into the bowl from the northern cut. The beast lifted its head from the stone wall it had been worrying for three days. Its armored back rose above the spoil. A second bell sounded beyond the quarry, farther east.

“Handlers,” Slate said.

Shale was beside him before he finished sharing the view. She saw the sacks, the bell and the narrow route from the quarry toward the captured ridge. “The north cut should be watched,” she said.

“It is. They're ringing from outside the guards' line. Get the watch clear. They can't hold the bowl.”

Edrin's Lurker sent the guard withdrawal at once. Two sentries climbed from the quarry rim, moving along the timber way Lu had laid after the first breach. The Cragback had never been a prisoner there. Slate had kept it fed, kept people beyond its reach and watched for the day it chose to leave. Shen had chosen the day for it.

At the ridge, the defensive works faced the eastern saddle. Lu had repaired the approach, placed timber supports under the slope and cut fallback positions for Sumnu's companies. The fresh braces still smelled of cut

wood. Quarry grit packed the old wheel ruts behind the rear wall; pale scrapes marked the barrels they had rolled through its narrow gate. It was good work against a banner of soldiers. The quarry opened behind it.

“How long before it reaches the road?” Slate asked.

Lu listened to the stone beneath his claws. “If it follows the bell, less than a quarter hour. If it stays for the sacks, longer.”

“Plan for less.”

He sent Sumnu to move the forward food wagons west of the ridge and Brenn's relay to warn the next convoy. The height mattered. The expedition mattered more. He would not spend half his veterans because a fortification had made him fond of the view.

Another image came from the quarry. A man in a highland coat crouched beyond the north cut with the iron ring in his hand. Two more dragged a sled of feed. They had chosen a line that led toward the ridge's rear stone wall, not the supply road below it.

“Can we take the ring?” Shale asked.

“Edrin's closest pair can reach the handlers. If they fail, I don't want them between the beast and its food.”

The Lurkers moved. Slate watched through one of them as green scales crossed a narrow ledge above the handler. The man with the ring heard a scrape and struck it early. The Cragback turned its enormous head. Its sideways horns passed beneath the ledge and peeled a strip of stone from it. The Lurker jumped to another hold. The second reached the sled and cut its rope.

The feed scattered. The Cragback went after the sacks instead of the ringing man. For several breaths its handlers lost their line. Then one of them opened a fresh sack farther east. The beast saw it. It came through the quarry mouth with a body-wide ripple of stone beneath its forefeet.

The Lurkers withdrew. They had delayed it, not stopped it. Slate sent them to the ridge's north side to watch for the soldiers who would follow.

Shen did not leave the beast alone. Confederacy shields appeared on the eastern saddle, where Shale had driven the previous garrison off. The banners kept their distance. They would let the Cragback break the defensive works, then advance against whatever Scourge line remained.

“The road wagons?” Slate asked Sumnu.

Moving, Sumnu reported. *Two loaded, one still at the forward store. I can send men for it.*

“Send them for people first,” Slate sent Sumnu. *“Grain if the road stays open. If it doesn't, leave the grain.”*

Sumnu's displeasure came through the connection without words. He obeyed.

Slate went down to the rear wall with Brace and four of the Guard. Lu followed with two builders and the human carpenters. The wall stood above an old quarry approach made from fitted slabs. It had been convenient for moving supplies. Now the Cragback could travel from its bowl to the ridge without crossing more than a short strip of soil. They’d given the beast a road straight to their wall.

“Break the road where stone meets stone,” he told Lu.

“That denies the second wagon.”

“Better a wagon than the company behind it.”

They moved the people first. The last loaded cart crossed the rear approach while Lu cut a seam in its outer edge. The carpenters slid a timber plate across the gap for the wounded to walk over, then lifted it away. The remaining stone road ended a body length short of the wall. Slate wanted to learn whether the beast's shaping could cross that break. He didn't stake the evacuation on the answer.

The Cragback arrived with dust boiling around its legs.

It struck the road beyond the gap. Stone rose in a wave under its forefeet, rolled toward the missing section and stopped at the earth and open air. Loose fragments leaped ahead, but the shaped mass did not continue into

the wall. The beast lowered its horns and pushed through the broken edge. Its immense weight tore a larger hole. It could still reach the wall physically. The gap had bought time and a clearer limit, not safety.

“It needs the same stone beneath it,” Lu said.

“Until it walks across.”

“Yes.”

Slate passed the observation to Edrin. The animal's shaping traveled through connected stone under direct pressure. A disconnected block or a wooden deck did not carry the working. Its horns and mass could still break either one. The beast's first collision bent the wall inward. Its plates scraped against the upper course, shedding chips that struck the road like hail. Slate put his warded body between Lu and the falling stone while the Builder shifted a support away from the damaged section. Chips cracked against his warded chest and shoulders as Lu worked behind him.

“Leave the joint,” Slate said. “Keep the escape stair.”

Lu released the wall. He and the carpenters moved along the inner face, opening the timber-supported stair that led to the lower supply route. Slate wanted them ahead of the soldiers, not proving they could hold masonry against an animal built to unmake it.

The second collision brought a section down.

The Cragback did not aim like a trained shaper. It pressed its head and forefeet into the resisting stone. The structure flowed around the pressure, then hardened behind its departing body. Each step made another part of the wall useless. The shaping was strongest where its weight met the wall. Beyond a broken joint, Slate saw intact stone hold until the beast touched it.

Confederacy soldiers moved on the eastern saddle.

“Sumnu, first company to the lower stair. Second company covers the rear. Do not let anyone stand on the slab the beast is using.”

Understood.

Shale took the upper line. She sent the remaining flyer along the crest to watch the enemy advance. The first arrows struck the rear court while Sumnu's soldiers were still pulling the last store barrels toward the stair. One barrel split. Dry grain spilled across stone already shaking under the Cragback's approach.

Slate could have ordered it recovered. The grain would feed three dozen people for a day. A man trying to lift it would be exactly where the wall was about to fall. He had the stores officer mark the loss and move.

The enemy advanced behind the beast. Their shapers tried to exploit the damage, drawing the far edge of the rear court upward to cut the Scourge retreat. Slate saw mana light through the stone. He used Mana-Infused Monomolecular Edge on the nearest working when he reached it, running a narrow current through his claw as he cut at the active seam. The line snapped within arm's reach. The court stopped rising there. The other shaper's work continued farther along, beyond his contact.

“One line,” he told Lu. “You'll have to open the rest.”

“I have the stair. Bring your people through it.”

A ballista fired from the saddle. The bolt struck the timber rail beside the senior engineer and drove splinters through her sleeve. She kept her footing. One of her carpenters did not. He fell against the outer edge as the rail broke.

Slate leaped down two steps and caught the man's belt. A second bolt would find him there if he stayed. Dessa joined her ward to his long enough to cover the lift. The carpenter came up bleeding from the arm, able to walk. Slate sent him down with the senior engineer and released the join once the carpenter was clear, saving their remaining mana for the withdrawal.

The Cragback came through the rear wall.

Its body occupied the breach from side to side. The high plates along its neck scraped both jambs. It couldn't turn quickly within the gap. Its spined tail struck a retaining pier behind it and broke the masonry into a fan of fragments. Slate's Guards pulled the last soldiers clear before the tail swept again.

Above the lower stair, a Confederacy file appeared on a side path Shale had marked the night before. Their captain had waited until the retreat began to use it. Six shield bearers came first, followed by a shaper whose hands were wrapped in pale cloth. They were aiming for the stair mouth. If they closed it, the Scourge still in the rear court would have only the path past the Cragback.

“Brace, take the guard's lower pair,” Slate sent. *“Keep the stairs open.”*

“I'll need the landing,” Brace replied.

“You have it. Sumnu, hold them there until Brace arrives.”

Sumnu left Slate with four Raiders and ran down through the dust. The first Confederacy shields struck his line at the landing. He met them with the curved plates of his arms, driving one man against the rock while his Raiders pulled the second shield aside. The shaper behind the enemy line reached down to the fitted step. Stone tilted beneath Sumnu's hind foot.

Slate saw the working through the dust. It lay too far away for his new edge to cut. He could reach the shaper, but only by passing across the rear court while the beast tore it apart. Instead he sent Lu the image.

I can brace the stair from below, the Builder answered. *Not while the shaper has both hands on it.*

“Brace, the hands,” Slate sent.

The guard commander reached the lower landing with Dessa. He had a wooden shield taken at Shouguan. He put it above Sumnu's shoulders, absorbing two spears, while Dessa crossed beneath it and struck the shaper's wrist with the flat of her blade. The man pulled free, losing contact with the step. Lu caught the load from below. The stair settled level under Sumnu's feet.

The enemy captain looked from the Cragback behind Slate to the guard now holding the landing. He had expected the beast to force the Scourge down the narrow passage in a frightened mass. Instead the first wounded were already past the lower turn, and the Raiders he faced were fighting with room to move.

He called a retreat. Sumnu let him take it. The side path remained exposed to Shale's archers, and the captain knew it. Slate sent a Lurker to follow far enough to make sure the file didn't circle back.

“You could have gone after the shaper,” Brace sent when the landing cleared.

“And left you a stair that moved under your feet,” Slate replied to Brace. *“I like the result we got.”*

Brace didn't answer. He turned the shield over to show a spearhead still lodged through its face. Slate had one of the Guards record that the wood was no longer sound. It had served them well in the retreat. Slate wouldn't let someone carry it into the next fight with a hole through it.

Slate thought of the quarry bowl. The beast had followed food into it, then followed food out. It did not understand whose banners stood above the road. It knew hunger, pressure and the irritation of a wall refusing to give way. Shen's handlers had made those needs point at Slate's route.

“Take the handlers,” he told Edrin. “Without them, the animal may still break our wall. It won't choose the next one for Shen.”

The Lurkers reached the feed sled from the flank. One handler fell. Another ran. The man with the bell struck it once and dropped it when Edrin's claw cut across his wrist. The ring rolled beneath the sled and stopped.

For a moment the Cragback halted inside the broken wall.

Its flanks expanded beneath the armored ridge. It had moved more stone in the last few minutes than it had during the whole morning in the quarry. Slate could hear the labor in its breathing. The beast lowered its muzzle toward a broken sack. It took a mouthful, shook grit from the meat and swallowed. A handler on the saddle called for another load, as if the animal's appetite could be supplied faster than the road behind it had been destroyed.

Then the ballista struck its armored neck. The iron head broke. The beast turned toward the saddle and roared. Confederacy shields moved apart to let

it through. Shen's shapers pulled a strip of road upward, offering the irritated animal a path that also cut the Scourge from its forward store.

“They're steering it with the road now,” Lu said.

“They can steer it away from us for the next minute. Use that.”

The last Scourge came down the lower stair. Slate held the rear with Sumnu and the Guard until Shale's upper line withdrew. The animal struck the forward store on its way toward the saddle. The roof buckled; barrels rolled into the street. The remaining food and spare iron went under its feet. Beyond it, Confederacy troops occupied the ruined approach, raising shields against a counterattack Slate wasn't going to make.

He brought his force to the lower ravine after dark.

Water seeped from a seam in the wall and threaded between the slabs underfoot. It clouded wherever a soldier stepped into it. The walls leaned close above the water, leaving a thin strip of sky. Ferns grew from the wet seams; their crushed stems smelled sharp beneath the quarry dust. Slate had to fold one wing tight to pass a leaning boulder. A stretcher would need turning to clear it. He sent Brace the image of the gap.

The carpenters took the driest shelf for their wounded. Farther along, Raiders sat against the wall with their tails drawn out of the path. A lamp moved from hand to hand as men checked straps and opened packs. Slate had the uninjured shift their gear off the inner bank. If the ridge troops followed, he needed room to move the injured.

They had kept most of the soldiers who had held the ridge and the civilians working behind it. They had lost the high position, the direct wagon route, the forward store and enough food to make the next week uncomfortable. A few wounded had to be carried. Two names did not answer the final roll. Slate waited until Brace had checked the missing men against the teams sent to the lower stair, then had them marked as lost.

One was a Raider from the store detail who had gone back for the last pair of mule harnesses after the order to abandon the barrels. Sumnu had seen him under the falling roof and sent men to look from the lower approach. They found a length of harness, but no place where they could lift the

beams without bringing down the rest of the building. The other was a Lurker who had kept the eastern archers watching while the civilians crossed the stair. Edrin knew the exact ledge from which her last image had come. Enemy shields held it now.

Slate had the names read aloud. He told Sumnu to clarify what a retreating stores crew was permitted to salvage, and Edrin to look for a recovery route when daylight made it possible. One soldier had disobeyed a withdrawal order; the other had held her assigned post. Their commanders knew the difference.

The nearest convoy had halted west of the Nine Spans under Brenn’s standing order. It carried three days of rations, enough to replace the lost store if Slate could open a route. Otherwise his soldiers would have to eat their fighting reserves.

He sent Serena the loss and asked the convoy for timber, rope and loads the porters could carry. The destination lay below Shen’s ridge, out of sight of its watchers.

Shale found him where the ravine widened around a fallen slab. He had spread the map on its dry upper face and wedged a hooded lamp into a crack beside it. She drew her tail close to keep it off the paper. Dust whitened her silver scales. She set the captured orders from the earlier assault beside his map. “They expected us to defend the ridge after the wall fell,” she said. “The second banner was waiting above the lower road.”

“It can keep waiting.”

“We cannot feed this force from the direct route.”

“I know.”

He did not tell her to look at the people they had saved. She had commanded the withdrawal and knew exactly which feet had crossed the stair. He put one claw on the old maintenance gallery below the Nine Spans, a line Song's drawings left mostly blank.

“Lu says the beast's working stopped at a gap in the stone,” Slate told Shale. “It had to walk across before it could shape our wall.”

“It still walked across,” Shale replied.

“This time we cross that gap first. Edrin marks the far ledge tonight. Lu builds from the maintenance gallery, and our porters bring food through before Shen can move his second banner.”

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XXXVIII

The Living Road

LU COULD HEAR THE CONVOY ABOVE HIM.

Its wagons waited on the western approach to the Nine Spans, wheels held against the grade with stones. Men called to one another as they shifted sacks into smaller loads. None could see the gallery beneath the bridge. From below, Lu heard the creak of harness, the scrape of a shovel and the irritation of people who had been told that food existed but couldn't be delivered.

The lower maintenance passage hadn't been built for wagons. It was a narrow gallery cut into the cliff beneath the westernmost bridge, with iron eyes for repair ropes and a ledge where a mason could stand to inspect the bearing. Beyond it, a ravine led toward the lower route below Shouguan. The two pieces didn't meet. Between them lay a broken span of rock and a drop that made the senior engineer stop talking when she first looked over it.

“How far?” she asked.

Lu measured the void. His new senses returned a length so exact he disliked saying it aloud. “Twenty-three paces and a forearm. The gap widens below.”

“Not a bridge for carts,” the senior engineer said.

“No,” Lu said. “A bridge for people carrying what the army needs tonight. The carts can use it after we build a second support.”

The senior engineer planted a peg in the gallery wall. “If that support fails, your people fall into the watercourse.”

“If the direct road stays shut, Slate's soldiers go hungry. We test each load before anyone follows it.”

He did not say the risk made him comfortable. The senior engineer had seen him test enough structures to recognize the hesitation.

Slate arrived with Edrin, Dessa and the apprentice from the White Stair. Her name was Mei Lin. She had spent years measuring irrigation seats while someone else moved the stone. Lu had asked her to show him an error in his first drawing; she found two. He put her on the gallery crew that morning.

Slate crouched under the bridge's lowest support. “Shen thinks the road is gone. How many people can you move without telling him he was wrong?”

“Four at a time across the gap once we set the first truss. Carrying half loads. If the enemy sees the upper wagon, the gallery remains hidden, but the convoy must leave no visible trail down to its mouth.”

“And the families below the White Stair?” Slate asked Lu.

“They need an exit in the other direction. I won't put their foot traffic against grain porters in a one-person throat. Two passing bays here and here.” Lu touched the rock. “They can wait under cover while a load crosses.”

“Build those first. We don't know when we'll need them,” Slate said.

Slate handed him the supply list. Ordinary food, bandages, timber pins, spare bowstrings, salt and a small allocation of biomass for the wounded. The reserve bearer would carry the last item personally. Lu gave the heaviest grain sacks to a later run. No one was going to prove a new path sound by overloading its first crossing.

“You'll have guards,” Slate said. “Edrin watches the ravine. Dessa stays with the builders.”

“I need wood,” Lu said. “Long pieces. Not whatever was easiest to drag from the forward store.”

“Tell Sumnu what length. He has a company carrying timber from the old mill yard.”

“Yesterday you lost a ridge. Now you're sending Raiders to haul beams.”

“They can complain while they carry.”

Slate went back above the bridge to keep the visible patrols active on the direct route. Shen's observers needed to see men measuring that broken road and arguing over its repair. They did not need to see the work beneath it.

Lu began with the ravine connection. The nearest sound rock lay beyond the fractured lip. He could shape a receiving socket into it, but stone couldn't grow across empty air. The carpenters built a truss from two long beams with shorter members between them. Lu shaped their grain around fitted joints, tightening each connection without making the timber brittle. Mei Lin checked the angles against her own line. When the truss was ready, four Raiders walked it forward on ropes from the gallery.

It struck the far socket. Lu felt the contact through the wood before anyone called it. He seated the far end with a precise turn of grain, then drew stone around it. The near end rested on an old maintenance pier that had carried less weight than this for centuries. The senior engineer refused to trust its age as proof of strength. She had Lu expose the foundation and test it under a staged load.

“You enjoy making me wait,” he said.

“I enjoy sending people home after you finish.”

Mei Lin tied a marker to the outer corner of the pier. It moved when the first two Raiders crossed. It moved less when they returned. The settling stopped within the measure Lu had allowed. He wrote the result on the board and made them test with a half grain load. Only then did he let the reserve bearer approach.

A bell sounded high above the ravine.

It was not the Hollow Choir. This warning came from a bell-throated ape on the upper saddle, its low note swelling against the cliff. Edrin sent a view

from his lookout: three Confederacy scouts on the old road, one leading the animal. They had noticed movement at the bridge.

“Above,” Lu sent Slate. *“The gallery is hidden unless they descend.”*

I see them, Slate replied through the link. *Keep building. We'll give them something on the upper road to watch.*

Sumnu's visible repair crew began hauling broken stones toward the deck. Slate walked among them, gold wings half opened. An observer at the saddle would have no trouble seeing the Scourge avatar put hands on the obvious problem. Lu could hear his voice carry faintly down the cliff as he told the soldiers where to stack material.

The scouts stopped above. The ape called a second time. One rider turned east with a report while the other two remained.

“They may send someone down,” Edrin said. “They know galleries exist under these spans.”

“Then find the place they would use,” Lu said. “I can hide the entrance from the road, not from someone who knows exactly where to put a hand.”

Edrin sent two Lurkers along the western scree. They did not need to kill the scouts. They needed to keep any visitor from looking beneath the bridge long enough for the first loads to cross.

The reserve bearer stepped onto the truss with a pack much smaller than the grain sacks. His claws gripped the rough top. The engineer watched the marker on the pier. Lu watched the force spread through the fitted joints. At the midpoint the truss deflected less than the thickness of one claw. The bearer reached the far socket and looked back, delighted.

“Don't jump,” the engineer told him.

“I wasn't going to.”

“You thought about it.”

He had. Lu had seen the shift of weight before the man admitted it. Her scolding saved Lu the trouble.

They built the first passing bay while the next three loads crossed. Stone came away from the inner wall in a shallow alcove. Lu shaped the removed material into a low curb along the ravine edge. It wouldn't stop a falling cart, but it would warn a tired porter where the drop began. Mei Lin marked a line on the floor for the safe load path. Lu liked this part: an old passage that people could use again.

At the eastern end, the old gallery met a natural shelf descending toward Shouguan's lower ravine. A short section of loose shale lay between them. No shaper could turn those separate pieces into a sound road just by smoothing their top. Lu set timber sleepers across the unstable ground and locked their ends into stone beyond it. The sleepers would distribute each porter's weight. He left the shale free to move beneath them.

“It looks unfinished,” Mei Lin said.

“The ground is unfinished. I want it to tell us when it shifts. Paint the outside pegs. If one moves, close the path until I inspect it.”

She painted them with red clay and recorded the starting positions. Lu liked that she asked what could make the measurement wrong instead of simply writing down his number.

The first enemy scout came down the scree as afternoon light left the gallery. Edrin's Lurker spotted him before he saw the truss. A second followed higher up with a crossbow. They had found an old inspection stair hidden behind scrub.

“We can seal the stair,” Lu sent.

“Not yet,” Edrin answered. “If they think it collapsed, they will look for another way down. Let them reach the turn.”

Lu kept his hands on the truss while the Lurkers prepared their ambush. The sound of boots carried through the rock. A small stone knocked loose above him and fell past the ravine edge. The engineer moved the porters into the nearest bay without raising her voice. The loads waited. No one blocked the truss.

The crossbowman reached the turn first. He saw a Lurker on the lower stair and fired. She slipped aside. His bolt struck the outer rock. The scout behind him lunged forward, trying to reach her before she could climb away.

The second Lurker came from above. He caught the crossbowman's harness and pulled him onto the narrow landing. The weapon went over the edge. The first Lurker drove her attacker against the inner wall and held him there with a blade beneath his jaw.

The fight lasted only breaths. Its noise would carry to the saddle if the ape's handler listened carefully. Lu looked to Edrin.

“They saw the gallery,” Edrin said. “They won't report it. Others may know the stair.”

“I can close it after your people come down.”

“Do that. Leave enough of the old entrance that a patrol believes it ended in a rockfall.”

Lu shaped stone across the turn, then covered the new face with loose rubble and dust from the old stair. He did not try to forge centuries of age. He made it look like a minor collapse a scout wouldn't clear without an engineer. The two prisoners went west under guard. Neither had seen the far end of the truss.

Mei Lin called from the eastern socket. “The outside peg has moved.”

Lu was beside her before she finished measuring. The painted mark sat a finger's width below its starting point. That was more than the settling he had allowed. Three porters waited at the far end with grain on their backs. He closed the truss at both ends and had them set their loads down on the sound shelf.

“Did the scouts strike it?” the engineer asked.

“No. The load is finding a weakness in my first seat.”

The far socket looked intact. Lu examined it through the new close vision that let him inspect the grain inside a peg and the stone around it without a

magnifying glass. A narrow crack had opened beneath the inner edge. Not through the rock he had shaped, but through an older layer below it. His new stone had transferred more force downward than his first test revealed.

He could widen the socket into the upper layer. That would move the load toward the gallery wall and solve this crack, until enough porters crossed to tire a different joint. The right correction required a second bearing beneath the first, reached from a wet ledge a few paces below.

“Rope,” he said. “Two lines. Anchor them separately.”

The engineer gave him a look that asked whether he intended to descend himself.

“I can measure the lower rock from here,” he said. “I cannot seat timber in it from here.”

“I'll send a carpenter.”

“The lower joint needs wood and stone moved together. I will go with one.”

They lowered Lu and an experienced carpenter to the wet ledge. His tail braced against the rock while the carpenter set a short beam beneath the cracked seat. Water struck Lu's boots and ran through the chasm below. He opened a stone socket in the lower layer, shaped the end of the beam to fit it, then drew the upper grain tight without crushing it.

He felt a change in pressure through his tail. The outer truss had settled another fraction as someone moved on the far shelf. *“Stop the porters,”* Lu sent.

They are still, Edrin answered. *A civilian party is coming toward your eastern end. I have them waiting.*

One of the civilians was injured. Her husband had carried her as far as the shelf before the closure. Lu could hear her trying to tell him she could walk. She needed the route open. His pride could wait.

“Hold the upper line,” he told the carpenter. “I'm going to take the load briefly while I close the socket.”

The carpenter wrapped the rope around his waist. Lu put both palms against stone and let the truss settle onto the new beam. The force arrived through the grain and into the lower rock. His perfect sense of angle showed him the beam bending by a small, acceptable measure. The old crack stopped opening. He fixed the beam's stone seat and signaled the engineer to begin the test again.

First the empty bearer crossed. Then one half load. The peg didn't move. Lu asked for the second half load and watched the lower beam take the weight without shifting its ends. He marked a reduced capacity for the rest of the night. A wider deck could wait until they understood the lower foundation better.

They climbed back to the gallery. The injured woman crossed with one person supporting her on each side. She kept her weight between the red lines. Her husband followed carrying their tools, a roll of cloth and a small covered cage of cloudmoth cocoons. He had refused to leave them in the house where soldiers had begun searching for spare grain.

“Will they hatch here?” Mei Lin asked him.

“If I keep them warm and damp. Ask me again after I find a room.”

Lu sent him toward the western convoy's receiving post, where a Scourge clerk could record his route and find a sheltered room where the keeper could tend his cocoons. Getting one family across took longer than carrying three sacks of grain. But others would see they could trust the route with their children and belongings. Lu checked the painted peg once more. It held at the new mark.

The sun had gone behind the western ridges when the first food reached Slate's camp. Sumnu's soldiers carried half loads through the lower ravine. They were dirty, hungry and proud of making three trips. The wounded received bandages and biomass before the company cooks opened the grain. Civilians from the terraces used the opposite bay to pass west with two children and a basket of tools. They had chosen to leave their house for the night while Shen's patrols searched the upper road. Lu gave them a guard as far as the convoy.

One of the children stopped beside the painted pegs. “Is this a secret road?”

“For now,” Lu said. “Watch the red marks and don't step past them.”

She stepped carefully through the bay, delighted by the rule.

The engineer sat on an empty timber crate and ate a piece of bread with both hands. “You're thinking about a wider deck.”

“Tomorrow. First I want to see whether the pier moves overnight.”

“It will move a little.”

“Then I will decide how much is acceptable before we put an animal on it.”

Slate came down after the evening meal. He crossed the truss alone, respecting the painted line as though Lu had placed a guard at each end. At the far socket he looked back toward the wagons waiting unseen above the bridge.

“Shen thinks my army is cut off,” he said.

“His scouts know there is an inspection stair. They don't know we crossed from it to this ravine.”

“How many can you move tonight?”

“Food for the camp. One small reinforcement party before dawn. After that I want the pier inspected again. We cannot make the whole army vanish through it.”

“I don't need the whole army. I need a force large enough to take the junction that commands the roads.”

Lu looked east. The maintenance shelf continued around a bend that the upper saddle couldn't see. Its far end emerged below the relief routes Shen was using to gather his hosts. A small force could travel there without using the upper road.

“Give me two nights,” Lu said. “We can widen the passing bays and make a second exit. Your soldiers can go through carrying weapons instead of sacks.”

“You built me a road under his road.”

“A path. A road when it can carry the loads you intend to send.”

Slate smiled. “Then I'll wait for your signature.”

He returned west before the next porter came across. Lu remained at the far socket with Mei Lin. She held the measuring cord against the painted peg. It hadn’t moved. Above them, their own supply wagons could still be heard on the deck. Shen held the road beyond the crossing, not the bridge itself. Each axle beat told Lu how much weight the upper route carried. The sound had become a measuring tool for the road beneath it.

Lu touched the truss, felt the living grain take a small shift in weight and passed another load east.

When it was across, he set two builders to the second exit and sent the engineer the revised load measure. He also sent Slate a drawing of the lower foundation with the weak layer marked in red. If Shen found the gallery, the first thing he would attack was the truss. Lu intended the road to have another way out before the army relied on it for anything larger than a night's food.

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XXXIX

The Offered Peace

Shen set a model of Shouguan between them.

The fortress rose from a stone table in the shape it had held before Slate's attack: whole curtain, northern stair, upper store. A road ran from its gate to Covenant. No Scourge flag marked the wall.

"You made the old version," Slate noted.

"It is the one my people know."

Slate chuckled. "They'll need a new map."

The Surety's mouth barely moved. He sat beneath a canvas roof above the lower ravine, his bandaged wrist beside the model. Three guards each waited beyond hearing. Brace and Ren remained at opposite ends of the table, unarmed.

Slate had considered bringing Lu. The Builder would have found every hidden joint in the table. Shen had asked to meet one avatar to another, though, and Slate wanted to hear what the dwarf would offer before the coming battle.

"The roads around you are closed," Shen said.

"Most of them," Slate agreed.

"Your forward stores are lost. You have wounded behind a position you cannot supply by wagon. I will grant your army safe passage west. Your prisoners go with you. I will return those held by my officers."

A clean withdrawal, with the fortress intact and its households returned to Covenant rule. Shen was offering the part of the army Slate could still save in exchange for the ground that made the campaign worth fighting. Slate

watched Shen’s open left hand. The bandaged one had never made him harmless.

“And the fortress?”

“You leave it intact,” Shen said. “My garrison returns after your last company passes.”

“The terraces?”

“Confederacy administration resumes. Any inhabitant who has taken your service may petition the Weighted Court for release from local obligations.”

“With your officers deciding whether their service counted.”

“With witnesses from the member houses and a record of the obligation.”

Slate looked down at the white stair cut into the model. Water lines fed the orchards from the upper spring. The district was a storehouse, a road junction, and a working foothold inside the Confederacy. The people who knew its channels made it useful. Lose them, and he held a stone shell his army could not feed.

“The orchard crews kept the water running while your captain tried to take their shaper east,” he said. “They chose to stay. I’m not handing them to a court that calls my occupation a breach of contract.”

Shen turned the model a quarter turn. “Those channels were built under house obligations. Their keepers have claims against one another. If an individual leaves by speaking to you, the neighbor whose field depends on that labor must be heard too.”

“Then hear them. Pay for the work. Don’t put a chain on a person because water needs tending.”

“You have enough Builders for every channel?”

“No.” Slate let the answer sit. Shen had asked about labor, not compassion. “I have people who know their craft. Wagons taking them away would cost me the irrigation, the harvest, and every potential recruit who watched me let it happen.”

“My terms,” Slate continued. “I keep Shouguan and the approach roads I can hold. Households choose where they live. Irrigation work gets paid and maintained. Your houses may send witnesses for claims against individuals, but no soldiers enter to enforce them without my agreement. Prisoners return by exchange, case by case.”

“You ask me to recognize a foreign jurisdiction inside the Confederacy.”

“I ask you to recognize the part I already govern,” Slate corrected. “Choose whichever word makes it easier for you to write it down.”

The Surety seemed uncomfortable. “The Covenant has no article permitting me to give away a member house’s land.”

“It has one requiring you to defend it.” Slate tapped the model where the road narrowed at the lower terraces. “You’re doing that. My army is still here while many of my enemies became food for the Scourge.”

Shen’s fingers closed once against the table. He couldn’t let the houses see him trade a stronghold and its people for one defeated garrison’s safe return. They would ask what the Covenant had bought them. Slate didn’t need him to care about the terraces; he needed the Covenant to make Shen answer for them.

“I can suspend the campaign while a hearing takes place,” Shen said. “Your troops remain west of the Nine Spans. The households stay in their villages. No one removes them before the hearing.”

“And whose guards hold the terrace roads while we wait?”

“Mine.”

Slate snorted. “Then the hearing begins after I surrender. A slower way to ask for the same thing.”

“You have made yourself responsible for people your supply line cannot reliably reach,” Shen said.

Slate gave him no sign of the lower road. “I have a road. It doesn’t take a wagon. That’s what Builders are for.”

Shen’s gaze went to the ravine. He knew there was a route; not where it entered or how Slate kept it open. Let him search. The farther Shen’s scouts looked in the wrong places, the longer the real road stayed useful.

“It will be found.”

“Eventually. Then I’ll build another.” Slate shifted his wings. “Or I could send the Scourge over terrain your cliffstriders won’t cross.”

A stone marker moved along the eastern route and stopped at a concentration junction. Shen placed a second above the northern saddle. The offer had become a map of the army waiting to close on Shouguan.

Slate already had Edrin’s captured orders and Shale’s high ridge. Shen’s markers confirmed the timing and showed which route he wanted Slate watching. Slate placed one claw on the miniature western road and scored a line toward the fortress, leaving it open at the lower terraces.

“You have time to withdraw before they close,” Shen said.

“You have time to move them before I eat them.”

Ren looked up. Shen studied the cut. Slate kept his claw on the road and let Shen weigh the assault against the army massing beyond the markers.

“What of the Forsworn?” Shen asked. “Some who attacked people under my seal are now inside your lines.”

“The ones who helped me cross kept their terms.” Slate waved a hand. “The ones who tried to take my prisoners didn’t. They’re no longer a concern.”

“And Yan?”

“He’s loose in your mountains. You know the paths better than I do. Find him if you want him.”

“He could make a district ungovernable for either of us.”

“Then we agree on the problem.” Slate had no reason to explain how little he knew about Yan’s next move.

Shen reached for the model. The cut line remained. “I offered your army safe return. I will not offer it after you attack gathering banners.”

“If I wanted only the army home, I’d be on the western road.” Slate held Shen’s gaze. “Send the contract records for the Covenant shapers. They can read them with my people beside them. I’ll pay for work they agreed to. I won’t send them back because one of your contracts needs breaking.”

“You would judge the houses’ covenants?”

“I’d let the workers read them.” The records would force each house to defend its claim in front of the workers.

Ren pulled out a folded sheet. “A limited exchange, separate from the larger question. Six wounded at Shouguan. Four of yours at the north camp. Names and injuries.”

Slate read the first line and passed the sheet to Brace. “Any of ours unable to walk?”

“Two. One has a crushed foot.”

Slate wanted his wounded counted. A little biomass and food would put the soldier back on his feet. Shen had to carry and feed his wounded, diverting men and supplies from the march. Slate could send them back to the line.

“Carts on the lower road. No closed wagons. Their guards inspect the carts; mine watch the handover.”

“Agreed.”

Ren’s pen faltered. Slate kept his eyes on Shen. The Surety did not amend the agreement. At noon, Slate would see whether Shen’s officers obeyed it.

“We do it at noon,” Slate said. “My surgeon assesses the four you send. If one can’t travel, she treats him where he is.”

“My healers will attend.”

“They can watch,” Slate agreed. “They don’t remove patients while she’s working.”

“Your surgeon is human?”

“Yes. She doesn’t care for you either. Be polite to her.”

Ren’s pen stopped. Shen glanced at him, and it began moving again.

They rose. Brace shifted half a step closer without blocking Slate’s path. Ren folded the offer into its case. Both guards had expected the talks to fail. Slate had given them no reason to relax.

At the canvas edge, Shen stopped. “You could leave the stronghold and still protect your people in Bastion.”

Slate considered the other leader's words before replying. “Bastion is a refuge. Shouguan is an approach.”

“You make them a reason for more soldiers to die,” the Surety warned.

“I make the crossing worth holding.” Slate watched Shen take that in. He did not need the households to love him. He needed their work, their local knowledge, and the fact of their choice. Each family that stayed made the foothold cheaper to keep and the Covenant’s claim harder to enforce. “Your Covenant sends soldiers to defend an obligation. Mine takes ground. Don’t mistake either for kindness.”

Shen studied him. “We weigh different things.”

“Your Covenant spends lives to keep its word.” Slate shrugged. “I spend whatever buys the road.”

They left with one narrow agreement: the wounded exchange at noon. Shouguan remained Slate’s, with Shen’s banners on the roads around it.

Six Confederacy wounded came down beneath a white cloth. Four Scourge waited on the opposite bank. Brace counted both groups before anyone crossed. A shaper raised a stone lip between the files. Slate cut it flat with his tail blade. The wounded had enough trouble crossing without negotiating a wall.

Two Scourge needed carts. The surgeon examined them while Shen’s healers watched. One objected when she cut the boot from the man with the

crushed foot. The soldier caught his sleeve. “Let her finish.”

She found a clean splint and infection at the wound’s edge. Shen’s camp had treated him, then held him too long. Slate watched all six of his prisoners reach the eastern bank before sending the carts west.

The man with the crushed foot asked if the lower road was open. “Lu’s path will take a litter,” Slate said. “Even with you on it. I had him test the weight.” The soldier laughed once, then slept.

The exchange bought no truce. Beyond the bridge, Shen’s high road carried the banners Slate had just refused to let into Shouguan.

After the exchange, Slate returned to Shouguan and called Edrin, Sumnu, and Shale to the map. He set Matek’s dispatch beside it. The dispatch marked the signal stations; Shen had shown him where the contingents would gather. The contingents were still on separate roads. Once they gathered, Slate would have to fight them together.

“Get me the signal book before dawn,” he told Edrin. “Then we decide which road to cut.”

Slate’s order gave Edrin until dawn. Under a shelf of wet limestone, he lay with three Lurkers and listened for the note. It sounded like a throat trying to swallow a stone. He counted the interval before it came again. Two short breaths, a longer one, then silence. The signal traveled from an opening halfway up the eastern wall of the ravine. A watcher in a second opening replied with a thinner tone. By dawn the message would have crossed the Hollow Choir and reached the roads where Shen’s contingents were assembling.

If he had read the signal correctly.

Matek's report had come from Bastion with sketches of the station's shutters and a merchant's account of which notes meant troop movement. The merchant had heard one season of signals. Shen had changed his army's routes since then. Edrin needed the shutters, the dispatch book and someone who knew how to read both. His orders were to bring the liaison back alive if possible. Slate had added that he would accept a corpse only if the book came with it.

“Three watchers on the ledge,” Tavi whispered. “One at each pipe, one with the mirror.”

Edrin watched the mirror flare and darken. “And below?”

“Two guards in the cleft. One ape with a handler,” Tavi whispered.

The bell-throated ape sat beneath a canvas hood. The animal's pale ruff made a ring around its face, but its throat pouch lay slack. Its handler held a leash attached to a broad leather collar and a whistle between his lips. The beast wouldn't need a clear view of the Lurkers. A shifted stone or a scent carried down the cut could wake the whole station.

Slate crouched farther back with Brace and two of the Guard. He had insisted on coming. Edrin would have preferred that the avatar remain where he could direct a reserve, but the station had a worked stone shutter that locked the inner archive. Lu couldn't reach it from below without exposing the approach. Slate had shown Edrin what his new edge did to an active shaping. Close contact, a precise cut, and the working failed along the line of the blade. That gave them one chance to enter before a defender sealed the mouth.

“The ape will hear the upper team,” Slate said.

“If they climb on the south face. Tavi will come from above the lip.” Edrin pointed to the dark overhang. “The animal faces the cleft. I want your Guard behind the lower door when she moves.”

“What do you want me doing?” Slate asked Edrin.

“Cutting the archive. After I say it's clear,” Edrin replied.

Slate's grin showed a little tooth. “You're enjoying this.”

“I command the Lurkers,” Edrin said. “You said so in front of everyone.”

“I did. Don't get carried away,” Slate replied.

Edrin waited until Tavi's team vanished above the shelf. The wind brought the dry mineral breath of the pipes down to him. The Hollow Choir was a series of natural chambers opened and narrowed by generations of shapers.

Wind passing across a mouth could carry a chosen note through more than one bend. A shutter could stop it, sharpen it or make it answer at another station. The sound needed a clear path through the chambers. A shaper had to set the shutters, and a listener had to hear the note.

He held up two fingers. His Lurkers moved.

The first reached the lower cleft while the handler adjusted the ape's hood. Edrin saw the animal's head tilt. Its collar tightened. The handler put the whistle to his mouth. Tavi dropped from the ledge above and hit him between the shoulders. The whistle struck stone. The ape lunged, dragging both of them sideways.

Its call began as a swelling deep in the pouch. Edrin crossed the last stretch of exposed ground and drove his shoulder into the animal's flank. The note came out against his ribs. It shook through the limestone and into his jaw. He seized the collar and pulled the head toward the cleft. One of his Lurkers caught the hind legs. They did not cut the throat. Slate wanted to know whether the handlers could call it again, and Edrin had no reason to slaughter an animal for answering a whistle.

Above them, a shutter slammed. The pipe's lower note changed to a high, urgent cry.

“They're signaling,” Tavi called.

“Take the mouth,” Edrin ordered Tavi.

The first guard came out of the lower door with a hooked sword. Brace met him shield first, pinned him to the wall and took his wrist. The second guard touched the stone above the doorway. The lintel thickened, closing the opening around Brace's arm. Slate reached past him, put his claws against the active seam and drew the new edge down. A narrow black line appeared. The shaping stopped advancing, and Brace tore his arm free.

Slate did not try to bring down the entire wall. He stepped through the gap the broken working had left and struck the guard hard enough to put him on the floor. “Door's open,” he told Edrin.

Edrin sent two Lurkers in first. He remained long enough to make sure the ape's handler was breathing. The man had one arm trapped beneath Tavi, but he was watching the animal. She let him up when he agreed to take the whistle out of reach. The beast's warning had already gone. Killing it now wouldn't take the sound back.

The inner passage climbed through three low rooms. Each held a shaped lip of stone and a screen hung over an opening to the ravine. The defenders had prepared the station for a raid: bags of dispatches sat near a firebox, and two runners waited beside a stair cut into the rear wall. They hadn't expected the lower door to open while the guard still held its shaping.

One runner took a bag and climbed. Edrin went after him. The second tried to light the papers. Tavi kicked the brazier aside, scattering coals over her own boot. She rolled the bag out of the room and tried to smother the scattered coals with a cloth. Her skin began to smoke before she got the cloth over the coals.

“Leave it,” Edrin called. “We have the bag.”

The runner ahead had reached an outer shelf. Wind hit Edrin's face. The path beyond was narrow enough that a single defender could hold it, and the man knew the footing. He threw a stone behind him without looking. It lifted from the shelf, struck Edrin's shoulder and sent him into the wall.

The runner was a shaper. Edrin caught the next stone with his claws, let it break and closed the distance before the man could set another. They hit the shelf together. The bag slid toward open air. Edrin hooked one foot under a lip and caught the strap as it passed. The runner grabbed his wrist.

“Let it go,” the man said.

“You first.”

The shaper pulled at the rock beneath Edrin's foot. It moved. Edrin let the bag swing outward, then drove his elbow into the man's shoulder. Both of them fell against the inner wall. A long, low note rolled up from the far side of the ravine. A receiving station had heard the alarm.

“They're coming,” the runner said. “You won't hold the archive.”

“I need you more than I need the room. Stand up.”

The man spat blood and pushed against Edrin's arm. Edrin bound his hands with the bag strap and brought him back through the passage. He could have carried him. Making him walk let Edrin judge his injuries and watch for another trick.

Slate stood at the archive shutter. The stone screen was closed. Its seams vanished into the wall and changed thickness whenever Brace tried to wedge a blade into them. A defender worked it from the other side.

“That one is persistent,” Slate said.

“The station warned the valley,” Brace grunted. “We have minutes.”

“Then the person behind it gets one chance.”

Slate placed a claw at the upper edge. The active stone pressed back. His new mana-infused edge made a faint white line where it touched the working. He drew it downward, slowly enough that the energy stayed against the moving seam. The shutter stopped closing, but a section behind the cut remained solid. The ability did not dissolve every stone a shaper had ever touched. Brace fitted an iron wedge into the cut, and three of the Guard heaved. A slice of the screen broke free.

The defender inside threw a rack of slate tablets at them. Slate took the weight across his warded shoulder. The film of Scourgeshield flashed, and stone fragments scattered against the opposite wall. Edrin went under his arm. He found a woman braced at a desk, one palm against the floor, the other holding a short chisel.

“Hands where I can see them,” he said.

She put the chisel through a tablet instead. Edrin struck her wrist. The chisel clattered away, but the tablet split and its upper half slid through a slot in the wall. He followed the sound and saw a narrow chute running down into the rock.

“Copies,” she said, breathing hard. “You can have the room. The order is already gone.”

“That is why we're taking you too.”

He bound her hands while Slate examined the remaining tablets. A map of the road system covered the far wall. The junction Shen had marked on his table was there, but the lines around it had been scraped and redrawn. One road ran north to the saddle. Another reached the Stillhold camp east of the old quarry. A third, thinner line descended behind the south terraces.

“Tell me which road carries Neriq’s Preservers,” Slate said.

The woman laughed once, despite the blood on her lip. “You think a road can be hidden from a creature that flies?”

“I think someone bothered to erase that line twice.”

Edrin watched her face. She looked at the northern route before she could stop herself. Slate saw it too. He made no show of having won the answer.

The bell-throated ape called again below them. A second beast answered much closer. Edrin sent Tavi to the rear stair. She returned with news of shields climbing from the eastern shelf and a signal crew cutting a fresh path into the outer wall. They had rehearsed a counterattack on this room.

“Our exit?” Edrin asked.

“The lower cleft remains open. Not for long.”

Slate chose three tablets and handed them to Brace. “Take the captive with the pen. Edrin, keep the runner.”

“We can carry more,” Brace said.

“Everything on that wall is in here.” Slate tapped his head. “And we’re taking the people who can tell us which parts are lies.”

Edrin would have wanted the archive too. He looked at the wind pipes and counted the bodies required to move the tablets down a tight stair. The enemy's shields would reach the lower door first. “Take the shutters,” he said. “They can read a signal off the fittings.”

Tavi loosened two control plates. She had to leave the third. Slate drove his edge into the groove and severed the shaping that held it shut. The plate fell

across the table. They carried the captured parts and dispatches out while the first counterattack hit the rear stair.

Edrin took the last position. He heard stone grinding behind him as the woman tried to call to her rescuers through the wall. He put his hand over her mouth long enough to pass the lower door. Then he let her speak. He wanted the defenders to know their liaison lived and might be traded. That gave them a reason to check a shot before taking it.

The ape was on its feet outside, its handler kneeling with both hands around the collar. Its first call had left it winded; the next came thin and rough. Tavi cut the leash. The animal scrambled toward its handler, not toward Edrin's party. The man took it around the back of the neck and stayed where he was. Edrin left them both under guard until the last of his people passed, then released them. The signal network could make use of the ape again. Edrin had learned what its warning cost and how long it took to recover.

The counterattack found the cleft as the Lurkers reached the limestone shelf. Two shapers pushed a waist-high wall up across the path. Edrin expected Slate to cut it. Slate remained beside the captives, using his body to shelter them from fragments as the stone rose. Tavi and another Lurker vaulted the incomplete wall. They seized the nearer shaper, and Edrin struck the other before he could thicken it. They had taken walls before Slate grew that edge.

They withdrew in pairs along the wet shelf. The receiving station sounded another note. It was longer and lower than the alarm. Across the ravine, a shutter answered. The defenders had shifted from warning to orders. Edrin couldn't yet read them, but he knew they had started the clock.

Slate held the rearguard until everyone reached cover. He let the captured woman look back at the ruined shutter and the unbroken wind pipes. “You can rebuild it,” he told her. “I can come back.”

“The houses won’t forget what you did here.”

“Good. They can remember who took their station. Now tell me where their troops are moving.”

She looked away. Edrin didn't mistake silence for assent. He had heard enough prisoners agree to anything on a narrow ledge. The useful work would happen under guard, with the dispatches on a table and corroboration from the captured runner.

They reached Shouguan after sunrise. Edrin washed the blood from his shoulder while Tavi spread the rescued leaves beside Matek's copied cipher. The captured liaison called herself Commander Lin Qiao. The runner was her nephew; he had burned most of his route book. What remained showed wagon allotments and shutter positions, though Matek's merchant source had heard only one season of signals. Edrin couldn't read every mark. He could match the wagon count to a tablet Lin Qiao hadn't known they captured.

“Harvest carts,” the commander said.

“With four hundred shields and a Stillhold escort?” Edrin asked.

Her nephew looked at the floor. Questioned separately, they had named different roads but given the same departure time. Edrin trusted the time.

Slate set water before them. “Drink. Your soldiers will need someone to tell them where to find their wounded after we take the station. That can be you.”

“My oath doesn't dissolve because you offer water,” the dwarf snarled.

“I wasn't asking it to.”

Edrin checked the surviving shutter sequence once more. The northern note appeared to order movement; the southern one acknowledged it. The road names remained uncertain. The departure time matched.

“Two columns at dawn tomorrow,” he told Slate. “One by the northern saddle, one on the eastern quarry road. Stillhold's Preservers follow the northern column. The two supply trains meet at this station.”

Slate put a claw on the map. “How many guards?”

“Too many to take from the front. Lu's gallery reaches past their first wall.”

“Will the houses still come if we take it?”

“Their oaths bind them. They'll come without a common supply road, and Shen will have to turn one column while the other waits.”

Sumnu studied the tablets. “He'll know what we know.”

“He knows we took a liaison,” Edrin said. “He doesn't know which dispatches we carried out. We have a day.”

Slate looked toward the hidden lower route. Lu's builders had made a passage for food and wounded, not a whole army. It would take a fast force in small files. The main body had to keep Shen watching Shouguan. Edrin had already measured the width in his mind.

“Sumnu, hold the western approaches and make him think I'm inside,” Slate said. “Shale, show your veterans on the lower road. Edrin, you and I take the junction. I want prisoners, but the wagons matter more. We take that station before those columns touch.”

Edrin nodded. He had the shutters, a commander, a route and a time. The crossing was still dangerous. Now he could choose where to attack.

Above the fortress, the Hollow Choir sent another note into the morning. The captured commander listened despite herself. Edrin watched her face as the tone changed at the second station. “What was that one?” he asked.

She held out until the last echo died. “The Surety is coming to the junction.”

Slate's hand remained on the marked road. “Then we'd better get there first.”

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XL

The Isolated Host

Before dawn, Slate brought sixty Scourge to Lu’s hidden road. The passing bays held forty. He sent that many ahead and left twenty waiting at the Nine Spans.

Edrin's Lurkers went ahead, twelve of them, with the captured shutter code copied on strips of cloth. Twenty Raiders followed. Slate took Brace and six of the Guard through the first turn. Lu and nineteen more Raiders waited for his signal. They could reach the supply junction only if the advance group opened a second exit. If the stone collapsed, the waiting soldiers could still defend the retreat. Brace's other seventeen Guardsmen stayed with Sumnu at Shouguan.

Sumnu had the main body at Shouguan. He was sending visible patrols to the north wall and lighting cookfires where Shen could see them. Shale held the lower road with her relief veterans. A few dozen hidden attackers couldn't imitate a whole army, but the Scourge at the fortress could keep the Surety's scouts from knowing exactly which unit had left.

During the two nights Lu spent widening the gallery, Brenn’s next company had reached Shouguan. It had followed the supply convoy to the western crossing, then come through in small files between the food loads. The company had formed around veteran section leaders as recruits passed Brenn’s tests. Sumnu had added all one hundred and twenty-one to his forward roll.

The gallery smelled of wet wood and stone dust. Lu had braced an old service cut with living roots, flattened timbers and new mortar from his Builders. Slate touched one support as he passed. It held. Lu had spent days on the passage. A shaper who found it from above could collapse it in minutes.

“Your head clears the beam,” Lu told him. “Your wings do not.”

“I can fold them,” Slate said.

“You have told me before,” Lu replied. “Then you forget the right tip when you turn.”

Slate looked back at the scar on a newer post. “That was once.”

“It was this morning,” Lu said.

Brace made a sound that might have been a cough. Slate ducked.

At the eastern branch, Lu put a short claw against the wall. His stone-gray scales carried a dull bronze glint in the lamplight. Slate had seen him measure a gap by looking at it and cut both stone and timber to fit without a line. Now he closed his eyes and pressed his tail to the floor. The brace gave him another point of contact while he tested the weight above them.

“The roof is sound,” Lu said. “The outlet has a new slab laid over it. Two hands worked the lower edge. They haven't found the passage. They wanted a stronger road.”

“Can you open it quietly?” Slate asked.

“I can make it open when Edrin is ready,” Lu replied. “Quietly is his part.”

Slate sent the signal forward. Edrin answered with three taps on the root line, a code they had used on the western raids. Clear below the outlet. An enemy patrol crossed above. Slate waited for the bootbeats to pass before Lu began.

The stone around the slab changed by fractions. Lu did not try to lift it. He shifted its weight onto the adjoining road, then shaped a narrow lip under the corner. When he nodded, two Lurkers rose beneath it. They raised the slab just enough to slide out into the space behind the storehouse. Slate smelled grain, harness leather and a hundred horses. The junction was a working camp, not a lonely tower. If they failed, there would be no empty road to run through.

Edrin's Lurkers crossed the first yard and took the nearest sentries. One fought long enough to cry out. Slate climbed into the open and saw the second yard wake. Confederacy shields rose around two rows of supply wagons. Beyond them stood a low command house with a wind pipe on its roof. To the north, a paved road came down from the saddle. To the east, another road turned toward the quarry. Both entered through separate gates, and both used this storehouse's water and grain before descending to Shen's concentration ground.

Their captured liaison had been right.

“Cut the signals,” Slate told Edrin. “Brace, command house. Leave the granary standing.”

The first alarm note started. A Lurker reached the pipe and shut its mouth with a wedge. The tone became a howl and died. Another station farther north answered the fragment. Slate couldn't prevent the houses from knowing they were attacked. He could keep them from receiving a complete order before he decided which gate to hold.

A shaper inside the command house raised a square of paving beneath Edrin's feet. Edrin jumped clear. Slate ran across the yard, shielded himself against a volley of bolts and put his new edge to the lifted stone. The active seam parted. The square fell back onto its bed and trapped the shaper's fingers. Slate seized the wrist, pulled the man through the window and pushed him toward Brace.

“Alive,” Slate said. “He knows the wall.”

Brace cuffed the man's hands and sent a Guard to watch him. The captured shaper spat at Slate's feet. “You cannot hold this station.”

“Then tell your commander to hurry. I have a schedule.” Slate went through the door before the man could answer.

The contingent commander stood over a map with a hammer in one hand. She wore a house badge at her collar and had the scarred forearms of someone who had built walls before ordering others to die behind them. Two officers guarded her. Slate cut the first down with a claw across his

shield arm, not his throat. Brace drove the second against a post. The commander struck the floor, and a stone ridge rose between her and Slate.

Slate could have crossed it. Instead he let her make it. Every breath she spent moving stone inside the house was one she couldn't spend sealing the eastern gate or crushing Lu's exit.

“This is your supply station,” he said. “You'll want to stop setting it on fire.”

She looked at the hearth. A boy with a torch had been creeping toward a pile of rolled dispatches. Brace saw him too and knocked the torch from his hand.

“They're not yours,” she said.

“Your stores can feed my army,” Slate told the commander. “Those dispatches will tell me where you send them.”

The commander shifted the ridge, opening a slit through which two shields could advance. Slate let the men come. His first blow broke a rim; his second sent a shield against the doorframe. He moved through the space they left and pinned the commander to the map table before she could pull up the floor beneath Brace.

“Name,” he said.

“Captain Zhou Fen.”

“Zhou Fen, your northern column has a day's march ahead of it. Your eastern column is still loading at the quarry. You have soldiers in this camp who can die defending a ration store or live to tell Shen what happened. Decide quickly.”

“You believe I can dismiss my obligation because you have my wrist?”

“No. I believe you can choose where to meet it.”

She tried to drive the stone table into his ribs. Slate's ward absorbed the first impact. He held her wrist and shoved the table away. The strain traveled into his shoulder. Zhou Fen was good; if he left her free to shape, she would

make him pay for every step inside the house. He bound her hands to the table's iron frame and gave her to Brace.

Outside, the defenders had rallied. A line of shields blocked the north gate while two shapers tried to close the eastern road behind the wagon train. Edrin had taken the signal roof, but the alarm had reached men in the barracks. They were not wandering into a trap one by one. Zhou Fen had laid out a defensible camp and trained her people to fight even without her voice.

Slate sent Lu and the nineteen waiting Raiders through the outlet. He ordered them to seize the well and protect the food stores. The first group would take the gates. The second would hold what they won.

“We could burn the wagons,” Brace said.

Slate shook his head. “The grain is worth more to us than smoke.”

“They may burn it themselves,” Brace pointed out.

“Then keep their torches away,” the Scion ordered.

The north gate moved. Its arch thickened and the roadway narrowed. The defenders meant to make the Scourge assault in pairs. Slate did not send them at the opening. He sent Edrin over the stable roof, told the Raiders to strike the low east wall, and moved toward the well with the Guard. If the defenders concentrated on him, Edrin could enter behind their shields. If they moved to stop Edrin, Slate would take the gate from the inside.

They chose him.

Three shapers worked together on a strip of paving, lifting it beneath the Guard's feet. Brace shouted the warning. Slate leaped clear, then used the fallen edge of the pavement as cover while two Guard rushed the far end with spears. One shaper broke contact to defend herself. Another kept forcing the road upward, exposing herself behind the line of shields.

Slate reached her. He cut through the shaped rise where it joined the original paving, then drove his body between her and the Guard's advance. Scourgeshield flashed around him as a spear hit. He caught the shaft and

pulled its owner out of formation. The shaper tried to retreat. Brace was already behind her.

“Bind her. Don't let her touch the road,” Slate told Brace.

The third shaper abandoned the work when Edrin's Lurkers reached the stable roof. They came down on the shield line from the side. Their strike opened a gap, and the Raiders drove through it in a tight wedge. Men went down on both sides. Slate heard a Scourge call for a litter and saw one of the Guard drag a wounded Raider behind the well. He couldn't count losses until the gates were secure.

The eastern road offered Zhou Fen's people one chance to pull the wagons away. They cut the harnesses off two teams and tried to use the animals to block Lu's outlet. Lu stepped into the yard as the first wagon rolled. He set his tail, laid one short-clawed hand on the stone curb and the other on a timber post. The curb rose against the wheel. Wood bent under his touch and locked the axle in place. The horses stumbled but didn't fall. A Builder pulled them clear.

“That wagon stays,” Lu said.

Slate saw three soldiers look at Lu's hands. One lowered his spear. They had been told what Scourge could do in a fight. A creature that could reshape a road and a wagon at once was something different. Slate would have preferred to display Lu's skill to engineers willing to join him. Fear would do for the men trying to burn his grain.

The opening Lu had used to enter began to close.

Slate felt the change through the soles of his feet before he saw the slab settle. A defender at the barracks wall had found the old seam by following the draft. He pressed both hands to the paving. Lu was still holding the trapped wagon, and two Builders were carrying wounded toward the passage.

“Leave the wagon,” Slate called.

Lu let the axle spring back. The wagon rolled an inch and stopped against the curb. He ran awkwardly across the yard, his heavy tail swinging behind

him. It served him better planted against the ground. The enemy shaper drove the slab down harder. One Builder slid out with a wounded soldier across his back. The next had only reached the first bend.

Slate could cut the working at the rim. He couldn't reach it through a crowd of his own soldiers. He took three strides toward the barracks wall instead. A shield bearer moved to intercept him. Slate opened his wings, forced the man to cover his head, and landed behind him. The shaper looked up from the road just as Slate struck his forearm. The pressure on the slab stopped.

Lu shaped a small arch beneath the stone before it could settle under its own weight. He moved timber into the new cavity and locked the wood against the rock. The Builder below came out carrying his wounded companion. Slate watched until both were clear.

“That was your escape,” Zhou Fen said from Brace's hold. “You should have used it while you had the chance.”

“I did,” Slate said. “I brought more soldiers through.”

His right shoulder stung. A spear had found the edge of his wing during the crossing. The ward had taken most of it; a shallow cut remained. He held the injured wing still while he looked back over the yard. One Raider lay under a sheet near the well. Two others could still be saved if the route stayed open. He would not trade them for the satisfaction of proving to Zhou Fen how easily he could kill her people.

The north gate fell when Edrin reached its inner stairs. The signal station sounded a broken note. Beyond it, the saddle road carried dust from an approaching advance guard. They were early.

“Can we hold the gate?” Slate asked Lu.

“Against the men we see, yes. Against Shen's full army, no. I can close the road at the first turn and make them spend a day opening it.”

“Do that. Leave the lower track for prisoners.”

Lu sent his Builders to the turn. Slate took Zhou Fen outside and showed her the north gate from the well. Her soldiers still held the barracks and a

section of east wall. He would take both before the dust reached them, but it would cost lives.

“You can order a surrender,” he said. “I won't pretend the battle changes your oath. Your people can meet that oath later.”

“You ask me to trust the man who invaded my house.”

“You saw me keep the grain standing. You've seen my soldiers take prisoners. If I wanted bodies, I wouldn't be wasting time talking to you.”

Zhou Fen looked at the wagon where a Scourge medic bound the leg of one of her men. She could see her own wounded alongside his. She drew a breath that hurt, then called for the barracks captain. The order she gave was to lay down weapons in the yard, not to swear service to Slate. He accepted the distinction. Her people did too, though some held their spears a moment longer than others.

The advance guard reached the turn as Lu broke the road. Stone folded down in broad steps, each one large enough to stop a wagon. On the upper slope, Confederacy shapers began testing the new face. They could reopen it. They could not do it before Slate moved the wagons and the captives out of the exposed yard.

Slate sent Edrin to count the stores and Brace to count the wounded. He looked at the captives lined along the well. Bucket ropes had worn channels into its rim; spilled water darkened the dust around their boots. They had fought for the Confederacy as their covenant demanded. Now they were alive because he had offered their captain a way to stop. He would need them fed, guarded and exchanged. Victory took more work after the fighting than during it.

Brace returned with the first figures. One Raider was dead. Seven Scourge and eleven Confederacy soldiers needed the surgeon before night. The rest of the prisoners could walk. Grain filled twenty-four carts, though the harnesses on six had been cut. There were water jars, iron nails, winter cloaks and three barrels of lamp oil. No treasure hidden behind a ceremonial wall. Food, warm clothes and repair supplies. Enough to keep his army moving.

Beyond the stable yard, a service cut opened onto an abandoned quarry beside the lower road. Slate could see a hoist above the waste slope, its lifting chain coiled beneath the drum. Behind it, an iron-bound block hung in timber guides. It was larger than the grain wagon standing below.

Lu stopped at the entrance. “They cut the first stone for Shouguan here. That hoist could move loads off the upper road without putting every wagon through the yard.”

“Can it still lift?”

“The frame needs work.” Lu looked up at the suspended block. “And I want everyone out from under that weight before I touch it.”

Slate assigned a guard to the cut. “Inspect it when the wounded are clear. We may need that road tonight.”

“Post two guards on each store,” Slate said. “One of mine and one of Zhou Fen's if she'll name them. Let them see the tally.”

“Trust her men with the grain?” Brace asked.

“Trust them to notice if we steal it after promising to feed their wounded. They'll tell the rest.”

Zhou Fen heard him. Slate meant her to. He would hold the station by force, but the captives were going to carry an account of his rule back to Shen. He preferred that account to contain a measured ration and an intact granary.

The Stillhold Preservers appeared at the far end of the north road in pale cloaks. Their shields caught the sun. Behind them came Confederacy banners, unable to pass the broken turn in formation. To the east, a separate dust plume rose from the quarry road. Two columns. One junction. Slate held the junction.

“How long?” he asked Lu.

“Until a skilled shaper gets hands on every step. Shen could do it in hours if you let him work. His people will need longer.”

Slate frowned. “And if I put soldiers on the steps?”

“They will have to remove the soldiers first,” the Builder answered.

Slate sent word to Sumnu: keep the main body visible at Shouguan. Send one company, 121 Scourge, through Lu's gallery with food. The three forty-person platoons would cross two hours apart; the company commander and seventeen remaining Guardsmen would follow as a fourth group. Leave the lower way clear between groups for wounded going west. Then he sent a message to Shen at the north turn. He had Zhou Fen write it so the Surety would know his captain still lived.

Your people are under guard and being treated. The junction is mine. The eastern road remains open to unarmed wagons carrying medicine. If you want the captured soldiers back, come with a list of names.

Zhou Fen read the message twice. “You are leaving him a road.”

“I'm leaving him a choice. There will be more than one battle.”

She studied him. “He will come for this ground.”

“I know.”

She put her name beneath the message. Slate watched a runner take it up the lower track. The two enemy columns remained apart, but the mountain had only so many roads. Shen would find another way to join them. Slate had until sunset to strike while they were apart.

Above the broken turn, the first Preserver raised a white shield. A second figure stepped beside him and pointed down at Slate's camp. The road itself began to answer.

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XLI

The Chosen Allegiance

Lu found the flaw in Yan Bo's drawing before he recognized the handwriting.

The old water channel crossed the slope above White Stair on three stone saddles. In the sketch, the middle saddle was marked for removal. The weight of the filled channel would pull the other two inward. Water and rubble would sweep through the lower terraces before Shen's northern column could use the road beneath them. It was an elegant way to cut the enemy's march. The orchard, the houses and the people sheltering there had been left blank.

“Who brought this?” he asked.

Xie stood at the table beside him. She had come from the lower settlement with dust on her sleeves, a bruise along one cheek, and a ripped hem she hadn't stopped to mend. “A boy from the mill. Yan told him to give it to you. He said you'd know where the charges belong.”

“Where is the boy?” Lu asked Xie.

“Outside. He thinks he's done something heroic,” Xie said.

Lu laid the drawing flat with one short-clawed hand. His eyes could follow the grain of the paper and the pressure of Yan's pencil. The lines were precise. Yan had measured the channel before leaving the Forsworn refuge. He had not drawn the buildings below because they mattered less to his plan than the road.

“Did you see Yan?” Lu asked.

“No. He sent a message with the boy. If you help him, the Forsworn will strike the saddle during Shen's advance. The Scourge will get an hour to

attack his flank.”

“And the people below?” Lu asked.

“Yan says the terraces are empty,” Xie replied.

“They're not,” Lu said. “I have two Builders repairing the east spillway. There are families in the old kiln hall.”

Xie's jaw tightened. “I told the boy that. He said Yan had checked.”

Lu turned the drawing over. On the back, Yan had written a shorter message for him alone: You know what the houses did. Choose your own people while you still can.

His old teacher had once made him spend a week correcting a warped arch. Yan had stood beside him each morning, impatient with his excuses, and showed him how a stone bore weight through the whole curve. The lesson had made Lu better than the apprentices who finished early. Now Yan had calculated the load of a falling channel down to the width of its saddles and called the houses beneath it an empty terrace.

“I have chosen,” Lu said.

Xie looked at the drawing. “Slate will want Yan alive.”

“So will I. He owes the people below a warning.”

Lu took the sketch to Slate at the junction. The avatar stood over an inventory of grain and wounded, with Brace counting stores beside him. Slate listened without interrupting until Lu named the channel and the occupied kiln hall.

“How soon?” Slate asked.

“The middle saddle is already exposed. He could have the charges ready within two watches. If Shen advances, he'll light them.”

“Can you stop the collapse?”

“I can brace the channel if I reach it first. Yan will have people on the crest. He expects me to help, not to bring you.”

Slate studied the drawing. “Can I move the families?”

“If you start now. The water can still kill the orchard and leave the district without the upper supply. We need to keep it standing.”

“Then we do both. Brace, send a detail to clear the kiln hall. No carts up the channel road. They'll alert him. Use the lower path.”

Brace went. Slate waited until he was beyond hearing. “Yan offered you a way to hit Shen. You came to me instead. Why?”

“The channel is worth more to the people who use it than the road is to either army.”

Lu remembered the first canal he had repaired for the Confederacy. A house clerk had counted stone and wages while the farmers carried buckets around the broken section. No one had asked Lu whether the work mattered. They had asked when the water would run. He had resented the clerk, then spent the night on the wall because the farmers' seed was already in the ground. What Yan had drawn would make the buckets useless. Lu couldn't call himself their liberator while taking the water they depended on.

“That's a good answer for an engineer. What's yours?” Slate asked Lu.

Lu ran a claw over the paper. The line of the missing saddle darkened under it. “He taught me to see what a building carries. He left the village off because he knew I'd see it. He wanted me to prove which side I'd choose.”

“He got his answer.”

“He may not believe it until I stand there.”

Slate folded the drawing and gave it back. “Take Edrin's Lurkers. I'll send a reserve behind you. You call the work. If Yan gives up, bring him in. If he tries to bring the saddle down while people are still below it, stop him.”

Lu heard what Slate left unsaid. There was no guarantee Yan would survive the attempt. Slate had put Lu in charge to save the channel, not his old friend.

The lower path took Lu, Xie and six Lurkers through an abandoned root cellar. He could smell cold apples under the stone, though none remained. His new senses mapped every turn of the tunnel. His new height made him duck beneath every beam. He knew the angle of each turn and the pressure in the roof without measuring. He could see a hairline crack beside a beam as clearly as the whole slope above. The passage had been built for the dwarf he used to be. When he came out near the spillway, the open air felt almost too large.

The channel ran across the mountainside, three men wide and full enough to wet its rim. Beneath it, terraced roofs stepped toward the White Stair. The houses shared retaining walls, each lower roof almost level with the next house's doorstep. Narrow stairs wound between them, their treads hollowed by feet and the corners chipped where someone had dragged a cart down. Water trickled through open gutters beside the steps. Even from here, Lu could pick out the dark strips of watered earth beneath the orchard trees.

The kiln hall stood across the lowest terrace, its broad loading doors open. A squat chimney rose above a roof patched with several shades of tile. Smoke drifted from it. Outside, a woman shook a cloth over the stone yard while a child held the other end clear of the gutter. Someone had stretched a washing line between the hall and an orchard tree. Brace hadn't yet reached the families. Lu followed the slope back up to the saddle. If it fell, those narrow stairs would carry the water straight to the loading doors.

“Two on the crest,” Edrin whispered from beside him. “One farther back with a coil of fuse.”

“Yan will be at the middle saddle. He won't trust someone else to judge the load.”

Lu took the lead. He kept his claws open and his hands visible as he climbed the maintenance stair. Yan stood where Lu expected, one boot on the channel rim, dark powder packed into holes drilled around the central support. Two Forsworn watched the approach with short spears. They didn't recognize Lu at once. His new height changed the line of his shoulders, and stone-gray scales covered the face Yan had known.

“Master,” Lu said.

Yan's gaze traveled from Lu's hands to the tail planted behind him. “You made yourself into one of them.”

Lu nodded. “I told you I did. The boy carried your drawing.”

“And you came.” Yan paused. “I thought you would.”

“You left out the kiln hall.”

“It can be emptied.” Yan shrugged.

“It hasn't been. People are inside now.”

Yan looked downhill. Smoke rose from the chimney. He had seen it before Lu spoke. “Then Slate should move them. He has soldiers for that.”

“The channel feeds the whole terrace. If you drop it, they lose next season too.”

“If Shen's host crosses, they lose their homes by winter.”

For years, Lu had accepted harsh measures to prevent worse harm. Yan had used that reasoning to hide people from the Weighted Court and destroy ledgers that bound them. Lu still understood why. The channel was different. Yan had chosen the damage before asking the village whether it would bear it.

“I can cut the road without bringing water through their houses,” Lu said. “There is a drainage bed east of the orchard. It reaches the same turn.”

“A drainage bed can be bridged. This cannot.”

“It will take Shen's shapers time to cross. Enough for Slate to strike.”

Yan's mouth tightened. “You speak like a commander counting tokens on a map.”

“I speak like the man who will have to rebuild what you destroy.”

The Forsworn with the fuse coil stepped nearer to the packed holes. Edrin's Lurkers shifted below the stair. Lu could see the movement in the stone's reflection, but Yan had his eyes on him.

“Stand back,” Yan said. “I don't want to hurt you.”

Lu spread his hands. “Then don't light it.”

“You were my apprentice.”

The Builder nodded. “I was.”

For a moment Lu believed Yan might pull the fuse free. Then the man stamped on the channel rim. A ridge of stone shot toward Lu's feet. It would pin him while the charges burned. Lu set his tail, put one hand to the stair and widened the tread beneath him. The ridge struck it and stopped. He sent a narrow wooden root through the old mortar toward the fuse coil. His new gift from Silvys had delighted him the first time he shaped a board; now he used it to close around the cord and pull it from the Forsworn's hand.

The man with the cord cried out. Edrin's Lurkers rose over the lower edge and took the two guards. Yan drove both hands into the saddle. Stone thickened around the drill holes, hiding the powder. For an instant Lu thought he meant to bury it. Then he felt the load shift toward the packed chambers. Yan was building pressure behind them.

“Get off the support,” Lu told Edrin.

He dropped to the maintenance shelf. His claws were made for fine work, not combat. He couldn't fight Yan hand to hand and hold the channel together. He pressed one palm to the underside of the saddle and the other to a timber brace fixed beneath it. He sensed the span, the load, the water’s temperature and the direction of the timber grain at once. He moved the load away from the charged holes. Stone began to fold beneath Yan's feet.

Yan had more raw reach. He drew the opposite side of the support toward him, trying to make Lu's new bearing buckle. Lu let that part move. He joined the old stone to the timber above it, then sent a second root brace through the channel wall. It took pressure off the weak point. He was not trying to win a contest of force. He needed the structure to survive one man's anger.

A spark sounded above him.

The Forsworn with the cord had kept a short length in his sleeve. Edrin caught his wrist after the tinder lit, but the ember dropped into a drilled hole. Lu felt the powder wake. He couldn't pull it out fast enough. He closed the nearest stone into a dense sleeve and opened a vent on the uphill side, away from the houses. The charge fired. The sound struck his ribs and filled his mouth with grit. Water spilled over the rim in a white sheet, but the central saddle held.

Lu opened his eyes. Edrin had one Lurker down with a broken arm. Yan lay against the channel wall, alive, his right hand blackened. A crack ran from the nearest blast hole toward the water line. Lu set both hands on it. The gap closed slowly. He couldn't make the lost stone reappear, but he could draw a buttress from the untouched mass below. The channel steadied.

Then he felt the western saddle take a pressure it had never been designed to carry.

The blast had shifted water against the far wall. It pressed into an old repair where different stone met without a proper key. Lu had studied that joint months ago in a drawing. In person he could see the rough faces grinding together. If he held the middle support and let the western saddle fail, the water would find the lower spillway and the first row of roofs. He had to move the load twice, and he had only two hands.

“Xie,” he called. “Bring the loose timbers from the stair. Two long pieces.”

She was already below the channel. She looked up once at the crack, then sent a Lurker for the wood. Yan pushed himself to one elbow. “The old joint is soft,” he said. “You can't put the channel's whole weight through it.”

“I know.”

“Cut a relief into the upper lip. Let half the water spill onto the bare rock.”

Lu looked where Yan pointed. The bare rock was not bare. A footpath crossed it, and three people were running along that path away from the kiln hall. They could clear it if someone warned them. Xie read his glance and went down the stair, shouting for the path to empty. Lu waited while he held the saddle under pressure. Water sprayed through the crack at his wrist. His tail trembled against the shelf.

The runners reached the next terrace. Lu shaped a notch in the upper lip. Water poured onto the rock and followed a shallow runnel away from the houses. The channel's force dropped enough for him to seat the western joint. Xie came back with the timbers. He shaped one to the stone and the second to the first, fitting their grain so the support would bear weight as a triangle. His new sight showed him fibers crushed at one edge. He adjusted the angle before they failed.

“You used my cut,” Yan said.

“After we moved the people,” Lu said.

Yan said nothing else. Lu did not want his approval. He had still taken the useful part of the old man's advice, because the channel didn't care who offered it.

“The other charges?” Edrin asked.

“Three holes,” he answered. “Two still live. Keep every ember away.”

They pulled the powder out by hand under Lu's direction. He made each hole wide enough for fingers and waited for the Lurkers to remove the charge before shaping it shut. He wanted no hidden pocket to catch a future fire. Edrin set guards over Yan and the others. The old master watched Lu work without speaking.

Brace's detail reached the kiln hall as the last charge came free. The families filed out with bedding and pots, looking uphill at the wet mark on the channel wall. One man tried to carry a rolled mattress through the doors sideways, caught it against a jamb, and had to turn back while the people behind him waited. Lu watched until the doorway cleared. He had saved the houses. They had still heard the blast. He didn't expect gratitude before they knew whether water would keep flowing tomorrow.

Yan found his voice when Lu lowered his hands. “Slate will use you until he has enough Builders to replace you.”

“Then he’ll have someone to tend this channel when I choose to go,” Lu said. “You nearly took the choice from all the innocent families living below it.”

Edrin took Yan down the stair. Lu did not ask him to loosen the bonds. He had seen the powder packed beneath the water line. His former teacher had made a choice with other people's roofs underneath it.

Lu marked the drainage bed, the place where Shen’s troops would try to bridge it, and the old anchors that could delay them without sending water through a house. The work needed six Builders and an hour with no enemy at the channel. It wouldn't stop Shen forever. It could make his cavalry arrive later than his shapers.

Slate examined the drawing when Lu reached camp. “Can you build this and hold the junction route?”

Lu considered it. “If you give me the crew. I’ll inspect the channel after the fight.”

“And Yan?” the Scourge leader asked.

“Guard him. Treat his hand. Let him answer to the people below the saddle before anyone decides what else he owes.”

Slate held his gaze. “You know he won’t thank you.”

“He taught me to see the whole building instead of just a single support,” Lu said. “He can be angry that I finally did.”

Slate gave him the Builders. On the way back to the channel, Lu passed the lower settlement. An older woman stood at the kiln hall door holding a wet blanket. Water still dripped from its hem onto the threshold, darkening the pale clay dust caught in the worn stone.

Through the doors, he could see the kiln's rounded back built into the far wall. Its bricks had glazed dark around the firing mouth. The drying racks had been cleared of pottery and hung with blankets, dividing the hall into narrow sleeping spaces. A pair of small shoes stood beneath one of them. The floor sloped toward the loading doors so it could be washed down; any flood coming the other way would run beneath every partition. Lu could smell damp wool and supper cooking over woodsmoke. They would need the hall again tonight.

She asked whether the channel was safe. Lu told her which joint had cracked, how he had relieved it, and why she should keep the first room empty until his crew inspected the brace at dawn.

“Your people broke it?” she asked.

“A Forsworn crew placed the charge,” Lu said. He hesitated, then gave her the rest. “Their leader was my teacher. I stopped him after the first one fired.”

She looked at the wet line on the wall. “Then the water nearly flooded the whole settlement.”

“Yes.”

She folded the blanket without taking her eyes off him. “Come back with your inspection. I want to see where you put the brace.”

“I will.” Lu looked toward the channel. By morning she would be able to see the support and the water moving past it. He intended both to be there.

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XLII

The Shattered Field

Slate put his reserve behind a ridge Shen could see.

He wanted the Surety to notice the empty stretch between the captured junction and the White Stair. The Scourge held the storehouse, the lower road and three broken terraces, but not enough ground to make a solid wall. Their companies waited in separated pockets with routes marked by Lu's Builders. From the north, the formation looked thin. From inside it, Slate could move men laterally without crowding them against a shaped stone barrier.

Before Shen's columns appeared, Slate had sent Zhou Fen, her captured soldiers and the wounded to Shouguan under Raider escort. None of them would be trapped beside the storehouse if he burned it. Brace's remaining seventeen Guard had reached the junction with the reinforcement company’s commander; all twenty-four were here, though seventeen waited behind the ridge while Brace kept six close.

The ground shook before the enemy banners appeared.

Cragback came down the quarry road with a chain of handlers ahead of it. The beast had eaten well since tearing apart Shale's ridge. Fresh stone plated its shoulders. One horn was chipped, and the heavy shell on its left flank carried white scars where old blocks had struck it. It reached the broken turn Lu had made and put a forefoot against the first step. Stone rolled out beneath its claws. The steps did not remain broken.

“We knew it would do that,” Brace said.

“I still liked the steps,” Slate said.

Slate watched the beast's pace. It shaped only the road its weight touched. A shaper behind it widened the new surface for wagons. The animal did not do the army's work for free. It needed a handler to lead it, space to move, and time to put its body against the stone. Slate had built his defense around those limits. He hoped Lu had been right about the one he meant to exploit later.

Shen's army advanced in two bodies. The northern houses followed Cragback, their shields close and shapers ready behind them. The eastern houses came from the quarry side with a line of cliffstriders moving along the high slope. Their divided hooves found holds in stone too steep for a horse. Riders carried long hooked lances and wore light armor to spare their mounts. Stillhold Preservers held a separate line in pale coats, joined to Shen by agreement rather than house oath. Neriq's shield mark hung at their center.

The signal crews had found new positions after Edrin's raid. They used the wind pipes sparingly, passing short orders through shaped mouths on the ridge. Slate could hear the notes but couldn't read all of them. Edrin had brought back two shutters and a liaison, not the entire language of an army. The few phrases they did understand let Slate identify the first advance. For the rest, he had to watch the ground and the people walking over it.

Slate had fought pieces of this army. Seeing them assembled was different. The Confederacy had enough people to replace the men captured at the junction and enough faith in its covenant to bring them over hard roads. He had taken the easiest place to feed those people. They had come anyway.

“Sumnu's left is ready,” Brace said. “Edrin has the lower ravine. Shale reports riders moving above her.”

“Tell her to let them commit before she shows the second line,” Slate told Brace.

“And the beast?” Brace asked.

“Everybody knows the rule,” Slate said. “No standing on stone connected to its path when it reaches them.”

They had cut short breaks in some of the terrace roads and laid timber across them. Those breaks wouldn't make Cragback harmless. It could smash a wooden span with its weight. It could climb over debris and press into the next length of rock. They would force it to slow and choose a point of contact while the Scourge moved elsewhere.

Shen gave the first order from a stone dais on the north road. His right wrist still carried a bandage beneath a narrow brace. Slate could see the Surety's white robe against the darker shields. Shen raised one hand. The Hollow Choir's signal note came across the valley, followed by a lower call from a bell-throated ape. The front ranks advanced on the beat. No confusion, no house waiting to see what its neighbor did. Their obligations had brought them here and their officers knew how to use them.

The first stone attack struck an empty position. Slate had left a row of shields on the upper terrace and withdrawn the men behind them. A ridge of rock broke through the abandoned line, flipping the shields into the air. The shapers saw movement below and sent the next ridge down the stair. Sumnu's Raiders had already gone left through a Builder-cut passage. The ridge met a stone plug Lu had reinforced overnight, broke it, and filled the route behind them. Their planned fallback was gone, but the Raiders had another.

“A good first guess,” Slate said.

Brace looked at the blocked passage. “They'll learn.”

“So will we.”

Ironroot beetles surfaced under the eastern earthwork. Their black mandibles had left small piles of fresh soil there during the night. Slate's scouts had marked three likely tunnels, and the Builders had driven stakes across them. Two broke through elsewhere. A defender fell when the earth gave under her boot. Brace sent the nearest Guard to pull her clear. A beetle dragged itself into the trench, mandibles clacking against the stake line.

Slate did not order a company to fight the animals. He had the trench abandoned and called for a soldier to throw hearth ash into the exposed tunnels. The dust showed where air moved through the burrows. A Builder

closed those mouths after the last Scourge passed. The beetles could excavate soil, not shape the road. They had made a local breach.

Lu sent him a view from the lower quarry. A fresh burrow had opened through the waste above the pit. The covering earth broke beneath a Builder’s probing pole, leaving a hollow deep enough to swallow it. Beyond the fill, the old haul road was still sound.

“The hoist works,” Lu sent. *“The fill won’t carry the beast. If we can get one side off the haul road, its own weight will take it down.”*

Slate watched the Cragback making a road through his broken steps. *“Get your chain ready. Keep the crews behind the cut until I send you.”*

He assigned six Builders and a hauling detail to the quarry. Brace would have to take an engine from the enemy when the time came. For now, Slate needed the beast moving away from that road while Lu’s people worked.

Above the trench, Shale fired a flare. The cliffstriders had committed to the narrow shelf behind her first line. Slate saw the lead animal spring across a gap that would have turned back a cavalry horse. Its rider drove a hooked lance into an apparently exposed Scourge. The figure fell. A second Shale rose from behind a broken post farther up the shelf. The first had been a decoy shaped in her armor. Her veterans struck the lead rider from both sides. The cliffstrider landed, skidded, and caught itself with its divided hooves. Another followed too close and couldn't stop. They collided, throwing one rider over the edge.

The mounts weren't fools. Their handlers pulled the following pair away from the blocked shelf and circled for a higher path. Shale didn't chase. She had gained minutes and kept the ledge; she hadn't removed the cavalry from the battle.

Cragback reached the first timber span. Its handler rang iron from the far side. The beast put one claw on the beam, tested it, then struck it with a forelimb. Wood exploded. It crouched and crossed the gap in a single heavy bound. Its landing drove a tremor through the next road. Stone flowed up over its forefoot and rolled beneath its body. Slate watched a loose boulder at the edge of the cut remain where it lay. It was not joined to the road. The beast did not reach across empty air to move it.

One of the watchmen had stayed on the wrong side of the break. Slate saw a small figure in a blue cloak crouched behind a milestone as the beast came on. Not Scourge. A local boy from the terrace watch, old enough to carry messages and young enough to think a stone marker could hide him from a creature taller than the gate.

“Brace, take six of your Guard around the lower cut. I'm getting the boy.”

“You'll be on the road it can shape,” Brace warned Slate.

“For a few steps. That's why I'm moving now.”

Slate flew from the terrace. He could clear the gap the beast had jumped, but the wind beneath its bulk threw dust into his face. He landed on the far side, seized the boy by the back of his cloak and felt the roadway shift under them. The beast had placed a forefoot against the same stretch of stone. A ridge rose across Slate's planned takeoff. He kicked against it before it hardened, put his warded body between the boy and a spray of chips, and beat his wings once. They reached the lower cut with the beast's horn passing through the place where his leg had been.

The boy had lost his message tube. Slate set him behind the Guard and turned back. The tube rolled toward the beast. He did not retrieve it. He asked the boy what it contained instead.

“The east shelf,” the boy managed. “They saw riders go around Shale. I was taking it to the well.”

Slate sent a Guard runner. Losing a tube was cheaper than losing the warning. The boy stared at Slate's claws on his shoulder. Slate took his hand away. “Back to the shelters,” he said. “You've done your job. Next time use the cut below the marker.”

“The first gap slowed the beast,” Slate told Brace. “Mark the next one.”

Brace passed the observation down the line. The Guard had become accustomed to hearing their avatar count an enemy's limits while it came to kill them. It gave them something to do besides watch the horns grow larger.

The northern shields met Sumnu's forward Raiders at the low wall. The Scourge fought hard enough to hold for three exchanges, then withdrew through a slit Lu had left behind the grain store. Confederate spears struck the space they vacated. A shaper tried to close the slit. Lu, working from the far side, held it just long enough for the last wounded Raider to pass. His Builder hands were suited to tiny adjustments, and Slate had given him the authority to sacrifice the wall if the route required it.

The wall folded. The Raiders were clear. The enemy gained a piece of stone it could hold and found no Scourge behind it.

Shen changed the attack. He sent the eastern houses toward the junction well and ordered the Preservers up the northern stair. Cragback turned toward the storehouse. If it reached the grain, it could break the walls by walking through them. The same stores Slate had seized would become a trap if he defended them too long.

Slate made the choice before the first horn touched stone. “Move the grain we can. Burn what we can't carry when my signal comes.”

Brace looked at him. “You told everyone we'd keep it.”

“I did. I kept it until it fed us. I won't feed Shen with it.”

The carts had already gone down the lower road. Six remained inside. A Builder opened the rear wall and the teamsters pulled four through. The fifth lost a wheel. Slate sent its driver out and let the cart stay. He had meant his promise to Zhou Fen. He could explain the fire to her at Shouguan, if there were soldiers left to feed.

Cragback hit the outer storehouse wall. The masonry swelled against its shoulder, then came apart. Timber rafters struck its shell and slid off. The handlers rang again, trying to guide it deeper. Slate sent Cleansing Fire across the opening. The beast recoiled from the heat and drove its horn into the floor. A ring of stone bucked outward, toppling shelves and throwing one Mystic against a post. Slate caught her before the next row fell. He used his warded back to take the impact and carried her through the rear opening.

“Burn it,” he told Brace.

The last stores caught. Fire ran along spilled lamp oil. The handlers pulled Cragback away from the smoke. They couldn't make the animal charge into flame simply because Shen needed it to. It went around the building, taking more time, while the Scourge withdrew through the lower route.

At the well, the eastern houses had gained the flagstones. Edrin's Lurkers fought among the water jars, striking at officers and retreating when the shapers reached for the ground. The Preservers held the northern stair. They did not try to press through the fire. Neriq ordered them to secure a corridor for wounded Confederacy soldiers, and her people did it under Scourge fire. Slate recognized the discipline. They had their own purpose in the battle; they weren't spare house infantry.

Lu's drainage obstacle opened beneath the cliffstriders' next approach. It was not a pit. The old watercourse, relieved of its plug, sent a shallow rush across the hard slope. The animals could cross it. They could not take the sharp turn beyond it at speed with wet hooves. The first rider slowed. The second went wide. Shale struck the gap between them, then pulled her veterans back before the shapers below could raise a wall around the ledge. Her narrow victory bought the Scourge another retreat line.

The Scourge gave ground a few yards at a time. Neither side could land a decisive blow. Raiders would hold a terrace until the enemy shaped the wall, then move through a route Lu had kept open. Edrin would draw a signal crew into an alley and take its shutters. Shen would close another gap. Slate kept one eye on the Cragback and the other on the reserves behind his visible ridge. He hadn't used them yet. If he sent them at the beast, Shen's infantry would take the lower road. If he held them too long, the units in front would have no position left from which to counterattack.

Shen was watching for the same moment. His first attempt to find the reserve came from beneath it. A line of stone rose at the ridge's base, pressing up toward the concealed path. Lu felt the pressure through a signal stake and ran to Slate with a measurement: the working was six paces wide, widening, and close to the root braces that held the path's roof. Shen could break the route before the reserve used it.

“Can you hold him?” Slate asked.

“Not if he works directly against me. I can shift his force into the old retaining wall and make him think he has reached the wrong passage.”

“That wall keeps the third terrace up.”

“For a few minutes after I move it. Then it settles.”

Slate looked at the wounded being carried along that terrace. “Get them clear first.”

Lu sent two Builders and a Guard escort. They moved litters while Shen's pressure lifted the ridge inch by inch. The old wall began to bow. Slate could have ordered the reserve out early and saved the structure. He held them because the eastern infantry hadn't yet crossed the narrowing. A premature counterattack would meet a complete shield line instead of its exposed flank.

The last litter passed. Lu redirected the load into the old wall. Stone groaned down the slope, blocking the third terrace and leaving Shen's rising seam with nowhere useful to go. The reserve path remained open, but Slate had lost another fallback position. He watched Shen change his hand position on the far dais and knew the Surety had understood the exchange. Shen wouldn't waste the next working on a false passage.

At the junction well, a Scourge runner came with a tally of water remaining. Half the jars had broken. The well itself hadn't gone dry, but enemy shapers could close its mouth if they reached the flagstones. Slate ordered Edrin to leave enough Lurkers to defend the rim and withdraw the rest. He needed those Lurkers ready to counterattack. Giving up ground around the well rankled, but he gave the order.

Sumnu came back with dust caked in the seams of his armor. “The left can fall to the third terrace. After that we have wounded on the route.”

Slate made him wait while a runner crossed the field carrying a red cloth. The signal came from the enemy's east wall. A Confederate medic wanted the wounded removed from a strip both sides were striking. Slate gave the runner an answer: ten minutes, no armed escort within the marked space, and the Scourge would carry out any of their own still there. Shen's line accepted. For a brief interval soldiers from both armies dragged bodies

away while the Cragback pawed at the road and its handlers struggled to turn it. Slate saw one of Zhou Fen's former guards among the wounded. A Scourge medic gave him water without asking which oath had put him there. Then the red cloth came down and the battle resumed. Slate had spent ten minutes he could hardly spare. He had gained the chance to use the lower route without stepping over men who might still live.

“How many wounded?” Slate asked Sumnu.

“Enough that I'm not leaving them,” Sumnu replied.

“You won't. Third terrace, then hold for my signal.”

Sumnu looked past him toward the eastern houses. “They believe we're running.”

“We are running. I want them to keep believing we'll do it all the way to Shouguan.”

The eastern commander saw Sumnu's withdrawal and called his shields forward. Shen saw it too. Slate watched the Surety lift one hand, then hesitate. The eastern houses had to cross a narrowing between the well and the burning storehouse to exploit the retreat. Their shapers could defend the passage but couldn't support the northern stair at the same time. Cragback was moving around the fire, separated from the infantry by the collapsing roof. The Preservers held their corridor farther uphill.

For the first time since dawn, Shen's army had three strong parts and no quick way to make them one.

“Now,” Slate said.

Brace brought his six back from the lower cut and raised the reserve signal. Behind the visible ridge, the other seventeen Guard and the fresh Raiders rose from a concealed lower path. Lu opened a slit through the retaining wall at the eastern commander's flank. The men who thought they were pursuing a broken line saw Slate step into the opening with his wings spread and his claws lit by ash.

The next ground Shen shaped would decide whether they reached the enemy center.

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XLIII

The Avatars Clash

The retaining wall opened wide enough for Slate and six Guard to pass.

They struck the eastern shields from a side the men had thought was stone. Slate went first, wings half open in the narrow gap, ash bright along his claws. The nearest spear met his Scourgeshield and glanced away. He caught the shaft under one forearm and pulled its bearer out of line. Brace drove the Guard through the opening behind him.

Sumnu's Raiders turned back from their apparent retreat. The eastern commander had sent most of his line after them, leaving the shapers who held the well with a thin escort. Slate wanted those shapers contained before Shen moved to save them. He could kill soldiers at the front all morning and still lose when the road closed beneath his army.

“Well first,” he told Brace. “Don't chase the banners.”

The Guard split around the water jars. Edrin's Lurkers rose from the low store roof and struck the signal crew. One wind note broke off halfway through a command. Slate reached the first shaper as she pressed her palm to the paving. She raised a lip to bar his path. He laid his mana-infused edge against the fresh seam and cut downward. The lip stopped growing. He went over it and knocked her hand free of the stone.

The second shaper did not try the same working. He pulled an old flagstone up whole and threw it. Slate couldn't sever a moving slab by touching a shaping that had ended. He rolled under its edge and heard it smash two jars behind him. Brace took the man from the side. The well stayed open.

Above the field, Shen's signal changed. A deep note from the Hollow Choir carried farther than the broken station at the junction could answer. The

northern shields shifted toward the well. Their captain had recognized the danger. The Preservers remained on their own corridor, guarding a line of wounded. Slate had perhaps three minutes before the northern houses closed the gap.

He took two.

The eastern shields withdrew toward a square of intact stone where Shen could support them. Slate ordered Sumnu to press, then held the Guard back a pace. The square looked like refuge. It also gave Shen a direct line from his dais through the road to anyone standing on it.

“He'll lift it,” Brace said.

“Let him,” Slate said.

“You intend to be on it,” Brace said.

“For a moment,” Slate replied.

Brace’s jaw tightened. Instead of arguing, he looked for a way to get Slate out. He sent two soldiers around the square and kept the rest close enough to pull Slate off it if the road opened beneath him.

Slate stepped onto the center stone. Shen raised his left hand. A ring of paving rose around Slate, sealing him into a shallow well. The first motion was fast. Slate leaped for the rim, found it climbing with him, and drove one claw into the active seam. His new edge made a line of pale fire. Stone stopped on one side. The other continued upward and struck his wing. Pain ran through the joint. He pulled free before the ring could close.

Shen changed the working instead of forcing it. The stopped half tilted inward, a slab whose weight no longer depended on shaping. Slate couldn't cut that movement away. Brace and his three guards hit it with a timber beam from the side. Slate jumped across the narrow gap their shove opened, landed hard and felt his wing drag against the pavement.

He looked up at Shen. The Surety had come down from the dais. His robe was dusted gray, his braced wrist tucked close. He walked beside his advance with six stoneshapers and a ring of household guards. He had seen Slate exploit the flank and chosen to intervene before an officer made a

desperate mistake. His presence steadied the retreating eastern men. They made space for him without waiting for a shouted order.

“You found your road,” Shen called.

“I took yours. I like it better,” Slate called to Shen.

Shen's gaze went to the burning storehouse. “You burned the grain you promised to preserve.”

“We took what we could carry,” Slate said. “I wasn’t leaving the rest for your beasts.”

“Ah, the so-called protection of the Scourge?” Shen asked.

“Then take the stores back,” Slate said. “I’d like to see your shapers get past mine.”

Shen did not answer with an argument. He touched the road. Three of his shapers did the same at points across the square. Slate felt the working divide around him. Shen was no longer trying to trap one target. He was building a wall between Sumnu's Raiders and the well, cutting Slate's counterattack in half.

Slate sent the instruction through the Scourgemind. *“Lu, the seam from the north marker.”*

“I see it. I cannot take the whole line,” Lu replied.

“Don’t. Hold the lower exit.”

Slate ran along the growing wall while Brace's Guard covered him. He could cut a narrow section at contact, enough to let a few soldiers through. If he stopped for every yard, Shen would finish the other end. Sumnu understood without an explanation. His Raiders jumped the unfinished wall in small groups, leaving heavy gear behind. Edrin opened the lower exit. The barrier rose between companies already moving to either side of it, and its purpose failed.

Shen looked toward Lu's position. Slate saw the calculation on his face: strike the Builder and let the wall finish, or keep the shapers defending the

exposed eastern house. Shen chose the soldiers closest to him. He folded the wall into a shield around their retreat.

“He won't abandon them,” Brace said.

“No,” Slate agreed. “That's the opening.”

The eastern house began to fall back in order. Slate needed to turn that retreat before the northern shields joined it. He sent Edrin's Lurkers across the roofline toward the wind pipe and put his remaining Guard against the rear of Shen's protective wall. Sumnu struck its front. For a breath the stoneshapers held both sides.

Shale's flare rose from the upper shelf. Her veterans had forced the cliffstriders away from the path above the wall. No riders would arrive there in time to relieve Shen. She had not destroyed the cavalry. She had made it choose a longer route.

The Stillhold line moved to protect the withdrawal. Neriq had waited on the northern stair while the eastern house fought for its own way out. Now her Preservers raised their pale shields and advanced across the open strip between the northern shields and Shen's wall. They were not rushing to rescue Shen personally. Their agreement had brought them to the field, and the exposed soldiers were in danger. Slate saw two of his Raiders prepare to meet them and called them back. The Preservers had kept a corridor for wounded earlier. He would not reward that choice with a charge into their backs while they carried men out.

Sumnu’s warning came through the Scourgemind. *“They’re blocking us.”*

“Then make them stay there. The house soldiers are the ones we need off the square.”

Sumnu sent a line of shields toward the Preservers and stopped short of contact. The two formations held one another's attention. It cost Slate Raiders he could have used against the wall. It also prevented Neriq from adding disciplined troops to Shen's immediate defense. Slate was satisfied with a stalemate in one place if it let him win another.

At the broken wind pipe, Edrin caught a runner carrying a fresh shutter. The man fought with a knife, then smashed the shutter against the roof rather than surrender its setting. Edrin took him alive and showed Slate the broken halves. A different note had been cut into each side. Shen had sent a revised order to the northern house, timed to his intervention. Edrin couldn't read it in full, but the runner had been moving toward the well. That was enough. Slate ordered Brace to keep the water clear and had a Guard scatter quarry lime along the north approach. The powder lifted where the stone began to move, giving the Guard seconds to withdraw.

The moving wall left Shen and his nearest shaper on the far side, cut off from the fight at the well. Slate could clear it by air and land within reach of the Surety. The wing hurt where a spear had cut it at the junction, and the rising wind would push him toward the wall. He could make that flight once, perhaps twice. He would spend it on Shen.

Slate went up.

His injured wing protested. He used both anyway, clearing the wall by inches. He angled for the gap behind the nearest shaper, hoping to land within reach of Shen. Shen intercepted him in midair: a column surged from the road and struck his chest. Scourgeshield flashed around him. The blow drove him back against the wall and scraped the ward thin. Slate planted both feet against the column and kicked off it. He landed on Shen’s side of the barrier, short of the shaper but clear of the wall.

Shen advanced, one hand on the road. Slate saw the Surety's white sleeve darkened at the cuff by blood from his old wrist wound. Shen favored it, but the other hand moved stone with terrifying control. He drew two low slabs across the road behind Slate, sealing the way back to the Guard. If Slate stayed, Brace would have to lead them around through the lower exit.

“Brace, lower exit,” Slate called. “Take them around.”

“I'm not leaving you,” the Raider protested.

“You're following the route I gave you. Move.”

Brace led the Guard through the lower exit, taking them around the slabs and out of reach. Slate had hated accepting a personal guard because it felt

like a ring of men authorized to tell him where to stand. On this field their discipline let him choose a risk without turning the whole unit into a rescue party. He owed Brace an apology he was unlikely to enjoy giving.

When the Guard disappeared through the lower exit, Shen stopped three paces away. A narrow stone ridge divided the road between them. Slate could break it with his edge if he reached it; Shen could raise another. Neither would win by repeating the same motion until one was exhausted.

Slate let the edge fade for a breath. Its cost had begun to pull at him after several cuts. He didn't know how much more active stone Shen meant to put in front of him. He could ask for another opening from Lu, but Lu was holding the lower exit and its wounded. Shen, meanwhile, had a braced wrist and six shapers somewhere behind his moving shield. Both avatars were tired and wounded. One mistake could decide the battle.

“Your captains have the lower road,” Slate said. “Take them back. Leave the well.”

“It supplies the households beyond this field. The Covenant binds me to keep it open.”

“Then let your wounded draw before they withdraw.”

“And after?” The Surety frowned.

Slate shrugged. “Then I take the road.”

“Into the Confederacy.”

“I came for a foothold,” Slate reminded him.

“The Covenant will answer.”

“Then I take ground before it does.” Slate flashed his fangs.

Shen’s gaze moved from the well to a wounded shaper. At Slate’s nod, a Confederacy soldier carried her toward it. A Scourge Raider raised his shield over them, guarding the brief passage. Slate let them draw water while Edrin crossed the roof and Sumnu pressed the wall. Both were in position before Shen turned back.

“You’ve taken one district,” Shen said. “You think that is enough?”

“Enough to make you come here.”

Shen lowered the ridge without warning. Stone rose beneath Slate's rear foot, tipping him forward. Slate let the motion carry him over the line and struck for Shen's unbraced shoulder. A plate unfolded from the Surety's cuff. Slate's claw bit through it, but Shen had already stepped inside the reach of his arms.

His palm struck Slate's chest. The road answered. A wedge rose at the angle Shen had once used to stop a falling cart. This time Slate was the load. It drove under his ribs and lifted him high enough to take his feet from the ground. Scourgeshield flared, held for an instant, then thinned. Slate folded his wings around the wedge and cut along its live seam. The stone stopped rising. Its weight remained. He kicked away as a second pillar slammed into the place his skull had occupied.

Shen followed. No more speeches about the well. His good hand moved, and the paving broke into a dozen narrow teeth. Slate caught one on his shield, vaulted another, and felt a third rake his flank. The white robe came through the dust behind them. Shen was closing the distance while Slate watched the stones.

Slate drove his tail blade at Shen's knee. Shen sank into a hollow in the road, letting Slate’s tail blade pass over his shoulder. Before Slate could pull his tail back, a cuff of stone snapped around his left forearm.

The cuff grew from the road, thick as a man's torso, with Slate's left forearm set through its center. Shen twisted his good hand. Pressure climbed from wrist to elbow. Bone creaked. Slate cut at the nearest seam. The edge stopped the shaping there, but the rest had already hardened. He could break it if Shen gave him time. Shen was building a spike beside his throat.

Across the square, Brace called for the Guard.

“Stay on the well,” Slate snapped.

Shen came in with his braced wrist held close and his good palm open. The spike turned toward Slate's neck. He had mistaken Shen's restraint for

reluctance to kill. Shen had just corrected him.

The arm was attached to him. That made the decision inconvenient, not difficult.

Slate curled his tail across his flank and drove the blade into his left arm above the cuff. Scales and muscle parted. He braced his right claw against the stone and struck again. Bone ground under the edge. Shen drove the spike at his throat before the cut was finished. Slate twisted into it, giving it the outer strut of his wing. Stone punched through membrane and dragged against bone. His arm parted. For one white instant he could neither hear nor feel the ground beneath him. Then blood struck the stone, and the rest of him came free.

Shen recoiled a half step. Not enough.

Slate threw himself through the gap, his weight pulling him toward the missing arm. He hit Shen hard enough to tear the Surety from contact with the road. Slate drove his right claws under Shen's stone guard. Shen caught his wrist. Slate's tail came around again.

Shen saw the first motion and turned. The blade entered below his ribs instead of across his belly. Slate pulled it through cloth and flesh, felt it drag against bone, and pushed closer when Shen tried to retreat. Blood spread across the white robe. Shen's grip loosened.

A shaper shouted his name. Shen rammed his forehead into Slate's face. Slate tasted blood and kept hold of him. Another stone tooth broke the skin along Slate's back. He dug his claws into Shen's shoulder and drew the tail blade back for the second strike.

This one would finish it. Shen's eyes dropped to the blade. His good hand, which had been reaching for Slate, struck the road instead.

The road heaved between them. Shen broke the paving beneath his own feet and dropped into the hollow as a wall slammed up between them. Slate’s blade carved a bright furrow across its fresh surface. He cut through the working, but the severed slab kept falling. He threw himself aside. It struck the square and crushed the stone cuff. His severed arm vanished beneath it.

For a moment he could hear only his own breathing. Then the Confederate horn sounded twice from the eastern wall.

The house soldiers were still trying to hold the breach Sumnu had made. Their Surety had a hand pressed to his side, and blood ran between his fingers. Two guards caught him when he stumbled. Shen shoved one away and touched the road. A ramp opened toward the northern shields, crooked where his concentration faltered. His six shapers ran to take the weight. One tried to come after Slate instead. Shen caught her sleeve and ordered her back to the ramp.

He was saving his soldiers again. Useful habit.

Slate sent the order through the Scourgemind. *"Now. Sumnu, take the square. Edrin, keep their signals broken. Lu, the lower road is yours."*

"Your arm," Brace said.

"Working on it." Slate grimaced.

Slate took three steps after Shen. The fourth nearly put him on his knees. Blood loss blurred the line of the new wall. He forced mana into the wound until the flow slowed, but the torn limb didn't grow back. Repair would take material and time. He had neither to spare on the road.

Brace reached him with two Guard. One pressed a field dressing against the stump. Slate wanted to throw him off and follow Shen through the wall. The ground shifted under his feet, and he let the man work. Shen was being carried now. His head remained up, but the way his guards held him made the injury plain to every soldier watching.

The eastern captain saw it too. She called the retreat before Sumnu reached her rear. The house soldiers withdrew down the ramp in ragged groups, abandoning the square and half their shaped barricades. Neriq's Preservers opened their corridor for the wounded and held it while Shen's shapers struggled to keep the ramp intact. Slate left them room. He had already taken the ground he needed. Killing stretcher bearers would buy him nothing he wanted.

The ramp shuddered. Shen, halfway through the northern shields, turned toward Slate. For an instant his hand lifted as though he might close the road on the Scourge again. His knees gave, and his guards carried him behind their line. A pale-cloaked Preserver pushed between them, pressed folded linen beneath Shen's ribs and shouted for a litter. Shen tried to rise once. The Preserver forced him back down. The stone held only because his shapers had taken it from him.

“Did you get him?” Brace asked.

“He's alive.” Slate watched a red trail mark the pale steps of the ramp. “He knows how close that came.”

Brace tightened the dressing. Slate's tail twitched at the pain, and the Guard nearest it wisely moved aside.

The well belonged to the Scourge. Slate posted a guard at the chain and ordered water drawn for the wounded crossing the square. Brace looked toward Shen's retreating line.

“Ours first if they're dying,” Slate said. “Then his. I want him to know who kept his soldiers alive.”

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XLIV

The Broken Siege

The Cragback struck the lower road while Lu's soldiers were still hauling chain.

Its forefoot came down beyond the burned storehouse. Stone rolled ahead of the claws, lifted the corner of a grain cart and overturned it. The men pulling at its shafts fled beneath the next arch. The beast followed the cart far enough to crush its rear wheels, then raised its head toward the junction well.

Lu felt the weight through the quarry lip. It had found the haul road.

“Leave that end,” he told the Raiders. “Get behind the posts.”

The chain fell into the scree with three links still showing. He had wanted them covered. He had also wanted another hour, a captured ballista and an enemy willing to keep its animal elsewhere until he finished.

Across the junction, Confederacy shields began moving again.

Shen was being carried north. Lu had seen the blood on his robe through the views crossing the Scourgemind. Slate had come back from the square without his left arm. Neither army had stopped fighting because its avatar could no longer stand at the front. The northern companies were gathering behind the beast, and Sumnu's Raiders had turned to face them among the abandoned siege wagons.

If the Cragback reached the well, those Raiders would have a shield line in front of them and moving stone beneath their feet.

Lu pressed his tail into the ground and looked down into the old cutting.

The quarry had supplied Shouguan's first builders. The haul road entered along its northern wall. Opposite it, discarded stone sloped into the pit beneath a crust of earth and grass. Ironroot beetles had burrowed through that fill during the battle. Their spoil lay in little fans beside openings large enough to put an arm into.

Above the waste stood the hoist.

Its lifting chain had once carried blocks out of the cutting. Now that chain lay in a loop across the weakened slope, one end fastened to a roadstone and the other passing through the hoist's low hauling drum. The frame would take the first pull as the animal fell. After that, Lu wanted its feet fighting loose stone while Brace brought an engine to the rim.

He couldn't promise how long that would give them.

Behind the drum, the hoist's counterweight hung in timber guides. Iron straps enclosed a block larger than a grain wagon. An old repair platform ran beneath it. When Lu first inspected the machine, he had refused to let anyone stand there. The holding pawl had rusted into its notch. The block might remain suspended for another century, or fall when the frame shifted under its first real load.

“Clear beneath the weight,” he called. “And stay clear. I haven't made that part safe.”

Six Builders answered from their positions along the cutting. The dozen Raiders had taken hold of the hauling line, standing on timber laid over loose fill. Lu could feel the places where bedrock came close beneath them. He had broken the shallow connections he could reach. There would be others he hadn't found.

Edrin's view reached him from the storehouse ruin.

Tavi had a handler against a blackened post, one hand over his mouth. A second man lay beside a dropped mallet. The bell remained in Edrin's claws. Farther north, another handler was running for the shields with his iron already ringing.

The beast turned toward that sound.

“Lu. Ready?” Edrin asked.

Lu looked at the uncovered links. A Builder was still hammering a wedge into the drum's footing.

“Bring it.”

Edrin rang from the broken road outside the cutting. The Cragback swung back. It drove its head through the remains of a wall between them, knocking a roof beam across the road. Edrin leaped onto the beam, rang again and disappeared over the quarry lip.

The animal came after him.

Lu had watched it from a ridge, through another soldier's eyes and on the measured drawings he'd made afterward. None had prepared him for the head filling the haul road. One horn scraped the quarry wall while the other passed above the outside edge. Pine bark remained caught between two plates along its neck. A whole tree could have vanished beneath that shell without making it turn.

It reached the fill and stopped.

One forefoot remained on the road. The other came forward, pressed through the earth and lifted again. Loose stones ran into an ironroot tunnel. The beast watched them fall.

Edrin rang from beyond the slope.

The Cragback kept its foot on sound rock. It lowered its muzzle, smelled the feed they had spread, and began drawing the haul road out beneath it.

A broad tongue of stone pushed into the loose fill.

Lu put his hand to the quarry wall and cut its connection at the root. The tongue broke under its own weight. The beast lifted its head toward him.

“He's found you,” the nearest Raider said.

Lu moved before the ground rose.

A ridge tore through his old position and struck the hoist's nearest foot. The whole frame jumped. Iron clanged overhead. Lu landed on his side in the scree, got his tail beneath him and scrambled onto the timber deck.

The forefoot came down again. Another tongue began growing into the pit, wider than the first.

“Brace,” Lu sent. *“I need that engine.”*

“Crew's still on it.”

Lu received a glimpse of a ballista turning behind Confederate shields. Brace's Guard were fighting along the side of its wagon. There would be no shot until they took it.

A silver body crossed above the haul road.

Shale landed on the quarry wall behind the Cragback's head. Her claws caught an old lifting socket. The animal turned toward her, swinging its nearer horn along the face. She climbed over the sweep and dropped onto the heavy ridge above its eye.

“Here!” she shouted.

The Cragback threw its head upward.

Shale clung to the horn with both arms. Her feet skidded over armor. She found the softer edge of its nostril with one claw and drove it in.

The bellow struck Lu through his ribs.

The beast stamped forward. Its new bridge broke beneath the blow, leaving its forefoot in the fill. The ironroot tunnels collapsed.

Shale let go as the shoulder dropped. A wing struck the wall. She caught the rim with one hand while waste stone poured past her into the cutting. The Cragback twisted toward the sound. Its other forefoot left the haul road.

Both shoulders went down.

“Take the slack!” Lu shouted.

The Raiders hauled. Links dragged through the falling scree and caught beneath the animal's lifted foreleg. The loop tightened across its chest. It did not stop the fall. It turned the body far enough for the shoulder to strike the waste instead of the solid wall.

The impact threw Lu against the drum.

For a moment he could see nothing. Grit filled his mouth. Through the timber beneath his palms he felt the frame pull toward the pit, then stop as the roadstone took the strain.

Shale came over the rim coughing, one wing folded awkwardly against her side.

“Again?” she asked.

“Don't do that again.”

She spat dust over the edge. Below them, the Cragback dragged a forefoot through loose rubble and tried to lift the road it had just left.

The quarry wall began to bend.

Lu set both hands to it. He broke the narrow shelf where it joined the upper road. The mass fell away before it could carry the beast. He sent two Builders to the far rim, where a Confederate shaper had found another way to raise stone beneath its rear feet.

The enemy had understood the trap. Their shields were coming down the haul road behind it. On the far rim, the shaper drove a stone tooth through one Builder's thigh. His partner dragged him out of reach. Lu felt their support fail and took the next rising shelf himself.

Shale took a spear from a Raider and went to meet them.

“Engine coming,” Brace sent.

Four Guard dragged the captured ballista around the burned storehouse. Its wheels struck the broken cart and stopped. Brace put a shoulder against the axle. Another Guard cut the wreck's projecting shaft away. They heaved the engine clear while bolts struck the road around them.

Lu wanted to help. The wall beneath his hands lifted, and he leaned into it instead.

The Cragback had found bedrock with one rear foot. Its shell rose above the scree. The hauling drum turned half a notch, pulling a Raider off his feet before the others caught him.

“Don't pull against it!” Lu shouted. “Hold the brake!”

He shifted the roadstone so the line drew across the animal's shoulder. Its head turned away from the wall. A strip of dark hide showed below the jaw.

Brace saw it. He drove a wedge beneath the ballista's front wheel and called his crew onto the winding handles.

The beast went still.

Lu felt it stop trying to climb. He could hear the rasp of its breathing beneath the chain. Blood from Shale's claw ran over the stones under its muzzle.

“Wait,” he told Brace.

The Cragback pressed both forefeet against the wall.

The whole face came toward them.

Lu's first cut divided a shelf. The next section was already rising above it. He reached for the deeper root, found more stone moving than his hands could hold, and understood that the animal had stopped making itself a stair.

It was bringing their firing position down.

“Fire!”

The bolt struck beneath the jaw as the lip broke.

The Cragback screamed. Blood ran along the shaft. It lurched backward, wrenching the chain tight enough to tear the drum from its front seating.

Lu lost the wall beneath his hands.

Brace seized the nearest crewman and threw him toward the road. The ballista tipped into the cutting. Its bow arm struck the quarry face and burst. A Guard jumped after a falling companion and caught his wrist at the edge; another man slid with the engine and vanished behind it.

The chain struck the drum housing like a hammer.

“Let it run!” Lu shouted.

The Raiders couldn't reach the brake. The first link broke inside the casing. A length of iron whipped across the platform, taking a post out at Lu's shoulder. He ducked as the drum tore free.

The Cragback climbed through the place where the ballista had stood.

It came up with the bolt beneath its jaw and half the loop dragging from its chest. Blood poured down the shaft, but its forefeet found the cartway beside the quarry. Stone flowed around them. The nearer horn passed over Brace's back as he pulled the hanging Guard onto the road.

The animal shoved. The surviving parapet fell outward. A man screamed beneath the debris.

Lu caught the low wall and kept the last blocks from following him. He couldn't see the man. He could feel weight moving beneath the masonry.

The beast took another step toward the well.

There were Raiders on that road. The wounded were behind them, and the northern shields had begun cheering.

“Sumnu, clear the cartway beside the pit,” Lu sent.

“We're holding their infantry.”

“I have to drop it.”

The answer came from Slate. *“Sumnu, move. Lu has the road.”*

Lu had spent days opening roads for this army. Grain had crossed his joints, wounded soldiers had trusted his rails, and Slate had brought a whole company through a passage he'd made for porters. He could see where the

cartway met the retaining face. Break it there and wagons would not reach the junction until they rebuilt it.

The Cragback lowered its head toward the well.

Lu drew his right claw down the joint.

His Builders took the line farther along, opening the same break beneath the moving beast. The cartway sagged. The forefeet slipped, found the falling slab and tried to shape it back into the wall.

Lu tore the last connection away.

The road went into the cutting with the Cragback on it.

One horn struck the lip and sheared through the old repair platform. Lu's left hand was still on its rail. Timber closed around his palm, then broke before he could pull it clear.

He fell beside the hoist with two claws bent against the back of his hand.

For a few breaths he could only hold it against his chest. When he looked up, Shale had caught him beneath one arm.

“Feet,” she said. “Get your feet under you.”

He obeyed. The pain changed when his tail took some of his weight. He could think again.

Below them, the animal was already trying to rise.

The cartway's broken slab had landed across the spoil. The beast could reach that stone. Each time it pushed, the slab tilted and drove deeper into the fill instead of lifting it toward the road. Its front legs scraped for the quarry wall. One found purchase beneath the hoist.

The old counterweight shifted in its guides.

Lu looked up.

The block hung above the waste side, behind the beast's armored shoulders. Its short drop would crush the shell against rubble. It might hurt the animal.

It would not reach the throat where the bolt had entered.

“Brace,” Lu said. “I need its head under the weight.”

Brace looked at the block, then into the pit. He did not ask whether Lu meant to make another trap.

“How long?”

Lu tried to open his left hand. Pain drove up to the elbow. He pressed it against his chest again.

“I don't know yet.”

Brace turned to the Guard. “Pikes. The wagon above the store. Bring it down.”

Two men ran. The others put their shields along the surviving edge. Shale picked up her spear. Its point had bent against the animal's armor; she broke the splintered shaft shorter and kept the iron head.

“I'll turn it,” she said.

“It nearly had you.”

“Then be ready when it comes up.”

She left him beside the hoist.

Lu climbed the frame's inspection ladder with his right hand. The lower rung had broken. He shaped a foothold in the post, put his weight on it and pulled himself higher. His tail dragged across the braces, catching where his old body would have passed without difficulty.

He could see the pawl from the platform. The drum's fall had bent its mounting. Iron held the weight in place. He couldn't move that.

The timber carrying it was another matter.

Below, the Cragback struck the wall. The ladder jumped under Lu's feet.

Shale dropped onto its horn again, using the quarry face to reach it. This time the animal was waiting. It threw its head toward the wall before she

could find the eye.

Her back struck stone.

She lost the spear. One hand stayed around the horn. Her wing dragged through scree as the animal pulled away for another blow.

Brace went over the edge.

He landed against its cheek, caught an armored ridge with one hand and drove the claws of the other into the soft corner of its mouth. The jaws snapped shut. Brace tore his hand clear as the head turned toward him, carrying Shale clear of the wall.

She found a hold above the eye and climbed.

“Up here!” Brace shouted at the beast.

The Cragback came after him. He scrambled onto the low shelf beneath the hoist. A Guard caught his arm and hauled him back while pike points drove at the open mouth. The animal swept them aside with its horn. One shield broke across its bearer. His companions dragged him from the edge before the forefoot landed.

The grain wagon struck that foot.

Sumnu had brought it down the remaining slope with six Raiders pushing behind it. They let it go at the last moment and scattered. The empty wagon wedged between the animal's chest and the quarry face. Wood burst beneath its weight, but the axle held long enough to stop its first lunge.

Above them, Lu put his right palm against the hoist post.

The pawl's iron mounting ran deep into it. To release the weight, he would have to open the timber beneath the fitting. The block's load would then tear the upper frame toward the pit. He could not lower it gently while men fought underneath.

He sent Brace the view through the frame: the weight, the nearest shelf and the strip of bare ground below the broken road.

“Get them onto that slope. Stay off the wall.”

Brace glanced up at him. *“Call it.”*

Shale had reached the ridge above the Cragback's eye. She drove her remaining claws beneath its edge, close enough to make the animal close the lid. The head turned with her. The bolt beneath its jaw dragged against the wagon's broken side.

Blood spread over the wood.

The animal recoiled. Its neck rose below the counterweight, but Shale was still on it.

Lu held the post.

She had to let go. He could not judge her jump for her. He could barely judge the platform under his own feet, where the splitting grain had begun to carry more force than the old pegs could bear.

A forefoot struck the hoist's base.

The Cragback had seen him.

Stone climbed around the post and began drawing it down. The guide frame tilted. Lu felt the counterweight shift away from the neck.

He could let go and jump. The block would remain in its cage, the animal would reach the road, and they would spend the night carrying wounded back toward Shouguan while it broke everything behind them.

He put his injured hand against the timber.

For an instant he saw nothing but white. His right hand stayed where he'd set it. He found the post's grain through that contact, took the iron mounting's load across the sound side and opened the fibers beneath it.

The pawl tore free.

“Clear!”

Brace pulled the shield line back. Shale jumped from the horn as the first guide broke. Her wing opened, caught the falling frame and folded under it. She hit the spoil rolling.

The counterweight dropped.

It struck the raised jaw below the shell, driving the broken bolt through the neck. The impact flattened the grain wagon and threw Brace off his feet. The cage burst apart. Iron straps lashed through falling timber as the stone block drove the animal's head into the cut road beneath it.

Lu's platform tipped.

He slid on his side toward the break. His right claws caught a brace, pulled through rotten wood and lost it. He shaped the next crosspiece around his forearm as he fell. The timber bent, tore out of one seating and swung him against the quarry wall.

Below him, the Cragback moved.

Both forefeet drove into the broken cartway. Stone rose under its breast, lifting the counterweight a hand's breadth. The neck beneath it was open. Blood ran down the slab, but the working kept coming.

Lu clung to the crosspiece. His left hand would not close.

“The slab,” he sent his Builders. *“Break it into pieces. Now.”*

They reached its exposed edge from the waste slope, two on either side. The animal rolled one foot toward the nearer pair. They jumped back. Sumnu hit the foreleg with the broken wagon tongue, keeping it turned while the Builders found the same fracture from below.

The slab split.

One half fell away from the animal's foot. The other turned upright beneath its chest. Its last rise stopped. The counterweight settled against the ruined neck with a wet sound Lu could hear above the falling stones.

The beast's hind legs drove once into the spoil.

Then the ground stopped changing.

Nobody cheered.

Lu stayed hanging from the crosspiece until a Builder reached him along the wall. Together they made a ledge beneath his feet. He could stand on it. He did not trust his knees enough to try at first.

“Shale?” he asked.

“Here.”

She was below the broken road, crouched beside Brace. Dust had made her silver scales almost white. One wing hung low. She lifted it while a Guard felt along the joint, then swore and folded it again.

The animal's eye remained open beside the counterweight. Lu watched it until grit stopped moving against the lid. He set his right hand to the wall. Beneath the weight of fallen timber and stone, he could feel no answering pressure.

“It's dead,” he said.

A Raider sat down in the scree as though someone had cut the straps holding him upright.

Sumnu turned toward the northern road. The Confederate shield line had stopped advancing. His Raiders struck it before its captain could decide whether to come down or withdraw. Shale tried to stand with them. Brace caught her elbow.

“Let them finish it,” he said.

She stayed beside him, watching.

The shields withdrew around the north turn. Pale-cloaked Preservers came through behind them with litters. The Scourge let them recover the wounded, then followed far enough to take the teams from the abandoned siege wagons. No bell called the Cragback after them.

Lu made himself look at the road.

The cartway beside the quarry was gone. Part of the retaining face lay beneath the beast. His hoist had become a heap of broken posts, chain and

the block that would have to stay where it was until they could cut the carcass away.

“You have a man under the old firing lip,” he told Brace. “He's moving. Bring a medic and two Builders. Lift the outer slab first.”

Brace sent them. One Guard had broken his leg in the ballista's fall. Another lay beside the shattered shield with blood at his mouth. The Builder wounded on the far rim was being carried down. Lu counted them as they came into view. He needed names, but first he needed them out from under the loose stone.

Slate arrived supported by Brace's deputy. A fresh dressing covered his stump. He stopped where the cartway had been and looked down at the creature's buried head.

Lu waited for the question about the road.

Slate looked at his hand instead. “Lynia is at the well. Go.”

“The retaining face needs—”

“You have Builders. Tell one of them.”

Lu turned to the nearest. “Two braces under the firing lip. Nothing on top until the Guard is out. Keep everyone off the old cartway. The whole edge has to be checked.”

The Builder repeated the order and went.

Only then did Slate ask, “How long for wagons?”

“Days. I can't tell you how many until we see beneath it.”

“People?”

“A footway by morning, if the far seat holds.”

Slate looked toward the captured wagons. Sumnu's men had brought one ballista clear. The other lay broken under the quarry lip. Teams stood amid loads of grain, iron fittings and shaped blocks the Confederacy had failed to take away.

“Get the food across by hand,” Slate told Brace's deputy. “Keep the loads small. Lu signs the footway before anyone uses it.”

Lu held his ruined palm against his chest. “I broke your road.”

Slate followed his gaze into the pit. “It was walking toward my wounded. You put it there instead.”

He turned back to the deputy. “When the surgeons have what they need, put guards on the carcass. I want the armor examined before anyone starts cutting it for trophies.”

The deputy went to find Sumnu.

Lu descended toward the well with Shale beside him. At the bend, two Raiders moved aside to let them pass. One was the man who had held the brake until the drum tore free. He had wrapped his burned palms in strips torn from a grain sack.

“Which side do you want the new path?” he asked Lu.

Lu looked back. His surviving Builders were waiting above the pit. Raiders had already gathered beside the spare timbers, ready to carry them where he said.

He pointed to the inland wall. “Start there. Leave room for a litter.”

This time he went to the surgeon while they worked.

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XLV

The Right Claimed

Slate held court in Shouguan's old gatehouse because the roof had survived and the doors opened wide enough for a crowd.

The Builders had faced the repaired doorway in white stone, leaving the old bar sockets exposed inside it. A single cleansing flame burned above the entrance, its light reflected in the polished curve of the new lintel.

Slate had set his table across the former guard recess, with the narrow windows behind him. Anyone approaching had to cross the open floor. Brace could watch both doors without turning his head.

His left arm ended in a fresh dressing. Whenever he reached for a paper with his missing hand, Brace moved it within reach of his right.

The first people through were not petitioners. They were farmers from the White Stair who wanted to know whether he intended to march west now that Shen had gone. One woman carried a broken irrigation gate across her shoulders. A man beside her held the list of families who had stayed through the battle. They set both on the table before Slate. No one bowed. The broken gate dripped onto the scrubbed floor. The next family waited until Brace shifted a bench to make room for it.

“The channel can be repaired,” the woman said. “Lu told us how. We want to know who can keep us safe while we make the repairs.”

“The Scourge,” Slate said. “Edrin has the north watches. Sumnu has the quarry approach. Lu's Builders are on the channel this morning.”

“For how long?” the woman asked.

“Until I decide the ground isn't worth holding.” Slate paused to assess the woman. “I just fought a war to take it. You can assume I'm staying.”

Several people in the room relaxed. Others looked at him harder. Shen had marched away with the survivors. They wanted to know whether Slate would do the same. Slate didn't ask for their trust on the strength of a victory speech. He had brought records, guards and people authorized to make decisions after he left the room.

Serena sat beside the door with two clerks. She had arrived from Bastion with more ink than provisions and had complained about the order in which the wagons were packed. Now she kept three lists open: households, disputed obligations and repairs.

The mill prisoners had a separate hearing pending in Bastion, with Sui’s case excluded from the others. Matek was still gathering witness accounts. Slate had ordered the prisoners kept there until each case could be heard.

Zhou Fen stood under guard near the rear wall. Slate had invited her to witness the terms for prisoners and for households still claimed by her member house. She had come because refusing would leave her people represented only by his staff.

“Each household keeps the home and tools it held when my army arrived,” Slate said. “If someone says a debt transfers the tools or the people, bring the paper to Serena. We'll read it with the people named on it and with a Confederacy witness if one comes. No one is moved by force while that claim is examined.”

“And the water work?” the farmer asked.

“Paid. Lu will tell us what the channel needs.” Slate gestured to the group with his intact hand. “Your people decide who takes the jobs.”

“From whose grain?” the farmer asked.

“Mine until the first harvest,” Slate replied. “After that we agree on a district levy in the open. You should know what protection costs. I should know what you can afford without starving.”

Serena made a mark and looked up. “I will need the acreage and the last two harvest tallies before anyone names a rate. No promises on a number today.”

The farmer regarded her. “We can bring those.”

“Good. And bring whoever’s going to argue the levy with me,” Serena said.

Slate let Serena handle the next questions. She knew which granary had survived and which cart had carried seed instead of rations. Slate knew what he had committed to. He would keep the road open, pay the people repairing it, and stop his own soldiers from treating the district as a captured storehouse. If he failed at any of those, Shen wouldn't need an army to make his rule look temporary.

Zhou Fen asked to speak. Brace watched her hands as she stepped forward. She had fought to defend the junction and hadn't changed her oath in captivity. Slate wanted the farmers to hear her objections and his answers.

“My house still claims the north terraces,” she said. “I cannot recognize a levy imposed there by an invader. I can witness the households' condition and carry their petitions to Covenant. Will you permit that?”

“Yes,” Slate told the Confederacy representative. “You don't get to remove anyone or carry military maps out with the petitions. Serena can copy what the families give you.”

“I will tell them you placed guards on our road,” the representative said.

“They already know,” Slate replied. “Tell them the guards have orders to let an unarmed family through either way.”

The farmer with the broken gate looked between them. “If my son leaves for Covenant, will your men call him a spy?”

“No,” Slate told the farmer. “If he comes back with Shen's shapers and a siege engine, they will.”

That drew a short laugh. Slate liked the woman better for refusing to flatter him. He asked her name and put it beside the gate repair on Serena's list. By midday the room had grown warm and crowded. The bare walls carried every complaint. Slate could hear a man near the door rehearsing his claim while Serena checked the name ahead of him.

A former house worker wanted wages counted against a debt he had never seen. A shopkeeper wanted compensation for a roof the Scourge had broken during the withdrawal. Two brothers disputed which of them had authority to sell the field Slate's quartermaster had requisitioned. None of it made a song worth singing. His answers would tell the people who’d stayed what living under his rule meant.

Slate resolved the roof first. His company had broken it; his stores would pay. The quartermaster could argue later about whose hands had signed the receipt. The brothers' land would remain unsold until both could bring witnesses. The worker's debt went into Serena's disputed ledger, and he would draw wages in the meantime. Slate didn't pretend a day in a gatehouse could unmake every house covenant. It could stop his own officers from enforcing one they had never read.

Near the end of the line, a mother came forward with a boy of perhaps twelve. She hadn't brought a paper. Her older son had been taken as a runner by a retreating house company. She had heard he was alive, but no one could tell her whether he had crossed the district line. Zhou Fen knew the company's badge and the captain who had led it. She offered to send a message through the next prisoner exchange. The mother looked at Slate before answering. She wanted to know whether accepting help from a Confederate captain would put her own home under suspicion.

“No,” Slate said. “She's the person who can find him. Let her.”

He gave Zhou Fen a guard and a messenger slot, not a free pass beyond his lines. She wrote the boy's name in her own hand. Slate told Serena to keep a copy and set a day for an answer. The mother asked what would happen if the house refused to return her son. Slate said he would take that up with Shen as part of the exchange. He did not promise he could bring a child home by sunset. He could promise the name wouldn't vanish under a stack of ledgers.

After she left, Brace asked quietly whether using Zhou Fen as a contact made the captain too valuable to exchange. Slate looked at the list of her captured soldiers. “It makes her useful while she's here. Shen will want her back. I want her people to know what she did for them under my guard. We can both get something without pretending she's mine.”

Lu arrived carrying a piece of the repaired channel in his right hand. His left palm was wrapped, two damaged claws held straight beneath a little timber splint. He set the piece on the table beside the broken gate. Stone curved into wood with a join so clean Slate had to touch it to find the seam. Lu's short claws had worked the narrow groove. His tail steadied him while he reached across the crowded table.

“The channel runs,” Lu told the farmers. “The damaged saddle has a new buttress. I want it checked after the first hard rain. The relief lip remains open until then.”

The woman examined the join. “We can make more gates like this?”

“With my crew and yours. I'll teach whoever maintains it.”

Slate looked at Lu. “The Builder Corps is yours again. Keep them on the east route until loaded wagons can reach Bastion. After that, choose how many remain here and how many work in the city. Serena gets the materials list before anyone moves.”

“I did,” Lu said. “She sent half my timber back.”

“Because you counted the same boards for a bridge and a roof,” Serena said.

“I intended to move them after the bridge was open,” Lu protested.

“Tell me that in the request and I will stop accusing you of growing a second forest.”

The room laughed again, this time at people who had already begun to govern it. Slate let the exchange run. He had made Lu the commander of a corps, not a pet craftsman to be called when a wall broke. The Builders had a place in his army and in the work that kept a territory alive.

For eight days, porters carried food around the quarry while the Builders replaced the cartway Lu had dropped beneath the Cragback. The beast lay under the broken hoist, its shell visible from the new path. Soldiers stopped talking when they passed it. Some had fought beside the frame. Others had only heard what happened there, and wanted to see how large a thing the Builders and Raiders had brought down.

The first loaded wagon crossed the repaired route on the eighth day. Slate walked beside it over the first of the Nine Spans and down the lower connection Lu had opened under the old road. The bridge carried grain, tools and three families returning to White Stair. One wagon wheel struck a joint hard enough to make Slate glance at Lu. Lu had anticipated the load. The stone beneath it didn't move.

“You can put a second wagon on it tomorrow,” Lu said. “Not side by side. The lower turn is still narrow.”

Slate nodded. “Then tomorrow we'll send them one after another.”

The road reached Bastion's heartland without passing through a house checkpoint. That didn't settle the legal claim Shen would make. Slate could supply Shouguan without depending on a hidden passage. The farmers could sell grain west. Bastion could send iron east. A Scourge patrol could reach the district before a rumor grew into a raid.

By the time Slate returned to Bastion, loaded wagons ran between working gates. His left arm was growing back, but he let Brace keep the Guard close until he could carry a shield again.

The east gate's white arch rose above a queue of grain carts. A golden sun motif filled the recess above the wicket, its rays cut deep into the surrounding stone. Light gathered on the raised edges and left the hollows cool and gray. Wheels had worn gray tracks through the scrubbed paving. Slate turned sideways to let a cart's rear wheel clear him. Brace moved with him.

Fresh stone showed brighter along the repairs to the western wall. He preferred the visible scar to a lie about what the city had cost.

Fidem met him at the east gate with dust on his shoes and an ambassador's request in his pocket. “You have an hour before the trade conversation,” the governor said.

“And what do you want to show me in it?”

Fidem smiled. “The academy. They did more than mend your walls.”

The governor-priest led him into the academy through a square court planted with white irises. Straight paths divided the flower beds and met at a clear space wide enough for a squad to assemble. Inside, high windows cast long bars of light across the training partitions. Pale timber beams spanned the roof. Along the lower walls, shields had left gray scuffs at human shoulder height and deep claw marks nearer the floor.

Slate watched the cover reset between exercises. Human recruits in Concord regalia drilled beside Scourge veterans. Their own officers gave the orders.

Brenn’s trainers watched the mixed units, stepping in when a Scourge moved too fast or crowded a human recruit. A human shield bearer turned too early at the breach and left a wounded partner exposed. The wall closed on the error.

Fidem stopped the exercise. The shield bearer was still looking at the gate when his Concord officer asked which partner he had left exposed. He turned and saw the recruit kneeling behind him with one hand on a painted wound. Brenn's trainer showed him where the Lurker's path crossed his. They ran it again. This time he held position until the partner was through, then called the withdrawal himself. The moving cover closed behind all of them.

Fidem showed him the ledger: fewer injuries in controlled drills, faster certification for mixed units. The hall's resources were reserved for scheduled courses; sleeping inside its walls made no one a Crusader. Slate had seen that lesson taught with a corpse. He approved the next class.

“Note their performance after they leave the hall,” he told Fidem. “I want to know whether the training survives first blood.”

The western yard lay behind a low white wall, its pale timber shelters open to the raked landing strip. Broad eaves shaded the tack benches. Stone troughs reflected strips of sky at either end, beyond the reach of an opening wing. Long talon furrows crossed the rake marks. Slate kept to the shelter side of them as Kegan brought him forward.

Kegan showed him a gryphon. Four legs, separate wings, a chest broad enough for a rider. The roc's electrical ability was gone. This animal could

launch from a short run and carry a trained human over the border. The gryphon turned its head at Kegan's voice and accepted its rider's hand at the beak.

Kegan had one proven rider pair; the rest needed months. The beasts could carry a soldier. They still had to learn which soldiers to attack. Concord officers would command the wing while Kegan trained them. The old lightning would not return. Their value lay in carrying riders, scouting and striking from above.

“Commission the first wing,” Slate said. “If a pair isn't ready, it doesn't fly over my soldiers.”

“It doesn't fly over mine either,” Fidem said.

Slate could imagine a future in which those talons came for him. Today they freed his soldiers for the east, and he had a road to hold.

At day’s end, Slate checked his status. His XP balance hadn't changed since Shouguan: Shen lived, and Lu’s crew had killed the Cragback. Apparently the System had no column for taking a province. He considered that an oversight.

Name	**Slate**
Faction	**The Scourge**
Form	**Scion**
LVL	**35**
XP invested in self	**297,500**
XP available	**9,400**
Next LVL investment	**17,500**

BIOWEAPONS
- **Acid Gland II** *(Etching Acid)*
- **Active Duotoxin Control** *(Paralytic Neurotoxin II, Hallucinogenic Psychotoxin)*
- **Magotoxin I** *(mana-network disruption after injection)*
- **Prehensile Tongue** *(Anticoagulant Saliva)*
- **Claws and expanding jaws**
- **Tail Blade** *(Monomolecular Edge, Mana-Infused Monomolecular Edge I, toxin delivery, Vampiric Blade)*

BIOLOGICAL SYSTEMS
- **Skeletal System II** *(Crystalline Osteo-Remodeling, Mana-Forged Osteo-Matrix)*
- **Muscular System I** *(Mana-Forged Musculature)*

- **Integumentary System IV** *(Chromatophoric Sheathing, Mana-Forged Hide II, Phase-Shift Cloaking)*
- **Sensory System I** *(Combined Vision, Otolithic Matrix I)*
- **Nervous System II** *(Mana-Forged Synapses, Directed Mana Conduction)*
- **Immune System III** *(battle regeneration, rapid wound sealing)*

UTILITY & SPELLCRAFT
- **Communion**
- **Cleansing Fire**
- **Ash Infusion I**
- **Scourgemind** *(concurrent exchanges)*
- **Scourgeshield II**
- **Harmonic Resonance I**
- **Kinetic Dispersion I**

Weeks later, Slate went to Woodhaven. The new arm had its reach back, though the shoulder ached when he spread his wings. Shale's older young came at him in a crowd that smelled of warm bark and stolen kitchen food. One wriggled under his wing. Another demanded to know whether Cragback was larger than the west wall. Slate marked its length with his tail until the child accused him of cheating.

Shale lowered herself beside the nursery's white stone hearth and let another adult take the smallest child. Low benches of pale wood curved around the hearth, with folded blankets stacked at the ends. Through the open door, honeysuckle brushed the lintel in a breeze.

Slate saw how slowly she settled and took the place beside her rather than ask whether she was tired. Three new clutches rested in dry chambers under constant watch. None had hatched. The older twenty-four still needed feeding, correction and more space every week. Slate's army had grown in the east; here its future made noise.

Merus had raised the west wall since the climber's escape. Shale showed Slate the smooth white face and the drain their son had found two days later. “I made Merus leave it,” she said. “He ends up in the herb garden instead of beyond the trees.”

“Merus will object.”

“He already has. Twice.”

“He can write his objections on a taller wall.”

Shale's mouth twitched. The young one tested the drain under a watcher's eye, then dropped into the herb garden and ran toward them as if he had invented the route. Slate caught him before he trampled Shale's seedlings. He stayed beside her while the others turned the story of the stone beast into a game of climbing over his tail.

A dispatch from Covenant reached him the following morning. Shen had returned with his surviving army. The wound kept him from riding, but not from filing a claim under the original covenant. Shouguan, the White Stair and the households who had stayed there remained bound to the Confederacy's covenant, his seal said. A survey party was already on the northern road.

Slate sent Serena's household terms back with the names of every witness willing to sign them. He sent Edrin to watch the north marker. Then he looked at the list attached to Shen's claim. The woman who had carried the broken irrigation gate into his court was on it, along with her son and the field his men now guarded.

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Epilogue

The Divided Heavens

LUCIDUS BEGAN WITH THE FLOOR.

A pale circle of stone spread beneath her feet, one fitted block at a time. She raised the forum around it: an open court ringed by white columns, with cleansing flames burning in sconces between them.

Fog gathered around her ankles. She spread it across the stone until the firelight caught in it, then grew honeysuckle along the balustrade. The first breath of its scent brought back the old Bastion so sharply that she stopped working.

There had been a city here once, in the center of Somnium. The gods had walked its streets before taking their places in the forum, where grievances were aired and commitments made. Lucidus remembered negotiations that lasted until morning, servants replenishing cups while the fate of a mortal kingdom waited on someone agreeing to surrender a river crossing. Lives had been traded as easily as silver. Most of the people affected had never learned that a bargain had taken place.

She built the streets below from memory. Ghostly followers filtered between houses and small courtyards. A woman carried bread wrapped in a cloth. Two children chased a hoop past an old man who had already warned them about his knees. Near the market, Justicars in shining golden armor helped a resident lift a fallen cart. One braced the axle while the other set the wheel back on.

Above them, a gigantic gold dragon banked around the forum. Its wings stirred the fog, and moving light swept across the streets as it passed.

Lucidus let the city continue without her attention. Maintaining it cost less strength than she had feared. The five restored seats were bringing prayers

to her again; people who had once whispered her name now spoke it openly. She felt them even here.

She had missed that feeling. Admitting how much made her look toward the empty chairs.

Ferrun and Silvys would never sit in them again.

For most of her existence, Lucidus had thought of losing followers as a retreat she would eventually reverse. Now she knew where a retreat could end. A shrine abandoned, a priest gone unanswered, children taught to pray to someone stronger. She wondered how often the others counted what remained to them.

A red ember settled on the stone. It stretched upward into an arch of worked flame, and Ambystos stepped through. Wisps of black fire flitted through his dark hair at the temples. He inspected the nearest column before looking at her.

“I remember that crack,” he said, resting a hand against the base. “You could have left it out.”

“I wanted to see the place again.”

He looked past her at the city. His expression softened briefly. Then he turned back, waiting for the reason she had invited him early.

“Ordan will ask you to stand with him,” Lucidus said. “He wants the houses bound to Shen even where the people living in them want to leave. I need you to refuse him in front of the others.”

“And when he asks what I intend to do about Nocturnus?”

“Tell him.”

Ambystos walked to the balustrade. “I intend to take part of the Collective. Harbors first, then enough ground to supply them. Ignatum needs timber and ore, and I want a position on the mainland that doesn't depend on someone else's ships.”

“You already have ships.”

“They need somewhere to unload.” He watched the dragon turn above the roofs. “Moraeth and I have a peaceful border. I could spend years trying to cross her territory and have nothing fit to occupy when I finished. The Vallyrian Collective is across the sea. Nocturnus is weaker than he has been in centuries. I won't get a better opportunity by waiting for him to recover.”

Lucidus joined him. “Slate has done most of the work.”

“And he may do more. I'm willing to let the Scourge lead. I'd rather negotiate for a harbor behind his army than lose a fleet trying to take one ahead of it.”

That was what she had expected. She needed to know whether he intended to negotiate before or after his soldiers landed.

“You'll tell me before you send the fleet north,” she said. “I'll put you in contact with Slate. If you want passage or a port, ask him for it. Don't sail into ground he's taken and expect me to settle the fight afterward.”

Ambystos considered her. “Will you support him if he claims the whole coast?”

“I'll hear what he intends to do with it. I'm not promising you his conquests.”

“Then don't promise them to Nocturnus either. If Ordan demands that every captured province be restored, I want you beside me when I refuse.”

She could give him that. Nocturnus had lost the ground. Returning it would restore the power he had used against her, while telling the people who had begun praying to her that their choice was temporary.

“I won't support restoring his borders by divine agreement,” she said. “But I won't guarantee yours. You'll have to hold whatever you take.”

“I can work with that.” Ambystos turned fully toward her. “I'll tell you before the fleet leaves. I'll negotiate with Slate through my avatar before landing on territory he holds. And I'll oppose Ordan's demand that the households be returned to their old obligations.”

“Even if Nocturnus offers you a port to change your mind?”

Ambystos drew a slow breath. She had named the concession that might actually tempt him.

“Yes,” he said. “For this dispute. I'm not giving you every argument we'll ever have about an oath.”

Lucidus accepted the limit. He had surrendered a possible bargain with Nocturnus; she had surrendered the chance to use the council to shut Ignatum out of the north. Neither had promised an army. Both would have to explain their agreement aloud.

Stone shifted behind them.

Ordan entered with Isyra at his side. He studied the restored forum before acknowledging Lucidus. Isyra's gaze lingered on the streets below, where the Justicars were helping the cart's owner gather his spilled goods.

Nocturnus followed. His shadow dragged unevenly across the fog. Lucidus remembered when his darkness had filled a room before he entered it. Now the flames nearest him barely dimmed. He saw her notice and drew himself upright.

Thunder broke overhead.

Lucidus turned before Kharos emerged between the columns. She had invited him without expecting an answer. He had not attended the last convening, and he had offered no explanation for coming to this one. His eyes moved over the company, pausing on Nocturnus before settling on her.

Then Moraeth arrived.

The Lady of the Last Harvest stepped from a drift of brown leaves, her layered sari brushing the fog. Small flowers threaded her dark hair. She leaned on her staff while she examined the forum, then looked down at the city.

“You've remembered the market,” she said. “There used to be a dreadful smell behind those stalls.”

“I left that out.”

“Sensible. I spent enough time dealing with it when it was real.”

Moraeth smiled, but Lucidus was still thinking about her arrival. Two gods who had stayed away before had answered her summons. Isyra made a third. Whatever they wanted, they had decided it was worth being seen here to ask for it.

Thalune came last, smoothing the sleeve of an indigo robe as the salt scent of her passage faded. She carried her memory pearl in one hand. After greeting Lucidus, she paused beside Moraeth to exchange a few quiet words, then chose a seat from which she could watch both alliances.

Eight gods. There had been five at the previous meeting. Nemeia and Valis had stayed away again, but the empty places no longer dominated the court.

Lucidus caught Nocturnus counting the arrivals. She would have enjoyed that more if she knew why Kharos had come.

“My avatar has taken Shouguan and the White Stair,” she began. “Shen has withdrawn to Covenant. The households Slate now holds can bring their claims to a hearing, and he has promised not to move them by force while those claims are examined. Ordan disputes his right to do any of it.”

“I dispute his right to cancel obligations he didn't make,” Ordan said. “Those houses pledged to defend one another. Some have received that protection for generations. They cannot accept it until an invader arrives, then leave the rest to fight alone.”

“What if the people who made the pledge are dead?” Lucidus asked.

“Their descendants still live under its protection.”

“Some live under its debts. Slate is hearing from both.”

Ordan leaned forward. “With his soldiers at the door. You know what a frightened family will say to the man who controls their food.”

She did. She also knew what they might say to a god who called their endurance a sacred duty.

“Then send someone to hear them,” Lucidus said. “Someone who can tell you when they disagree with him. If the covenant serves them as well as you believe, you'll have witnesses.”

“And if he refuses?”

Lucidus inclined her head. “I'll ask him to admit one.”

Nocturnus's hand closed around the arm of his chair. “While you arrange witnesses, he strengthens his occupation. Every week makes it harder to remove him.”

Ambystos spoke before Lucidus could answer. “I won't support an agreement to restore your borders. Nor will I recognize Ordan's right to return the households by force because their ancestors swore an oath.”

Ordan turned toward him. “You agreed to this before we arrived.”

“Yes,” Lucidus said. “We agreed on our positions. I asked you here to state yours.”

Nocturnus stared at Ambystos. “How much of my coast did she offer you?”

“None. I intend to establish ports in the Collective. I've agreed to coordinate with the Scourge before landing on ground they hold.”

The shadow beneath Nocturnus's chair spread across the floor. Isyra lifted her feet out of its reach.

“Then hear my position,” Nocturnus said. “Ordan will have my support. My people will help defend the Collective against either of you.”

“And mine will help defend his,” Ordan replied.

There it was. Lucidus had expected the alliance, but hearing Ordan commit to it tightened something beneath her ribs. Attacking Nocturnus would now mean facing the god whose strength lay in bearing what others could not. Ambystos had wanted northern ports. He had just been given another reason to let Slate reach them first.

Isyra laid a hand on Ordan's arm. “I'll stand with you. My sanctuaries will receive the wounded, including those your enemies bring. I won't close

them to someone because of the banner they fought beneath.”

Nocturnus looked ready to object. Ordan answered first.

“I wouldn't ask you to.”

“You may need to tell your commanders that,” Isyra said. “Before someone arrives at a sanctuary with a prisoner they believe I should surrender.”

Ordan nodded. The small concession interested Lucidus. Isyra had asked for something he could actually order, and obtained it without raising her voice.

Kharos had not sat down.

“You've all decided who gets the land,” he said. “What happens when the fighting reaches one of us?”

The forum quieted. Below, a child's hoop struck the foot of a Justicar.

Lucidus understood then why he had answered her. He had not come to argue about the households.

“Ferrun is dead,” Kharos continued. “Silvys is dead. We sit here discussing which harbors are worth taking as though another century is assured to every one of us.”

“What are you asking?” Moraeth said.

“That an attack on a god brings an answer from all of us.”

Nocturnus looked toward Ordan. The proposal would give him more than their alliance had. He could continue the war knowing the other gods had promised to protect him if its consequences reached this court.

Lucidus watched Kharos. “Even if that god started the attack?”

“There are limits mortals shouldn't be allowed to cross.”

“We give them the power,” she said. “We send them into the fighting. You want them stopped when they become dangerous to us. Who stops us before we send them?”

“So you'll let another of us die?”

The question struck harder than she wanted him to see. She remembered the empty chairs before anyone arrived. For a moment she wanted to agree simply to make them less frightening.

“I won't promise to defend someone without knowing what they've done,” Lucidus said. “If you learn of a threat, bring it to us. Tell us who's in danger and why. I'll hear you.”

“After it happens, you'll find a reason to wait.”

“Then tell us what you know now,” Moraeth said.

Kharos looked at her. He had no name to give them. Or none he would share. After a long silence, he pulled out a chair and sat.

Lucidus had gained no ally in him. She had learned what might draw him to Nocturnus, and how easily her own fear might do the same work on her.

Moraeth rested both hands on her staff. “I'm staying out of your war. Ambystos knows he has no passage through my country. That applies to the rest of you as well. I'll continue trading with Ignatum. I'll sell food at my ports. I won't march my people north.”

“You're willing to feed his invasion,” Nocturnus said.

“I'm willing to sell you food too. If you want me to refuse him, you'll have to explain to my farmers who is buying their harvest instead.”

“You heard what Kharos said.”

“I did.” Moraeth's fingers tightened on the wood. “I came because I wanted to know whether anyone here understood why it frightens me. I haven't heard enough to put my people under your command.”

Nocturnus withdrew his hand from the chair. She had seen the attempt clearly. Lucidus wondered whether he had expected fear to make Moraeth less practical.

Thalune raised her pearl. “I've heard promises of safe passage from this room before. Some of those ships never came home. Before anyone asks for mine, I want to know who will honor it.”

“My ports will,” Ambystos said. “For merchant ships. Troop transports negotiate separately.”

“Mine as well,” Lucidus said. “I'll ask Slate about the crossings he controls. Until I have his answer, I can't offer them.”

Thalune turned toward Ordan and Nocturnus. Ordan agreed to receive merchants under terms his people would name. Nocturnus would commit to nothing while the northern coast was threatened.

“Then my captains will know that before they sail,” Thalune said.

“And where will they take their cargo?” Nocturnus demanded.

“Somewhere they can unload it and come home.” She closed her fingers around the pearl. “I'm not joining either army. If you want ships carrying grain into your harbors, give their crews a reason to risk the crossing.”

Lucidus watched Nocturnus look around the court. His alliance was firm, but it hadn't brought Kharos with it, and the neutral gods were asking him for concessions. He had come weakened enough for the sconces to burn through his darkness. Now merchants might turn from his ports as well. Fewer ships meant less food, fewer households able to stay, fewer voices calling his name.

He would know that calculation better than anyone here.

“I'll receive your merchants,” Nocturnus said at last. “Provided they carry no soldiers or arms.”

Thalune inclined her head. “I'll have the terms taken to the ports.”

She tucked the pearl into her sash. Lucidus doubted the same terms would survive every profitable opportunity, but they were more than Thalune had offered when she arrived.

Ordan rose. “Ask Slate about the witness. I want his answer before you describe those hearings as a choice.”

“I will.”

He left with Isyra and Nocturnus. Kharos followed them as far as the columns, then departed through a break in the cloud. Moraeth lingered long enough to ask Thalune about ships for her harvest. Their voices faded together beyond the forum.

Ambystos remained beside his ember arch.

“Have Slate send someone who can negotiate,” he told Lucidus. “I want to know what he expects for a harbor before I provision a fleet.”

“And I'll hear before that fleet leaves?”

“You will.” He glanced at the chairs Kharos and Nocturnus had occupied. “I'd prefer not to give them a cause they can both support.”

He stepped through the fire, leaving her alone with the city.

Lucidus reached for Slate through Communion. His awareness met hers across the mortal world. She told him who had come, then gave him the commitments as they had been spoken. The warning about Kharos took longer. She wanted Slate to understand what he feared before deciding how to use it.

Ordan wants a witness at the hearings, she finished. *Someone who can carry the households' answers back to him.*

He can send one, Slate replied. *Unarmed. No authority to remove anyone. Serena will give them copies of the petitions.*

He'll dispute your right to hold the ground.

I'm sure he will. He can listen to the roof claims while he's there. Several people would like to know which army is paying.

Lucidus felt a reluctant smile pull at her mouth. Slate had no intention of conceding his position, but he understood what a room full of angry petitioners might do to Ordan's certainty.

And Ambystos? she asked.

There was a pause.

If he wants a port, he can tell me which one. If he wants me to take it for him, he can start by telling me what he's bringing.

I've agreed not to support restoring Nocturnus's borders. I haven't promised Ambystos any ground.

Good. I'll speak with his representatives.

She let the connection close. Below, the Justicars had gone on to the next street. The cart rolled toward the market, its owner testing the repaired wheel over every joint in the paving.

Lucidus could maintain this city for as long as she chose. She could keep its people fed, its streets safe, its golden guards patient. In the mortal world, she had secured a witness, an ally's warning, and terms for ships that might still be broken.

She held the difference in mind as she let the first buildings fade. The dragon circled above the emptying streets. Soon she would have to leave the forum too, and return to the people whose prayers had given her the strength to build it.

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A F T E R W O R D

Thank you so much for reading! Writing LitRPG is an incredible journey, and bringing this story to life means the world to me. Because I balance writing with a demanding day job and family life, your support, reviews, and time are the ultimate motivation to keep building these worlds.

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A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

A massive thank you to my Patreon supporters. You are the lifeblood of this series. Your backing allows me to keep pushing limits, and your feedback on the advance EPUB chapters has been invaluable in keeping this massive pipeline moving forward on schedule. This story belongs to you as much as it does to me.

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R E A D O N : B R E A C H

The wagon moved another inch, and the woman beneath it began to scream.

Don't pull, Slate sent.

The bronze Initiate on the road stopped hauling. Below him, a rope hummed against the wagon's side. One rear wheel hung over the stream, turning slowly above the brown water. A man on the opposite bank raised a crossbow toward the Initiate's exposed back.

Slate swept down over the water. His tail took the man through the chest before he fired.

He pulled the blade free and kicked the crossbow into the water. Someone shouted behind him. Slate beat his wings, crossed to the wagon bank and dropped behind the low stone wall beside the road. Brace was already dragging a second Initiate out of the line of fire.

“How many?” Slate asked.

“Six I've seen. More in the trees.”

A quarrel struck the wall between them. Slate looked over its broken top.

The road west of Bastion crossed the stream on a squat stone culvert, then climbed through an orchard. Three wagons had reached the crossing. The first stood crooked across it with a shattered front wheel. The second carried roof beams, their pale ends jutting above a huddle of people. The third had been dragged down a loading track on the near bank. Whoever had taken it that far had intended to cross at the shallow ford below the culvert.

Now it leaned over the water, its weight caught between the track's crumbling edge and the rope in the Initiate's hands. The mill fittings lashed in its bed would make a splendid anchor when it fell.

The team had torn free of its traces. One animal stood trembling against the timber wagon; the other lay in the ford, with water folding around its neck. A split sack of meal had spread a white fan across the crossing. Slate could follow the hoofprints through it to the broken wheel.

Slate had seen those fittings leave Bastion yesterday. A new drive shaft, iron bands and enough tools to put a mill back to work. He had approved the expense after listening to two farmers explain what carrying grain to the next district cost them. They'd argued over the proposed levy for considerably longer than it had taken him to decide the mill was useful.

The road had been pleasant when he'd passed it that morning. Low branches reached across the orchard wall, trained there by someone who had expected to keep harvesting them. Between the trunks, straight little channels carried water into dark circles of earth. The culvert's downstream stones wore long green beards that trembled in the current. A bench stood beneath a roadside sun carved from white limestone, its seat polished by generations of people who'd found a reason to sit down before the climb.

He'd noticed the new shingles stacked beside the mill's roofless walls. Someone had swept the yard already. It seemed a small thing to do before a building had a roof, but the people waiting for these wagons had made room for them.

“Leave the chest!” a man shouted behind the timber wagon.

“It's got our papers!” another voice answered.

“Then take the papers!”

Slate had come out to inspect repairs farther along the road. A frightened escort's warning through the Scourgemind had brought him back at a run, with Brace and four members of his guard behind him. The convoy had nearly reached the ground his patrol had just crossed.

He disliked that part.

Who can see below the ford?

Neither Initiate could. One was holding the rope; the other had been trying to brace the broken wheel on the upper wagon. His right hand hung crookedly against his chest. He sent Slate an impression of a crossbowman running through the orchard with a sack over his shoulder.

An obliging target. Too obliging.

“They haven't opened the grain,” Brace said.

“What?”

“Beside the first wagon. Three full sacks. The one carrying a bag keeps looking back at our escort.”

Slate watched the man retreat between the trees. He stopped where he could still see the crossing. Beyond him, another head lifted above a ditch, then vanished when the Initiate on the rope shifted.

They were waiting for the escort to chase.

Stay with the wagons, Slate told the two bronze soldiers. *Brace has command here.*

To the nearest of his guards, he sent, *Take the wall south. See the ford before you cross it.*

The Raider lowered himself behind the stones and moved. Slate waited for his report. From the road, the reeds hid most of the lower bank.

Above the orchard, a branch shook.

Slate looked up. A crossbowman lay along the fork of a tree with his weapon pointing into the open space above the road. Farther south, another waited among the pale leaves of a willow. Neither was aiming at the wagons.

Someone had allowed for flying Scourge.

Below the track, the trapped woman cried out again.

Found them, the Raider sent. *Far bank. Men behind the willow roots. A Vallyr with them.*

He passed an image: pale face, dark coat, a gloved hand pointing toward the culvert. A second Vallyr stood farther back with violet light gathering between his hands. Beside him, a human in a leather cap held a satchel tight beneath one arm.

Slate measured the gap between the two watching crossbowmen.

Brace. They'll come up from the ford when you move toward the orchard, Slate sent.

I can give them something to look at, Brace replied.

Brace took the rope from the Initiate and passed it to two guards behind the wall. Then he pulled the bronze soldier down beside his injured partner.

“Get everyone behind the timber. Keep them off the crossing.”

“My sister's down there,” the Initiate said aloud.

“Then stop giving them another person to shoot.” Brace pushed him toward the wagon. “Go.”

Slate watched him obey. Brace climbed over the wall and advanced toward the orchard, showing the men in the ditch his broad red back. Behind the timber, the Initiates drew the last of the families out of the open.

Slate opened his wings.

He launched east, away from the orchard.

The man in the fork followed him with his crossbow. Slate saw the weapon swing, climbed and banked back over the culvert. He turned south along the stream, with open water below him and the willow ahead on the far bank. Beyond its roots, the caster looked up.

There. An open patch behind the roots, barely wide enough for a landing. Slate could reach it before a man on foot crossed the ford.

The first quarrel struck his Scourgeshield.

Pale light flared along his shoulder. He felt the impact through the ward and a familiar draw on his mana. The second passed under his wing. Then the caster thrust both hands forward.

A violet bolt hit Slate across the chest.

His shield caught it. The force still turned him sideways. For an instant he was flying toward the willow instead of past it, one wing angled into a tangle of branches that would happily do the crossbowmen's work for them.

Slate swept his tail the other way and beat down with his outer wing. The correction brought him clear, but left him coming in too steeply.

He folded and hit the bank on his feet and one hand. Mud burst beneath his claws. His momentum carried him into the first spearman, who made the mistake of trying to hold his ground.

The shaft snapped against Slate's forearm. Slate caught the man's collar and drove him backward into the willow roots. Something broke with a wet crack.

Coming up the track, Brace sent.

Slate rose as a swordsman lunged around the tree. Steel rasped over his scales. He trapped the arm, pulled its owner across his path and shoved him into the caster's next working.

Violet light burst against the man's back. He screamed. Slate let him fall and went through the space he'd made.

The caster was a Vallyr, long fangs bared over a lower lip wet with blood. He stepped backward with surprising speed. One hand reached for the willow; the other turned toward Slate.

Slate's tail struck the wrist before he could finish.

Blood sprayed across the bark. The Vallyr tried to wrench free, but Slate had already hooked the blade behind his forearm. He pulled him close, caught his jaw with his free hand and drove his claws beneath it.

The caster's last effort lit the inside of his mouth purple.

Slate tore his hand sideways.

The light went out. Blood ran warm between his fingers, and the System's notice appeared at the edge of his attention. He dismissed it. He could count the reward when the bank was clear.

The man with the satchel ran.

Slate sent a narrow stream of Cleansing Fire across the ground ahead of him. White flame struck the reeds. The carrier recoiled, turned toward the water and found Slate already between him and the ford.

“Down.”

He dropped the satchel and raised both hands.

Behind Slate, the swordsman was still moving. He struggled onto an elbow, the back of his coat smoking, and reached for the fallen spearhead.

Slate's tail crossed his throat.

Two above the road, he sent to the guard still behind the wall. *One in the orchard fork. One in the willow south of it. They've both fired.*

The Raider answered and moved. Slate didn't watch him go. The officer in the dark coat was splashing across the ford toward the lower wagon.

On the near bank, Brace met the rush coming up the loading track. His shoulder drove into a shield, lifting its bearer off the ground. A second man thrust for the gap beneath Brace's arm. The Raider turned far enough to take the point along his side instead, caught the shaft and hauled.

The man came with it. Brace put him under the feet of the attacker behind him.

At the timber wagon, the two Initiates kept the families low. The one with the injured hand braced a shoulder against the load. His companion ducked a sword, caught the attacker's ankle and dragged him beneath the projecting beams. There was a scream and a flash of bronze claws.

Then the officer shouted something from below.

The surviving attackers broke away from Brace. One fell in the shallows. Another threw down his shield and climbed the opposite bank, leaving his companion to fight alone.

The officer wasn't interested in saving him.

One of the retreating men handed him a burning brand. Slate saw him press it into the loose straw under the mill wagon. Dry packing flared. The woman beneath it began hammering on the boards above her head.

The Vallyr looked directly at Slate before he threw the brand into the wagon bed.

Then he jumped back into the ford, crossed to Slate's bank and ran south beneath the trees.

Slate could catch him.

The officer had chosen the trees, which would force Slate to land, but he wasn't fast enough. Two wingbeats down the stream, a climb over the reeds, and Slate could put himself in front of him.

The back is going, Brace sent.

One of the guards on the rope slid a full pace toward the bank. Earth came away beneath the wagon's hanging wheel. From under the bed came a short, muffled sound, worse than the screaming had been.

Slate looked at the fleeing officer. Killing him would recover nothing he had already taken. Behind Slate lay a living clerk and a satchel. In the wagon lay equipment he would have to manufacture again, people who might still be useful, and a very public test of what his protection was worth.

He turned back toward the ford.

Follow him, he told the Raider who had spotted the enemy position. *Stay on this bank until you're clear of the wagons. Watch his route. Don't fight him, and don't follow out of contact.*

The soldier acknowledged. Slate seized the satchel and shoved the carrier flat behind the willow roots.

“Move, and I'll come back.”

He didn't stay to see whether the man believed him.

Slate crossed the shallow water at a run. Smoke rolled from the wagon bed. A man with a hatchet waited beside it, looking from Brace to the taut rope above him. He had enough sense to see what cutting it would accomplish.

He raised the hatchet.

Slate hit him before it fell.

They struck the side of the wagon together. Slate's claws opened the man's belly. He shoved the body clear, put one shoulder against the rear corner and felt the whole load shift toward him.

“Not there!” Brace shouted.

Slate stopped pushing.

“The axle's caught her. Lift that corner and it turns over.” Brace pointed with his chin. “Hold it where it is.”

Slate set his feet in the streambed and pressed upward just enough to take the strain. Water pushed against his ankles. Above him, the wagon creaked around its iron load.

He could smell burning cloth now.

Brace slid down the loading track with a second rope looped over his shoulder. He passed it around the wagon's uphill frame and threw the free end toward a stump beside the track.

“Around that. Twice. Keep it low.”

One guard caught it. The other stayed on the first line. Behind them, the Initiate with the uninjured hands started down the slope.

“Garin,” the trapped woman gasped. “Don't get under it.”

He stopped so abruptly that his claws tore furrows in the bank.

“Listen to her,” Slate said. “Get the burning things out of the bed.”

The Initiate climbed onto the upper side, teeth bared at the heat. He hooked a blanket with his claws and threw it into the stream. Sparks hissed around Slate's legs. A wooden crate followed. Then another.

“Those are her tools!” Brace called.

“They're on fire!” Garin shouted back.

“Throw them uphill,” Brace ordered.

Garin changed his grip. The next crate landed on the track and burst open, spilling iron punches across the mud.

Slate shifted his shoulder beneath the frame. The corner bit into the scales over his back. He had plenty of strength to move this thing and very little room to use it. The wagon was a lever, its load was off-center, and somewhere beneath it a woman's leg occupied the space he needed.

“How far?” he asked.

Brace lay on his side, head level with the axle.

“Her skirt's wound around the hub. Foot's under the rim.”

“Cut the skirt.”

“She's trying to.”

Slate bent far enough to see beneath the boards. The woman had a small knife in her hand. Her forearm shook as she sawed at the cloth. Beside her, an older man lay face down in the mud. He wasn't moving.

“Give it here,” Brace told her.

“I can—”

“I know. I can reach it.”

She passed him the knife.

The uphill rope tightened around the stump. Slate felt some of the weight leave his shoulder. He moved one foot, tested the purchase, then reached beneath the frame with his right hand.

“I'm lifting the rim. Pull her straight back.”

Brace put his arm around the woman's waist.

Slate lifted.

The wheel rose a finger's breadth. Pain flared along his back as the broken frame slipped against him. He forced it higher. For a moment all he could hear was the wet sucking of mud and the woman dragging air through her teeth.

Then Brace slid backward with her in his arms.

“Clear.”

Slate let the wheel down carefully. The cut hem of her skirt remained wound around the hub.

Above him, Garin started toward his sister.

Stay on the load, Slate sent. *She's out. We aren't finished.*

The Initiate stopped. Slate felt the effort that obedience cost him, then the firm acknowledgment.

With the woman clear, they could finally work on the wagon. Brace kept the upper line low while Slate moved behind the axle. Garin levered the iron shaft toward the middle of the bed. Two guards hauled from the track, their feet digging into old wheel ruts.

Slate pushed.

The wagon rose, hung on the bank's broken lip, then lurched onto firmer ground. One of the ropes snapped. The free end lashed through the reeds where Brace had been standing before he moved to the stump.

The second line held.

Slate drove the wagon uphill until its wheels settled into the loading track. Then he stepped away, breathing hard, and pulled a splinter out from between the scales of his shoulder.

The mill shaft lay in the bed, blackened but intact. Beneath it, packing still smoldered.

“Unload it,” he said. “Before someone decides we've saved it.”

They brought the dead man out after the wagon was secured.

His name was Halen. He had driven the rear cart, and he had gone under it when the attackers pulled the team down the track. Garin's sister told Slate that while a guard bound her foot. She kept looking toward the body, then away, as if each glance might give her a different answer.

Slate asked who else was missing.

One escort lay dead beside the broken lead wheel. A second driver had been carried off before Slate arrived. The survivors had seen him taken through the orchard. There was blood on the seat where he'd been sitting.

Two dead, one captive. Garin's sister had a damaged foot, the other Initiate's hand hung crookedly, and Brace's side would need attention. The mill's bearings had survived. Its lifting frame had burned, along with bedding, clothes and most of the food packed around it.

The road would remain closed to carts until someone replaced the wheel on the culvert.

Garin knelt in the mud collecting the scattered tools. He had set a small chisel beside his sister, handle first. She picked it up, cleaned it on what remained of her skirt and asked him to find the others.

“Your name?” Slate asked her.

“Nessa.” She looked at his hand. He was still holding the knife Brace had passed back to him. “That's mine.”

He gave it to her.

“Can someone else set the shaft while your foot heals?”

“My husband can. He'll be at the mill.” She closed the knife, then opened it again to check the tip. “He'll come if you send word.”

“We'll send him with the repair cart.”

Nessa nodded, holding the little knife across her lap. Beside her, Garin had begun laying the tools in rows on a surviving scrap of blanket. He used his claws to tease mud out of a file, concentrating on it with the same ferocity he'd brought to the man under the timber wagon.

Slate checked the System's record.

> XP gained: 2,400
> XP available: 11,800
> LVL: 35
> Next LVL investment: 17,500

The developed caster had provided most of it. Slate closed the record without spending anything. His back needed repair and his mana needed time. The reward would still leave him short of his next level, and he had other uses to consider before committing it all to one.

Brace brought the satchel's owner over by the upper arm. The man stared at Slate's bloodied hand.

“You carried the orders?” Slate asked.

“Tallies.”

“For whom?”

The man hesitated. Slate opened the satchel himself.

The story continues in Breach.

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