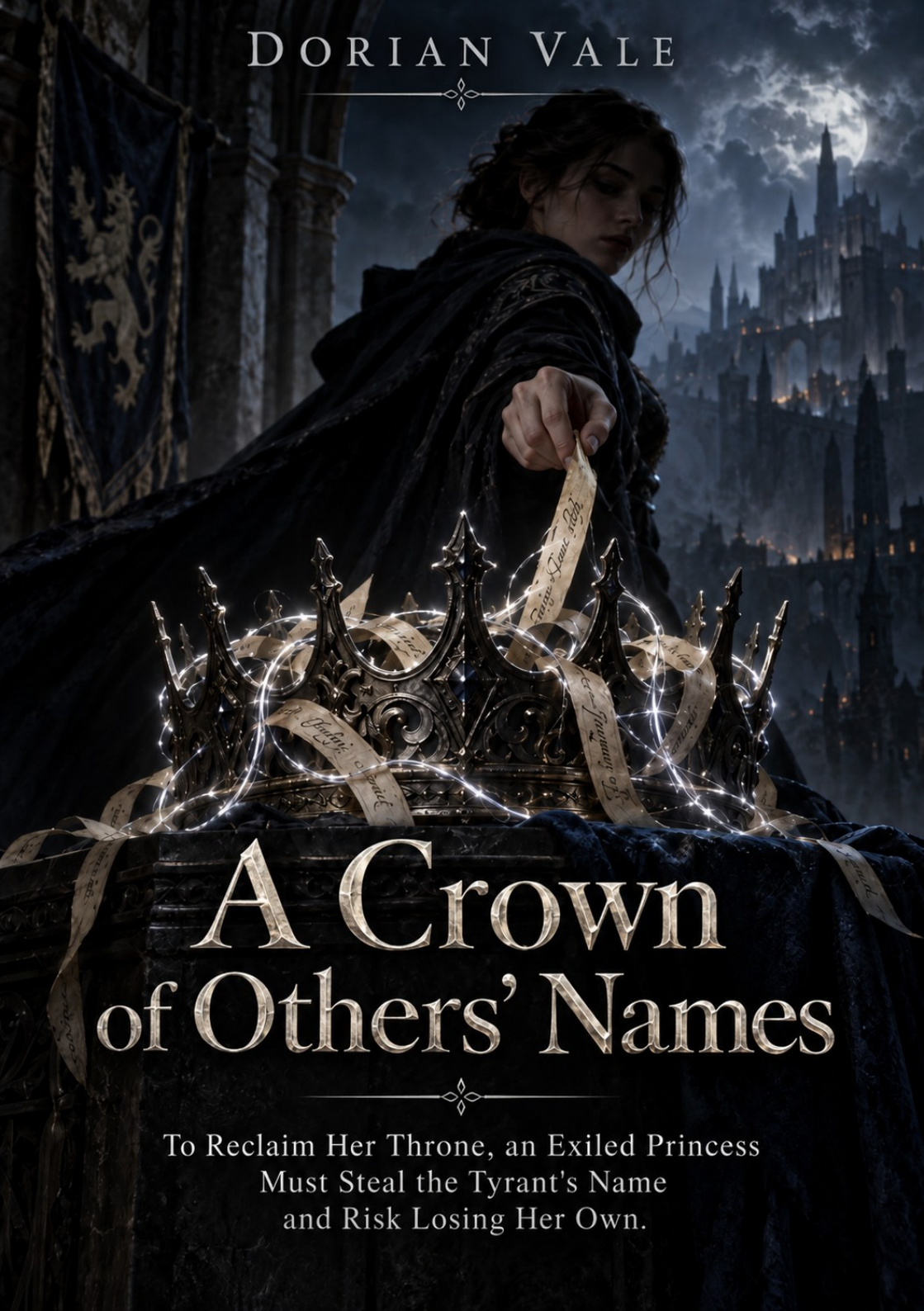




DORIAN VALE

A Crown of Others' Names

To Reclaim Her Throne, an Exiled Princess
Must Steal the Tyrant's Name
and Risk Losing Her Own.

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Dorian Vale

FANTASY

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INTRO

Nera was supposed to pay for another woman's name with a memory, but the woman across the table demanded another six silver coins.

- Two now. Four when you give it back.

She placed one hand on the tabletop without removing her glove. Dried flour clung between her fingers. Nera looked at her thumb, crooked from a badly healed break, and at the neatly patched cuff of her sleeve. She had expected a smuggler or a thief dealing in cemetery records. This woman looked as though someone had dragged her away from kneading dough. The room above the landing smelled of tallow; water slapped beneath the floorboards, and through a crack in the shutter Nera could see the lantern beside the city gate. Beyond it lay Talren.

Seven years of exile had narrowed to the width of a river.

- Rud said three silver pieces - Nera said.

- Rud won't be nobody for an entire night.

The old man sat beside the stove, warming a silver needle. He did not deny it. Ever since they had reached the landing, he had spoken to Nera over his shoulder, as though she might still abandon the plan if he refused to look her in the face. He had taught her how to remove bindings for five winters. He had let her unravel expired oaths, open locks belonging to the dead, and find false joins in silver. Until tonight, he had never allowed her to touch a living name.

Nera counted out two coins. They were warm from her body; she had carried them in a hidden pocket sewn beside her ribs. The remaining four were everything she had left for

the crossing, a bed for the night, and the search for the man who had once kept the royal birth registers.

- I'll return them before dawn.

- The name too.

The woman pulled off her glove. A narrow silver ring encircled her finger, cut in two places and repaired with darker metal. Rud moved his stool closer, inspected the joins through a small lens, then reached for the purse.

Nera pressed it to the table.

- The oaths first. I want to know what I'll be taking with it.

- Flour deliveries to the castle bakery. Debt to the miller. Service to the king.

The last words sounded as ordinary as the others. Nera felt her jaw tighten. The man who had ordered her father dragged from the council chamber had spent seven years hearing that title from bakers, boatmen, and women who patched their own sleeves.

But this was exactly the kind of name she needed: living, recorded in the city, and legally permitted to pass through the gate.

Her own name was enough to raise a scaffold.

- What kind of service?

- Delivery when summoned. Castle orders come first. Obedience to the guard. Don't bother looking for someone without the last one. They haven't been letting those people in since winter.

Rud finally looked at Nera.

He did not need to remind her that a borrowed name would not change her face. It merely made sworn objects

recognize the new bearer as the owner: the gate, castle doors, guards' rings. If any living person recognized the exiled king's daughter, no silver would deceive them.

She had been twenty-one when she fled the city. Seven more years had changed her less than she needed them to.

She gathered her hair at the nape of her neck and tucked it deeper beneath her scarf.

- Let's do it.

The woman introduced herself as Istra. She spoke the name while touching her ring, and Rud slid the heated needle beneath one of the dark joins.

Nera offered her left hand.

The prick itself was small. Worse was the moment when the old man joined her blood to the silver.

Something moved beneath her skin, as though someone were drawing a thread, impossibly fine, from her finger toward her elbow.

Istra clenched her teeth.

The shine slowly faded from her ring.

- Don't choose something you can merely describe - Rud muttered. - Choose something you can still live through. Otherwise it will choose for you.

Nera had prepared a night from the palace kitchens.

She had turned twelve that day, escaped her arithmetic tutor, and eaten hot plums straight from a saucepan. Her mother had found her beneath the table, but instead of pulling her out, she had lowered herself onto the floor beside her.

Nera remembered the cook's astonishment. Sticky fingers. Warmth against her hip.

Throughout her exile, she had returned to that moment whenever she needed to believe there had once been a home waiting for her beyond the throne.

She chose it because she thought it would be enough.

Rud twisted the needle.

For an instant Nera saw unfamiliar hands pouring flour into a kneading trough. She knew without thinking that the left handle was loose and should never be pulled.

Then came a certainty far deeper than any image.

She was Istra.

She was late with a delivery.

The miller would overcharge her again.

Nera jerked her hand back, but Rud held her wrist.

- Your name.

- Nera.

- All of it.

She hesitated in front of the stranger.

The thread tightened all the way to her armpit.

- Nera Sarn.

Istra raised her head.

Her gaze moved from Nera's face to the scarf hiding her hair.

Then the woman's ring went completely dull, and a thin silver arc appeared beneath Nera's skin.

Rud withdrew the needle.

The entire transfer had taken less time than pouring a cup of water.

Nera tried to remember the plums.

She knew they had existed. She knew why she had been thinking about them only moments ago.

But she could no longer find the kitchen.

Her mother's face.

Her own laughter.

Only the information remained, as distant and impersonal as the date of some forgotten battle.

She pressed her fingernails into the tabletop.

Rud pretended to clean his tools.

- When I return the name...

- No.

She did not ask again.

The woman across from her moved her lips soundlessly.

She was trying to introduce herself.

Terror appeared on her face now, though it had not been there when the needle pierced her skin.

Nera took out the remaining four silver pieces and pushed them across the table with the purse.

- Before dawn - she repeated.

Rud put away the needle, then hung a small pouch of coarse salt around Nera's neck. Rubbing it into the puncture would sever the connection. The name would return to its owner, but every nearby seal would hear the break.

At the gate, that meant falling portcullises and an alarm.

Nera tucked the pouch beneath her shirt, beside the place where the coins had been.

On her way down to the landing, she looked back once.

Istra was holding the money.

But she was staring at the empty ring.

Rud paid the boatman. Nera stood at the bow and watched the walls approach, searching for the window of her old chamber.

She could not find it in the darkness.

Higher up, above the rooftops, lights burned in the castle where Hadran kept the first record of his own name.

That was the record she intended to find.

Without it, he remained master of every sworn gate and every sworn person.

With it in her hands, he might lose his crown before anyone had time to draw a sword.

At the entrance to the city, the guard raised an iron ring.

- Name?

- Istra.

The metal heated to red.

The portcullis behind him shuddered and began to rise.

Nera took one step forward, but the guard stopped her with the shaft of his spear.

- New order for castle suppliers.

He touched the ring to the silver arc on her hand.

A sting answered beneath her skin.

- By order of King Hadran: if you know the whereabouts of Nera Sarn, you are to point them out.

Nera pressed her lips together.

Her left hand rose against her will.

Her extended finger slowly turned toward her own chest.

Chapter 1 - The Name Left at the Gate

Her finger touched the wool over her breastbone. Nera caught her left wrist with her right hand, but all she managed to do was press it harder against her chest. The guard looked at the movement, then at her face. He had not recognized her yet. What appeared in his eyes was irritation rather than suspicion - the annoyance of a man whose final hour on duty had just become more complicated. Behind him, the portcullis was still rising. Beyond it, in the light of two lamps, a handcart loaded with sacks waited to pass. The man at the shafts leaned forward, judging whether there was enough room yet.

- What are you pointing at?

Nera released her wrist. Her left hand remained against her heart, obedient to the order laid upon the borrowed name. With her right, she slipped two fingers beneath her collar and dragged out the pouch. The cord refused to loosen. She bit through it, tasting salt where it had seeped through the cloth.

The guard saw the white crystals.

- Hands where I can see them.

Her right hand began to move away from her throat. The command was simple; Istra's name did not need to understand it any better than the previous one. Nera twisted as though shielding her hands from the wind and forced the torn pouch between her extended finger and the needle puncture. Salt scattered across her shirt. Several grains entered the wound.

Pain shot up her arm and into her jaw.

At the same instant, she drove her full weight against the shaft of the guard's spear. She did not try to take the weapon. He was heavier and braced for a struggle; he hauled the shaft toward himself, and she moved with it, crashing her shoulder beneath his elbow. The heel of his hand struck her temple.

The world tilted.

For an instant all she saw was wet stone.

She rubbed salt into the puncture before he could catch her by the throat.

The silver beneath her skin broke apart into pale points. Her hand opened by itself, free of compulsion.

A bell rang above them, so close and so loud that for several heartbeats she heard nothing else.

The portcullis stopped rising.

The man with the cart shouted. Instead of backing away, he yanked the load forward, trying to make the landing before the gate closed. One wheel dropped into a rut directly beneath the iron teeth.

The guard turned his head.

That was enough.

Nera tore the edge of her scarf free from his grasp and lunged toward the gap beside the sacks. She went down on one knee, caught herself with her right hand, and squeezed beneath the cart's side rail.

The portcullis slammed into the shafts.

Wood split.

The cart lurched sideways, and one of the iron teeth tore through her sleeve and into the skin of her forearm. The pull

stopped her for a second. She jerked her elbow backward, leaving a strip of cloth behind, and rolled onto the cobbles inside the city.

A sack dropped beside her head.

Flour burst into the lamplight.

- That woman! Istra! Stop her!

Nera got to her feet, struck her hip against the corner of another cart waiting beyond the gate, and ran along the wall.

She had no more than a dozen paces of advantage.

Deeper inside the passage, someone was dragging an injured porter out of the way while another man tried to lever up the jammed portcullis. The guard outside could not follow her, but two more appeared by the watchroom.

She heard another order to stop.

This time she felt nothing but fear.

The first alley ended at a locked warehouse. She saw the chain between two posts and turned before trapping herself in a dead end. Beside the next house, stairs climbed over the entrance to a cellar. She dropped to hands and knees and crawled beneath them into darkness smelling of damp wood and cabbage.

She pressed her face against her sleeve.

Footsteps passed.

Stopped.

Returned.

Through a gap between the steps she saw boots, then the red reflection of a lamp sliding across a blade.

Nera waited until her neck began to ache.

The guard checked the locked cellar door beside her hiding place, shook the handle, then moved on, calling to his companion to cover the stairs leading to the upper market.

Only when the lamps disappeared around the corner did she allow herself to breathe.

The torn salt pouch was still clenched in her left hand.

A little remained inside, wet with blood.

She no longer had the right to enter the city, although she was standing in the middle of it.

For a moment she mapped the route back to Rud in her head.

Beyond the gate lay the landing, then the river, then the upstairs room where the woman she had borrowed the name from should now be getting it back.

Nera imagined Istra's relief.

Then she heard the cry for Istra repeated somewhere near the gate.

The name left behind there belonged to the baker, not to an exiled princess.

The guards did not need to understand the craft of transferred names to go looking for the woman whose ring had carried the connection.

Rud will understand the bells, Nera thought. He'll get her out.

She repeated it once more, with less certainty.

During the years of exile, the old man had always known when a job needed to be abandoned, when the fire should be smothered and the back door used. But this time he might be waiting for her. Without seeing her, he would not know

whether she had escaped or was lying beneath the portcullis.

Nera tore the damaged sleeve with her right hand and her teeth. She wrapped the strip around her forearm and pressed the folded cloth against the cut.

The wound burned whenever she bent her elbow, but her fingers moved, and she could feel no hard displaced edge of bone beneath the skin. Moisture ran down her temple. She wiped it away and checked her fingertips.

Only sweat.

She could not remain beneath the stairs until dawn.

When the bell finally stopped, she crawled out.

From the landing came the sound of hammers. Someone was trying to free the trapped cart. There was something almost reassuring in the ordinary necessity of it. Even after an alarm, someone still had to clear the gate, gather the spilled flour, count the ruined sacks.

Nera adjusted her scarf, tucking the frayed edge beneath her chin, and started uphill with her injured arm held close to her body.

She remembered Talren from horseback or from behind carriage curtains. In those days every street led somewhere people were waiting for her. Now she recognized a window or a stone corner only after she had passed it and had to retrace her own steps.

At the old market well, someone had built a wooden shelter.

Barrels stood beneath it, each sealed with a sworn metal band. A woman with an empty jug sat on the step. Nera was about to ask for directions when she noticed a metal plaque

hanging from a cord: water would not be dispensed until the first morning bell.

She walked on.

Salt lingered on her lips, and she did not want to discover what thirst might persuade her to do.

Outside an inn, two men were discussing the alarm. One had heard there was a smuggler. The other claimed someone had stolen a military seal. Nera slowed, hoping to hear something about river traffic.

The innkeeper standing in the doorway looked at her torn sleeve, then at her face.

- Looking for a room or water?
- I need to send a message across the river.
- Now?

He held out his hand without answering.

It took her a moment to understand.

She reached instinctively toward the empty pocket beside her ribs.

The man withdrew his hand.

- Come to the landing in the morning. Maybe one of the boatmen will carry it out of pity.

She wanted to tell him she would pay later.

Among the people she had belonged to during the first twenty-one years of her life, that sentence would have ended the discussion. Here she would still have had to explain why anyone should believe her.

She left before the innkeeper could study the blood again.

It took her less than half an hour to reach the Old Steps. They rose behind the tanners' market, narrow and cracked

near the drains. At the entrance she had to grip the railing. Bright spots drifted across her vision again.

A window opened in the house opposite, and someone threw out a basin of water without looking below. Nera moved her foot back before the splash reached her.

For one ridiculous instant she wanted to call out a warning the way a servant walking ahead of her once would have done.

The thought filled her with disgust.

She had returned to take the city from Hadran, yet she still moved through it as if other people were supposed to clear obstacles from beneath her feet.

On the second landing she passed a sleeping man. He had tied an empty basket to his wrist so no one could steal it. The most carefully protected part of his entire body was the hand that wore his ring. He had wrapped it in cloth and tucked it beneath his cheek.

Nera looked away, but the image stayed with her as she climbed to the third landing.

During her training she had imagined stealing a name as opening a heavily guarded lock.

Not as bending over a man who had pledged his own life as the key.

She recognized the house she wanted by the stone planter beneath the window. It was still there, though instead of a shrub it now held wooden slats weighing down wet cords.

A bookbinder's sign hung above the door.

Someone had painted over the former owner's name so carelessly that the last two letters could still be read beneath the new paint.

Oren had lived here when he kept the royal birth registers.

Rud had promised only that he had survived the coup.

Nera was the one who had assumed that a man tied to the same house for three decades would have no reason to leave it.

Now she saw the marks of an official seizure seal on the doorframe and understood how foolish that assumption had been.

She knocked anyway.

Light moved behind the door.

A small hatch slid open at eye level.

- Workshop's closed.

The voice belonged to a young woman.

- I'm looking for Oren.

- Why?

- He knew my father.

- Did a lot of people know your father?

Nera put her good hand against the stone to hide the trembling in her fingers.

A single lamp burned behind the woman, too weak to reveal her face.

- I need the man who kept the registers before Hadran. I'm not asking for a free repair.

- Good. We don't work free either.

The hatch began to close.

- Rud taught me how to remove bindings.

The woman froze.

She turned her head and said something into the house. Nera could not make out the reply.

After a long moment the lock scraped.

The door opened the width of a hand, and a man appeared in the gap with a leather apron thrown over one shoulder. He had much less hair than Nera remembered and red-rimmed eyes. He held the lamp low, shielding the flame with one hand.

- Rud doesn't send apprentices after dark.

- This time he couldn't stop me.

He raised the lamp.

Nera recognized the instant he truly saw her.

The hand holding the light moved back several inches.

He did not bow.

He did not say her name.

- Go away.

- I didn't bring the guard with me.

- You can't know that.

He did not raise his voice, yet she looked down the steps.

The route she had taken disappeared around a bend.

Only then did it occur to her that this house might be the last thing the man had managed not to lose after the coup.

He had no obligation to sacrifice it merely because she had lost more.

- The guard is looking for the woman whose name I borrowed. I need help.

- And her?
- She has her name back.
- That wasn't my question. Where is she?

Nera gave him the name of the landing and described the room above it.

Oren looked at the blood, the torn sleeve, then over her shoulder.

He pulled her inside so abruptly that her injured arm struck the doorframe.

The woman shut the door and dropped a horizontal bar into place.

- Tesa, water. The boiled one.
- I know which one.

There was no servility in her reply.

She walked past Nera and took the lamp, and only then did Nera realize she was no girl. She was around thirty, with glue stains on her apron. A section of hair was missing near her right ear, as if she had cut it away in haste when it got in the way of work.

Her gaze paused on Nera's face, but she asked nothing.

Oren seated Nera on a bench beside the book press. Stacks of covers without pages filled the shelves, and sheets of parchment dried on frames against the wall.

Nera saw no royal registers.

As a child, she had thought of Oren as a man who could find anything provided someone had once written it down clearly enough.

Now he seemed to spend most of his time repairing things that paid very little.

- Rud stayed on the other side? - he asked.

Nera nodded.

- Then he was already packing his tools when the bell rang. If that woman let him move her, she won't still be in the room.

- They need to know the guard is looking for Istra.

Oren took a thin cord with three wooden discs from a hook beside the door and pulled the middle one.

A faint bell rang somewhere beyond the wall.

- The neighbor carries messages for the guild. He knows a man at the lower ferry.

- I don't have any money.

- I noticed.

Tesa brought a bowl and strips of clean cloth. Before touching Nera's arm, she rolled back the sleeve and inspected the cut carefully.

She did not offer comfort.

She only said the flour had to be washed out or the wound would fester.

Nera clenched her teeth when water ran over the raw skin.

- Thank you, Tesa.

The woman's movement stopped.

She looked at her father.

- Is that your name? - Nera asked carefully.

- That's what people call me.

- But...

- I know the question. No, I can't say it myself.

There was no ring on her left hand.

Only a pale band and two small scars on either side of the finger.

Nera recognized the spacing between them.

That was where the needle went when a removal began.

Istra's silver had been repaired in the same places.

- Who carries it?

Tesa tied off the bandage.

- I don't know.

Oren took a scrap of paper from a drawer and wrote a message. He did not use Nera's name. He included the place Rud should take Istra from, a warning about the guards, and the workshop address.

When someone knocked twice on the side wall, Oren went into the entryway.

Nera heard coins, a quiet argument about the closed crossings, then finally the bolt sliding from the rear door.

Tesa checked the bandage to make sure it was not too tight.

- I can't pay you for this - Nera said.

- Father already paid. All I need from you is not to move that arm.

Oren returned empty-handed.

The message had gone out, but no one had promised him it would find Rud before dawn.

Nera accepted that without protest.

He had earned the right to tell her the less comforting truth, especially after what he had just done.

- You're looking for an old register - he said. - Which one?

- Hadran's first record.

Oren set down his pen.

- I don't have it.

- I know he keeps it in the castle. I need a route to the repository. Someone who knows the security layout, the guards' permissions. I didn't come back to raise an army.

- You came back to take his name.

- It will be enough if he loses control over them. After that I'll show myself to the council.

She had repeated that plan for years, beside a cold stove and while working. It always sounded reasonable when she was not standing beside someone who could not introduce herself.

Now she noticed that Tesa had stopped rolling the used cloth.

- Enough - Oren repeated.

He reached behind a parchment frame and pulled out a long, flat box. The lid bore the mark of the old Crown, the same sign used to seal decrees under Nera's father.

Oren placed the box in front of her but kept both hands on it.

- First you'll see what it is you actually intend to take.

Chapter 2 - The Space Where a Person Should Be

The box had no keyhole.

Two silver clasps held the lid shut, and between them, in a shallow depression, lay the impression of a seal. Nera tilted the lamp closer. Beneath the brown wax she could see thin metal fibers spread unevenly like the roots of an uprooted plant.

One of them bore the worn mark of an official ring.

Oren had tried to open the box many times, always in the same lawful way.

- They took my office seal - he said when he saw what she was studying. - An ordinary ring isn't enough.

- You could have cut through the wood.

- And found blank pages. The record is bound under the same seal.

Nera moved a finger over the wax without touching it.

There was none of the faint trembling she felt near a living connection. The closing command remained, but the man who had been its source could no longer sustain it.

Oren noticed her hesitation.

Nera lowered her gaze.

As long as she thought of her father as the murdered king, she saw the council chamber and the men dragging him away.

Here his death meant something else.

A weakness in the lock.

Something she could exploit.

- This isn't Hadran's first record - Oren warned her. - It's the ledger of matters I handed over to my successor. I kept an authenticated copy.

- Why?

- Because I expected that one day he would claim I hadn't given him everything.

Tesa placed a tool box beside Nera's right hand. Inside lay needles, awls, and narrow knives used for trimming parchment.

Nera selected the finest needle and examined the point in the lamplight.

It would do.

She lacked Rud's small pincers, but Oren found a pair of narrow pliers normally used for stitching thick bindings. She set them on her right.

Her left hand could do little more than steady the lid.

- Can you do this? - Tesa asked.

- Yes.

- With that arm?

Nera turned the box.

- Hold it here. Not near the silver.

She warmed the wax over the lamp just enough to soften the edge.

A dead command did not have to be displaced with the full weight of another person's life, but someone still had to pay for altering it.

She summoned a small memory, the sort she had surrendered during training.

A summer morning outside Rud's cottage.

A bowl of blackberries set on an overturned bucket.

One had been sour. The rest were warm from the sun.

She knew how much a weak seal like this should cost.

There was no reason to reach deeper.

She pricked her right thumb.

A drop of blood stayed on the needle.

She slid the point beneath the thinnest metal fiber.

The silver answered with a pale glow.

Nera waited until she could taste berries in her mouth, then turned the needle.

When the taste vanished, the clasp lifted with a quiet snap.

Tesa let go of the lid.

- What did it take?

- A morning.

- All of it?

- That one.

Nera could no longer say whether she had sat on the bucket or beside it.

The fact remained: Rud had given her blackberries.

She withdrew the needle and wrapped the punctured thumb in a scrap of cloth.

It was not much to lose, but suddenly she wished everyone in the room would stop looking at her.

She did not want to see the accounting in their faces when she was trying so hard not to keep one herself.

Inside the box lay a ledger bound in gray leather.

Oren opened it beneath the window even though it was dark outside and moved the lamp into the place where he ordinarily read.

That instinctive motion told Nera more about his years among documents than all the shelves in the room.

Tesa brought a stool and sat close enough to see the page.

She did not behave like someone waiting for her father to explain things to her.

At the top of the first sheet was a heading:

Register of Names Accepted as Security for Deliveries.

Nera recognized the date.

The last winter before the coup.

- These records were made while...

- Your father was still king.

Below the heading were suppliers' names, sums, and deadlines. Beside each sum was the name of the person responsible for the debt.

It was not always the debtor.

One miller's wife had been listed.

Beside a barge owner were the names of his two sons.

- Collateral - Nera said.

- Names - Tesa corrected her.

Nera looked up.

For a moment she wanted to explain that she understood the official meaning of the term, that she did not mean to diminish what had been done.

She stopped herself.

The woman sitting beside her had a better reason to dislike the word than Nera had to defend it.

Tesa brought over a bundle of ordinary sheets tied with cord.

Oren selected one and placed it beside the old entry.

It was a settlement statement confirming repayment six years after the name had first been pledged.

The money had been paid.

The interest as well.

In the section meant for return of the name, someone had entered the number of another register.

The next document was the same.

And five more after that.

- The debt was cleared - Nera said. - They should have released the record.

- They should have - Oren agreed. - I took eleven cases like these to the chancery. I received eleven confirmations saying the deposits had been returned to their rightful owners.

Tesa found another sheet.

Her name was written on it, beside a date from several months earlier.

- Glue, leather, and the workshop tax - she said. - Father was ill. We had to keep the orders going.

- Why your name?

- Because his ring opens the workshop doors. We could still work without mine. Without his, no one could collect orders or sign for payments.

She said it without bitterness toward her father.

Nera nevertheless noticed that Oren was looking at the ledger instead of at his daughter.

- We repaid the money before the deadline - Tesa continued. - The first time they told me to come back in three days. Then six. Eventually they showed me a receipt confirming the return. The name wasn't there, but the case had been closed. We've been collecting other people's receipts ever since.

She spread the papers out.

Her own was joined by others bearing several different seals.

They were not name records.

They were certificates confirming the return of something that had never been returned.

Nera instinctively began searching for an error in the dates, some mismatch between the amounts.

Oren let her look.

She found something else.

Beside the phrase rightful owner, the silver trace left by the official needle did not close into the usual loop.

It divided and disappeared beneath the seal of the Crown.

Rud had taught her to look for that shape in fraudulent contracts.

On paper, the thing was being returned to the person named at the beginning of the document.

In silver, it was being directed somewhere else.

- Do you have a lens?

Oren handed her one with a wooden handle.

Nera tilted it until tiny marks appeared along the second branch.

The message was brief:

Incorporated into the Royal Record.

She became aware of the edge of the chair pressing into the backs of her thighs.

She shifted deeper into the seat.

- Hadran?

- His chancery - Oren said. - That much I can prove. What happens to the names afterward, I don't know.

Nera returned to the old ledger.

There, every accepted name had two separate notations: the location where the first record was held and the scope of the obligation.

Tesa's receipt contained only the number of a new repository.

No deadline.

No duty whose completion would trigger the return of the name to its owner.

- There's no release condition.

- That's why I needed you to open this copy. I remembered there had to be one under the old system. But my memory isn't enough in front of an official.

Oren put a finger beneath the original wording.

The skin beside his nail was cracked; a dry fleck of glue fell onto the margin.

Nera suddenly understood how long he had been waiting to point to that single line.