

The Last Bearer

A novel by U.K. Raven

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*The world was ever, is now, and shall ever be an ever-
living fire — kindling in measures, and going out in
measures. — Heraclitus*

PRELUDE

Ash

The fire had burned on this headland since before his grandfather was born.

Tonight Rian was going to lose it.

The wind came across the basin and put him a step sideways before he got his feet.

Rain drove across the headland in sheets, flattening itself against stone and skin. It struck the fire full on and tore at it, ripping the flame sideways into thin guttering strands.

The basin sat back from the cliff edge — far enough that a gust couldn't pitch a man into the dark, close enough that the glow reached out over the water. Tonight the glow barely reached the fog.

Half the wood in the basin was soaked through. What was left had collapsed inward, a blackened tangle sinking into its own ash. The flame clung low and uneven, breaking apart and reforming in weak bursts.

Rian dropped to one knee at the rim — fitted stone, worn smooth along the top where hands had gripped it through a hundred watches — and braced himself against the gusts.

No one else was fool enough to be out in it.

He dragged a half-burnt length of wood across the basin, trying to catch what flame was left and pull it into something that could live.

"Come on," he said to it, out loud, alone on a headland in the dark. "Come on, then." His voice cracked on the second one and he didn't care.

The heat came off it thin and scattered, no weight to it at all. Every time the fire gathered, the wind opened it up again.

Below the cliff the waves went into the rock and came back up through the stone into his hands.

Between one crash and the next—
silence.

Too clean for weather.

Rian looked up.

Beyond the reach of the firelight the fog had pressed closer. Where the wind staggered him, the fog stood still.

Something shifted inside it. He saw the fog thicken in one place and then in another, the way water changes over something swimming under it.

The flame dipped to a line of red along the coals.

From the fog — a sound.

Close to a voice.

Rian went still, one hand on the stone rim.

He bent forward and breathed into the basin, pushing what heat he could back into the coals. Steam hissed where the rain struck. The wood gave nothing back.

The fire should have died already.

It hadn't.

Another gust hit harder than the last. The flame tore apart and went down into scattered embers under the ash.

The fog came closer, against the wind.

Rian didn't look at it again.

He lowered both hands into the basin.

The coals were hotter than they had any right to be for how little was left of them. He felt the heat go into his palms and keep going, up through his wrists and into his forearms. He pushed against it. It was like leaning on a door that wasn't latched. The wood took what he gave it and asked for more, easily.

The skin of his fingers tightened and split. He smelled it. He kept his hands where they were.

There was nothing down there that should have caught.

The coals brightened anyway. Then the wood under them, wet through, went up all at once with a sound like a held breath.

Flame came up past his forearms. He felt it on his face and it did nothing to him.

It rose in a narrow ring, a hand's width in from the stone rim, and stood straight up in a wind that should have laid it flat. Rain came down into it and disappeared without a sound.

Rian stayed on his knees at the edge of it with his hands in the coals.

Out past the light, the fog stopped where it was.

* * *

"That's the one about the watchman," the guard said.

Vankeur turned the cup a quarter turn on the boards and did not drink out of it.

"That's the one."

Outside the inn the wind came off the water and shoved at the walls and set the lanterns swinging on their hooks. The traveller had come in an hour ago with the rain still on their

coat and had said almost nothing until the headland fire came up in the talk.

"Everyone's heard that one," the guard said.

"Depends who told it to you."

The innkeeper set down the mug he was wiping. "And that's the story, is it?"

"Half of it," Vankeur said. "There's a second man. A hundred years after. They never heard each other's names, and they ended up called the same thing."

"That's two stories, then," the guard said.

"It might be."

The woman by the hearth didn't look up from her netting, but her hands had slowed.

"The second man," the guard said. "What's he got to do with the—"

"Go on, then," the fisherman said.

Vankeur looked at the black window long enough that the guard went back to his drink, and then turned back to the table.

"It starts in the rain," they said. "A long way inland, on a river you've not heard the name of. There was a doctor in it, and they sent for him."

Nobody made a move to go. The innkeeper put another log on the fire and nobody asked him to.

* * *

CHAPTER 1

Long Enough

They sent for the doctor first. Morrow was the one who came.

He heard it before he reached the door — a woman's voice going up and cracking and going up again, past words now, the shape a person makes after the words run out. The miller's back room smelled of blood in standing air, thick enough to sit on the tongue, and someone had cracked the window a hand's width — enough to say it had got bad, not enough to say it was still getting worse. Outside, rain had been coming down since noon, the gutter over the door had choked, and it hammered on the sill as if it wanted in too.

Yenna and one of the mill hands had the girl pinned to the cot by the shoulders and one knee. Jonis had both hands buried in a wad of linen that had gone through white twice already and wasn't going to a third time.

"Where is he?" Yenna kept saying, to the room, to no one. "Where's the doctor? Where's the—"

"Here," Morrow said, and every head in the room swung on him at once, too fast, the look people give a door when they've spent ten minutes deciding it's about to be someone specific and it isn't.

"You're not him," Jonis said.

"No," Morrow agreed, already on his knees at the cot, already reaching. "Let go. I've got it."

"She won't stop—"

"I know. Let go."

Jonis let go. Blood found the gap immediately, welling up dark between Morrow's fingers before he'd even clamped them flat, and it came in pulses, a push each time her heart went. Something in there was still open that shouldn't be.

"What happened?" he said, working the linen back a fold at a time.

"The mill wheel took her," Yenna said. "The drive gear. She reached for the sack before it cleared and it—"

The girl made a sound that wasn't a word either.

"Hey," Morrow said to her, close, quick. "Look at me. Not the ceiling. Me."

Her eyes found him and did not quite hold him.

"Good," he said. "Now breathe with me. In four, out six. Can you count that high?"

"I'm not — " Her voice cracked. "I'm not a *child*—"

"No," Morrow said. "You're just bleeding on my knees. In four."

She breathed in. Ragged, but in.

"Out six."

She got to four and ran out.

"That's fine. Again."

He pressed his palm flat over the wound — not the linen now, past it, until he could feel the give of muscle and the harder line of bone underneath — and pushed, and it began to cost him almost straight away. The blood stopped coming in pushes and only welled.

By the second time the girl lost the count his forearm was cramping and he had started sweating through his shirt, and he

was breathing the way a man breathes carrying something up a flight of stairs.

"Talk to me," he said, to the room now, not looking up. "Somebody talk to me while I do this."

"Doctor's coming," a boy said from the doorway, out of breath, soaked to the collar. "I ran the whole way. I think I'm dying."

"You're not," Morrow said. "I'd notice."

"Ma's going to kill me for the boots."

"Add it to the list."

The girl's breathing had steadied to something almost like the four-and-six he'd given her. Morrow matched it without deciding to, in through the nose, hold, out slow, because his own hands had started to shake at the wrist and counting was the only thing he had to give them to do instead.

"Who was stitching before I got here?" he said.

Jonis's hand went up, small. "Me."

"Wash first?"

"Yes."

"Soap?"

"Yes—"

Something let go further up and the blood hit his hand in one hard shove.

"Hold her," Morrow said, sharper than he meant it, and two of the three at her shoulders threw their weight back down as the girl's spine came half off the cot. Morrow got his shoulder over the hand and bore down. The pain came up the arm and he stopped talking. The blood went back to welling and stayed at that.

"What was that?" Yenna said, in the voice of somebody who only wanted the answer.

"I don't know," Morrow said. "Talk. Please. Anybody."

"They're patching the sluices again," someone by the door said, too fast, grabbing at it. "Been saying it all week."

"River keeps climbing like this we'll be swimming to market," said another voice, and nobody laughed, but a breath went round the room that was the start of one, thin and grateful for anywhere to go.

The girl's eyes had gone somewhere private. Her lips were still moving on the count, four, out, six, even when nothing was coming out with it.

"Stay with me," Morrow told her. "Not the ceiling."

She found him again. It took longer this time.

The door opened and two older men came in on a gust of rain — Herren and Voss. Men who'd been around long enough that others went quiet when they talked.

Herren looked at the girl, at the blood, at the hand buried past the wrist in it, and then at Morrow.

"How long?" he said.

"Since I walked in," Morrow said, not looking up. "Which was three breaths after I should have."

"That's not what I'm—"

"I know what you're asking," Morrow said, and for the first time all night he had to work to keep his voice level. "Not now."

Voss crouched at the foot of the cot, close enough to see the wound, and looked at it.

"Does it feel different?" Voss asked. "From the last one?"

Morrow could have lied. He was tired enough that lying would have taken more than telling the truth.

"It doesn't feel like anything's stopping me," he said. "That's the part I don't like."

Voss stayed where he was. "Your grandfather said as much."

Yenna's head came up. "Not now."

"I know when," Voss said quietly. "I didn't bring it in. It was already in the room."

Nobody answered him.

His arm had been cramping for a long while and his back had gone from the angle. He had carried heavier things further. What bothered him was that the thing itself had not pushed back once, and that he could tell it was not going to.

"He's here," Jonis said, forehead against the window glass. "The doctor. He's running."

Something went out of the room all at once, closer to the sound of a held breath going than to relief.

"Good," Yenna said, thin. "Then we can stop."

The doctor came in wet through and swearing, took one look, and was on his knees before his bag hit the floor.

"You kept her," he said to Morrow, in the same voice he had used on the door.

"Yes."

"Long enough. That's all I needed." He was already working. "Off. Now."

Morrow lifted his hand. Where his palm had been, the linen was dry. Where his hand had been still so long, it wouldn't stop shaking.

The doctor took over. The room exhaled the rest of the way.

Her father came off the wall and took Morrow's hand in both of his and shook it, and went on shaking it, well past the point where either of them knew what it was any more, saying thank

you in a voice that had stopped working, and then he gave it up and put his forehead down on his daughter's hair and stayed there.

As people started drifting toward the front, somebody near the back said, low, "Engine's running hot again, they're saying."

"Better hope it holds," someone answered. "Harven's had his crew on the east valve all week."

"Still running, though."

Voss lingered by the door while Morrow got his feet back under him, which took longer than it should have.

"You did well by her," Voss said.

"I always do," Morrow said. It came out thin.

Voss looked at him a moment too long. "That's what worries us."

He went. Morrow stayed sitting on the floor, listening to the room come back to itself — a chair scraping, someone in the front room asking, unbelievably, about supper, as if that were still a thing people did.

By the time he reached the front room his hand had stopped shaking. The arm ached from the shoulder down, and would go on aching into tomorrow, and he was glad of it.

* * *

Morrow didn't go home right away.

If he walked in straight off using it, his mother would look at his hands as if she could read the day off the skin. If he waited, she'd know anyway, but at least he wouldn't be handing it to her.

The boards laid across the miller's yard were furred green along the edges and slick down the middle, and he went over

them flat-footed. He took the longer path along the river. The wind off the water made his eyes run, and he was glad of it until it came harder off the bend and he had to set his feet against it. The current was slow and heavy, thick with silt, riding higher up the reeds than it had a week ago. Somebody had driven a stick into the mud at the old waterline. The stick was under.

He stood on the bank until the tingling in his fingers settled. It went, eventually, all at once and unpleasantly.

From this part of the bank you could see the upriver road where it came out past the last of the houses and went up over the shoulder of the hill and stopped being road. About a mile of it, on a clear day. A cart went away up it, too far off to hear.

He watched it until it went over.

He had been fourteen the first time he did that. There had been a cart that year too, and his mother's cousin Hettie sitting on the back of it with her hands in her lap, because she had been out of the tannery eight months by then and the sheet only had the one column for that. The family had walked her up as far as the turn and not past it. Nothing came back afterward — no letter, no word through anybody — and none had been expected. Her name stayed in the household about two years and then stopped being said at meals.

If his mother had ever asked why he came the long way round he'd have told her it was shorter, which it wasn't.

He had the whole conversation on the way home and then went in and had it again.

The house was lit when he opened the door. The lamp on the table was burning even though there was daylight left. His mother did that.

She sat with a cup of tea gone dark and cold and still in her hands. She didn't look up when he came in.

"You eaten?" she asked.

"No."

"That's a shame," she said. "You're getting worse."

"I fed the doctor's ego," Morrow replied, hanging his coat on the peg. "It was starving."

That got him a small sound — half huff, half sigh. It was the closest she came to laughing when she was worried.

He sat across from her. The chair creaked. Somewhere over their heads the house creaked back.

His mother finally looked up. Her eyes went straight to his hands.

Morrow spread them on the table, palms down, as if he were presenting evidence.

"You fed it," she said.

"Yes."

"How long?"

"Long enough for the doctor."

"I asked you how long."

Morrow leaned back. "I didn't check the clock."

His mother's mouth tightened. "Someone did. They always do."

He didn't answer. They both knew that was why the elders had come.

She took a sip of her tea and made a face like it had offended her. "Who?"

"Herren and Voss showed up," Morrow said. "Voss said my grandfather's name like he was seeing if it still fit."

"And did it?" she asked.

Morrow looked down at the table. There was a knot in the wood just left of his hand that he'd traced as a child when conversations got too sharp. He traced it now without thinking.

"No," he said. "It didn't."

His mother watched him until he looked away, then stood and went to the cabinet. She took out a narrow wooden box, small and carved, the edges worn round.

She set it on the table between them.

Morrow didn't move.

"I wasn't going to," she said, as if defending herself to the room. "I told myself I wouldn't. But then you walked in with that look."

"I don't have a look," Morrow said.

His mother lifted her eyebrows.

"All right," he admitted. "I have a look. But it's not new."

"It's newer than it should be," she said, and opened the box.

Inside were thin strips of wood bundled with twine gone soft with age. Names carved into them. Some deep. Some shallow. Some rubbed down nearly smooth.

She didn't take the first one she touched. Her fingers went down the bundle and came back up it twice.

Then she slid one strip out and set it in front of him, carefully, in a way Morrow didn't like.

His grandfather's name.

Morrow flinched before he could stop himself. Just a twitch.

"I don't need that," he said quietly.

"You do," his mother replied, and her voice was softer than her words. "Because you're starting to believe the wrong thing."

"And what's the wrong thing?"

"That keeping a person going is the same as saving them."

He let out a breath, sharp and humorless. "I didn't save anyone."

His mother's gaze didn't waver. "Good. Keep saying that."

Morrow's hand drifted toward the strip, then stopped short.

"You don't talk about him," he said.

"I talk about him plenty," she replied. "You just don't like the version I'm talking about."

"That's fair," Morrow said, and then, because he couldn't help himself, added, "I prefer the version where he wasn't a cautionary tale."

His mother snorted. "Everyone prefers that."

She sat again, folded her hands around her cup, and for a moment looked older than she was.

"It started with a fall," she said.

Morrow blinked. "That's—"

"Yes," she cut in. "Always. A fall, a slip, a blade where there shouldn't have been one. We're not special in that way."

He didn't interrupt again.

"It was your great-uncle Marlen," she continued. "Not blood the way people argue about blood, but family all the same. He was head of the mills then. Loud man. He took up space like it was owed to him."

Morrow could picture it. He'd heard Marlen's voice in old stories even if he'd never heard it with his own ears.

"He caught fever after," his mother said. "And then infection. And then there was a day he stopped waking up properly. The doctor said it was a matter of hours."

"And your grandfather," she said, looking at him now, "couldn't stand the idea of it ending like that."

"Because he loved him."

"Because he loved him," she agreed. "Because he was proud. Because he couldn't tolerate being helpless. Pick your favorite."

Morrow almost laughed. "You make him sound charming."

His mother's eyes flicked toward him. "He was. That's what made it worse."

"He started feeding it that first night," she said. "Hand on Marlen's wrist. Then on his chest. Then just sitting there, like if he stayed still enough the ending would get bored and leave."

"At first, everyone was grateful," she went on. "It gave people time to arrive. It gave family time to say what they wanted to say. It gave the mills time to appoint someone who could sign papers. It gave your grandmother time to stop shaking."

Morrow nodded. He could see it. He'd done a smaller version of it that day.

"And then," his mother said, and her voice flattened, "it kept going."

"A day," she said. "Then another. Then a week. And your great-uncle didn't get better, Morrow. He didn't recover. He didn't wake up and apologize for the trouble and tell us all to stop fussing."

She set the cup down and left her hands around it.

"He just stayed," she said. "Breathing, barely. Heart beating, barely. Not enough to live, not enough to die."

"How long?" Morrow said.

His mother looked at the strip, then at him.

"You've asked the question," she said. "Now you get the answer."

"Forty-three days," she said. "Forty-three days of people in and out of that room. Forty-three days of meals left untouched because no one could decide if it was disrespectful to eat while

he lingered. Forty-three days of arguments whispered in the hallway about inheritance and leadership and who was waiting for what."

She leaned forward slightly. "Do you know what happens to a town when a man won't finish dying?"

"It waits," Morrow said.

"It rots," she said.

Morrow looked down at his hands. They had stopped shaking an hour ago and had stayed stopped.

"Your grandfather stopped needing to touch him," she said quietly. "That's the part no one says out loud anymore, but they remember it anyway. At first he had to be right there — hand to skin, eyes open, refusing. Then it was enough to sit beside the bed. Then enough to sit in the room. Then..."

She trailed off.

"Then what?" Morrow asked.

"Then he went out to eat and Marlen didn't die. Then he went home to sleep and Marlen didn't die. Then he walked to the mill and Marlen didn't die."

"That's when people started keeping track," she said. "Not because they wanted to accuse him. Because they needed to know what the rules were, and there weren't any."

She tapped the table once.

"They watched," she said. "They watched your grandfather."

Morrow stared at the strip with the carved name.

"And then Marlen died," he said, voice rough.

His mother took her time over it. "Eventually."

"Was it worse?"

His mother didn't answer right away. When she did, her voice was quiet.

"It was ugly," she said. "Quiet. It took him the best part of a day."

"And your grandfather?" he asked.

His mother looked away.

"He didn't talk for a week afterward," she said. "Not a word. Just sat on the step and stared at the road like he was waiting for someone to come explain what he'd done."

Morrow tried for humor. "Did anyone?"

His mother gave him a look that was almost fond, if you didn't look too closely. "No."

"So the town decided to blame him," Morrow said.

"The town decided to learn," she said.

Morrow's fingers found the edge of the wooden strip. He turned it over. The back was worn smooth, a shallow dish where other people's thumbs had sat, over years.

"You think that's what's happening to me," he said.

His mother didn't flinch. "I think you're getting used to it."

"I sweated through a shirt," Morrow said.

"I know," she said, too quickly. Then she exhaled and softened her voice. "Morrow. That's the beginning of a habit."

"I'm not Grandfather," he said.

"No," she agreed. "You're worse, in a way."

"That's — thank you," Morrow said.

She made a dry, joyless sound, more breath than laugh. "You sit like him. Quiet. Kind. Helpful. That's how it starts. That's how it gets called mercy."

Morrow sat back, the chair creaking under him. "So what do you want me to do? Refuse when they—"

"No," she said. "Don't be dramatic. We don't have the luxury."

He couldn't help the small smile that tugged at his mouth.
"We really don't."

"You do the work," she said. "You keep them going until the doctor arrives. You keep them going until the bleeding stops on its own. You feed your persistence into it until the decision gets made by someone who's paid to make it. And then you take your hand off."

"That's easy to say."

"That's why I'm saying it," she replied.

"They'll want me at the engine again," Morrow said.
"Harven's been short-handed since the spring."

His mother's face didn't change. Her hand came off the cup and stopped on the table.

"Good," she said. "Go. Every day if they'll have you."

Morrow frowned. "You just spent an hour telling me not to touch anyone."

"I spent an hour telling you not to touch a *person*," she said.
"A beam doesn't have a family standing in the doorway keeping count. A beam doesn't get better or worse depending on how long you stay. It just holds, or it doesn't, and nobody's counted days over it since the world began." She wrapped both hands around her cold cup. "You want to feed something, feed the engine. It won't ask you to stop, and Nyr's never once looked twice at a bridge."

"That's not comforting."

"It's not meant to be comforting," she said. "It's meant to be a line. Stay on the right side of it."

He rubbed his thumb over the back of the wooden strip, over the worn place.

"And if I can't?" he asked, and hated himself for asking it.

His mother's gaze sharpened. "Then you come home," she said. "And you tell me. And we don't pretend."

Morrow exhaled, slow. "You'd stop me?"

"I'd try," his mother said.

"That would go badly for you."

"It would go slowly," she said, and for the first time she smiled — a thin, tired thing. "You're easier to deal with when you're annoyed."

Morrow laughed once, quietly, surprised into it.

His mother closed the box and slid it back toward the cabinet. She paused, hand on the lid.

"I loved him," she said, softer. "And I miss him. And I still think he did what he did because he couldn't bear to lose someone."

Morrow nodded, throat tight.

"And," she added, looking at him again, "I still think he was wrong."

Morrow didn't answer.

His mother stood. "Stay for supper," she said, voice back in its practical register. "Or don't. But if you don't, I'm sending food with you anyway."

"That's extortion."

"That's parenting," she said.

Morrow stood too.

As he moved toward the door he flexed his fingers, and the ache came with them, dull and steady, from the shoulder down.

His mother watched him from the table.

He didn't look back.

* * *

On-Site

The sound hit first, before the smell of it, before the heat — a pressure, dense and low and too consistent, the kind of sound that made the inner ear tilt wrong.

The engine was already working when Morrow stepped through the south intake, and that alone wasn't unusual. But the floor buzzed underfoot in a way it usually didn't at this hour, and the steam hung crooked in the corridor air instead of rising straight, and both of those together were.

Someone passed him hauling cable in both arms, wet to the knee and moving too fast to spare him a look, let alone a greeting — the kind of hurry that told Morrow more than any of the gauges would.

The corridor was familiar down in the body, past thinking about it — scored pipe on the left, a red lamp behind wired glass halfway down, flickering, condensation peeling off the ceiling in shudders and dropping into the dark below the walkway. The air smelled of old metal and warm algae, river rot trapped in heat too long and gone sweetish with it, the smell he associated with this place.

He took the stairwell down to the control floor, hand grazing the guard rail out of habit. Someone had tried to muffle the clanging with tape; it hadn't worked. The whole space rattled in slow rhythm, like a jaw clenching and unclenching on its own.

Five techs moved through the chamber, each on some job that should've had three names behind it.

The board was already flipped to surge condition. One red. Two yellow. Margin line pulsing faint.

He found the notation scrawled on the glass in someone's ugly handwriting:

"K"

"Sustaining?"

"Prob. Need him."

No one said Morrow anymore when things went off-pattern. Just *him*. Harven had left word he'd be back by fourth bell; that was two bells ago.

He crouched beside the junction plate, bracing on the hot railing, and touched the metal lightly with the edge of two fingers.

Nothing yet. Still rising.

He closed his eyes. Let the pressure come in.

From somewhere overhead: "You're late."

The voice came down off the steel. Kett, probably.

"Yeah?" Morrow didn't move. "That bad?"

"No, just boring," the voice called back. "You want rail or line?"

"Rail," Morrow said. "Line stinks."

"Everything stinks."

"That's why I like the rail."

A pause, then a short laugh — dry and tired.

He stood, crossed to the edge, and gripped the descent ladder. The rungs were damp. They always were.

Five levels, intake down to the tunnels at river grade, and half the town standing on the engine's shoulders without

thinking about it. Morrow's feet knew the stairs without him. Platform level was where the six ribs came in to the brace, and the span crossed them — the piece everybody watched.

He went down past platform level. The span was lit from underneath by the working lamps, a single blackened length of iron the width of a man's chest, its underside furred with sixty years of scale. Two techs stood beneath it not doing anything in particular.

He kept going, down into the sluice chamber.

The braces were old. The ribs older. Every tech who'd worked here long enough had a rib they watched the way you'd watch a tooth that had started to ache.

The heat down here sat closer to the skin than it did above. Above him the engine murmured louder; below him the floor carried its fine constant tremble up through his boots and into the bones of his legs, a shiver too steady to be mistaken for cold.

They already knew where he was going. He hadn't told anyone, and no one had asked.

* * *

The sluice junction wasn't locked. The left panel had slipped enough to show the inner ring, and mist was feathering out of a seam that shouldn't have had any pressure behind it at all, fine and constant as breath off cold water. It had gone unfixed and unflagged both, long enough that a rime of pale mineral had built up along the lip of the seam like frost on a window nobody had bothered to shut.

Morrow stepped over the rail trench, ducked under a hissing pipe, and crouched at the base of the junction, where the floor

had gone slick with algae grown fat over old rust, green going black at the edges.

He set his hand against the brace, elbow grounded into the frame.

The hum behind the plate was running faster and shallower than it should have been.

He shifted his weight, let his arm go loose, and stopped thinking about the metal as something that needed anything.

A breath passed. Then another.

He stayed on it through the better part of a quarter bell, and it cost what a quarter bell of that kind of work costs — the arm first, then the shoulder, then the back of the neck. He was sweating through his collar by the end of it.

The junction settled.

The room changed. The sound kept grinding, but the vibration under his forearm dropped a half step and stayed there.

A voice floated down from the upper deck. "Sluice two's leveling."

Another: "Yeah, main catch is dropping. Still slow."

Morrow let them talk over him.

He kept his hand on the metal, waiting for it to be done.

The hatch above scraped open. Someone leaned out.

"You doing something?" Kett, of course.

Morrow cracked an eye. "Not really."

"Cause it's working."

"Well. Maybe I'm lucky."

Kett grunted and started down the ladder. One boot scraped loud on the rail — too tired to hide it.

He came off the last rung and crouched on the grating beside Morrow, squinting at the seam.

"Looks better," he said. "Spitting less. Not stopped. You feel it settle?"

"Mostly." Morrow shifted his shoulders, rolled one wrist. "Still jitter at the edge."

Kett scratched at his chin. "You think we're past the jump?"

"I'd say we're on the right side of it. Doesn't mean it's good."

Kett nodded like that was close enough. He tipped his head at the ceiling, toward platform level. "Fourth's mine. Everybody down here's got one, and most of us it's the fourth."

He dug into his coat, pulled out a ration biscuit, unwrapped it halfway, then held it out.

"Eat. You look hollow. It's the last one I've got."

Morrow gave him a side glance. "That's just my personality."

"I've seen hollow. Man on the docks spent a whole winter on gull eggs and spite, and he had more color in him than you do right now."

"I'm upright," Morrow said.

"That's what he kept saying," Kett said.

Morrow took it and didn't eat it. Held it in one hand, thumb tapping the edge.

They stayed like that for a minute. The chamber was hot and the air was thick with steam.

Kett leaned back against the rail. "Lost another one off the floor Tuesday. Didn't come in, room's cleared out. That's three this year. All of them fit. All of them between twenty and forty, near enough. Not one of them's sent word to anybody."

"People go."

"People write."

"That's not—"

"Somebody's putting an army together out of us," Kett said. "Out of everybody."

"You don't know that."

"No," Kett said. "You should think about staying down here. Would save us the wait. I'm not the first one to think it."

"Yeah. I'll bring a cot."

"Could weld your name into the bulkhead."

"I'm flattered."

"You should be. We don't do that for just anyone."

Morrow smiled, barely.

The sluice gave one more slow groan, then eased.

One by one the crew peeled away from the rail. Back to checklists. Back to grease pens and loose bolts and dials that didn't read the same way twice.

"Leave him," one of the techs said. "He'll come up."

Kett stood last, stretched his knees until they cracked, and grunted.

"You want me to—?" he asked, gesturing loosely at the air between them.

Morrow gave a slight shake of the head. "Not yet."

Kett took that at face value.

"Right," he said. "Well. If you go static, somebody'll come down for you. Might be a while."

"Appreciated."

Kett grinned, then stepped over a hose and vanished into the upper corridor. Boots wet, coat trailing steam.

Morrow stayed. Hand on the metal, the arm aching from the shoulder down.

He barely noticed when the clipboard came out.

Across the deck above, someone began calling off the checklist.

"Valve four?"

"Green." That was Corvin, an older hand somewhere up in the pipework, humming under the answer the way he hummed through every valve he checked.

"Outflow one?"

"Stalled but tracking."

"Mid catch?"

"Set."

The rhythm was practiced and bored.

Then: "Noting presence. Morrow: on-site, stable."

The pencil didn't pause over it and went on to the next line.

"I'm not—" Morrow said, to the grating.

Nobody above had heard. He let it stand. There was nothing in it to correct.

* * *

"Come on," Kett said, tapping the pipe with two knuckles. "You should see what passes for maintenance out here now. Half of it I signed off on."

Morrow raised an eyebrow but didn't argue. His legs were stiff from crouching, and the floor still had that deep buzz in it, stone grinding on stone somewhere under the foundation. He stood slowly, pocketed the ration biscuit he hadn't eaten, and followed.

They moved along the lower trench, the wet concrete groaning underfoot. Kett didn't look back to see if Morrow was behind him.

A woman came the other way with a coil of packing rope on her shoulder, paying it out through her fist as she walked, hand over hand, slow. Where it came off her palm the fray had gone out of it and the strands sat tight again. She turned sideways to let them past and kept going.

"This here?" Kett pointed to a section of intake shielding where the mesh had buckled inward and someone had tried to stitch it back into shape with wire and what looked like fishing line. "Last week."

Morrow stared at it.

"Yeah," Kett confirmed. "That's a rake tine and two copper ties holding the left vent. Alsen swore it would be 'temporary.' Third time I've heard 'temporary' this month."

"You report it?"

"Sure. Wrote it up. Twice. Verren came by, looked at it, said it needed a proper fix. Then they sent Alsen back with better string."

They reached the third sluice gate, the crosshatch one that separated the runoff channels. A hinge had been braced with a wrench. Just a wrench, and the wrench was somebody's.

Kett nodded at it. "That's been on there since spring. Held through two surges. Two more than it had any business doing." He walked on. "That's Imrie's. She'll want it back and she's not getting it back."

"That's worse," Morrow said.

"Little bit."

Kett went on a few paces and stepped over a hose.

"Alsen's girl turns sixteen in the spring," he said.

"And?"

"He's putting her on the deliveries book. Two mornings a week."

"She's fifteen."

"She'll have a year on it by the time she isn't. You want a thing written down before you need it written down."

"Written down for what?"

Kett looked back at him as if he'd asked what the river was for. Then he decided it was a joke, and laughed at it, and went on up the walkway talking about the vent.

"There's no deliveries two mornings a week."

"There will be," Kett said.

Further along, where the ribs came through the chamber wall, Verren was down on one knee, two fingers flat on the third one, a stub of blue chalk in his other hand.

"Kett. Put your hand here."

Kett went over and put his hand where the fingers had been.

"Now here." Verren moved him a foot along the stone. "Difference?"

"No."

"No," Verren said. He drew a short line with the chalk and got up slowly, one hand at the small of his back. "It's dry through the joint and damp both sides of it. Water's getting in and not coming out. Give it two wet seasons and the load stops going through clean."

"You want it written up?"

"I've written it up." He went past them toward the stairs.

Kett watched him go. "He's right about most of them," he said. "We get to about one in five."

They kept walking. Kett pointed out a scuffed wall panel covered in marker notes:

→ DON'T TOUCH

→ REVERSE REVERSE REVERSE

→ "Fixed" 11th

→ (DO NOT REVERSE)

"Top-level engineering," Kett said. "We like to keep the language flexible."

Morrow ran a finger over one of the arrows. The paint had etched into the surface.

"I miss when people used to scrub these down."

"Yeah, well. We had a guy for that."

"What happened?"

"Job came off the book in the spring. He was gone by the summer. That's the first of them."

Morrow took his finger off the arrow. The paint had come away black under the nail.

Kett turned and pointed toward the far duct where a long cable sagged across a wet patch of floor.

"That one was supposed to be fixed before the first thaw. They marked it priority. The mark's still on it."

"And?"

Kett stopped walking.

"Guy who was supposed to patch it?" he said. "Said we didn't need to anymore. Said you were already here."

Morrow didn't say anything.

Kett rocked on his heels, hands in his pockets, and then went on ahead.

The pressure came without any of the usual announcing — the board dark, no tone sounding — just a change in the floor under Morrow's boots as they passed a rusted bulkhead, the

concrete flexing somewhere deep and out of sight, as if the foundation had turned over in its sleep.

Kett paused mid-step. Tilted his head.

"You feel that?"

"Yeah."

Kett pulled up short. "Sluice three?"

"Could be intake drift—"

"Nope," he said, already turning. "Not enough lag. It's three. I'd rather be wrong. C'mon."

They cut through a side corridor thick with hanging cables and mildew. Kett moved faster than before, boots hitting slick tile with just enough urgency to make Morrow follow without asking.

They came in through the west service lock — low ceiling, copper pipes sweating. The pressure was louder here.

Two techs were already there, leaning over a leak in the secondary flow box. One of them, Imrie, narrow-shouldered, sleeves shoved past the elbow and both forearms red to the cold, was wrist-deep in the box and did not come out of it to look at them.

"You brought him?" she said, already half-smiling.

Kett gestured toward Morrow like he was a spare part. "He was already in—"

"Good," Imrie said into the box. "Strut."

The other tech barely looked up. "We logged you already," he said.

Morrow moved forward, slow. Set one hand on the side panel, the other on a stabilizer strut that shouldn't have been that hot.

The strut stopped shivering and stayed stopped.

Behind him, Kett exhaled. "Nyr's teeth. That's better." He got Morrow by the back of the neck on his way past and shook him once, rough and glad, as if Morrow were a young dog that had done the thing right.

He sat on an upturned crate, ran one hand down the front of his face, and let his elbows fall to his knees.

"Nothing's fighting you," he said, mostly to himself.

Morrow kept his eyes on the strut.

The two techs began clearing tools. One of them muttered something about taking the early end of shift. The other asked if the mess was open yet.

Kett stood again and looked at Morrow.

"You're not leaving after this, are you?"

Morrow looked at the metal instead of at him.

* * *

They waited in silence until the pressure eased. Not long.

When Morrow stepped back his hands were dry. Kett watched him for a second, then looked at his own hands.

They headed toward the central stairs. Neither of them said anything. Just footsteps and distant steam.

On the third landing, halfway up, Kett slowed.

He stopped next to a wall where someone had etched initials into the metal — four or five sets, some crossed out, some circled, one faded to nearly nothing.

Kett knocked the wall once with the heel of his hand. "You remember Delvin?"

Morrow gave a quiet nod.

Kett didn't look over. "Big guy. Used to run intake nine. Shaved his head with a valve blade."

"He wore gloves in the summer."

"Yeah," Kett said. "Said the air had teeth."

He let out a low breath, half amusement, half fatigue.

"Delvin stayed two years longer than he was supposed to. Didn't take rotation. Didn't leave the deck. Said he didn't trust anyone else to hear when the rails shifted."

"What happened?"

"Started sleeping in the dry zone behind the sluice board. Said the vibration helped his back. Someone brought him meals for a while. Then they stopped. Then he stopped asking."

Morrow leaned against the railing.

"Is he still here?"

Kett tilted his head. "Maybe. Nobody's checked the dry zone in a while."

Morrow didn't speak.

Kett kept going, lighter now, like it was just a story.

"He used to hum, you know. While the board ran. Like he could match the timing. Claimed it calmed the pipes."

He paused.

"I think he was serious."

Morrow said, "That's the part that scares you?"

"No," Kett said. "The part that scares me is how long it took to notice he wasn't talking anymore. Three weeks, near enough, and I was down there every shift, and I'd say morning to him and he'd nod, and I took the nod for an answer, and one day it wasn't a nod anymore, it was just his head going with the judder of the board, down and up, down and up, and I'd been saying morning to that for I don't know how long."

Kett turned and started walking again.

Morrow stayed on the landing with his thumb on the deepest of the initials, feeling where the tool had skipped.

Then he moved.

He walked the long way out, along the outer catwalk past the old surge tank, where the paint had peeled down to bare metal in a patch the size of a door. The hum was softer up here and a half-tone lower.

He stopped near a lateral brace where two old flood valves rattled slightly out of sync.

Set his palm to the metal.

The rattle went out of the valves.

It didn't hurt.

It used to.

He remembered the first time he'd kept something standing — west sluice, brittle as glass, his uncle swearing they couldn't risk another delay.

They'd lifted him onto a crate and told him, "Just stay still."

He had.

The pipe screamed against him. His shoulder went numb. His knees locked. His teeth clicked from the inside out.

Afterward he vomited in a drain behind the lockbox, then pretended nothing had happened.

That was what sustaining had been.

Now it took a hand and gave him nothing to carry out of the room.

From somewhere above, a voice called: "We're good now!"

Morrow didn't answer.

He watched the sluice quiet, steam slipping out through the cracked vent at the top of the frame, rising too evenly.

He stayed a moment longer with his hand on the metal, listening.

Then he stepped away. The iron cooled the moment he lifted off it, already forgetting he had been there.

His arm hadn't. Along the catwalk the rattle of the two valves went on in his forearm, faint and out of time with his steps. He shook the hand out at his side without slowing. It was still there at the stairs.

On his way out he passed the control floor, where the board had been wiped clean of the day's surge and rewritten for the next shift in the same cramped hand as always, chalk dust still hanging faint in the lamp-light.

Somebody had already put him on it.

* * *

CHAPTER 3

Normal Load

By the time Morrow reached the river road, his trousers were wet to mid-calf.

The river beside the road had climbed its banks and kept going, slow and steady, working into the packed dirt and under the first row of houses.

People still walked it.

They lifted their skirts, rolled their trousers, and swore under their breath as they stepped around the worst of it. Cart wheels cut deep ruts that filled and refilled with brown water every time someone passed. A boy stood barefoot in one, daring himself to stay until the cold stopped bothering him.

"You'll lose a toe," someone called.

"I've got extras," he called back.

At the market steps the bottom stair had gone under and the one above it was dark to the edge. Ferna had her stall up at the top with the jars on a second crate, and she was going down the row taking lids off and putting them back.

"Wet gets into cloves and never comes out of them," she said.

"No," Morrow said.

"So I'll be here." She took off the next lid.

Two people in coats were standing under the weighhouse overhang at the head of the steps, out of the rain.

They were not selling and they were not buying, and they were not stopping anybody. They stood where the steps came

up and watched who came up them, and then watched them go down again.

One of them had a paper folded over the back of his hand, out of the wet. He did not open it while Morrow was there.

Verren's girl came up past them with a crate against her chest and her shoulders back under the weight of it, tipped so the jars would not slide, and lowered it onto the top step beside Ferna's own, and went down for the second one. There were duckboards over the two steps that had gone under, and they shifted under her every time she crossed them. Her da was on the engine floor until the bells, so she had the errands.

"Orla. The third one's cracked and I like it," Ferna said.

"I know."

Neither of the two moved while she went by them. One of them watched her down the steps and then watched the road again.

At the bottom a man with a barrow asked one of them whether the ferry was running. He waited for an answer, and did not get one, and went and asked somebody else.

Morrow came up and went past. Neither of them looked at him.

From the top of the lane he could still see the pair of them under the overhang, and the paper was still folded over the back of the same hand.

Morrow passed his father's shop with the shutters already down. Den had lifted the hides off the floor and onto the high rack — first hard rain, every year, same order — and a bucket set under the place where the roof had always let water through.

Ren was up on the ropewalk wall with two other girls, counting which of the marker stakes had gone under. Eleven, she called down, and then that it had been eight at breakfast, and then that he was walking on the low side like an idiot.

He moved to the high side.

Morrow stepped off the main track onto the narrow raised plank that passed for a walkway. It flexed under his weight. Water licked the underside with a steady slap.

At the bend the handstone was under again, same as every year. Morrow set his palm flat on the top of the post beside it as he passed, because the post was what you touched when the stone wasn't there. So did the man behind him.

"You're Morrow," the man said.

"I am."

"Thought so." He shifted a coil of wet rope from one shoulder to the other. "You did my aunt's hip. Two winters back. She got another year out of it."

"Good."

"She's gone now. She was eighty-one." He said it flat, a number and nothing under it.

They walked on together at the same slow pace, the rope dripping a thin trail behind them and the rain finding its way under every collar on the road.

"My boy's wife went in the spring," he said, in the same voice. "Caught her hand on a bit of wire in the yard and said nothing about it for four days, because there was nothing to say about it. By the time it was worth saying it was up in her arm."

His voice went on the last word — just once, one note down and back — and he stopped walking, and spread his free hand

flat on the rope coil on his shoulder, and stood there in the rain until it came steady again.

"Anyway," he said.

Morrow slowed.

"Nobody sent for me."

"Somebody did," the man said. "Third bell. Went up to the engine house and the girl on the door took the name and put it on the nail, and by the time anybody got to the nail it was the next morning."

"That shouldn't happen."

"It's not a complaint," the man said. "You were where you were meant to be. It was all written down properly." He hitched the rope higher on his shoulder. "I only mention it because you had your hand on the post, and I thought — he'll not know."

The plank flexed under the two of them.

"What was her name?"

"Wenna," the man said. "You'd not have known her. She came from downriver."

At the fork he went left toward the ropewalk.

Ahead, the engine house hunched low and broad against the sky, steam drifting from its vents and disappearing into the gray. The lines on the water-level markers at the bank had gone under. Someone had painted new ones higher up in a hurry, with less care.

He picked his way along the planks until stone replaced wood, then stopped to look back.

Sandbags along the lower doors. Buckets lined up under the eaves. Gutters choked with leaves nobody had cleared.

A runner splashed up behind him. "They're waiting," she panted. "Kett says he doesn't want to guess today."

"Good," Morrow said. "I'm not in the mood to be surprised."

She snorted, wet-sounding, still moving, and followed him inside.

Just inside the doors a girl of about fifteen sat on a stool with a book open on her knees and nothing written on the page for that day.

"Do people leave names here?" Morrow said. "For me?"

She tipped her head at the frame without answering. A nail had been driven up through a block of wood beside it. A fist of paper hung on the nail, the bottom sheets gone soft and brown along the edges.

"Who reads them?"

"Whoever's got a minute," she said.

She had been on that stool since the spring. There were three others like it in the building — a boy who logged deliveries that came twice a week, a woman who swept a corridor nobody walked down. Nobody pretended the work needed doing. It went in the station book all the same, with a name and a start date, because a start date was the only thing that answered the question when the question came round.

He put his thumb against the side of the stack and pushed. It gave, and came back.

"I could bring them up to you," she said. "If you want."

"No," Morrow said.

He left her there with the stack of names she wasn't reading and went in, past the frame and into the corridor's mouth, the light behind him narrowing to a wet gray line and then gone.

The air in the intake corridor was hotter and no drier. Condensation rolled down the inner walls and dripped off the cables in slow, regular beats. It was like standing inside a throat.

The control floor was full this time. Eight, nine bodies in a space meant for five. Jackets hung on anything that would stand still. Someone had spread a map across the gate levers, weighted at the corners with bolts and a tin mug. Red chalk traced the river's projected creep.

Kett was leaning over the main board, one hand flat, the other twirling a grease pencil between his fingers. He glanced up as Morrow came in.

"There he is," he said. "Our favorite bad idea."

"Morning," Morrow said. "What's broken?"

"Nothing," Kett said. "That's the problem."

The board lights pulsed at about half the rate they should have. Four yellows. No red. Flow rates marked within limits — barely.

"Surge markers," Morrow said.

"Tomorrow, by what upriver's telling us," Kett said. "So, yesterday."

Someone barked half a laugh.

Morrow stepped closer to the board, then to the observation slit that looked out over the main spill. Water churned in the concrete channel, white where it should have been brown, too close to the lip.

"This is high for normal," he said.

"This is normal for high," Kett said. "Flood season, remember? This is what the manuals call 'the ordinary rise.' Four yellows is the top of the ordinary, and I've stood here with five and a red and the same man writing 'ordinary' on the sheet, and the sheet's downstairs in a box if you want to go and take it up with him."

"That phrase makes me tired."

"Join the club."

A junior tech — Sela, short sleeves, ink stains on her fingers — came up with a clipboard. "We've got three freight barges asking clearance to come through on second bell," she said. "If we keep them on the east bank, we need to open two more sluices upstream to slow their drag."

"That bumps us over the safety line," Kett said. "Not far. Far enough that it goes in the log."

"Yeah," she said, as if she were talking about the cost of bread. "But Harven came by personally this morning. Said if we start delaying shipments this early in the season, we'll never get them back. Waited for an answer and left before I could ask him anything back."

She tapped the board where she'd underlined a number twice.

"It's within limit," she said. "On paper."

The ink on her fingers carried onto the side of her hand, where she'd put a figure in the same hard, level script as the underlined number — somewhere she could keep an eye on it without hunting for paper. Morrow read her hand before he read the board.

Morrow didn't move.

Kett glanced at him. "You got that look again."

"What look?"

"The one that says you're about to ruin my day with facts."

Morrow watched the water a moment longer. The rain had thickened; droplets streaked down the glass.

"Past the line, I'm on the gates the whole time," he said. "No one in or out."

"Yeah," Kett said. "There's nobody to put beside you."

"And a second thing goes. A gate sticks, a rib gives—"

"We'll hope it doesn't," Sela cut in. "And if it does, you'll be standing right there."

She said it the way she read out a flow rate.

Kett spun the grease pencil once more, then let it fall and caught it by reflex.

"Look," he said. "They're going to do it with or without your blessing. The only difference is whether it's stupid or very stupid."

Morrow exhaled slowly. "And this one."

Kett gave him a tired smile. "This is stupid with supervision."

* * *

They began the stabilization an hour before the barges were due.

Morrow took his place in the sluice chamber, hand on the same junction brace he'd touched a dozen times before. The pressure climbed — careful, careful, then a little too fast.

He felt it meet him.

It met him before he had his feet right, and the vibration under his forearm dropped and stayed dropped.

Morrow kept his hand where it was and tried to remember the last time he'd said no down here.

The answer came up blank.

The freight whistles came faint through the rain, three low notes layered in echo. The first two went through, the second dragging hard along the far wall; Morrow felt it come down through the ribs and into the brace.

"The third?" Kett asked.

"Third's late," someone said.

Outside, the rain thickened. The level rose another half-hand. Morrow's hand tightened on the brace.

"We should drop back to normal," he said. "Let the third wait. Bring it through when the crest passes."

Silence on the line.

"Say that again?" Kett asked.

"You've made your point. Trade knows we can run them in this load now. They'll keep coming. But today, we're done. Go back under the line before we bake it in."

A low murmur went round the tube. Morrow could picture the faces turning toward Kett, toward the board, toward a decision none of them had been hired to make.

Finally Kett said, "You heard him. Opinions?"

"If we dial down now, council will scream about playing favorites," Sela said. "First two through, third stuck in the mud, and if we—"

"And if we drop while the third's in the bend and bring it back up after, we ride the line twice instead of once," someone else said. "That's worse math."

"It's stable," another voice said. Morrow didn't know whose. "We're not in the red. It's stable."

Two people repeated it further down the floor.

Kett sighed into the tube. "All right. We keep it until the third shows or we time out. I don't like it either. Morrow, you good?"

Morrow looked at his hand on the brace. Forty minutes of it were in his arm and his shoulder.

"I'm here," he said.

The third came in crooked half an hour later, nose too high, stern dragging. Morrow felt the drag enter the controlled stretch and shifted his stance to meet it, and before he had

finished doing it the spike he'd braced for came and went somewhere under the floor. His hand hadn't moved yet.

The barge went along the near wall and the sound of it came up through the concrete.

Then the shouting changed, and it was not the shouting men do at a barge.

The reading didn't move for any of it. Whatever had happened up there had happened somewhere the engine didn't measure.

"Kett."

"Stay on what you've got." Kett's voice came from further off the mouthpiece than usual. "Stay on it."

"What happened?"

Nothing came back down the tube for long enough that Morrow counted it.

"Deckhand," Kett said. "Fending off. He had the pole braced and the stern came round on him."

"Is he out?"

"He's out."

"Kett—"

"He's out," Kett said, "and I'm not saying the rest of it into a tube."

The stretch had another two minutes in it. Morrow stood in the sluice chamber with his hand flat on a brace that hadn't needed him since the first barge, and listened to boots run on stone over his head.

* * *

* * *

The story continues.

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