

JASON PINGEL • FREE FIRST CHAPTER

The City Between Clouds



Chapter 1: The Price of an Agreement

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Chapter 1 · The Price of an Agreement

A promise made while the world is ending remains a promise after the sky becomes quiet. — Elder Sella

Voss knew they were in trouble before Mira saw the first sign.

His ears went back.

Not flat.

Not frightened.

Annoyed.

Mira had learned the difference.

Usually.

They were less than half a mile from Foxglove Steps, following the old root-road beneath a canopy so thick that morning arrived in pieces. Sunlight slipped between leaves in narrow golden shafts. Rain from the

previous night still clung to enormous ferns and occasionally dropped onto Mira's shoulders with deliberate accuracy.

Voss stopped.

Mira nearly walked into him.

"What?"

The storm-cat looked toward the road ahead.

His first pair of eyes watched heat. His second followed movement. His smallest pair searched memory.

All six narrowed.

Mira sighed. "That bad?"

His tail struck the road once.

"Yes, apparently."

A little over a week had passed since the battle at the Null Gate. The immediate world-ending part was over,

which Mira had learned was not the same thing as being finished.

The Starforge was still being repaired far from Nyr Vale. The Manyheart Engine still carried Orun's living root as one of its consenting parts. Mira and Voss had come home because the promise made in the Rootdeep had survived the battle that followed it.

Inside Mira's coat rested the one piece of that day Voss had left for her to remember: a broken Nyr warden clasp, the old legal mark that had once named him a bonded beast in her care.

Mira had spent most of the journey home imagining sleep. A bath. Fresh bread. Perhaps two consecutive hours in which nobody asked her to save a world, negotiate with an ancient intelligence, explain the Starforge, or prevent someone from turning philosophy into artillery.

Apparently she had aimed too high.

The first banner appeared around the next bend.

WELCOME HOME, MIRA ASHWREN.

Somebody had painted beneath it:

TRAITOR.

Another person had painted over that.

Then someone else had written:

LET THE COUNCIL DECIDE.

Below everything, in smaller handwriting:

VOSS OWES TOMA FOUR RIVERFISH.

Voss stopped beneath the sign.

Mira looked at him. "I thought it was three."

His expression did not change.

"You stole another one?"

Voss walked on.

"That silence is basically a confession."

Foxglove Steps emerged gradually through the trees.

The city had grown around one of the elderroot's enormous lower branches, though calling it a branch was unfair to ordinary branches. It was wide enough to hold homes, markets, gardens, and several thousand people.

Living bridges curved between terraces. Water ran through channels grown directly into the wood. Homes occupied natural hollows whose windows glowed amber beneath the leaves.

Normally, returning travelers heard Foxglove Steps before seeing it.

Children. Vendors. Windbells. Arguments about fruit prices.

Today Mira heard people.

A lot of people.

Not laughing.

"Wonderful," she muttered.

Voss's ears flicked.

The crowd waited at the lower terrace.

Growers. Hunters. Root-singers. Healers.

Beast-wardens. Council representatives. Families.

Children standing on railings because adults had failed to build politics at a height inconvenient to children.

And in the center stood Elder Sella.

She looked exactly as irritated as Mira remembered.

Which was comforting.

"Mira Ashwren," Sella called.

"Still alive."

"I can see."

"Then why ask?"

"I was hoping your travels improved your manners."

"They encountered difficult conditions."

A few people laughed.

Not enough.

Sella looked at Voss. "Voss."

He regarded her.

Then Sella bowed her head.

Just slightly.

Mira noticed.

So did Voss.

There had been a time when Sella would have greeted Mira first and treated Voss as part of her equipment.

That time was apparently ending.

Slowly. Painfully. But ending.

Sella's gaze moved to Mira's coat. "You kept it?"

Mira drew out the broken clasp. "Voss left it for me."

The crowd murmured.

Voss moved closer to her.

Not protectively.

Simply near.

Mira had learned not to invent motives where she could ask - or wait.

Sella turned toward the city. "All seven councils are assembled."

Mira closed her eyes. "No."

"Yes."

"I haven't eaten."

"They've been waiting two days."

"They can wait through breakfast."

"The beast-wardens formed an eighth council this morning."

Mira opened her eyes. "Of course they did."

"They demanded equal standing."

"Did you give it to them?"

"No."

"Good."

"They brought chairs."

Mira looked toward the upper terrace.

A group of green-gray-coated wardens stood together.

Every one of them had carried a chair.

Mira stared.

Sella said, "Apparently furniture establishes jurisdiction."

"I was gone too long."

"Much too long."

A man in the crowd shouted, "Tell us what you promised!"

Another voice answered, "She had no authority to promise anything!"

A third: "The agreement saved us!"

Then: "It changed our laws without a vote!"

Someone shouted, "Ask the beast!"

Silence spread strangely quickly.

Mira felt Voss become still beside her.

The man who had shouted seemed suddenly aware that the beast in question was the size of a draft horse and capable of storing lightning in his fur.

Mira looked at him.

"That," she said, "is actually part of the problem."

The Hall of Branches had been designed under the belief that open air encouraged honest government.

Mira suspected the architects had never attended government.

Every seat was filled.

The eighth council had placed its chairs directly in the central aisle.

Sella stood at the central root with a new staff.

Mira eyed it. "What happened to the old one?"

"Politics."

"Understandable."

Voss settled beside Mira.

Not behind her.

Beside.

People noticed.

Good.

Mira set the broken clasp on the central root.

Conversation stopped.

The silver family seal had split through the middle. Before Rootdeep, Nyr law had treated that mark as proof that Voss belonged under her care. Mira had broken it. Voss had chosen which piece to leave her.

The nearest councilor stared at it as if broken metal might still bite.

Voss's smallest eyes opened.

Deep beneath the platform, the elderroot carried one slow pulse from the Rootdeep.

Orun.

Sella spoke. "Nearly a month ago, Mira Ashwren returned from the Rootdeep with Orun's consent and its conditions. The living root later joined the Manyheart Engine. It helped us survive the Null Gate. Nyr Vale's part of that agreement remains unsettled."

"Yes," Mira said.

"You asked Orun for a living piece of the world-root?"

"Yes."

"For the Manyheart Engine and the Starforge?"

"Yes."

A councilor from the river districts leaned forward. "An engine that became a weapon."

"For part of one battle," Mira said. "And a system built to carry refusal instead of erase it."

People murmured.

Mira let them.

Honesty had been part of the agreement.

It would remain so now that honesty was inconvenient.

Sella continued. "And Orun demanded conditions."

"Orun didn't demand."

Several wardens laughed.

Mira looked toward them.

The laughter ended.

"Orun refused us," she said. "At first."

That quieted the hall.

"The imperial fleet was above us. The Null Choir was inside the roots. People were dying. Orun could have destroyed imperial bases by moving fault lines, raising water, collapsing forests -"

"Then why didn't it?" someone asked.

"Because a fault line doesn't know which soldier volunteered and which mechanic was conscripted."

Nobody answered.

Mira continued. "We asked for help."

"And?"

"And Orun asked whether refusal would be respected."

Silence.

Mira looked down at the broken clasp.

"I said yes."

A beast-warden stood.

Warden Fen.

He had once taught Mira how to recognize marsh-hound territory by smell. He had also once thrown her into a pond after she ignored the lesson.

She had respected him for most of her life.

That made this worse.

"You allowed a thing beneath our country to decide our laws?"

Mira looked at him. "No."

"You promised changes."

"I promised to bring Orun's conditions home."

"That's the same thing."

"No. It isn't."

Fen stepped into the aisle. "Then say them."

Mira did.

"The Starforge will have no owner."

Murmuring.

"Every living system affected by it must retain a way to refuse."

More murmuring.

Then Mira looked directly at the beast-wardens.

"And Nyr Vale must end the law allowing wardens to claim creatures simply because those creatures cannot speak human words."

The Hall of Branches erupted.

Mira had expected anger.

She had underestimated creativity.

"Madness!"

"Our herds will collapse!"

"You can't grant rights to animals!"

"Who decides intelligence?"

"Does my kitchen lizard require a contract?"

Someone from the farming council yelled, "Your kitchen lizard has better judgment than you!"

Sella struck her staff against the floor.

No effect.

She struck again.

Still nothing.

Voss growled.

Everyone stopped.

The sound wasn't especially loud.

It didn't need to be.

Loose cups trembled on tables. A hanging lantern swung.

Voss opened all six eyes.

Mira looked at him. "Thank you."

He blinked slowly.

Sella straightened her robes. "I may start bringing him to meetings."

Voss's ears moved.

Mira said, "Don't volunteer him."

Sella looked at Voss. "Would you like to attend council meetings?"

Voss stood, turned around, and walked toward the exit.

The hall remained silent.

Sella nodded. "Clear enough."

A few people laughed.

Even Fen almost did.

Almost.

Then he looked toward the door Voss had used.

"My family has worked with marsh hounds for six generations."

Mira waited.

"We raised them. Protected them. Bred fever resistance into their bloodline. They patrol flooded roads. Find missing children. Warn villages before river surges."

"I know."

"You rode Voss into battle."

"Yes."

"You direct him."

Mira's expression changed. "No."

"I've seen you."

"You've seen us work together."

Fen's eyes narrowed. "The bond can carry commands."

"Yes," Mira said. "That is exactly why I do not confuse the ability to push with the right to do it."

"You give commands."

"Sometimes."

"And he follows."

"Sometimes."

Fen folded his arms. "Convenient distinction."

Mira's anger rose.

She let herself feel it before answering.

Years ago she would have snapped. Years ago she would have been certain.

Now uncertainty had become something she respected.

"I have made mistakes with him."

That surprised the room more than any argument could have.

Fen's arms loosened.

Mira continued. "I've mistaken habit for agreement. I've mistaken affection for obedience. Once I tightened a clasp he was trying to remove because I thought it had loosened."

Nobody spoke.

"I didn't understand until I saw the rubbed fur underneath it the next morning."

Fen glanced away.

Mira said, "Being wrong while loving someone doesn't make the mistake harmless."

A woman from the upper council asked, "What replaces the old law?"

Mira looked at her. "I don't know."

Half the hall erupted again.

Mira raised her voice. "I don't know!"

That silenced them.

"That's not the same as having no answer. It means we have work to do."

"You would destroy our system before designing another?"

"No."

Mira looked around the hall.

"But I'm done pretending that a system becomes moral because it's old."

Fen's marsh hound lay beside his chair.

Kesh.

Red-feathered ears. Dark muzzle. Three silver bands around his forelegs and one broad collar around his neck.

Mira noticed him scratching.

Once.

Twice.

Again.

Fen nudged his paw away.

Kesh scratched harder.

Voss had returned to the doorway.

His smallest eyes opened.

Mira followed his gaze.

"Fen."

"What?"

"How long has Kesh been doing that?"

Fen looked down. "Doing what?"

"The band."

Kesh scratched again.

"Always."

Mira's stomach tightened. "Always?"

"He dislikes fittings."

Something cold moved through her.

Because she knew that sentence.

Different words.

Same certainty.

Voss doesn't like the clasp.

Voss always pulls away during fitting.

Voss is difficult about harnesses.

Mira approached slowly.

Kesh stopped scratching and watched her.

She stayed several feet away.

"Fen."

He already knew.

She saw it in his face.

"No."

"Take them off."

"They protect his joints."

"All four?"

"He'll run."

Mira looked at him. "Then let him."

The hall became completely quiet.

Fen stared at her. "You don't understand what you're asking."

"I understand exactly."

"I raised him from a pup."

"That isn't the question."

"He sleeps beside my bed."

"Still not the question."

"He saved my daughter's life."

Mira softened. "I believe you love him."

Fen's jaw tightened. "Then what are you accusing me of?"

"Nothing."

Mira looked at Kesh.

"I'm asking whether love survives an open door."

Fen's face changed.

Slowly, he knelt.

Kesh watched him.

The first clasp opened.

Kesh flinched.

The second came loose.

Then the third.

Finally Fen's hand reached the collar.

He stopped.

Kesh trembled.

Fen whispered something Mira couldn't hear.

Then opened it.

The collar fell onto the floor.

Kesh stood.

No one moved.

He walked toward the open edge of the Hall.

Fen made a sound.

Not quite his name.

Kesh continued.

Twenty steps.

Thirty.

The Hall of Branches had no walls.

Beyond its edge ran a root-road descending into miles of forest.

Freedom.

Kesh reached the road.

Stopped.

Fen had gone pale.

Mira could almost see the command rising in him.

Come.

Stay.

Heel.

Years of words.

Years of training.

His mouth opened.

Then closed.

He said nothing.

Kesh looked back.

For several seconds they stared at one another.

Then the marsh hound turned.
Walked back across the Hall.
And lay beside Fen.
Nobody cheered.
Mira was glad.
This wasn't a victory.
It was a question.
Fen sank onto the floor beside Kesh.
His hand hovered over the animal's neck.
Then stopped.
Kesh leaned into it.
Fen closed his eyes.
Voss walked into the Hall.
He approached Kesh.
The marsh hound stood.

Storm-cat and hound regarded one another.

Voss lowered his head.

Kesh touched noses with him.

Then returned to Fen.

Sella spoke quietly. "That does not solve the law."

"No," Mira said.

"But it changes the conversation."

"Yes."

A councilor near the back muttered, "One animal."

Mira heard him.

"So start with one."

The meeting continued for four hours.

Nothing was decided.

Which apparently counted as progress.

Three committees were formed.

One immediately split.

Two wardens resigned.

One grower threatened to release every bonded glider in his district until somebody pointed out most of them already came and went freely and would probably return for breakfast.

The farming council demanded definitions.

The beast-wardens demanded delays.

The children's representative demanded lunch.

Mira supported the children.

By sunset, her head hurt.

Voss's tolerance had expired several hours earlier.

She found him outside the Hall lying across a branch.

Children had gathered around him.

One small boy was counting Voss's eyes repeatedly, apparently expecting the number to change.

"Six," Mira told him.

"I know."

"Then why keep counting?"

"In case."

Voss opened one eye.

The boy grinned. "Seven!"

"That is not how counting works."

The boy ran away delighted.

Mira sat beside Voss.

For a while neither of them moved.

Below them Foxglove Steps glowed beneath the evening leaves.

Arguments continued on bridges. People clustered outside meeting houses.

Some beast-wardens had removed collars from their animals.

Others had tightened them.

Mira watched one woman walk by with a glider bird perched freely on her shoulder.

Behind her another man dragged a reluctant marsh beast by a silver chain.

Same city.

Same day.

Two futures.

"I thought coming home would be easier."

Voss's tail moved.

"I know. That's on me."

He rested his head against the branch.

Mira leaned backward.

Above them, the elderroot disappeared into a silver cloud ceiling.

It had always been there.

Cloud. Rain. Nothing worth thinking about.

She stared at it.

Voss noticed.

Then looked up too.

"Don't."

His ears lifted.

"That expression means you're thinking."

Voss stood.

"Oh, no."

He stretched, front paws forward, back arched, then stared upward into the clouds.

Mira groaned. "We have had enough discoveries."

Voss continued looking.

"All I want is somewhere nobody is arguing."

His head tilted.

"Yes. Quiet."

Voss looked higher.

Mira followed his gaze.

The great trunk climbed into silver mist. Branches vanished inside it.

Everyone in Nyr Vale knew there was nothing up there.

Or rather - everyone knew anyone who tried climbing into those clouds eventually came back down.

Mira looked at Voss.

"No."

His ears moved.

"No climbing."

Voss stared at her.

"Tomorrow."

He continued staring.

"Maybe."

His tail moved once.

Mira narrowed her eyes. "I recognize manipulation when I see it."

Voss started walking toward the upper branch-path.

"Voss."

He kept going.

Mira watched him.

Then looked back toward the Hall of Branches.

Someone inside shouted, "Point of procedure!"

Another voice answered, "Your procedure has fleas!"

Mira stood.

"Fine."

Voss stopped.

"One hour."

His ears lifted.

"We find a nice branch."

Voss lowered himself slightly.

Mira stared at his back.

"No."

He waited.

"You are not winning because you offered me a ride."

He waited longer.

Mira looked toward the arguing councils.

Then at the clouds.

Then at Voss.

"Oh, I hate that you know me."

She climbed onto his back.

Voss began walking upward.

Neither of them noticed the cloud move.

Not yet.