

JASON PINGEL • FREE FIRST CHAPTER

The Glass Weaver



Chapter 1: The Glass Skiff

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Chapter 1 · The Glass Skiff

AGE NINE — CANALGLASS ROW, AURUM VALE

“Before a child learns to weigh a star, she must first learn the courage to let water reflect it without reaching out to smash the pool.” — Master Sira Vael, Early Lectures on Refractive Light

The glass canals of Aurum Vale did not freeze, but they remembered winter.

At dawn, before the furnace valves of the lower ministries warmed the aqueducts, the water ran so clear that nine-year-old Seren Vey could count the copper coins lost between the submerged flagstones three fathoms below. Her strawberry-blonde hair, copper-gold where the dawn caught it, had escaped its morning braid in two stubborn strands, and her hazel eyes carried a narrow blue ring that became more noticeable whenever she concentrated.

She had counted eleven that morning.

Tovin Rell insisted there were twelve. He was lean and black-haired, with amber-brown eyes, scraped knees, and the permanently hopeful expression of a child who believed every warning sign had been posted for someone less interesting.

"That is a leaf," Seren whispered.

"It's round."

"So is your head."

Miri Tallow, small and bright-faced with chestnut curls escaping beneath her red scarf and green-brown eyes that noticed hurt faster than anyone else, slapped both hands over her mouth to keep from laughing loudly enough to wake the fishmongers.

Dael, who was nine years old like the rest of them but had been nine for nearly seven months and therefore considered himself the senior member of the group, sighed from his seat on an upturned barrel. His sandy-brown hair had been cut crookedly by his father,

and lamp grease already lived beneath his fingernails as though it had signed a lease.

"This," he said, "is why nobody lets us do anything respectable."

"Nobody lets you do anything respectable because you put lamp grease in Master Pellen's tea," Miri said.

"That was Tovin."

"You handed him the grease."

"He said it was honey."

Tovin looked offended. "It was the same color."

The four of them huddled along the damp cedar planks of Canalglass Row while Aurum Vale yawned awake around them. High above, bridges of blue-green glass joined the eastern towers in shining ribs. Solar vines clung to their undersides, each silver leaf still jeweled with rain. Far below, the canal lapped softly against the

stone embankment, and somewhere beneath the walkway an old lock pump gave a sleepy iron cough.

KLUNK.

A pause.

KLUNK-klunk.

Then a long mechanical sigh traveled through the pipes under their feet.

Miri looked down. "It sounds sick."

"It's warming," Dael said.

"It sounds like my uncle after pepper stew."

"Everything sounds like your uncle after pepper stew."

Seren barely heard them.

She knelt with her knees green from moss and held a skiff folded from stolen tax parchment.

Most children along the bridges made boats from baker's wrapping or discarded theater handbills.

Those softened, sagged, and sank in five minutes, which made races brief and noisy. Seren had decided this was poor engineering.

So she had treated her parchment with distilled resin scraped from solar-vine bark. She had folded a double spine into the hull, weighted the miniature keel with a chipped glass prism pried from a ruined transit lantern, and marked tiny measurements along the sides in black ink.

The skiff did not merely float.

It caught the early slant of sunlight passing through the eastern towers and threw a thin arc of cobalt fire across the ripples.

Miri crouched beside her, red scarf dragging dangerously close to the water.

"It's pretty."

Seren ducked her head, pleased and suddenly embarrassed to be pleased. "It's supposed to be balanced."

"It can be both."

Tovin poked the stern.

Seren smacked his finger away. "Don't."

"I was checking it."

"With what? Your finger?"

"My finger is very reliable."

"Your finger got stuck in a lock gear last week."

"And it got out."

"Dael got it out."

Dael rubbed grease into a frayed towing harness and did not look up. "I am still waiting for payment."

Tovin produced a walnut from his pocket.

"That is not payment."

"It is if you're hungry."

Dael took the walnut.

Seren smiled despite herself.

This was the part she liked best: before the city fully woke, before mothers called from windows and masters opened shops and adults began asking where children were going, why they were wet, and whether anyone had touched anything labeled municipal. At this hour, Aurum Vale seemed to belong to the four of them.

The canal sweepers had not rung seventh chime. The school bells were still silent. No one had yet told Seren that a paper skiff had limits.

She set the skiff on the water.

"If the current bends at the arch," she said, "it should ride the crest all the way to Moonsilver Avenue."

Dael finally glanced over. "Boats don't ride crests. They get swamped by delivery barges."

"This one won't."

"And that is official ledger paper," he added. "You can still see the stamp of the Ministry of Weights on the port hull."

Miri leaned close and squinted. "It says thirty bushels of sweet anise."

"Twenty-six," Seren said.

"What?"

"Twenty-six arrived yesterday. Master Callow dropped four sacks into the lock gate because he was trying to steer with his elbows."

Tovin stared at her. "How do you know that?"

"I watched."

"You watch everybody."

Seren looked down at the little boat. "People leave things unsaid, but they never leave them unmeasured."

Dael and Miri exchanged a look.

Tovin whispered, "She talks like an old person when she's excited."

Seren's ears went hot.

"I heard that."

"Old people hear everything."

She shoved him with one shoulder. He nearly toppled into the canal and windmilled his arms, grinning.

"Quiet," Dael hissed, though he was smiling too. "If the sweepers catch us in the upper trough, we're done."

Seren placed two fingers against the skiff's folded mast.

For a moment she hesitated.

She was brave when the others were watching. Or at least she had discovered that if she did something

quickly enough, no one could tell the difference between bravery and not having time to become afraid.

She released the boat.

The cedar water took it smoothly.

The little vessel leaned into the current instead of tumbling toward the bridge piling. Its prism keel split the canal's pale turquoise into violet, copper, and blue ribbons. The children moved along the railing with it.

"It's working," Miri breathed.

"Of course it's working," Seren said, too quickly.

"You didn't think it would."

"I did."

"Your face didn't."

"Faces aren't instruments."

"Yours is. It gets this little line right here."

Miri touched between Seren's eyebrows.

Seren swatted her hand away, trying not to laugh.

The skiff reached the shadow beneath the arch.

Then something strange happened.

Seren stopped.

Beneath her sternum, in the quiet hollow where hunger or fear usually lived, a minute warmth prickled.

Not heat exactly.

More like the feeling of a bell being struck miles away in an empty room.

The prism flashed.

The light did not scatter into the canal.

It tightened.

A thread of blue-white brilliance, thin as spider silk, stretched between the skiff's prow and the palm of Seren's right hand.

She gasped.

Miri grabbed her sleeve.

"Seren?"

The skiff accelerated against the tide.

Dael dropped the harness.

"Vey... did you tie something to it?"

"No."

"Then why is it doing that?"

"I don't know."

It was one of the few phrases Seren hated saying aloud.

The thread pulled gently at her fingers. She could feel the canal through it - not water itself, but direction, resistance, speed, the push of one current against another. Numbers seemed to arrange themselves behind her eyes.

It was beautiful.

It was terrifying.

And because she was nine, the second feeling did not cancel the first.

"Do it again," Tovin whispered.

"She's doing it now," Miri said.

"I mean more."

"Don't do more," Dael said.

A delivery bell clanged around the eastern bend.

CLANG. CLANG.

All four children froze.

A melon barge nosed beneath the glass bridge, its paddle assembly churning the canal into green foam.

The iron paddles struck the water with a wet thump-thump-thump while the pilot shouted at someone unseen on the deck.

Dael grabbed Seren's shoulder.

"Your boat."

"I see it."

"It doesn't see the barge."

The skiff should have vanished beneath the first wake.

Instead the blue thread drew taut.

The little paper bow turned three degrees - perhaps four - and slipped neatly between two converging ripples.

Tovin made a noise like a swallowed cheer.

Miri whispered, "Oh."

Not fearfully.

Wonderingly.

Seren forgot the cold planks under her knees. Forgot the wet hem of her skirt. Forgot that her mother had specifically said not to go near the upper canal before breakfast.

For three heartbeats the whole world seemed to narrow to light, water, and the small impossible pull in her palm.

Then a woman's voice came from beneath the bridge.

"A fascinating keel."

Seren squeaked.

The sound escaped before she could stop it.

Tovin ducked behind Dael.

Miri stood so quickly she banged her knee against the railing.

Dael muttered something impolite under his breath.

An elder woman stepped from the archway into the dawn.

She wore four translucent coats in the ancient Auri manner, their hems edged with gray fur that brushed wet stone without seeming to take water. Her hair was bound in silver wire. Over one shoulder hung an

astronomical surveyor's sighting frame of polished walnut and brass.

Her pale gray eyes were fixed on Seren's wrist.

"Though," the woman continued, "the refraction is ninety seconds ahead of the sun's true declination."

Seren's concentration snapped.

The blue thread vanished.

The skiff struck the second wake of the melon barge, folded sadly in half, and disappeared beneath the emerald churn.

"Oh no," Seren whispered.

Tovin leaned over the rail. "It's dead."

"It was paper," Dael said.

"It had a good life."

The woman stopped beside them.

Dael's face changed first.

He straightened so fast that the barrel behind him rolled away and knocked into a stack of empty eel baskets.

CLATTER-CLATTER-CLATTER.

"Magister," he said.

Miri's eyes widened.

Seren's stomach dropped.

Everybody in Aurum Vale knew the name Sira Vael.

Seren had expected someone taller.

She immediately felt guilty about this thought.

Sira did not scold them. That was worse.

She stepped close and held out one ink-stained hand.

Seren looked at it.

Then at Sira.

Then back at the hand.

Around her friends Seren could argue with anything. Adults were harder. Important adults were nearly impossible. Words that had been perfectly organized inside her head became smaller as they approached her mouth.

"Your hand, child," Sira said.

"Oh."

Seren placed hers in it.

Sira turned her palm upward.

"You corrected for the canal's curved bottom. Who taught you the focal arc?"

"Nobody."

Seren's answer was barely above a whisper.

Sira looked at her.

Seren wished she had said it louder.

"Nobody," she repeated, a little firmer. "It looked crooked if I didn't tilt it."

"Nature is crooked," Sira said. "Only vanity expects it to conform to straight lines."

Tovin whispered to Miri, "I like her."

"Shh."

Sira's eyes moved toward them.

Tovin became suddenly fascinated by his shoes.

"Names," Sira said.

Miri blurted, "We didn't steal the paper."

Silence.

Dael covered his face.

Seren stared at Miri.

Miri stared back.

"I panicked," she whispered.

One corner of Sira's mouth moved.

"Your names," she repeated.

"Dael Orun."

"Miri Tallow."

"Tovin Rell."

Seren swallowed. "Seren Vey."

Sira's gaze returned to her.

"Vey."

She seemed to listen to the name.

"My name is Sira Vael."

Seren forgot about the drowned boat.

She knew the stories. Sira had remapped the southern comet fields after the Imperial Academy insisted there were no southern comet fields to map. She had repaired the Meridian Clock after three ministries declared it beyond restoration. Dael claimed she had

once told the Minister of Celestial Roads that his favorite astronomical model was "an expensive collection of circular mistakes."

Seren had never admired anyone so quickly.

Sira released her hand.

"The Moon Archive has eighty thousand volumes of celestial observations requiring sweeping, cataloging, and an unreasonable amount of correction. The apprentices currently assigned to me believe starlight is decorative."

"It isn't," Seren said.

The words came out before shyness could stop them.

Sira's brows rose.

Seren looked at her wet shoes.

"So I have long suspected," Sira replied.

Dael coughed into his fist to hide a laugh.

Sira looked toward the upper city.

The moonsilver towers of Aurum Vale were beginning to catch the full gold of morning. Glass walkways blazed between them. Steam rose from heating vents in thin white banners, and somewhere high above, a chain lift began its day's work with a distant metallic chatter.

CHINK-CHINK-CHINK-CHINK.

Against the whitening sky hung the six pearl moons of Elyndra-9.

Far beyond them, dull and motionless, floated the gray pebble of Ilyr.

"Do you know what the seventh moon does, Seren Vey?"

Seren shaded her eyes.

"It stays behind."

"It sleeps," Sira corrected. "And those who sleep in the sky eventually wake with an appetite."

Miri edged closer to Seren.

Tovin looked delighted.

Dael looked like he wished adults would stop saying things designed to give children nightmares.

Sira turned back.

"Tomorrow. Ninth chime. West entrance of the Moon Archive. Bring a parent or guardian who can be convinced that scholarship is only moderately fatal."

Seren blinked.

"Me?"

"Unless one of your companions built the boat."

Tovin pointed at Seren immediately.

"Definitely her."

"Traitor," Seren muttered.

"I don't want moderately fatal scholarship."

"You climbed the grain crane yesterday."

"That's different. I knew what the grain crane did."

Sira's mouth twitched again.

Seren gathered enough courage for a question.

"Am I in trouble?"

"Almost certainly."

"For the ledger paper?"

"For being nine. The paper is a lesser offense."

Miri giggled.

Seren considered this seriously.

"What happens at the archive?"

"You will answer questions."

"What kind?"

"The kind whose answers produce more questions."

That sounded wonderful.

Sira began to walk away.

Seren found one more scrap of courage.

"Magister?"

The old woman stopped.

Seren held up the hand that had been connected to the skiff.

"What was the blue thread?"

Something in Sira's face changed.

Only for an instant.

But Seren noticed small things.

"Tomorrow," Sira said.

Then she disappeared into the waking traffic of Canalglass Row.

The four children remained quiet until she was halfway across the bridge.

Dael turned to Seren.

"You're dead."

"She didn't threaten to kill me."

"Your mother will."

Miri nodded gravely. "Mine would."

Tovin leaned over the rail. "Can we get the prism back first?"

Seren peered into the canal.

Something blue winked beneath the water.

Her prism had lodged between two brass teeth of the runoff gate.

Dael saw her expression.

"No."

"I didn't say anything."

"Your eyebrows did."

"It's evidence."

"It's trash."

"Those are not opposites."

Tovin was already removing his shoes.

Miri grabbed the back of his shirt.

"Absolutely not. Your mother said if you fall in again, she's sewing bells onto your clothes."

"She can't catch me if she can hear me coming."

"That is exactly what bells do."

Seren climbed over the rail.

"Seren," Dael said.

"I'll be quick."

"That's what you said before the roof tile incident."

"That was quick."

"You fell through a bakery awning."

"Quickly."

Five minutes later Seren climbed back onto the walkway soaked to the waist, hair plastered to her cheeks, the blue prism clenched triumphantly between her teeth.

Miri wrapped her scarf around Seren's shoulders.

Dael muttered about pneumonia.

Tovin asked if he could try the prism next.

Nobody noticed the faint blue spark that moved once inside the glass and went still.

By the time Seren reached home, her mother was waiting in the doorway with both arms folded.

Seren stopped three steps away.

Mara Vey was still striking even when annoyed: a dark-haired woman with gray-green eyes, a straight nose, and the kind of steady face that made customers confess how they had actually broken their memory lamps. Fine glass cuts crossed her capable hands. She looked first at her daughter's wet clothes, then at the prism, then at the trail of muddy footprints behind four children who had apparently decided that collective guilt was safer than individual guilt.

"Good morning," Seren offered.

"No."

Miri whispered, "I told you."

"It could improve," Seren said.

"Inside."

The Vey family shop sat beneath Bridge Twelve, though calling it a shop gave it more dignity than it possessed. It had one crooked brass sign, two walls of permanent construction, one wall made mostly from

patched sailcloth, and a roof that leaked whenever rain came from the west.

Which was often.

The sign read:

VEY LANTERN REPAIR

MEMORY WICKS - GLASS - NAMES RESTORED

Someone had once painted a gold star beside the lettering.

Time had eaten half of it.

Seren liked it better that way.

Inside, shelves climbed nearly to the ceiling, crowded with lanterns of every shape and age. Some were simple household memory lamps - palm-sized cylinders of frosted glass that held a name, a voice, or a few preserved moments. Others were ancestral lamps with bronze cages and crystal cores, too valuable for

most canal families to own and too temperamental for respectable scholars to repair.

Those were Seren's favorite.

They made sounds when the shop warmed.

Tiny sounds.

A glass tick.

A silver filament singing under tension.

The papery whisper of memory wicks settling inside their housings.

Sometimes, if three or four old lamps stood close together, the shop seemed to breathe in its sleep.

Seren loved that too.

Mara pointed at the floor.

"Boots."

Four pairs came off.

"Wet things by the stove."

Four children obeyed.

Mara looked at Dael, Miri, and Tovin.

"Do your families know where you are?"

Three expressions became very interesting.

"Mostly," Miri said.

"That means no."

"It means they know we're somewhere."

Mara closed her eyes.

"Wonderful."

Dael tried to help by saying, "We were supervising Seren."

Mara opened her eyes.

"Were you successful?"

Dael thought about this.

"No."

"At least you're honest."

She sent the others home with strict instructions to report themselves before someone began dragging the canals.

Tovin paused at the door.

"Seren?"

"What?"

"If you go somewhere interesting, come get us."

"Tovin," Mara said.

He vanished.

Miri poked her head back in.

"He means tomorrow. Somewhere interesting tomorrow. With permission."

"Goodbye, Miri."

"Goodbye, Mistress Vey."

The door shut.

The shop became very quiet.

Seren preferred Tovin's version.

Mara folded her arms.

"Now tell me why Dael's grandmother sent a runner to inform me that my daughter was seen stealing imperial records, conducting unauthorized canal experiments, nearly climbing into a runoff gate, and speaking with Master Sira Vael before breakfast."

"I didn't steal imperial records."

Mara lifted one eyebrow.

"They were Ministry of Weights records."

"Seren."

"And they were wrong."

"That does not make them public folding material."

Seren set the prism carefully on the workbench.

"Master Sira told me to come to the Moon Archive tomorrow."

Mara's hand stopped halfway toward the kettle.

The movement was small.

Seren noticed small things.

"Did she?"

"Ninth chime. West entrance. She said to bring a parent who believes scholarship is only moderately fatal."

Mara resumed reaching for the kettle.

"That sounds like Sira."

Seren stared.

"You know her?"

"Everyone knows of her."

That was not the same answer.

Seren stored the difference away.

The kettle began to hiss.

Mara pushed a dark memory lamp toward her.

"Before we discuss why the most troublesome astronomer in Aurum Vale has taken an interest in my most troublesome child, tell me why this lamp will not wake."

Seren forgot to be suspicious for almost three seconds.

She leaned over the workbench.

"The wick is bad."

"New."

"The crystal is fractured."

"It isn't."

Seren narrowed her eyes.

Within the lantern sat a nest of silver filament, thin as spider silk. At its center rested a bead of translucent

stone. A name had been etched around the inner brass ring.

ARDEN VALEK

The letters had been polished so many times that some were barely visible.

Seren tapped the housing with one fingernail.

Tink.

"Maybe he doesn't want to wake up."

Mara lowered the magnifying lens.

"That is not how memory lamps work."

"How do we know?"

"Because lamps do not want things."

"People said the same about river engines before the East Lock killed six dockworkers."

"River engines do not want things either."

"Then why did it kill six dockworkers?"

"Because someone forgot a pressure seal."

Seren thought about this.

"That sounds like what a river engine would want us to think."

Mara sighed through her nose.

Seren tried not to smile.

"You enjoy this too much," her mother said.

"What?"

"Existing."

"I didn't pick it."

Mara's mouth twitched.

"Look again."

Seren did.

She moved the lantern toward the window. Morning light passed through the glass.

Something flashed among the filaments.

There.

One silver strand had been twisted beneath another.

Not broken.

Reversed.

"That one."

"What about it?"

"It's backward."

"Filament doesn't have a front or back."

"That one does."

"Seren."

"Turn it around."

Mara studied her daughter, then used tweezers to lift the thread and rotate it.

The lantern inhaled.

There was no other word for it.

A soft hhhaaah moved through the crystal as light gathered inside, weak and gray at first, then warm as candle flame. The filaments brightened one after another with tiny silver pings.

Ping.

Ping.

Ping.

The whole lamp glowed pale gold.

A man's voice whispered from somewhere inside it.

"Elia?"

Seren stopped smiling.

The voice was old.

Confused.

Tender.

"Elia, is that you?"

The light softened and went still.

Mara looked at Seren.

"You saw the twist through the housing?"

"Yes."

"Without the lens?"

Seren nodded.

Mara glanced toward the cloudy shop window.

Beyond it, porters and traders moved beneath the bridge. A canal inspector was writing something on a slate. Seren hoped it was not about her.

Mara lowered her voice.

"Don't tell anyone."

"Why?"

"Because I said so."

"That's not a reason."

"It is when I'm your mother."

"That's a position, not a reason."

"Seren."

She folded her arms, then immediately unfolded them because it felt too much like something Tovin would do before losing an argument.

Mara closed the lantern casing.

"Some people like useful gifts," she said. "Other people like owning useful gifts. Learn the difference before you show strangers what you can do."

Seren's eyes moved toward the blue prism.

"Does Master Sira like useful gifts?"

Mara was quiet too long.

"Master Sira likes useful questions. That can be nearly as dangerous."

"So I can go tomorrow?"

"I did not say that."

"You also didn't say no."

"Do not build bridges out of missing words."

Seren touched the memory lamp.

"Was Elia his wife?"

"Daughter. According to the intake card, she died before he did."

Seren stared at the brass name.

"Then who was he calling for?"

"A memory."

"But he sounded like he thought she was here."

"That's what memories do sometimes."

Seren thought about the blue thread over the canal.

About the way it had felt through her fingers - not as though she had made the light move, but as though she had remembered a rule the light already knew.

"Do memories know they're memories?"

Mara sighed.

"Go dry your hair before you make me regret teaching you words."

By evening, Aurum Vale had transformed.

The Lantern Rising was the oldest tradition in the city. People said it began before the canals, before the glass towers, before Auralis itself had decided what to call itself.

Every year, on the first evening of the autumn convergence, families carried memory lamps to the water and spoke the names of the dead.

Then they set the lanterns afloat.

Thousands of lights drifted through Aurum Vale's canal system until the city looked as though the stars had fallen into the water and found the reflection more interesting than the sky.

Seren loved the Lantern Rising with the wholeheartedness children reserved for things adults had not yet managed to make boring.

She loved the food carts hissing beneath copper awnings.

She loved the bells tied to the long ferry poles.

She loved the glass bridges glowing from within, every pane catching a different color from the lanterns below.

She loved the sound of the city layered upon itself: fiddles beneath one bridge, hand drums beneath another, vendors calling sugared pear cakes, children shrieking when tiny candlefish nipped at their fingers

near the waterline, and beneath everything the slow slap and swirl of the canals carrying names away.

Even the machinery sounded festive.

Lift gears clicked high in the towers.

Water pumps thudded deep beneath the paving stones.

The great lock at Southglass opened with a groan so low Seren felt it through the soles of her shoes.

She stopped walking.

"Did you feel that?"

Miri, beside her, nodded solemnly.

Tovin said, "I think my teeth moved."

Dael said, "Your teeth are loose because you keep opening walnuts with them."

All four children were together again, clean enough that their parents had apparently decided public embarrassment had limits.

Miri wore a blue ribbon in each braid. Tovin had somehow acquired a paper crown from the pastry guild and refused to explain why. Dael carried his family's lantern with both hands, suddenly careful in a way he rarely was with anything else.

Seren liked seeing that.

It made her feel less strange about being careful with hers.

Scholars gave complicated explanations for the ritual.

Priests gave longer ones.

Mara gave only one.

"A name is a lantern," she told Seren as they walked beneath Bridge Twelve. "And a lantern is a rebellion against the dark."

Seren liked that explanation because it was short enough to remember and sounded as though darkness

were a government one could annoy by filing the proper paperwork.

At Southglass Run, the four children knelt beside their families.

Seren had three lamps.

One belonged to her grandfather.

One to an aunt she had never met.

The third was empty.

"Why do we bring an empty one?" she asked.

"For the names nobody remembers anymore," Mara said.

"How can we remember them if we don't know their names?"

"We remember that they had one."

Seren considered this.

"That seems inefficient."

Miri made a strangled laugh beside her.

Mara looked down at Seren.

"Not everything needs to be efficient."

"Why?"

"Because then you'd have nothing left to improve."

Seren looked up.

Mara smiled.

Together they lowered the lamps onto the water.

The current caught them.

One by one they joined the river of light.

For a little while no one spoke.

Even Tovin.

Seren watched the lanterns drift until she could no longer tell which three were hers.

Miri leaned against her shoulder.

"Do you think they can hear us?"

Seren knew what an older version of herself might have said.

Something about crystal resonance or memory decay.

But she was nine, and the water was full of stars.

"I hope so," she whispered.

Miri smiled.

Something tapped Seren's boot.

Dael stood one step higher on the embankment, attempting to look innocent.

"Your evidence," he said.

He opened his hand.

The blue prism lay across his palm, cleaner than Seren had left it.

"You stole it."

"From your windowsill."

"That's still stealing."

"I learned from the Ministry of Weights."

Seren took the glass.

"Why did you clean it?"

"My grandmother made me. She said if I was going to assist in your criminal career, I should at least have standards."

Tovin leaned in.

"Let me see."

"You always say that right before breaking something," Dael said.

"That's because I need to see it before I break it."

Seren held the prism toward the nearest lantern.

Gold light fractured into blue.

Normal.

She turned it toward a bridge lamp.

Normal again.

Then something above the western towers flashed.

Blue-white.

Gone.

Seren straightened.

"Did you see that?"

"See what?" Miri asked.

Stars filled the narrow spaces between the buildings. Three moons were visible tonight: bright Athea high above the east, little Corin near the horizon, and farther north the dull gray disk of Ilyr.

Nobody paid much attention to Ilyr.

It was ugly as moons went.

No bright seas. No silver rings. No seasonal color.

Just a gray coin hanging in darkness as if the heavens
had forgotten to spend it.

Seren raised the prism.

She found a pale star beside Ilyr.

The star shifted.

She lowered the glass.

Back.

Glass up.

Shift.

Glass down.

Back.

Dael leaned close.

"What are you doing?"

"Being bothered."

"You do that professionally."

Seren ignored him.

She changed the angle.

The nearby stars refracted predictably, sliding in clean relation to the thickness of the prism.

One did not.

It moved farther.

Not much.

Enough.

The warmth beneath Seren's sternum returned.

A bell in an empty room.

She slowly turned the prism toward Ilyr.

The gray moon sharpened.

For one heartbeat, nothing happened.

Then Seren saw lines beneath its surface.

Perfect lines.

Straight lines.

Crossing lines.

Geometry where mountains should have been.

Her mouth opened.

No sound came out.

Miri noticed first.

"Seren?"

Seren forgot to breathe.

The lines did not lie upon the moon.

They lay inside it.

Layer beneath layer, faint as bones beneath skin.

"What?" Tovin said. "What do you see?"

Seren handed him the prism without thinking.

He pressed it to one eye.

"Ow. Everything is blue."

"Look at Ilyr."

"Which one's Ilyr?"

All three stared at him.

"What? There are a lot of moons."

Dael took the prism.

"Gray one. North."

He looked.

His joking expression faded.

"I see... something."

Miri snatched it next.

"That's not fair. I want - oh."

She went still.

Seren's heart beat faster.

"You see them?"

"Lines," Miri whispered.

Tovin grabbed for the glass.

"Let me try again."

A hand closed around Seren's shoulder.

She jumped so hard she nearly fell into the canal.

Mara stood behind her.

"Mother."

"What are you doing?"

Seren held up the prism.

"Look."

Mara's expression changed when she saw the glass.

"At what?"

"Ilyr."

Mara raised it.

For two seconds she looked like a woman examining an ordinary moon.

Then her hand tightened.

Seren saw it.

A stillness beside the mouth.

Fear behind the eyes.

"Do you see the lines?" Seren whispered.

Mara lowered the prism.

"We're going home."

"You saw them."

"Seren."

"You did."

Dael looked toward his grandmother's stall and apparently decided he had urgent business elsewhere.

Tovin started backing away.

Miri remained where she was, though she slipped her hand into Seren's.

"Old glass can produce internal reflections," Mara said.

"Not like that."

"You are tired."

"No."

"You've been awake since before dawn, swimming in canal water and irritating astronomers. You are tired."

"Master Sira asked me about Ilyr this morning."

Mara's eyes snapped to hers.

"What exactly did she ask?"

"What the seventh moon does."

"And what did you say?"

"That it stays behind."

"What did she say?"

Seren hesitated.

"That it sleeps."

Mara looked up at Ilyr.

For a moment, among thousands of lanterns and laughing families, Seren saw her mother look afraid of the sky.

That frightened Seren more than the lines.

"We're leaving," Mara said.

This time Seren obeyed.

Rain came after midnight.

It began as a soft ticking against the patched roof.

Tick.

Tick-tick.

Then the clouds opened and the whole canal quarter vanished beneath a silver hiss.

Seren lay awake in the narrow room above the shop, staring at the dark beams overhead.

On the table beside her bed rested the blue prism.

Mara had taken it away after the festival.

Seren had taken it back.

She did not think of this as theft.

Property became philosophically complicated when one's mother confiscated an object one had personally dragged from a canal.

Downstairs, the memory lamps murmured in their cabinets as the temperature changed.

Glass ticked.

A brass cage gave a tiny ping.

A loose shutter rubbed against the wall outside.

Eeeh... eeeh... eeeh...

Seren pulled the blanket over her head.

She lasted twelve seconds.

Then she threw it off.

She needed to see Ilyr again.

That was all.

Just see it.

She was not going to touch anything.

She told herself this twice, which should have warned her.

She dressed and climbed through the narrow window above the repair awning.

Rain struck her face at once.

She dropped onto the wet canvas with a soft whomp and nearly slid off the edge.

A hand caught her wrist.

Seren almost screamed.

Miri's face appeared beneath the awning.

"Shh!"

Seren stared.

"What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you."

"Why?"

"Because you were going to sneak out."

"I was not."

Miri looked at Seren's boots.

Then at the rope around Seren's shoulder.

Then at the blue prism in her hand.

"You are literally outside your window."

A whisper came from below.

"Move. I'm getting rained on."

Tovin emerged from behind a rain barrel wearing his paper festival crown under a hood.

Dael stood beside him with a tool roll tucked under his coat.

Seren stared at all three.

"How did you know?"

Dael shrugged.

"You looked at the old observatory seven times on the walk home."

"Eight," Miri said.

"Seven."

"Eight. I counted."

Seren felt strangely offended that someone else had counted something better than she had.

Tovin grinned.

"So where are we going?"

"Home," Seren whispered. "All of you."

Nobody moved.

"I'm serious."

"So are we," Miri said.

"My mother said -"

"Your mother said we're not supposed to do dangerous things," Tovin said. "She did not specifically say anything about observatories."

Dael looked at him.

"That is the stupidest argument you've made today."

"Today started at midnight. Give me time."

Seren chewed her lip.

Part of her wanted them gone.

The sensible part.

Another part - the larger part, if she was honest - felt relieved.

The city seemed much bigger at night.

And nine-year-olds, no matter what they told one another in daylight, understood that darkness changed the size of things.

"Fine," Seren whispered. "But nobody touches anything."

Tovin looked personally wounded.

"Then why did I come?"

"To carry the rope."

"That's insulting."

"Carry the rope."

He took it.

Aurum Vale after midnight belonged to different people.

The merchants had vanished. Ministry windows glowed faintly behind rain. Lockkeepers moved through the fog with hooded lamps. Night ferrymen poled black boats beneath the bridges while lantern collectors used long brass hooks to lift empty festival cages from the water.

The four children moved north beneath shared awnings and along maintenance walks slick with rain.

Their voices stayed low.

Their courage came and went in turns.

Tovin led across narrow places and pretended never to be afraid.

Miri talked whenever silence became too frightening.

Dael complained about every bad decision while making sure everyone stepped over the loose boards.

Seren kept looking upward.

Ilyr followed between the towers.

The old public observatory stood above the Fourth Ascension, built into the side of a tower whose upper floors had been abandoned after a lightning fire twenty years earlier.

The lower rooms were still used for public sky lessons. Seren had attended three.

She had been asked not to attend a fourth.

Apparently correcting a lecturer seventeen times in one evening was "disruptive."

Seren maintained that sixteen corrections had been necessary.

The observatory doors were locked.

Tovin smiled.

"Finally."

Dael sighed.

"Doors are supposed to stop people."

"Only people who don't know about windows."

The rain gutter ran beside a carved stone pillar to an upper ventilation opening.

Tovin started climbing before anyone agreed he should.

His shoes slipped twice.

The second time, Miri gasped and grabbed Seren's arm.

"He's going to fall."

"I'm not going to fall," Tovin whispered down.

"You almost fell!"

"Almost is just didn't with excitement."

Dael muttered, "I hate him."

"No, you don't," Miri said.

"I hate parts of him."

Tovin reached the vent and disappeared inside.

A moment later his face returned.

"Come on."

"Is it safe?" Seren asked.

"Probably."

"That's not a useful answer."

"Then yes."

"Did you change the answer because you checked?"

"No."

"Tovin."

Miri started climbing.

"If we wait for you two to finish, we'll be adults."

Seren followed.

The climb was harder than it had looked from the ground.

Halfway up, she made the mistake of looking down.

The canal was a black ribbon far below, broken by lantern reflections.

Her hands became damp inside her gloves.

"I don't like this," she whispered.

Miri was just above her.

"Don't look down."

"I already did."

"Then don't do it twice."

Seren pressed her forehead against the cold stone, took one breath, and climbed again.

When she finally rolled through the vent, Tovin offered his hand.

She ignored it for half a second out of pride, then took it because the floor was farther down than expected.

Dael came last, grumbling the entire way.

Inside, the observatory smelled of brass, dust, wet wool, and old paper.

Rain rattled against the dome overhead.

The children stood still until their breathing quieted.

Moonlight spilled through the high glass in pale bars.

The main telescope occupied the center of the room, enormous and ceremonial. Its brass tube was thick enough for Tovin to crawl through, which Seren knew because he immediately considered it.

"No," three voices whispered.

He looked hurt again.

Seren moved closer to the machine.

Up close it was magnificent.

She had seen it during lessons, but never like this - asleep in darkness, without scholars or visitors around it.

Counterweights hung from chains thicker than her wrist. Graduated rings overlapped one another around the mount. Tiny engraved stars circled the adjustment wheels.

The rain made soft drumbeats on the dome.

Somewhere inside the telescope, cooling metal ticked.

Tick.

Tick.

Tink.

Seren reached out but stopped before touching the brass.

"It's beautiful," Miri whispered.

Seren nodded.

She was too astonished to make a clever answer.

That happened sometimes.

Words simply fell away.

She imagined the machine following stars through the night, its gears turning one tooth at a time while everyone below slept.

Dael crouched beside the base.

"This one's newer than the housing."

"What is?"

"That bearing. Somebody replaced it."

Seren leaned down.

"How can you tell?"

"Different grease."

She smiled.

This was why Dael came.

He could look at a machine and see its history in scratches and oil stains.

Miri wandered toward a wall of framed sky charts.

"Seren."

"What?"

"Why does this one have seven moons?"

Seren joined her.

The chart was old and faded. Six moons had names written beside them.

The seventh circle was blank.

Tovin appeared between them.

"Maybe they forgot."

"People don't forget moons," Seren said.

"People forget everything. My father forgot my birthday."

"He remembered the next day."

"Which was not my birthday."

Dael opened a drawer.

It squealed.

SKREEEEEE.

All four children jumped.

Dael slammed it shut.

The drawer squealed again, shorter this time.

Eek.

Miri clutched her chest.

"Don't do that!"

"I didn't know it would scream."

Tovin began laughing so hard he had to sit on the floor.

Seren tried to glare at him.

Then Miri started laughing too.

Seren lasted perhaps two seconds longer.

They muffled themselves against sleeves and shoulders, terrified that a night watchman would hear.

That was when Seren noticed the star map hanging crooked behind the eastern desk.

Maps were not supposed to hang crooked in observatories.

She stopped laughing.

"What?" Miri asked.

Seren pointed.

Dael looked at the map.

"It's crooked."

"Exactly."

Tovin frowned. "Things can be crooked."

"Not here."

They moved the map aside.

Behind it stood a narrow iron door.

No handle.

No visible keyhole.

Only a symbol engraved into the metal.

A circle.

Inside it, seven smaller circles.

One had been scratched out.

All four children became quiet.

"That's the chart," Miri said.

Seren took out the blue prism.

It was warm.

"Don't," Dael said.

Seren looked at him.

"Don't what?"

"Whatever you're about to do."

"I don't know what I'm about to do."

"That's worse."

Tovin crouched near the door.

"There's a seam here."

"Don't touch it," Seren said.

He looked up at her.

"You just told me you didn't know what you were doing."

"I know what you're doing."

"What?"

"Touching things."

Miri snorted.

Seren held the prism closer to the symbol.

A point of blue-white light awakened inside the glass.

The children stopped breathing.

From within the wall came a soft mechanical tick.

Then another.

Tick.

Tick.

Somewhere behind the iron, something released with a deep hollow clunk.

KLOONK.

Miri grabbed Seren's sleeve.

Dael stepped backward.

Tovin whispered, "Do it again."

"I didn't do anything."

The iron door shuddered.

A seal that had not moved in years - perhaps decades - gave way with a dry cracking sigh.

Hhhhhhhk.

Then the hinges began to turn.

They did not creak politely.

They screamed.

SKRRRAAAAAAAEEEE.

The sound scraped down the inside of the wall and rolled through the observatory floor. Rust dust sifted from the upper hinge. The door moved only a finger's width, stopped, then groaned farther open with the exhausted complaint of something being forced to remember a job it had hoped never to do again.

All four children stared.

Tovin's grin slowly returned.

"That," he whispered, "was amazing."

Miri slapped his arm.

"That was horrible."

"It can be both," Seren said.

Miri looked at her.

"You stole my line."

Seren smiled.

Beyond the door, stone steps descended into darkness.

Cold air touched their faces.

It smelled of mineral dust, old oil, and something metallic that reminded Seren of lightning.

Dael peered down.

"We should go home."

Tovin said, "Yes."

Nobody moved.

Miri looked at Seren.

"Are we going down?"

Seren's stomach fluttered.

She did not want to be the first to say yes.

She also knew she would think about those stairs every night for the rest of her life if they left now.

"Just to the bottom," she said.

Dael groaned.

Tovin beamed.

Miri tightened her scarf.

They found a wall lamp beside the doorway. Dael coaxed the wick alive with flint while Seren watched.

Fffft.

A weak amber flame appeared.

The stairs swallowed it almost immediately.

Tovin went first.

"Why do you always go first?" Miri whispered.

"Because if something eats me, you can run."

Miri stopped.

"Don't say that."

Tovin looked back.

For once he noticed her face.

"Nothing's going to eat me," he said quickly. "I was joking."

"Bad joke."

"Sorry."

They continued.

The staircase spiraled farther than it should have.

Their footsteps changed as they descended.

At first: tap, tap, tap against dry stone.

Then: tok, tok, tok where the steps became metal-edged.

Then, lower still, each footfall returned from somewhere far beneath them.

Tap.

...tap.

...tap.

Seren counted thirty-six steps.

Then forty-eight.

Then sixty.

"How far underground are we?" Miri asked.

"Too far," Dael said.

"That's not a number."

"It's the number I'm using."

At the bottom stood a chamber much older than the observatory above it.

Not neglected.

Hidden.

There was a difference.

Seren stepped inside and forgot, for a while, to be afraid.

The room was enormous.

Its ceiling arched into darkness, crossed by bronze ribs. Mechanisms lined the walls in concentric tiers: gear trains, counterweights, glass cylinders clouded with age, narrow brass pipes disappearing into stone, and circular housings larger than carriage wheels. Thin channels had been carved into the floor in repeating geometric arcs.

At the center stood a narrow black telescope mounted inside a complicated cage of rings.

It looked nothing like the polished instrument upstairs.

This one looked as if it had been built before anyone decided machines should be beautiful.

And yet it was.

Not prettily.

Terribly.

Seren stared until her eyes hurt.

"Oh," she said.

That was all.

Miri whispered, "It's huge."

Dael had already moved toward the nearest wall mechanism, hands carefully behind his back.

"These teeth were cut by hand."

Tovin looked upward.

"I could climb that."

"No," the other three said.

He sighed.

The chamber was not silent.

That was the strangest part.

Nothing appeared to be moving, yet small noises lived everywhere.

A pipe clicked as it cooled.

Something deep in the wall gave a slow metallic knock.

The floor carried a vibration so faint Seren felt it more through her knees than her ears.

Mmmmmmmmm.

She crouched and pressed her palm to the stone.

The hum stopped.

Seren looked up.

"Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Dael asked.

The hum returned.

Mmmmmmmmm.

Miri's eyes widened.

"I feel it."

Tovin put both palms on the floor and lowered his ear.

"It sounds like a giant sleeping."

Nobody laughed.

The black telescope pointed north.

Toward Ilyr.

Seren approached it.

There was writing along the tube.

Most had faded.

Miri rubbed dust away with her sleeve.

Three words remained.

DO NOT ALIGN.

Dael read them aloud.

"That's clear enough."

Tovin reached toward a wheel.

Seren slapped his hand.

"Ow."

"It says do not align."

"I wasn't aligning. I was touching."

"Those are related activities."

Miri leaned close to the tube.

"There are smaller words underneath."

Seren joined her.

The old letters were nearly gone.

Miri sounded them out slowly.

"By... seventh... witness?"

"That's not a normal phrase," Seren said.

"Neither is a secret telescope under a public observatory."

Dael circled the mount.

"This wheel is locked."

"Good," Seren said.

Tovin crouched at the opposite side.

"This one isn't."

"Tovin -"

Click.

He froze.

All four stared at his hand.

"I barely moved it."

From beneath the floor came a heavy internal thunk.

Then another.

THUNK.

THUNK.

A chain somewhere in the wall rattled awake.

Ch-ch-ch-ch-ch.

Dael's face went pale.

"Let go."

Tovin let go.

The wheel kept turning.

"I let go."

"I can see that."

"Make it stop."

"I don't know how!"

The chamber inhaled.

Not like the little memory lamp.

This was enormous.

Air rushed through hidden ducts with a deep hollow
WHOOOOSH. Dust lifted from the floor. One glass
cylinder flickered blue, then another, then a third.

Ping.

Ping.

PING.

The black telescope twitched.

Miri grabbed Seren's arm.

"We should go."

"Yes," Seren said.

She did not move.

The telescope turned one degree toward the north.

Gears groaned beneath the floor.

Grrrrrrnk.

A toothed ring around the mount caught, slipped, and caught again with a violent CLACK.

Dael winced.

"That gear is binding."

"Can you stop it?" Seren asked.

"Maybe."

"Maybe is good."

"No, maybe is terrible when a machine is this old."

Tovin pointed.

"What's that?"

A small brass plate had lifted from the side of the mount.

Beneath it were seven recessed buttons.

Six were dark.

One glowed faintly blue.

The seventh.

"Nobody touch anything," Seren said.

Tovin put both hands in his pockets.

"I wasn't going to."

Everyone looked at him.

"I wasn't."

Seren drew out the prism.

Its inner light had brightened.

The warmth beneath her ribs returned.

A bell in an empty room.

No.

Closer now.

A bell just behind a wall.

She lifted the glass toward the eyepiece.

Dael stared at her.

"You said nobody touch anything."

"I'm not touching it."

"You're putting the strange glowing glass next to the forbidden telescope."

"That's different."

"How?"

Seren could not think of an answer quickly enough.

Tovin whispered, "I think it's different."

"Of course you do," Dael said.

Seren looked through the eyepiece.

Blackness.

She adjusted nothing.

"Can you see?" Miri asked.

"No."

The telescope gave a tiny click.

The view shifted.

A gray blur crossed the lens.

Ilyr.

Seren's heart began to hammer.

"It's there."

"Move," Tovin said. "I want -"

"Wait."

She held the prism over the eyepiece.

Nothing.

She rotated it.

The moon sharpened.

Seren gasped.

Behind her, Miri whispered, "What?"

The surface of Ilyr became translucent.

Enormous rings emerged beneath the gray shell.

Mechanical rings.

Not one.

Hundreds.

Nested inside one another at impossible angles,
turning so slowly the movement might have been
mistaken for the tremor of Seren's own eye.

Channels of blue-white light curved through them like
rivers trapped inside glass.

Seren's fingers tightened on the eyepiece.

Her mouth went dry.

Every clever sentence she had ever invented disappeared.

She was nine years old, standing underground in a forbidden room, looking through a machine older than her city at a moon that had gears inside it.

Wonder struck first.

Pure, breathless, enormous wonder.

Then fear arrived.

"Seren?" Miri said.

Seren whispered, "It's not a moon."

Dael's face tightened.

"What do you mean?"

"There are rings inside it."

"Let me see," Tovin said.

"Wait."

Something moved at the center.

A circle opened.

Not on the surface.

Deep inside.

Like an eye waking behind skin.

Seren jerked backward.

The telescope screamed.

SKRIEEEEEEEEEEEE.

All four children shouted.

The entire chamber exploded into motion.

Gears spun.

Chains snapped taut.

A flywheel slammed into rotation with a booming
WHUMP-WHUMP-WHUMP.

Blue light shot through cracks in the floor.

The prism burned Seren's palm.

She dropped it.

"OW!"

It struck the stone with a sharp glass clink and did not
break.

The black telescope snapped downward by three
degrees, then swung back toward Ilyr as though
yanked by an invisible cord.

One bronze ring along the wall began striking another.

BONG.

BONG.

BONG.

Miri covered her ears.

"Make it stop!"

Dael lunged for the binding gear.

"Don't touch it!" Seren shouted.

"You already touched everything!"

"I touched one thing!"

Tovin yelled over the noise, "Technically I touched the first thing!"

"THIS IS NOT HELPING!" Miri screamed.

A row of small valves began venting steam.

PSSSHHH! PSSSHHH! PSSSHHH!

The children ducked.

Seren's heart seemed to match the machine.

Thum.

WHUMP.

Thum.

WHUMP.

The blue button beneath the brass plate brightened.

Tovin stared at it.

Seren saw the thought enter his face.

"Don't."

"I wasn't -"

"Don't!"

A voice came from the stair behind them.

"Nobody move."

Every child froze.

The machine did not.

Master Sira Vael stood at the foot of the stairs.

She was soaked from the rain. Water darkened the shoulders of her archive coat. Her silver-bound hair

had come loose at one temple, which somehow made her look more dangerous rather than less.

Her pale eyes took in the four children.

Then the spinning telescope.

Then the glowing prism on the floor.

Then Tovin's hand, still hovering suspiciously near the seven buttons.

Sira inhaled.

It was a very controlled breath.

That made Seren more frightened than shouting would have.

"I gave you," Sira said to Seren, very quietly, "approximately twelve hours before your first act of trespass against the Moon Archive."

Seren swallowed.

"Technically this is the public observatory."

Dael closed his eyes.

Miri whispered, "Why would you say that?"

"The hidden staircase," Sira continued, "was meant to clarify the distinction."

"It didn't have a sign."

"It had an iron door."

"Doors can be opened."

"Apparently."

Tovin raised one finger.

"In her defense -"

Sira looked at him.

He lowered the finger.

"Never mind."

Sira crossed the chamber in four long strides.

She shut the machine down with movements so practiced that Seren noticed them even while terrified.

A lever.

CLACK.

A locking ring.

CHUNK.

A brass pin hidden beneath the mount.

SNAP.

The flywheel slowed.

Whump... whump... whump...

The chains sagged.

Ch-ch-ch-ch...

The telescope released a long metallic sigh.

Hhhhhhhhhh.

One by one, the gears stopped.

The sudden quiet felt enormous.

Only the rain remained, faint through the stone overhead.

And four children breathing much too loudly.

Sira picked up the prism with a folded handkerchief.

"Where did you get this?"

Seren hesitated.

"Canalglass Row."

"From what?"

"A broken transit lantern."

"When?"

"Three weeks ago."

"Has it behaved this way before today?"

Seren glanced at her friends.

Tovin whispered, "Define behaved."

Seren elbowed him.

Sira's gaze moved to Tovin.

He pretended he had not spoken.

"It moved a star," Seren said.

"Glass refracts light."

"I know."

Sira's eyes narrowed.

Seren felt small again.

Nine years old.

Wet hair.

Mud on her hem.

Three friends she had dragged into a forbidden chamber.

She looked at the floor.

Then Miri's fingers slipped into hers.

A small squeeze.

Seren looked up.

"It moved the wrong star," she said.

For the second time that day, certainty left Sira Vael's face.

This time it did not return quickly enough.

"Explain."

Seren did.

Not elegantly at first.

She stumbled over two words, started the explanation again, and got angry at herself for stumbling. Then the numbers took over and her shyness loosened.

"If it was ordinary refraction, every light source passing through the same thickness and angle should shift according to the curve of the glass. But one star moved farther. Then Ilyr showed lines inside it. At the festival, Miri saw them too. Dael saw something. My

mother looked and pretended she didn't. Then the glass got warm near the door upstairs and the door opened. Tovin touched a wheel -"

"Accidentally," Tovin said.

"You turned it."

"A little."

"And then the telescope moved. I looked through it."

Sira's gaze sharpened.

"Despite the inscription."

Seren's voice became small again.

"It didn't explain why."

Sira closed her eyes.

"Naturally."

Dael whispered to Miri, "We're never going outside again."

Miri whispered back, "My mother is going to make that true."

Sira looked at all four children.

"Your parents believe you're asleep."

No one answered.

"Of course they do."

Seren stared at the black telescope.

"You knew this was here."

Sira looked at her.

"Yes."

"You knew how to shut it off."

"Yes."

"And this morning you asked me about Ilyr."

Silence.

Seren felt the pieces settle into place with the satisfying click of a repaired mechanism.

"You already knew there were lines inside it."

Sira's expression went still.

"I did not say that."

"You didn't have to."

Dael made a tiny sound that was either admiration or dread.

Seren's face warmed.

She had not meant to sound bold.

It had simply come out.

Sira stared at her.

"There are moments, Seren Vey, when being correct is considerably more dangerous than being wrong."

"That doesn't make sense."

"It will."

"What is Ilyr?"

"A moon."

Seren frowned.

"No, it isn't."

Miri whispered, "Seren."

Seren heard the warning but could not stop now.

"There are rings inside it. Moving rings. And blue channels. And something opened in the middle."

Sira's face lost color.

Dael saw it too.

So did Miri.

Tovin stopped smiling.

Sira stepped closer.

"Something opened?"

Seren nodded.

"Like what?"

She did not want to say it.

Saying it would make it less like a strange thing seen through glass and more like something real.

Miri squeezed her hand again.

"Like an eye," Seren whispered.

The chamber seemed to contract around the words.

Sira turned toward the telescope.

The warmth beneath Seren's ribs returned.

A bell struck inside her.

Thum.

She pressed a hand to her chest.

A heartbeat later, something inside the wall answered.

THUM.

All four children jumped.

Miri made a tiny frightened sound.

Dael grabbed Tovin's sleeve.

"Did you touch something?"

"No!"

THUM.

This time the sound came from the telescope itself.

Not metal on metal.

Deeper.

Distant.

A pulse carried through stone.

The seven-circle symbol above the stair began to glow.

One circle.

Two.

Three.

Six inner circles shone pale gold.

The seventh remained dark.

Then the dark circle flashed blue.

Once.

Above them, the observatory bell rang.

BOOOONG.

Miri flinched.

A second chime rolled down the stairs.

BOOOONG.

Seren counted automatically.

Three.

Four.

Five.

Six.

Seven.

The last chime traveled through the hidden chamber until every brass surface seemed to remember it.

Then silence returned.

Nobody moved.

Tovin whispered, "I don't like seven anymore."

Dael nodded. "Best thing you've said all night."

Seren looked up at Sira.

"What does seven mean?"

The old scholar did not answer.

She was staring at the telescope.

For the first time in Seren's life, she saw an adult look at the sky the way children looked into dark rooms.

As if something inside might be looking back.

Sira wrapped the prism more tightly in her handkerchief.

"We are going to your parents."

Four children groaned at once.

Sira's eyebrows rose.

The groaning stopped.

"Now?" Seren asked.

"Now."

"It's raining."

"A remarkable observation."

Tovin whispered, "I like her less now."

"I heard that," Sira said.

"Sorry."

"You will be."

Miri covered her mouth.

Seren could not tell whether she was frightened or trying not to laugh.

Probably both.

They started toward the stair.

Seren took three steps, then stopped.

Sira looked back.

"What?"

Seren twisted her wet sleeve between her fingers.

She suddenly felt shy again.

"Am I still supposed to come to the archive tomorrow?"

Sira was quiet.

Seren's stomach sank.

Maybe she had ruined it.

Of course she had ruined it.

She had lasted less than one day before trespassing into a hidden chamber and waking a forbidden machine.

Nine years old, she thought miserably, and already expelled from a place she had not yet entered.

Sira looked at the four children.

At Dael with oil still under his fingernails.

At Miri clutching Seren's hand.

At Tovin trying very hard not to look at the buttons again.

Then back at Seren.

"No," she said.

Seren's chest tightened.

Sira continued.

"Tomorrow is no longer soon enough."

Seren looked up.

Outside, rain silvered the sleeping canals of Aurum Vale.

The city shone beneath it - bridges, towers, solar vines, lockhouses, lanterns - all of it impossibly beautiful and, for the first time, slightly unfamiliar.

Far past the glass roofs, dull and gray against the black, Ilyr kept its face turned toward the city.

Seren stood among her friends and listened.

The rain whispered.

The old telescope cooled with tiny metallic ticks.

Somewhere beneath the floor, one last gear settled into place.

Click.

And deep behind the gray face of the seventh moon, something that had slept longer than Auralis had possessed a name began, very slowly, to count.