

JASON PINGEL • FREE FIRST CHAPTER

The Starforge Covenant



Chapter 1: The Seventh Moon Wakes

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Chapter 1 · The Seventh Moon Wakes

From the border songs of Auralis: A name is a lantern, and a lantern is a rebellion against the dark.

On the morning the seventh moon opened its eye, Seren Vey was arguing with a dead astronomer.

"It is a lens," she told him.

The astronomer's memory stood waist-deep in the blue light of the archive well, dressed in the old Auri fashion of six translucent coats and no shoes. Master Pell had been dead for a hundred and forty-two years. Death had not improved his patience.

"It is a moon," he said. "I watched it cross the eastern meridian before your grandmother's grandmother learned to spell her own name. Moons do not become lenses because an impatient student wishes to publish before breakfast."

Above them, morning entered Aurum Vale by a thousand beautiful routes. It poured through the glass ribs of the Moon Archive, struck the water in the sky canals, and traveled in trembling blue bands across the floor. Rain from the night before still clung to the solar vines on the bridges. Each drop held an upside-down city: moonsilver towers, copper roofs, laundry lines, and bakeries lifting their shutters to let out the smell of anise bread.

Seren loved Auralis most at that hour. Before the ministries woke, the Glass City belonged to gardeners, bridge sweepers, canal pilots, and children racing paper skiffs toward school. Even the dead spoke more softly before eight bells.

She turned the brass model on her desk. Six pearl moons circled a green stone no larger than her fist. The seventh hung beyond them, dull and gray.

"I do not wish it," she said. "I measured it. Ilyr's last three occultations bent starlight inward. A body that size should bend it outward."

Pell sniffed. The archive had preserved the gesture with impressive fidelity. "Then your instrument is wrong."

"I built the instrument."

"My condolences."

Seren reached for the focusing ring. Something warm tightened beneath her breastbone.

The ember had lived inside her for eighteen years, ever since an expedition to a fallen shard of the Celestine Reach began collapsing around them. Master Sira Vael had shouted the bridge calculations until the air took her voice. Elohn Daire had pushed Seren toward the escape shell. Luma Tareth had reached for them from the wrong side of a widening fracture. Then a blue-white splinter passed through Seren's ribs

without leaving a wound, and only Seren came home. Magisters had called it a blessing in public and an emergency in private. It usually slept behind her heart like a coal under ash.

Now it beat.

Once.

Across the archive, every ancestral lamp flickered.

Twice.

The water in the well rose in a perfect column. Master Pell's memory looked down at his submerged hands.

"Seren," he whispered, and for the first time since she had called him from storage, he sounded afraid.

The roof darkened.

People in the streets stopped. Canal barges drifted into one another with soft wooden knocks. Seven shadows moved over Aurum Vale, although only six round moons crossed the sun.

Seren ran to the observatory balcony.

Ilyr hung in the west, pale enough to see in daylight. A black line appeared across its middle. The line widened with terrible calm, and the false moon unfolded in overlapping plates. Mirror beneath mirror caught the sun. In the center, an iris of machinery turned toward Elyndra-9.

Wonder was the first thing Seren felt. She hated herself for that later.

The lens was impossibly beautiful. Its inner rings shone with colors no atmosphere should have allowed: furnace gold, winter blue, the green of a memory before one knows it is a memory. Runes thousands of miles long ignited around its rim.

Then the heartbeat sounded a third time.

It did not pass through the air. It moved through bone.

All over the balcony, mages collapsed. A clerk clawed at his throat. A weather-scribe began reciting the name of

every storm that had killed someone she loved. Seren gripped the rail as the ember answered with a burst of blue flame. Her sight divided. She saw the city as glass and stone, then as a web of names burning inside people. Each name was connected to the opened moon by a thread thin as spider silk.

The dead in the archive screamed together.

Not words at first. Hundreds of voices, pulled from a hundred thousand memory lamps, made one broken chord. Windows shattered inward. The blue column in the well struck the ceiling and became rain.

Then Master Pell seized Seren's wrist. Memory should not have been able to touch flesh. His fingers were cold.

"Do not let one voice name the world."

Every lamp went dark.

Somewhere below, three bells rang the archive alarm.

Seren forced herself upright. The ember continued beating, but now a second rhythm answered from beneath the floor. Not below the building. Farther. Deeper. She thought of planetary strata, buried transit lines, the name lattice Magisters insisted was a metaphor. Something inside Elyndra-9 was listening to Ilyr.

She hurried down the spiral stair. Archivists were carrying the fallen into the mosaic hall. Pieces of colored glass covered the floor like hard rain. A boy in apprentice gray sat against a pillar, staring at his palms.

"I forgot my mother's face," he said.

Seren knelt. "What is her name?"

He opened his mouth. Nothing came.

The panic in his eyes frightened her more than the moon.

"Write down every name you still know," she told the nearest clerk. "Ink, paper, walls, skin. Do not trust the lamps. Disconnect the archive from the civic lattice."

"By whose authority?"

"Mine until someone wiser arrives."

The clerk looked offended, which was reassuringly normal.

A crash sounded from the western gallery. Seren drew light into her hand. Blue-white fire wound between her fingers, bright enough to throw the bones of her hand onto the skin.

The gallery doors burst open.

A six-eyed storm-cat came through first.

It was the size of a draft horse and moved with the silent care of falling snow. Dark silver fur lifted along its spine. Its front pair of eyes fixed on Seren; the next tracked the doors and windows; the smallest pair

stared at something behind her that she could not see. Lightning crawled between the hooked tips of its ears.

A woman followed with a long knife in one hand and leaves braided through her black hair. Mud stained her boots to the knees. Three archive guards chased her at a respectful distance.

"Do not cast," the woman said.

"That depends on why you brought a storm-cat into a memory archive."

"Voss goes where Voss chooses."

The cat blinked all six eyes, one pair at a time.

"And you?" Seren asked.

"Mira Ashwren. Nyr Vale." She nodded toward the floor. "Whatever woke above us has roots below you. My people have been tracking its sickness for six weeks."

One of the guards finally found courage enough to speak. "Magister Vey, this beast destroyed the south entrance."

Mira glanced back. "The south entrance was locked."

"That is generally the point of a door."

Voss turned his third pair of eyes toward the ceiling. His growl made the loose glass dance.

Seren felt it then: a pressure where sound should have been.

The insects in the archive gardens stopped. Canal water ceased slapping against the outer wall. Even the frightened people in the hall fell quiet, not by choice but because the air had taken their voices.

Figures entered through the shattered balcony.

They wore mirrored masks without openings for eyes or mouths. Black robes hung without stirring. Each

carried a crescent rifle, and each rifle pointed not at Seren but at the people writing names on the walls.

The first shot made no noise. A clerk fell. The ink beside his hand faded from the page.

"They are erasing records," Seren said.

Mira was already moving.

Voss crossed the hall in three bounds. Lightning filled the cat's fur and struck the nearest rifleman in a white branching flash. Mira slid under another's shot, cut the power cord at his belt, and drove her shoulder into his knees.

Seren released her flame.

It spread into a curved shield between the masked figures and the wounded. The first crescent round struck, and cold passed through her arms. The projectile did not break the shield. It removed the rune for hold from Seren's spell. Blue light collapsed.

These weapons did not destroy. They subtracted.

The ember surged, eager and enormous. For a heartbeat Seren knew she could burn every attacker, the balcony, perhaps half the archive. Power offered itself with no argument and no concern for what stood behind the target.

She narrowed the flame instead.

A thread of starfire entered the cracked floor, ran beneath the riflemen, and melted only the metal clasps on their boots. Mira understood at once. She kicked a loose stair rail across their path. Three masked figures fell together. Voss landed among them with all six eyes bright.

"West bridge," Seren shouted to the clerks. "Take the injured to the canal kitchens. Their ovens are shielded."

"You are giving evacuation orders to an archive," Master Pell's voice said faintly from a dead lamp near her feet.

Seren snatched it up.

"You disapprove?"

"Profoundly. Well done."

His image vanished again.

The last masked attacker backed toward the balcony. A brass token dropped from his sleeve. Before Seren could reach him, the mirror of his face clouded from within. He folded as if every string holding him upright had been cut.

There was no body beneath the robe. Only gray ash and a smell like rain on hot machinery.

Mira crouched beside the token. Its face bore a thorn surrounded by seven tiny stars.

"Thorn Bazaar," Seren said. "The market under the city."

"A trap?"

"Almost certainly."

Voss touched the token with one claw. His smallest eyes filled with blue reflections. On the token's reverse, lines of light unfolded into a coordinate and a single word in archaic Auri.

EMBER.

The alarm bells stopped. Beyond the broken windows, Aurum Vale glittered beneath the opened eye of Ilyr. People were already writing names on bridge stones, shop fronts, sleeves, and one another's hands. A woman stood in the rain-damp street painting her children's names across her own door in letters tall enough for the moon to read.

Seren closed her fingers around the token.

"I need answers from the Bazaar," she said.

Mira wiped her blade. "I need to know what is growing beneath your city."

They regarded each other across the ruined hall, two strangers connected by a machine older than their countries and an enemy that could remove the evidence of a life.

Voss went to the western doors and looked back, impatient with human ceremony.

Seren tucked Master Pell's lamp into her coat.

"Then we begin below."