

Prologue

The First Fraying — and the Ninefold Stand

In the first dawn, when the world was but breath and flame, the Nine rose from the Eternal Veil.

Aelthir of the Dawn, bearer of light, whose song first parted night from day.
Kaelen of the Word, keeper of law, who carved the runes of binding upon stone.
Thamros of the Mountain, hammer and anvil, who gave the earth its bones.
Sylvara of the Loom, weaver of years, who spun the threads that held time itself.
Morveth of the Lantern, who guided the lost into rest.
Lira of the Tide, whose waters gave voice to the sea.
Nhal of the Flame, dancing fire and breath of desert winds.
Drevos the Beast, whose roar crowned the wilds with fang and feather.

Last came Sevrak the Coil, serpent of depths, whose eyes were endless hunger.

Together they forged covenant. Nine voices, Nine seals, Nine shardstones hammered in flame and light, bound into the roots of the world.

So long as they stood as one, shadow would not unmake creation.

So long as the Loom held, all threads would remain.

And so it was written in fire and stone:

*“Nine shall bind, and nine shall keep.
Should one turn, the threads shall weep.”*

But Sevrak’s heart was never for binding. On the day of covenant, when hands clasped over the Loom, he coiled apart.

“Why bind eternity,” he whispered, “when eternity was made for me?”

And the First Fraying began.

The shardstone in Sevrak’s hand cracked, scales darkening, coils writhing. From his grip poured venom, black rivers that boiled the seas. The earth split, and the first Maw yawned open, swallowing coast and city whole. The Nine staggered. The Loom shuddered. And shadow had its first taste of freedom.

It is told that one of the Nine’s mortal champions rose then — a sworn to Aelthir, nameless now in all tongues, but marked by light on his brow. He lifted his blade and cried:

“If gods will not hold the bond, then let flesh do what flesh must!”

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His blood fell upon the Loom, sealing its wound for an age. But the threads were weakened. Nine became eight-and-one, balance broken. And from that day, even gods feared what slept beneath the coil of shadow.

Ages later, when the Veil thinned and darkness returned, Nine stood again — not gods this time, but mortals. They bore the shardstones as crown and burden, champions bound by covenant renewed. Upon the broken fields they made their last stand: kings and thieves, scholars and wanderers, bled as one against the tide.

The first to fall was Caldryn, hammer still ringing as he split the skull of a dragonkin before the spears pierced his chest. The second was Elira, whose song held the storm at bay until her throat was cut. One by one they fell, yet the Loom held, each life a thread of defiance.

And in the end, when only the Bastard remained, he did not flee. Shard blazing upon his brow, he drove his blade into the Serpent's heart, and the Veil tore open with a scream that shook the heavens. Darkness was bound, but not destroyed. It whispered, coiled, waiting.

The bards would later name it *The Ballad of the Ninefold Stand*. The priests preserved it as *The Covenant Chant*. Sailors sang of *The Serpent's Song*.

But among the bloodline of the Bastard, it was remembered as curse.

For the shardstones still wait:

Buried in mountain deeps.

Hidden in forests of green shadow.

Sunk in deserts where flame still dances.

Guarded in tombs where lanterns burn.

And in Dawnkeep, beneath the Crown Spire, a shard of Aelthir's light lies silent and cold.

Until the hour it burns again.

Chapter One: Dawnkeep

The bells of Dawnkeep tolled in bright iron notes, rolling down the stone halls and across the markets gathered beneath the Crown Spire. Each strike carried the weight of ceremony, reminding every soul within the walls that the Feast of First Dawn had come again.

Banners snapped in the autumn wind, crimson and gold stitched with the sunburst of Aelthir. Priests moved in procession through the city gates, their lanterns swaying like fallen stars. Incense trailed after them in sweet coils, clinging to stone and flesh alike.

And behind them, carrying little more than a scroll sealed in wax, walked the boy no one noticed.

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He was ward to the court, a bastard with no claim, given food, schooling, and a bed in the eastern wing. His surcoat bore the High Kingdoms' sunburst, but the thread was worn and the fit not tailored. To the nobles he was always *the reminder*—a mistake of blood, kept near out of obligation. Too fine to be cast into the streets, too stained to be seated among the family.

When the kitchens needed an errand-runner, or the scribes required a lad to fetch ink, or the squires wanted an extra arm to blunt their practice swords, he was sent. Today, when the Feast demanded a hundred small offerings at the Spire, it was his turn to carry one.

The scroll felt heavy despite its weightless paper.

He crossed the practice yard, where squires clashed in the morning chill. The ring of steel on steel rang sharp against the air. Sweat steamed from their brows despite the cold. One noticed him and grinned crookedly.

"Don't trip, bastard!" the boy jeered, loud enough to carry.

The others laughed, swords lowering as they turned to watch. Heat burned in the ward's neck, but he kept his head down. The scroll was too important to stumble with—not because he believed in it, but because the wrath of the master-at-arms was worse than their scorn.

Still, he felt their eyes on his back until the stone arch of the yard hid him from view.

A servant carrying loaves of bread from the kitchens paused and murmured, "Don't mind them. They're just children with sharper toys." Then she was gone before he could answer.

It was a small kindness, and it lingered.

The streets outside the castle thrummed with festival life. Merchants hawked sweetbread, apples, skewers of roasting meat, and ribbons dyed in sunburst yellow. Children darted through the crowd clutching wooden swords. Dogs barked and chased after them, tails wagging in chaos.

A bard stood on a barrel near the square, lute in hand, his voice rising above the din.

*"Nine stood as one when the Loom was whole,
Nine stood as one when the Coil first broke.
Stone held firm and fire still burned,
Till serpent's hiss and shard was turned."*

The ward slowed, scroll clutched tight, listening. The bard's eyes glimmered as though he knew his song had found an audience.

But a guard's bark—"Move along!"—snapped the spell. The boy lowered his head and obeyed.

At the north gate, priests of Morveth knelt as they set lanterns in a solemn line. The flame of each wick flickered against the chill wind. One priest, an old man with sunken cheeks, whispered as he lit his lantern, "The dead stir uneasily."

The ward shivered. He told himself it was only the autumn wind.

Then the Spire rose before him. Crown Spire, tallest tower in the High Kingdoms, its peak vanishing into morning mist. Stone as white as bone, windows tall and narrow as watching eyes. And at its heart, the shard of the Dawnstone lay waiting.

The reliquary stood in the grand hall: a pedestal of black marble etched with runes too old to read. The shard upon it was pale, dull, its light little more than a dying ember. Nobles gathered in semicircle, silks rustling, jewels flashing. The king and queen sat on their dais, solemn as carved statues.

The ward felt his breath catch. He had walked these halls a thousand times, always unseen, but today... today he was not a shadow.

Priests began to chant. The sound rolled like low thunder, voices rising and falling in waves. One by one, offerings were carried forward: goblets of wine, baskets of grain, candles, scrolls. Nobles stepped lightly, bowed deeply, and withdrew with grace.

Then came the bastard ward.

He placed the scroll carefully at the base of the reliquary. His hand brushed the stone.

And fire answered.

The shard flared, sudden and blinding, as if the sun itself had descended into the hall. Heat shot up his arm, searing into bone. He gasped, staggered, fell to his knees. The scroll fell from his hand.

The hall dissolved into vision.

Threads unraveled before him, snapping into the void. An ocean boiled crimson, waves higher than mountains. A serpent coiled in black water, vast as the world, eyes like molten stone. At the Loom stood nine figures, blurred but terrible, their voices rising as one:

"Gather... or fall."

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He collapsed.

When his eyes opened, silence held the hall.

His palm smoked. Upon the flesh burned a mark like fractured crystal, glowing faintly, pulsing like a heartbeat.

Gasps and mutters rippled through the nobles gathered.

“A trick,” spat Lord Carradon, jeweled rings flashing as he pointed. “Some bastard’s sleight. He brushed oil on his hand, I’ll wager, to feign a miracle.”

“Oil does not burn like that,” hissed Lady Enra, clutching her pendant. “That was the shard itself. I saw it flare.”

“Impossible!” Carradon snapped. “The Dawnstone has not answered in five centuries. And to him?” His voice dripped venom. “A nameless whelp born of scandal?”

The ward curled his marked hand to his chest, his breath ragged. His voice barely escaped as a whisper: “*Why me?*”

Priests rushed forward, robes whispering over marble. One knelt, trembling as he stared at the mark. “The Covenant stirs!” he cried, tears glinting in his eyes. “The Nine speak again!”

“Blasphemy!” snarled another priest, seizing his sleeve. “The gods would not choose a bastard. This is a demon’s mark.”

“Demons do not bear light,” countered the first. He reached toward the boy’s hand, then recoiled as the heat singed his fingers. “This burns with the fire of Aelthir. Deny it if you will, but I will not.”

The queen’s voice cut through them all, cold as steel. “Enough.” Her gaze locked on the ward. “If the shard has awakened, then why him? A mistake of flesh, not a prince. Explain that, priest.”

The priest faltered. His lips moved, but no answer came.

Whispers filled the chamber, hissing like serpents in the shadows. Guards shifted uneasily, hands twitching toward hilts as though uncertain if they faced a holy wonder or a threat that should be cut down.

“Perhaps the shard has been corrupted,” Lord Carradon said, eyes narrowing. “Perhaps it flared not to bless but to curse.”

The boy staggered to his knees, his palm still smoking. He wanted to scream that it was not his doing, that he had never asked for this. But the words clung to his throat.

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“Why me?” he whispered again, and none seemed to hear.

The king rose at last, his voice a low rumble. “This matter is not to be decided in the heat of spectacle. The shard has stirred, and the mark is plain. Whether curse or covenant, we will learn the truth.” His eyes weighed heavy on the boy, unreadable. “Take him to his chamber. Guard him well.”

The queen did not rise. Her gaze lingered, sharp with suspicion, as if she could pierce his chest and see the truth within.

And so the hall emptied in murmurs and glares, leaving him alone with the burn in his palm and the silence of stone.

That night, whispers spread through the city like wildfire. Some called him blessed, some cursed, most said nothing at all.

In the eastern wing of the keep, alone in his narrow bed, he turned his palm upward. The shard-mark still smoldered faintly in the dark. He pressed it against his chest as if to smother the glow, but the warmth remained, steady as breath.

He lay awake long after the torches in the corridors burned out. The chamber felt smaller than ever, its walls pressing close.

He thought of the bard’s song. Of the priest’s words about uneasy dead. Of the serpent’s eyes, coiling vast in black water.

And with each thought came the same question, burning hotter than the mark itself:

Why me?

He had no answer. Only the heavy knowledge that his life at the edges of the court was gone, and something vast and merciless had taken notice of him.

Chapter Two: Ashes of Doubt

Whispers crawled through Dawnkeep faster than fire through dry grass. By dawn the next day, every tavern had a version of what happened in the Spire. Some said the shard had split apart and chosen a new king. Others whispered of a bastard witch-child born of Coil’s blood. A few swore they had seen the serpent itself winding in the Spire’s shadows.

The boy heard them all. His chamber was no prison, but no sanctuary either. Guards kept their post at the door; servants came and went with food or clean clothes, never meeting his eyes.

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Every glance carried suspicion, pity, or fear. He sat with his marked hand hidden under his sleeve, but the heat never left.

The king summoned him before the court that morning.

The great hall was thick with nobles and priests. Their voices buzzed like a swarm of hornets until the herald's staff struck stone.

"All rise for His Grace, Alaric of House Veynar, King of the High Kingdoms!"

The ward bowed low, though his knees trembled. He had never stood at the center of such attention. Before, he had been a shadow drifting at the court's edges. Now every eye was fixed on him.

Lord Carradon was the first to speak, his voice sharp as a blade. "Your Grace, we all saw the trick. No true shard would stir for him. A bastard can bear no covenant."

Lady Enra rose, her hands clenched around her pendant. "And yet the shard flared, my lord. Can oil and lies make a god's fire burn? I tell you, something moved in that hall."

"A curse moved in that hall," Carradon snapped. "The Coil works in shadows. It is no miracle but an omen of ruin."

Another noble, Lord Reneth, interjected. "And if it is not? If the Covenant stirs once more, and we cast him aside, would you bear the blame?"

The hall broke into a storm of murmurs. Priests leaned on their staves, some nodding, some muttering prayers.

The boy's chest burned. He wanted to speak, to defend himself, but the words dried in his mouth.

King Alaric raised a hand. Silence fell. His eyes, iron-grey, turned to the ward. "Show us the mark."

Slowly, with shaking fingers, the boy pulled back his sleeve. The shard-mark gleamed faintly, as though embers slept beneath his skin. Gasps echoed through the chamber.

One of the younger priests cried out, "It is Aelthir's fire! No demon could bear that light!"

But another, older and bent with age, hissed, "Light burns as well as blesses. Do not forget the Coil wore radiance once."

“The Dawnstone does not lie,” a third priest argued. “If it chose him, it is by design. We cannot question the gods’ will.”

“And yet we must,” said another, grim-faced. “For the gods are silent, and only mortals remain to interpret their fire. Who here will stake their soul that this boy is salvation, not doom?”

The boy lowered his arm, wishing the floor would swallow him whole.

The queen’s voice cut through the murmurs, colder than steel. “If the shard has truly awakened, why did it not turn to my son, the rightful heir? Why a nameless mistake left rotting in our halls?”

The words struck harder than any blade. His vision blurred. For a heartbeat, he thought he might faint.

King Alaric did not answer her. His gaze remained fixed on the boy, unreadable. “The mark cannot be denied. What it means, we have yet to see.”

That evening, guards escorted him not to the dungeons, but to the chapel of Morveth. There, in the dim glow of lanterns, priests examined his hand. They spoke in low voices, their words circling him like vultures.

“It smolders as if alive.”

“It bears the geometry of the old runes.”

“No—see here, the fracture lines—this is dangerous.”

One priest at last addressed him directly. “Do you feel it still?”

“Yes,” the boy whispered. “It burns. Even now.”

“Does it speak?”

He hesitated. *Gather... or fall.* The words from the vision echoed in his bones. He wanted to deny it, to keep them buried. But he could not lie.

“Yes.”

The priests drew back, some crossing themselves, others muttering prayers of warding.

By the third night, the whispers outside had changed. Markets sang with new names for him—*Shard-marked, Covenant’s Bastard, Coil’s Heir*. Children shouted them in the streets while mothers dragged them away.

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And then came the shadows.

The first attack was small—so small the guards called it nothing more than drunkards. Two cloaked figures slipped into the keep's outer yard, blades glinting. Their steps made no sound; their eyes gleamed like wet stone in the torchlight.

The boy never saw them until the mark seared his hand like molten iron. He cried out, and the guards turned just in time. Steel flashed, torches guttered. One intruder lunged with a curved dagger, only to be run through by a halberd. The other screamed curses in a guttural tongue as he slashed wildly, striking sparks from a guard's helm before a sword drove him to the cobbles.

When the hoods were thrown back, their faces bore tattoos of twisting coils, black ink winding down their jaws and throats. The stench of sea-brine clung to their cloaks. Cultists. Servants of Sevrak.

The boy sat trembling, clutching his hand, as the captain spat on the corpses. "The Coil stirs," he muttered. "Gods help us."

Later that night, the boy returned to his chamber, heart hammering. He sat by the narrow window, staring at the shard-mark glowing faintly in the moonlight.

He whispered the words again. "Why me?"

But this time, he was not alone.

A shadow moved in the doorway. The servant woman who had spoken to him in the yard days before slipped inside, carrying a tray she had no need to bring. She set it down and met his eyes for the first time.

"You should not ask *why*," she said softly. "You should ask *what now*."

He opened his mouth, but no words came.

Her gaze dropped to his hand, and for the first time, he saw not fear in someone's eyes—but something closer to faith.

She bowed her head and whispered, "The Nine will rise again." Then she was gone.

He sat long into the night, her words tangled with the vision, the fire in his palm, and the laughter of nobles who would never call him kin.

And still the shard-mark pulsed, steady as a heartbeat, reminding him that whatever had begun in the Spire could not be undone.

Chapter Three: The Stone Oath

Word of the shard-mark did not stop at Dawnkeep's walls. Messengers carried it down river and road, to villages and cities, to keeps and mountains. Some scoffed. Some trembled. But when the tale reached Deepforge in the Stoneheart Mountains, the runes themselves stirred.

It began with a crack of stone. In the Hall of Echoes, where the dwarves kept their oldest carvings, one rune split across its face. Light seeped from the fracture, a glow older than memory. The runesmiths gathered, whispering of the Covenant, of prophecies chiseled when the mountains were young. And so the Stone-Bearer was sent.

Three days later, he entered Dawnkeep.

The boy was in the courtyard when the gates opened to admit the delegation. They came with no fanfare, only the steady tramp of boots and the low clatter of axes at their sides. At their head strode the Stone-Bearer: a broad figure in mail and leather, his beard plaited with iron beads, his eyes grey as granite.

The court gathered quickly, nobles murmuring about insult or spectacle. Some sneered at the dwarf's lack of ceremony. Others watched in wary silence.

The Stone-Bearer did not bow. He knelt once, striking his fist against the stone floor with a sound like a hammer on anvil, then rose to his full height.

"I am Borin son of Durn, Stone-Bearer of Deepforge," he said, his voice rolling like rockfall. "The runes woke when your shard burned. So I have come to see with my own eyes the one who bears the mark."

His gaze fell on the boy. Heavy. Measuring. Unflinching.

The king received him in the great hall. Queen Serenya sat stiff at his side, her lips thin, her eyes sharp. Nobles lined the walls, fanning themselves with silks though the air was cold. Priests stood in a cluster, whispering as always.

Borin wasted no time. "We know the Covenant is not dead. The stone told us. When one shard stirs, all remember. The mark is real."

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Carradon scoffed. “Real? It was a child’s trick. What dwarf would know of our gods?”

Borin’s head turned, slow as a grinding millstone. “Stone does not lie, lordling. And our gods once stood with yours. Do you think the mountains forget what men’s tongues refuse to sing?”

The hall bristled. The queen’s eyes narrowed. But the king held up a hand. “You believe this boy is chosen?”

“I believe he is bound,” Borin said. “Not by choice, nor blood, but by fire. The shard-mark is oath enough.”

Murmurs filled the chamber. Some priests muttered assent, others blasphemy. Lady Enra whispered to her neighbor, “Perhaps the gods choose where men will not.”

The boy shifted under the weight of so many stares. He wanted to shrink into the stone. But Borin’s gaze pinned him in place.

That night, Borin sought him out. The boy found him in the smithy court, studying the forges. Sparks leapt in the air as smiths hammered late into the evening.

“You carry it like a wound,” Borin said.

The boy startled. “Because it burns.”

“Of course it burns. All oaths do.” Borin stepped closer, eyes gleaming in the firelight. “Do you think the shard chose you because you were worthy? Hah. Worthiness has nothing to do with it. Oath does.”

“I never swore—”

Borin cut him off. “The stone does not ask. It binds. And now you are bound, whether you wish it or no.”

The boy clenched his marked hand. “Everyone thinks it’s a curse. That I’ll bring ruin.”

Borin leaned close. “Let them. A curse, a blessing—stone does not care what name men give it. What matters is whether you carry it or let it crush you.”

The words weighed on him long after Borin left.

The queen did not hide her fury. At supper the next day she spoke openly, her voice carrying across the table. "We shame ourselves, entertaining the delusions of a foreigner. Shall we next invite nomads to lecture us on gods?"

Borin drank deep from his cup and set it down like a hammer. "Better a nomad with eyes to see than a queen who fears what truth reveals."

Gasps spread. Knives stilled above plates. The queen's cheeks flushed pale. The king's hand tightened on his goblet, but he did not rebuke Borin.

The boy sat silent, his stomach clenched. He had never seen anyone defy the queen so boldly.

The cultists came again that night.

This time they were more than two. Five shadows scaled the keep's outer wall, their movements fluid as serpents. Their daggers gleamed faintly green with poison.

The boy was woken by the searing of his mark. Pain drove him upright, clutching his hand. Guards shouted in the courtyard below.

He stumbled to the window in time to see Borin cleave one cultist in half with a swing of his axe. Another darted past the guards, hissing in the guttural tongue of the Coil, only to be dragged down beneath steel.

One slipped inside.

The boy froze as the door to his chamber burst open. The cultist lunged, blade flashing for his throat. He raised his marked hand instinctively—
And the shard-mark blazed.

Light erupted, searing white. The cultist screamed, blinded, clawing at his eyes. Guards barreled in, cutting him down.

The boy collapsed, gasping, staring at his hand still glowing like embered stone.

Borin appeared in the doorway, axe red with blood. He looked at the boy, at the mark, then gave a grim nod. "Aye. It is real enough."

By dawn, the cultists' bodies lay burning outside the gates. The stench of charred flesh drifted over the city.

The king stood at the battlements, watching the smoke rise. “We cannot hide this,” he said at last. “The Coil stirs, and the Covenant is not as dead as we believed. If the boy is marked, then he is no longer just a ward of Dawnkeep. He is a sign.”

The queen’s voice was like ice. “A sign of our undoing.”

Borin only folded his arms. “Or your salvation.”

That night, the boy sat by his window again, the glow of his hand reflected in the glass. He thought of the serpent’s eyes, the priests’ fear, the nobles’ scorn, Borin’s words.

He whispered the question that had haunted him since the Spire. “Why me?”

The shard-mark pulsed, hot and unyielding.

And for the first time, he wondered if the answer was not *why*, but *what now*.

Chapter Four: The Forest Watch

The coil-smoke of burnt cultists still hung faint in Dawnkeep’s air when the second emissary came. Not through gates of stone, but out of the green.

They were seen first at dawn, a lone rider slipping from the Verdant Shroud. The watchmen on the walls squinted through the mists and saw a figure cloaked in grey-green, astride a pale stag with antlers that caught the morning light. No horn was blown. No banner raised. The rider simply came, as though they had always been expected.

By the time the stag’s hooves struck the cobbles of Dawnkeep’s outer court, whispers had run faster than the hooves. *An elf. A Warden. A Watcher from the Loom of Years.*

The boy stood among the guards when the rider dismounted. He had not been summoned, but he could not keep away. The mark in his palm burned faintly, as if it had sensed this coming before his eyes did.

The elf’s cloak fell back to reveal a face pale as birchwood, eyes deep green threaded with silver. Hair the color of frost fell loose over shoulders. Their gaze was cool, dispassionate, and when it landed on him, it was not surprise that flickered there, but recognition.

“I am Eryndor of the Watch,” the elf said, voice calm as still water. “The Loom frays. I am here for the shard-marked.”

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King Alaric received Eryndor in the high hall, as he had Borin days before. The dwarf stood present as well, arms folded across his chest, glaring openly at the newcomer.

The court buzzed with unease. Nobles muttered, priests fidgeted. To see a dwarf and an elf standing in the same hall was rare enough; to see them both drawn by the same omen was cause for whispers of prophecy.

Eryndor bowed — not to king or queen, but to the shardstone relic upon its pedestal. “The Loom speaks through fire and thread. Your shard flared because its pattern demands it. The boy is bound.”

The queen’s lips curled. “Another foreign tongue, chanting riddles. Do you all come to claim him as your own?”

Borin grunted. “Stone does not claim. Stone binds.”

“And the Loom does not claim,” Eryndor countered softly. “The Loom remembers. It waits. When threads unravel, it pulls tighter.” Their gaze swept the hall, then fixed once more on the boy. “And one thread has been tied to you, whether you will it or not.”

The boy swallowed, his chest tight. He wished to vanish into the stone floor. He wished he had never touched the shard. Yet beneath his fear was a terrible certainty: they were right.

The court erupted into argument.

Carradon shouted, “How long before every wandering zealot claims this bastard as theirs? Will we give away our throne piece by piece?”

Lady Enra shot back, “Better zealots than cultists. The Coil already stirs. Will you deny what we have seen?”

The priests joined in, some hailing the elf’s words as divine, others cursing them as dangerous.

Through it all, the king sat silent, fingers steepled, eyes unreadable. The queen’s stare cut cold as ever. And the boy stood beneath the weight of a hundred voices, feeling the mark on his palm burn hotter.

That evening, Eryndor found him not in the chapel nor in his chambers, but in the courtyard where the cultists had bled. Lanterns guttered in the wind, smoke still faint in the air.

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“You carry it poorly,” Eryndor said, stepping from shadow to light.

The boy flinched. “Because I never asked for it.”

“No one does.” The elf’s gaze softened, almost pitying. “Do you think the Loom seeks volunteers? The thread does not choose the hand. It is woven.”

He looked away, fists clenched. “Borin said nearly the same. That I am bound, not chosen.”

Eryndor tilted their head. “The dwarf speaks truth, though his tongue is rock. You are bound. But the binding is not a prison. It is a pattern. A place in the weave of years.”

The boy’s throat tightened. “Then why me?”

Eryndor stepped closer. “Because you were overlooked. Because you were unwanted. The Loom has always favored what men discard. In weakness, it weaves strength.”

The words pierced deeper than he wished to admit.

Later, Borin confronted Eryndor in the smithy court.

“You speak in riddles,” the dwarf growled. “The boy needs a hammer, not a song. Teach him to bear the weight, not to drift in dreams.”

“And you would turn him into stone,” Eryndor replied coolly. “But he is not stone. He is thread. If he cannot bend, he will break.”

The two locked eyes, fire and granite, unyielding. For a moment, the boy thought they might come to blows.

Instead, Borin spat into the forge’s ash. “So long as he stands, I care not whether he bends or breaks.”

Eryndor only turned away. “And I care not if he stands, so long as the Loom is mended.”

Their rivalry hung heavy in the air. The boy knew then that if he was truly bound to both, he would live caught between hammer and loom, stone and thread.

That night, the mark burned again.

He woke to shouting in the lower halls. Guards clashed steel against unseen foes. The boy stumbled to the doorway as Borin stormed past with axe in hand.

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“Another coil-worshipper,” the dwarf barked. “The rats multiply.”

Eryndor appeared from the opposite hall, bow drawn, eyes gleaming like a predator’s. “Not rats. Spiders. They creep where threads weaken.”

The boy followed in their wake, fear gnawing, hand searing.

They found the intruder in the library. Shelves lay overturned, scrolls scattered, lanterns broken. A figure cloaked in black crouched atop the archivist’s desk, muttering in the guttural tongue. In his hands gleamed a shardstone fragment — not Dawnkeep’s, but a sliver of something else, jagged and black.

The mark on the boy’s hand flared white-hot. He cried out, and the cultist turned, eyes burning crimson.

Borin roared and swung his axe. The elf loosed an arrow. Both struck true — yet the figure only laughed, even as his body crumpled. His last words hissed through blood: “The Coil rises. The Loom unravels.”

The shard fragment shattered into dust.

Silence followed, broken only by the boy’s ragged breath.

Eryndor bent to gather a fallen scroll, eyes narrowing. “This was not accident. They sought records of the shard. Knowledge. They search as we do.”

Borin spat. “Then let them search. When they come, we’ll break their skulls.”

But the elf’s gaze was far away, haunted. “You cannot break a pattern with steel.”

By dawn, the cultist’s body was ash, burned beside the gates. But the boy could not forget the look in those crimson eyes, nor the way the shard-mark had seared at the sight of that black fragment.

The king summoned him once more.

“You are a ward no longer,” Alaric said, voice heavy as iron. “You are marked, and the world will not let you forget it. Dwarves and elves alike come for you. Enemies stalk our halls for you. Whether curse or covenant, you are a sign. And we will bear you as such.”

The queen’s voice was ice. “Bear him as one bears a plague. Caged and watched, not honored.”

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The boy's heart sank. Yet when he looked to Borin, he saw grim pride. When he looked to Eryndor, he saw solemn recognition. And in his own burning hand, he saw no escape.

That night, as lanterns flickered and shadows lengthened, he sat between stone and thread. Borin's words echoed: *An oath will crush you if you do not bear it.* Eryndor's lingered too: *In weakness, the Loom weaves strength.*

For the first time, he wondered if the mark was not a wound but a summons — not to ask *why me*, but to decide *what now*.

The shard-mark pulsed, steady and relentless, as though answering.

Chapter Five: The Ember's Dance

The desert wind came to Dawnkeep long before the rider.

By midmorning the streets were choked with dust, banners snapping hard against their poles, the air heavy with heat despite the autumn chill. Merchants cursed the grit in their teeth; children laughed and chased rolling skeins of straw that tumbled like spirits down the lanes. Priests muttered prayers against ill omens.

And then, through the haze, the rider appeared.

They came cloaked in red and gold, a figure out of sand and fire. Behind them trailed three desert horses laden with urns that smoked faintly at the mouth, ash rising like incense. The crowd parted uneasily as the procession wound through the gates, for though no horn announced them, the air itself seemed to bow.

"The Flame-Keeper," someone whispered. "A Nomad of the Ember tribes."

The boy stood at the edge of the courtyard, hidden behind a line of guards. His shard-mark seared beneath his sleeve, burning hotter as the rider dismounted. Their skin was bronze, their eyes alight as if a coal glowed behind them. When they swept back their hood, a mane of black hair fell loose, streaked with ember-red.

They raised one hand, and flame flickered at their fingertips.

Gasps rippled through the crowd. Some pressed forward eagerly; others shrank back as if the fire might leap and consume them.

The Flame-Keeper's voice rang clear: "The shard has awakened. The Ember tribes send me to the gathering at Crown of Dawn."

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The boy's heart lurched. *Gathering?*

The king received them in the great hall. Borin stood to one side, arms folded, a mountain of disdain. Eryndor lingered in shadow, eyes sharp and unreadable. The queen sat rigid as ice, lips pressed to a thin line.

The Flame-Keeper strode to the center and knelt, pressing both hands flat to the stone. When they rose, heat shimmered faintly around them, as though the hall itself bent beneath desert sun.

"I am Kaelira of the Embers," they said. "When the shard in your Spire flared, the sands answered. Our sacred braziers burned without oil, and fire danced in the wind. The tribes knew the Covenant stirs, and so I came."

Lady Enra leaned forward. "First stone, then thread, now flame... You mean to say—"

The young priest who had spoken in the king's defense before could not contain himself. He stepped forward, eyes bright with awe. "This is no chance! The Nine rise again. Nine stood when the Loom was whole, and Nine shall stand when it frays. The shard calls them to Crown of Dawn, as it was written."

The hall broke into murmurs. Nobles whispered to each other, voices sharp as knives. Priests clutched pendants, some nodding fervently, others pale with dread.

The boy's pulse thundered in his ears. *Crown of Dawn... Dawnkeep*. They weren't just coming by accident. This was the place. This had always been the place.

The queen's voice sliced through the noise.

"Convenient, is it not?" she said, each word cold and measured. "First a dwarf, then an elf, now a desert zealot. Tomorrow, perhaps, a shepherd will knock at our gates, and you will hail him as Drevos' beast-kin. Perhaps a drunkard sings too loudly, and you will call him Kaelen's heir. You weave shadows into meaning because you crave prophecy. Nothing more."

Carradon barked agreement. "The queen speaks true! Are we to cede our kingdom to every charlatan who claims the Nine?"

The priest who had spoken bristled. "You dare deny the Covenant when the shard burns in plain sight?"

"It burns in the hand of a bastard!" Carradon shot back. "If that is your proof, then perhaps the Coil has already deceived you."

The argument surged, voices crashing like waves. Borin growled that stone did not lie; Eryndor whispered that the Loom did not err. Kaelira stood serene in the storm, flame still dancing at her fingertips, as if certain that fire did not care for men's quarrels.

And at the center of it all, the boy stood silent, the mark on his palm blazing until it hurt.

Later, Kaelira sought him in the chapel.

"You carry it like a wound," she said, studying his sleeve.

He almost laughed — Borin had said nearly the same. "Because it burns," he whispered.

"It will always burn." She held out her own hand. Fire curled lazily across her palm, bending to her will. "But flame does not burn only to destroy. It burns to refine. To reveal. To test."

He looked at her, fear and wonder battling in his chest. "Why are you here?"

She tilted her head. "Because the shard called, and the prophecy commanded. Nine stood once. Nine will stand again. You are the first thread. The rest will follow."

Her certainty chilled him more than doubt ever could.

That night, the court argued long into the dark. Some called for the boy to be locked away, lest the Coil's cults descend. Others called for him to be raised high as a sign of Covenant reborn. The king listened and said little. The queen's disdain sharpened with every new voice that dared to speak of prophecy.

The boy retreated to his narrow chamber, the words echoing in his skull.

This is the place. This is the hour. Nine shall rise at Crown of Dawn.

His life had never been meant for glory. And yet, one by one, they came — stone, thread, flame — and still more to come.

He pressed the mark to his chest, whispering not "why me" but the new question that burned hotter than fire.

What now?

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Chapter Six: The Lantern's Shadow

The air grew colder in Dawnkeep. Not with the bite of autumn, but with something that sank deeper, seeping into marrow and breath. Lanterns along the streets flickered though no wind stirred, their flames shrinking low, bowing toward the earth as if in mourning.

By the third day after Kaelira's arrival, word spread that the **Lantern's Shadow** was walking the High Kingdoms.

He came at dusk, through the western gate. No herald announced him. No guard stopped him. He carried no banner, bore no weapon. Only a lantern, its flame pale as bone-fire, swinging at his side. With each step the crowd parted, hushed not by command but by instinct.

The boy stood at the edge of the courtyard when the figure entered.

The priest's robe was grey and tattered, stitched with symbols of the Lantern — circles and lines forming the endless road to the Veil. His face was hollow, skin drawn tight, eyes sunken but bright with unnatural light. White hair hung loose about his shoulders. He did not look at the guards, nor at the nobles who whispered fearfully from the walls. His gaze fixed only on the boy.

"The shard burns again," he said, his voice low, carrying like smoke. "And the dead grow restless."

The king received him in the hall.

Borin shifted uneasily, muttering curses under his beard. Eryndor stood tall and silent, though his eyes narrowed at the sight of the lantern. Kaelira's flame dimmed at her fingers as she folded her arms, lips tight.

The priest stopped before the throne and bowed — not deeply, but with the weight of ritual. He raised his lantern. Its flame guttered, then flared pale. Shadows shuddered along the walls.

"I am Malrik," he said, "of Morveth's line. The graves of the Ember Vale cracked when the shard burned. Lanterns lit without oil in the crypts of my order. The dead whispered, though they had no tongues. And so I was sent, for the Nine rise not in fire and stone alone, but in shadow also."

The queen recoiled, pressing a sleeve to her nose as if the priest carried rot. "We have been plagued with zealots enough. Now you would fill our halls with carrion?"

Malrik's eyes turned to her, cold and unblinking. "Without carrion, my queen, there would be no soil for grain. Without shadow, light blinds. Without death, there is no Covenant."

The words chilled the hall.

Priests of Dawnkeep muttered among themselves. Some crossed their pendants, warding against evil. Others leaned forward, listening hungrily.

The younger priest — the one who had spoken in the boy's defense before — stepped forward, voice trembling. "First stone, then thread, then flame... and now shadow. It is clear! The Nine gather again at Crown of Dawn."

Malrik nodded once. "The threads pull tight. And the Coil stirs also. I smelled its venom on the road. Three villages I passed had graves torn open, corpses missing. Not for hunger of beasts. For worship."

The hall broke into a storm of voices.

Lady Enra pressed her pendant to her lips. "The cult spreads faster than rumor. You see? Even in our valleys the dead are stolen."

Carradon scoffed. "And we are to believe this corpse-draped wanderer? He comes with no proof but a pale flame."

Malrik raised the lantern. Its light flickered across Carradon's face. The lord flinched and fell silent, as though the flame itself had peeled away his voice.

The queen found hers quickly enough. "You would have us bow to prophecy like children at a puppet show. You would see this bastard crowned savior, and for what? Because carrion mutters and zealots dance flame?"

Borin growled, slamming a fist against his axe. "Enough tongue, woman. Stone does not bow, but even stone cannot deny what gathers. The runes split. The Nine rise."

Eryndor's voice, soft as silk, followed: "And the Loom shows threads converging. Whether you deny it or not, they are here."

Kaelira's eyes burned. "Even flame bends to the pattern. You may scorn prophecy, queen, but prophecy does not scorn you."

The boy stood frozen in the storm of voices, his hand searing under his sleeve.

That night, Malrik sought him in the chapel.

The lantern burned cold, its pale light painting the stone in shades of ghost.

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“You fear the mark,” Malrik said.

The boy nodded. His throat was dry. “Because I do not know what it means.”

Malrik set the lantern on the altar. The flame did not consume oil, did not smoke. It simply *was*, pale and steady. “It means you are bound to life and death alike. You will walk where shadows fall thickest. You will bear their weight, as I do.”

“I don’t want it,” the boy whispered.

Malrik’s gaze was unblinking. “Want has nothing to do with it. Death does not wait for want. It comes.”

The boy shivered. Yet in Malrik’s words, harsh as they were, he felt no cruelty — only inevitability.

The cult came again before dawn.

The guards found three bodies laid at the gate — their own men, throats cut, lanterns stuffed in their mouths like mockery. Beyond, in the fog, shadows moved.

The alarm rang. Borin stormed to the battlements, axe ready. Kaelira conjured flame from her hands, fire dancing wild. Eryndor nocked an arrow that gleamed with pale threadlight.

The boy ran with them, his palm searing.

Shapes emerged from the mist — cultists, cloaked and chanting. Their tattoos twisted, fresh blood painted over them in coils. They carried hooks, chains, blades slick with venom. And with them came the dead. Corpses that stumbled forward, eyes black, mouths sewn shut.

Panic rippled through the guards. Some fell back, muttering prayers. Others raised spears but their hands shook.

Malrik raised his lantern. Its pale flame flared, casting long shadows. The corpses froze, trembling like dogs before a whip. The cultists hissed and snarled, but their dead would not advance.

“Strike them now!” Borin roared.

The courtyard erupted. Steel clashed, flame roared, arrows sang. The boy stood in the midst of chaos, his shard-mark blazing until his hand felt like molten stone. A cultist lunged for him with a hooked blade — and the mark flared white, hurling the man back in a burst of light.

When it ended, the cobbles were black with ash and blood. Corpses smoldered. Guards panted and leaned on spears.

Malrik lowered his lantern, its pale fire shrinking once more to a steady glow. "This is only the beginning," he said quietly. "The Coil gathers its own Nine in mockery of ours. We will see them before the end."

By dawn, the bodies were burned outside the gates. The smoke stank of venom and rot.

The king stood on the walls, his face grave. "Stone, thread, flame, shadow... Already four stand in our halls. The Nine are gathering."

The queen's voice was ice. "And they gather around a bastard mark. You would crown him savior while ruin knocks at our gates."

The king said nothing. His eyes drifted to the boy, and the boy felt the weight of them like chains.

That night, alone in his chamber, the boy sat staring at his hand. It smoldered faintly, glowing like coal.

He thought of Borin's oath, Eryndor's riddles, Kaelira's fire, Malrik's lantern. Each so different. Each bound by something greater than themselves. Each pulled here — to him.

The shard-mark pulsed once more, steady as a heartbeat. And for the first time, the boy realized he was not only afraid of what it meant. He was afraid of what it demanded.